

The Legend of Blaze: Arise of the Fire Warrior

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In a world where animals speak and act like humans, a cat named Blaze is the heir to the leader of his home. However, a dark threat is lurking, and Blaze will have to master the ways of his father's mysterious sword if they are to survive.

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1 - The Two Lords

PROLOGUE

The harsh night winds blew down on the open moorland. The only movement was the exposed grass swaying back and forth in the wind. A chilling silence hung about the windswept land. The silence was broken by the paw-steps of many creatures, getting louder and louder as they got closer. They were marching to the sound of a drumbeat, which appeared to be keeping them up to speed.

A huge white dog-like creature was in the lead, with a blood-covered sword clasped in his right paw. Next to him was his captain, who was second in command. He was a fox, and was making the continuous drumbeat on a ragged looking drum. It was little more than a barrel with the skin of a poor woodlander stretched taut over the top and bottom.

Marching behind them was the leaders horde. Five hundred or more wicked looking beasts; foxes, badgers, oversized rats and wild dogs, each carrying a weapon and wearing silver armour. Regardless of how daunting these creatures looked, their leader was much worse.

He was the largest wild dog in his horde, and looked wolf-like. His ragged white fur was stained with dirt, dust, and mostly blood. Covering his back, he had on a magnificent red velvet cape, trimmed with pigeon feathers. He had on a little silver armour, but not as much as his horde. He was so strong and powerful; he didn't need it. All though his fur was white, his heart was dark. It was filled with hatred and desire to conquer the new land ahead, no matter the cost. Throughout the lands he had become known as Darkfang.

Darkfang and his horde had been marching for nearly a season, with little rest and on rationed food and water. Darkfang had ordered a score of his horde to stay behind the others with spears and swords. As well as being on the lookout for surprise attacks, they had been ordered to kill any creatures that couldn't keep up with the rest. No one new where they were going, or how much longer this pain-staking march was going to last. No one that is, except for their leader.

Darkfang had heard about a breathtaking land filled with foliage, food, water, and most importantly, lots of inhabitants. He would make them fear his name, and make them follow under his rule. He planned to use them as slaves to build a fortress where he and his horde would live. If any opposed his decision, however, they would regret the day they were born. He already had with him a number of slaves, each of which he had caught in the previous land he had conquered. In the middle of the horde were two score

of starved, exhausted, and miserable creatures, in which their only warmth was the ragged remains of their clothes. All were woodland creatures, made up of hares, squirrels, cats, and numerous other helpless animals. None had any hope for the future, and they lived only knowing that their death could be any day soon.

In the horizon, Darkfang could see very faintly the greenery of a distant forest. That meant that they were near their destination. *Another five days walk at the speed were going* He thought to himself. He was not happy with their progress. He wanted to be there in at least two days from now. A wicked grin broadened across his face. He stopped dead in his tracks, the confused horded bumping into each other at the surprise halt. A selfish badger named Stripejaw sat down tiredly, taking advantage of the situation. Many others followed his example.

"Blacktooth come over here" he growled, almost friendly like.

The captain paused in his drumming momentarily and shakily moved closer to Darkfang. "Yes my lord?" he said, his knees quivering. There was no telling what this wild dog was up to.

"Do you think we're making good progress while you are drumming?" The dog said, still sounding friendly.

"Uh..ummm I think so my lord"

"You think?"

The fox was unsure how he should answer

"Uhh, yes my lord"

"Do you think you could go any faster?"

"I'm going as fast as I can my lord. If I go any faster, some might not be able to kee..."

A swift stab with the leaders sword silenced him forever.

"Let this be an example to all of you hopeless excuses for a horde!" He growled, all hints of his friendly voice now completely gone.

The horde suddenly rose to attention. All except Stripejaw that is. Darkfang strode over to where Stripejaw was sitting and pointed the sword tip towards his bare neck, making him stand.

"Did you not hear properly Stripejaw? I could kill you right now but I have decided to spare you. You are my new captain. What you lack in loyalty to me you make up in strength. Besides, I never did like old Blacktooth anyway. Now make your way over to that drum and beat it at double time." Darkfang stoped momentarily and gestured towards the body of Blacktooth. The grass around him was stained deep red from the blood of the dead fox.

"Oh, and Stripejaw,"

The badger stoped dead in his tracks and turned to face his leader.

"If you ever decide to not do as I command again, you will follow in the paw-steps of this fox."

Stripejaw, fearing for his life, stumbled toward the drum and picked it up. Darkfang turned

towards the rest of the horde.

We are going to get to the forest in two days walk. At this rate, my whiskers will turn grey before you lazy beasts get there. Be wary to keep up, because you know what will happen to you if you fall behind."

With that he strode to the front and kept walking at double speed, stepping on the limp body of Blacktooth as he did so. The horde struggled to keep up and many felled victim to the spears of those at the back of the horde. As the group marched on, all that could be heard was the beating of the drum, and the anguished cry of those who could not keep up.

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"AAAARRRRRRGGGG!!!" A dark brown tabby cat screamed, jumping out of bed suddenly. His face was dripping with sweat; his eyes blood shot. He stared into the stillness of the room he found himself standing in. It took him a while to realise that he was standing in his chamber room, the familiar place calming him down. *It must have been a nightmare. Nothing to worry about.* In his ears he could still hear the pounding of the drum. How could he not worry?

Boom, Boom, Boom

"AARRGGG!" He screamed once more. "WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?"

Everything seemed to blur in the room, then he collapsed on the floor. He was seeing images. He saw a huge white wolf-creature in silver armour, and the black shadows of marching beasts. All of which he had seen in his dream. But what he hadn't seen in his dream startled him the most. It was only a quick flash, but he knew instantly what it was. It was himself lying on the ground, unmoving. Blood stained the grass a rich red around him. He was dead.

He couldn't take it any more, he wanted to escape this horrible place; back to his chamber, where he was safe. As if some beast had heard him, the images stopped, and he found himself looking at the ceiling of his chamber. Panting hard, he realized he had fallen, and without any hesitation he stood up and made a mad dash for the window. He was so high up, and he could see almost everything from here. He searched the land for a sign of evil. Mostly the wicked white beast he had seen in his dream. He could see nothing of the sort however. The peaceful land of Blossomtree forest seemed to stretch for miles before him.

Just as he thought the images had gone, one more flashed in front of him, although this one didn't give him the horrible feeling the other ones had. A great fire roared, and he

could feel its intense heat upon him. Out of the flames, a light brown tabby tom calmly walked towards him, drawing a great battle sword out over his shoulder hilt as he did so. It had a glowing amber eye carved on its handle, and the silver blade seemed to catch the light once it had been fully drawn. The carved amber eye on the sword looked exactly like those of its holder, in which a fire seemed to burn as brightly as the embers behind him. This cat was young, but the way he walked so fiercely, yet so calm, made him look like a true warrior. The cat raised his sword high over his head, and then swiftly brought it back down for a killing blow. The premonition ended just as the blade was a whisker length before the older cat, and once again, the dark brown tom found himself looking over Blossomtree country. For some strange reason, this vision seemed to fill him with hope, and had soothed his pain for the few seconds it lasted. He was not at all scared of this mystery creature, as he felt as though he knew him, although he only had a faint idea who the creature may be. Most of the cat's face had been shadowed, and the only part of his face he remembered seeing was the glowing amber eyes.

One other thing that had stunned him was the amber-eyed sword. It was the very same sword that he himself possessed, although the eye had never glowed like that for him. The leader turned towards his bed in which his sword was leaning against its foot. It looked the same as usual, nothing strange.

A small red robin flew past his window and caught his eye, bringing him out of his thoughts. He watched it fly to a tree and land on its nest, a delicate weaving of small twigs. He could see faintly that the nest was filled with tiny baby birds. The mother fed its children carefully, making sure that each one got an equal fill, and then started to prune them affectionately. The cat watched in awe at the wonderful sight. It would be spring in a few days. How could such a peaceful land be poisoned by such evil? He could not answer this question as he thought about the horrible wolf beast. The image of the amber-eyed cat had not made him forget about the evil wolf in his dream, and his body, lying still in grass.

Although it had just been a dream, it had felt so real. He clutched his neck with his paws and rubbed it. His neck felt like it had been a victim to a sword, yet he was still alive, and there was no blood. *I know what this pain is, he thought, it is the pain of my own death.* He looked out into the forest once more. Whatever it was, he knew something was out there, he could feel it. As he stared out into the distance he said to himself quietly, as if somehow that evil creature could hear him,

"I know my end is near, but I, Russetfur the warrior, ruler of this land, have one final vow. My blood will spill yours, and the path of death you leave behind you will end forever."

2 - Blaze, the young warrior

CHAPTER 1

It was the first morning of spring. The sun was rising over the forest, illuminating the land with an orange glow. For the first day in months, the sunrise brought with it the warm weather, which all the creatures of the forest had been longing for. Even the birds were cheerful, sharing their joyful spring song for all to hear.

In the midst of the forest was a lake, the sparkling water was reflected a deep orange from the sun. Sitting on the edge of this lake was a young, sturdily built cat with light brown tabby fur. His amber eyes were like a flame; he had unmistakably inherited them from his father. Next to him was his younger sister, a little bundle of fluff. She was a little tortishell kitten, hardly older than a few seasons.

"Blaze, 'ow long is it takin to catchin da fishy?" The younger of the two asked.

"Now, now Rusty, to catch a fish you must be patient." The older cat named Blaze answered.

"Ohhhh but its takin fa evar!" Rusty complained, "Maybe dares no fishies inna lake?"

"Patience is the key." Blaze answered, not turning to look at his younger sister.

He was concentrating on the lake. His plan had been to get up nice and early and catch a big fish for the spring feast. He had wanted to sneak out so no one would know of it, and then he could surprise the others when he got back. He used the back wall to sneak out, using the rampart ladders to get to the top of the wall. There was a thick tree branch that hung low over the wall, which he had used many times before to sneak out. The only problem was, the two fishing nets he had been carrying were too heavy to get over the wall, and it was enough that he had the fishing rod with him as well. He decided to leave the nets on the inside of the wall, and since it was behind the main building, it was unlikely that anyone would notice. Carrying the fishing rod in one paw, he had carefully made his way onto the over hanging branch to climb down safely to the bottom. He must have been too noisy, because his younger sister had heard him and followed him to the lake. He didn't even know he was being followed until he had cast his line. A loud 'Wat ya doin?' surprised and shocked him and he had nearly fallen into the lake. He had turned around and there was Rusty, staring at him wide-eyed. He hesitated, but eventually told her his plans of catching a fish. There was no way around it. Now, staring at the stillness of the lake, he started to think like his sister.

This is taking a long time. Maybe there is no fish in the lake. I've failed at even the easiest of tasks. I'm nothing like my father, I'll never get anything right.

Blaze started to feel disappointed. He had let his thoughts get to him over the past few seasons. His father, Russetfur, was the leader of the cat clan that he lived in. He was the most courageous, strongest and most selfless cat that anyone had ever known. He had become victorious in many battles though out his long life. That was why every cat looked up to him. Blaze had found it hard to believe that he was kin to such a brave warrior.

Blaze reached into the pocket of his red clothes and pulled out a shining piece of amber. He stared at its shinning orange surface, and was lost in its beauty. This gem was his lucky stone, and he took it with him where ever he went. It meant a lot to him, as it had saved him when he was just an infant. He had ran away from home using the same escape route he still uses, as his mother had just scolded him for sticking his paw into the cream cake she had just baked.

Tired, scared, and lost in the forest, he sat down and cried, until a huge brown snake had snuck up on

him. Eyes round with fear, he had tried to run, but tripped over and fell. With the snake advancing on him, he groped quickly around the floor for something to protect him. Feeling something sharp, he pulled an amber stone out the ground, and held it tightly in his paw. Blaze could remember seeing the huge white fangs looming over his head, dripping with venom. The snake went for the kill, and then went limp over Blaze's body as he was struck in the chest with the sharp orange jewel. Blaze crawled out from the snake's body and pulled out the gemstone.

He had still been shaking with fear when the elders had found him a few minutes later next to the snake's body. The noise had alerted them to his position, and was taken home to the delight of his worried mother.

Suddenly, a stir in the water's surface brought him out of his thoughts. Thanking the stones luck, he shoved it back in his pocket and stood up promptly, ready for anything.

Rusty jumped up and down exclaiming, "Lookie ther! Musta be a big fishy!"

Blaze didn't answer. He was concerned about what was in the lake. On the water's surface, there were ripples of what looked like mini waves, heading towards the bank. The movement on the lake suddenly ceased. Whatever it was must have gone back down to the depths of the lake. But that was not the case. The lake monster grabbed onto Blaze's fishing line, and with great strength, started pulling it underwater. Without hesitation, Blaze started to reel it in, but it was too big.

"Rusty! Help me! Pull!" The struggling cat yowled.

Rusty clasped her little paws around Blaze's tail and pulled.

"Oooowww not my tail!!! Grab my waist and pull!!!"

Rusty did as she was told. Even though the little cat didn't help much, it was just enough to help reel the creature in closer to the bank. Blaze's amber eyes shone like fire with determination. He wasn't about to let it get away. With one mighty heave, a massive fish flew out of the water, crashing into the shocked cats and knocking them off their paws.

Blaze stood up, heaving the massive fish off of him. It was way bigger than any fish he had seen before. It would feed the whole clan! He helped Rusty to stand up and brushed the dirt off of her fur.

"We should start heading back home with this fish. They'll be so happy!" Blaze meowed excitedly. He couldn't wait to get back home and see the faces of the cats, especially his father.

"Can I carry da fishy? Pleeeeeaaase!" Rusty meowed, grasping her paws around the fish. She couldn't move it however. It was a lot bigger than she was.

Blaze let out a little purr of laughter.

"I think it would best if I carry it back, Rusty. Here, why don't you carry my fishing rod? It would help me a lot. I'm sure it will be no trouble for a strong cat like you. Why, you're so strong, you even helped me pull this huge fish out of the water!"

Rusty's brilliant green eyes shone with happiness at the compliment.

"Oh it waz no twoubles at all! Dat fishy waz no mach for me! I'll carry da fishin rod den. I'm bein wery hewlpfull today!"

With that she ran to get the fishing rod that had fallen out of Blaze's paws, and picked it up. It was quite heavy but Rusty didn't say a word. She wanted to carry it home and make Blaze proud of her.

Together they made their way home, Blaze carrying the fish and Rusty carrying the rod. They both felt really proud of their achievements.

The home of the wildcats lay due east of the lake. It was a huge stone building, built on the tallest hill, which towered over the tallest trees. The cat's ancestors had built this magnificent home many seasons ago, when the elder's grandparents were children. It was made out of red stone blocks, which had been mined out of the nearby quarry. Surrounding the castle-like building was a stonewall, which was there to protect it from invaders. The only entrance to the inside was through the main gate; strong iron bars that could be bolted shut, making it nearly impossible for anyone not welcome to enter.

Standing next the main gate was a pale apricot she-cat. She had a worried expression on her face, and was looking out into the forest through the iron bars of the gate. A dark brown tomcat stepped outside of the building and strode over to meet the apricot cat. He was huge and muscular, a lot bigger than all the cats that lived here. He put his paw on she-cats shoulder and moved around to face her. He saw the concerned look on the pretty cats face, and wondered what was the matter.

"Rosie" the brown cat meowed quietly. "What is upsetting you? I've been looking for you all morning." Rosie looked into the amber eyes of her husband, then turned her head to continue looking out into the forest. "Oh Russetfur its terrible. Blaze and Rusty are not here. I woke this morning and found their beds cold. They must have been gone for a while." Russetfur thought for a moment. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen them all morning. He had been really busy with his leader's duties, and hadn't noticed.

"I'm really worried Russetfur. Anything could have happened to them, and what about little Rusty, she's too young to be in the forest by herself."

"She's not by herself." Russetfur meowed soothingly "She would be with Blaze. He'll take good care of her. Those two are closer than two peas in a pod."

Rosie turned to look at Russetfur once more "I dearly hope that you're right"

Russetfur gazed into his wife's beautiful green eyes. He embraced her in his arms and gave her a reassuring hug.

"Blaze is a strong cat, and one day he will follow in my paw steps and become a great warrior and leader. He's getting older now Rosie, he's not a kitten any more. He can look after himself. You must stop worrying over him. He's probably gone with Rusty for a walk through the forest. They'll be home soon, I'm sure."

"I hope your right Russetfur." Rosie still was not entirely convinced.

Russetfur faced his wife and still saw the same look of worry upon her face. A single tear fell down her face. He wiped it away with his claw; he didn't like seeing her like this. "I know I'm right. You're not doing yourself any good standing out here in the heat. Why don't you come inside and have something to eat, those two will be back soon. I can't see them skipping breakfast!"

Rosie started to feel assured and her husband's confidence. "Alright Russetfur, I trust your words, but can you at least ask the guards to keep a look out for them?"

Russetfur was glad that he had convinced her. "Sure Rosie, anything to ease your mind." He gestured to the two sentries standing on the wall ramparts to come and talk to him. The sentries turned their heads and climbed down the wall.

"Kestrel, Boulder, it's my wifes wish that you keep a look out for Blaze and Rusty. When you see them, let them in and send them straight to me." Russetfur instructed them. "Afterwards, you can then have some breakfast, then you can take the whole day off."

The pure brown cat-guard named Boulder nodded his head while Kestrel spoke, "Thank you kindly Russetfur. We will keep a lookout for your son and daughter." They gave a respectful bow of their head, then turned and made their way up the ladder and onto the wall once more.

After watching them go back to duty, Russetfur turned to his wife.

"Come now." He meowed gently. Together, paw in paw, they made their way to the main building.

3 - Russetfur's Preminition

CHAPTER 2

It was noon by the time the cats made it home. Blaze was starting to feel worried, as it had taken them both far to long to get home. Rusty had sat down for a rest, and wouldn't move. Blaze couldn't have left her there by her self, so he had stayed with her until she was ready to go. The huge fish Blaze was carrying didn't help them to go any faster either. He knew that his mother would be fretting about them, especially since he had Rusty with him. They were both standing just outside the gates, waiting to be let in by the guards.

"Blaze, Rusty!" A voice yelled from above. Blaze looked upwards to see Kestrel and Boulder on the ramparts calling to them.

"Where did you two young ones get of to? Your mother has been worried sick!" Boulder meowed fairly loud. It was hard to hear the sentries on the wall top but Blaze got the message quite clearly. Kestrel and Boulder climbed down from the wall and opened the gates from the inside. It took all their strength to pull the massive gates open. Blaze walked through the gates with Rusty not far behind. Rusty was now dragging the fishing rod behind her. She flopped down against the inner wall and rested once more; she wasn't used to such long walks.

As Kestrel and Boulder greeted them, they noticed the fish Blaze was carrying. "Well that explains where you have been" Kestrel meowed to Blaze "But you shouldn't have wondered off by yourselves, especially with your younger sister. I was watching her struggling to carry that fishing rod; you didn't take her just to carry your possessions did you? She's exhausted." Blaze was taken aback. He had only wanted to catch the fish for the spring feast. He never meant any harm.

"I just thought that I would help out with the spring feast. Rusty wanted to ca-" Blaze began, but Kestrel interrupted him. "Never mind explaining to us, your father wishes that you go speak to him immediately." Kestrel meowed sternly

When Kestrel had finished, Boulder moved closer to Blaze and meowed quietly so only he could hear, "Never mind Kestrel, she's known to have a sharp tongue. I think it's amazing that you and Rusty caught that fish by yourselves. Even skilled fisher-cats have trouble pulling that stunt off. That fish you hold in your paws is huge! The chef would love to prepare it for the feast tonight."

Kestrel moved closer and stood by Boulder "Well as long as you two have stopped chattering, these two trouble makers need to see their father." She flicked her tail towards Blaze, signalling that they were excused. She then went back to the ladder and climbed back to the wall.

"You better go and see your father." Boulder meowed "We will see you when our duty has finished. Since the feast will be held tonight, your father will let us rest early." He then turned and ran to meet kestrel on the wall top.

Blaze's stomach churned at the sound of food. He and Rusty hadn't eaten all morning, and holding a big, juicy fish in his paws wasn't helping either. Blaze decided that the quicker he saw his father, the quicker he could eat. He moved over to were rusty was sitting, the rod on the ground next to her.

"Rusty, we have to go and see father, he wants to talk to us." Blaze meowed "We best go now or he'll get angry at us for keeping him waiting." Blaze started walking towards the main building. Rusty was still tired, but she stood up and dragged the fishing rod behind her. She was way behind her brother, so she started to unsteadily run to catch up. The rod got in the way of Rusty s paws, and tripped her up. It sent

her ears over tail, and then flat on her stomach. She let out a surprised cry as she did so. Blaze heard the little cat's squeal and turned to see Rusty sitting up, nursing her paw. He dropped the fish where he was standing and ran over to help his sister up. She was covered in dirt and mud, but she wasn't hurt seriously in any way.

"Oooowww my hewting paw! I awmost died!" Rusty wailed to her brother

"Rusty your fine, an aching paw we can fix, but if it had been more serious, we might not have. You have to be more careful in the future." Blaze meowed. "Here, let me carry the rod."

"But I wanna carri da fishy rod!" Rusty whined.

"Alright Rusty I'll let you carry the rod, but you must leave it with father when we meet him, he'll put it back to were it belongs." Blaze didn't feel like arguing with Rusty, especially when he was already in trouble. This time he walked at a slower pace, with Rusty by his side. Momentarily stopping, he picked up the fallen fish, and then continued walking.

They reached the main building; its huge wooden doors wide open. Through the doors was a giant room, which cats called the hall. It was long and narrow, with a massive table the same shape. The table was large enough to accommodate the whole cat clan at once. Stepping through the door, Blaze's tummy rumbled once again. The sweet smell of honey floated in the air. How he longed to be sitting amongst the cats and eating what they were. He pushed that thought behind him as he and Rusty strode over to a dark grey cat at the table.

"Hey Smokey! Have you seen my father around?" Blaze was glad to see Smokey. Apart from being the happiest and most caring cat he knew, he was also his best friend.

"Myehs min a mitcen" Smokey meowed through mouthful of honey soaked bread.

"What? It's a little hard to understand you when you're with your mouth just about exploding with food! Look, it's even dribbling down your chin!" Blaze meowed with a hint of amusement. Smokey let out sigh and swallowed his food. Wiping his chin with his paw, he mewed,

"I said he's in the kitchen. He went in their not long ago. Must be arranging the spring feast with the head ch... Whoa! That's some big fish you've got there! Can I have it?" Smokey's mouth watered at the sight of the fish.

He loves his food all right, thought Blaze, letting out a purr.

"What are you laughing at?!" Smokey meowed, tilting his head to the side.

"Just thinking about how much you love your food. Smokey, you couldn't last five minutes without the stuff!" Blaze tried to hide back his laughter. "And as for the fish, you can have some tonight at the feast, but not all of it!"

"Huwwy up and stop tawkin we gots to see daddy!" Blaze had almost forgotten Rusty was there until he heard her voice.

"Oh I almost forgot! See ya Smokey I got to go. Come on Rusty." He gestured to Rusty to follow. Smokey said good-bye then continued on eating his breakfast.

On the right of hall was the kitchen. There were so many doors leading of from the hall that it was surprising that Blaze remembered which one was the kitchen. Although the big sign on the door with 'KITCHEN' written on it probably helped. They opened the door to find Russetfur and Dinn, the head chef, sitting at a small table discussing issues. Dinn's peculiar accent rang through the kitchen.

"Oh I jus' don' know wadda cook for de main corse. Russe'fur, wha' wud you like?"

Dinn and Russetfur looked up at the sound of the door opening. "But I don' think 'tis gonna be a problem no more. Look wha' your son 's brough' in!" He stood up and ran over to Blaze. He grabbed the fish and checked it over.

"Why, dis fish is 'uge! I 'aven't seen one like it in years! I 'ave to get star'ed on it righ' away!" He ran of to the other side of the kitchen and started to prepare it. Russetfur stood up and walked over to Blaze. He looked at Rusty and saw the rod in her paws.

"Rusty leave that here, I'll put it away later. Go and see your mother, she's in the nursery. Get her to fetch you something to eat. Run along now." Russetfur's voice was calm. It was hard to tell whether or not he was angry. Rusty turned to glance at Blaze then walked out the kitchen. Russetfur turned to face his son, no expression on his face at all. "Follow me Blaze. We will go to my chamber where we are alone. We need to talk." With that, he walked out the kitchen. Blaze stood there for a moment, puzzled at his father's behaviour.

He decided that it would be best to follow him. He walked out the kitchen and followed his father to the end of the hall. At the head of the room, was a door, much bigger than the rest. Through this door was a spiral staircase, leading to the tallest room in the building, his father's chamber. The stairs seemed to go on forever, and Blaze was starting to feel tired by the time he got to the top. His father was already there and seated in his huge red armchair. In front of him was a small table with a tray of food and drink.

"Blaze, come and sit down" Russetfur gestured to another armchair on the opposite side of the table. Blaze slowly moved over to the chair and sat down. It was a deep red velvet colour, and felt wonderful to sit in. He hadn't been in this room since he was very little, and since then it had seemed to have changed. His father rarely let creatures in his chamber, and when he did, the reason would have to be very important. He gazed at the large room in awe. The walls were full of hanging paintings; most of them were portraits of earlier leaders. Positioned at the end of the long line of paintings, was a picture of his father. He was holding his magnificent silver sword in one paw. His amber eyes were so intense, that they seemed to burn a hole right through him with their unmoving glare. At the opposite end of the room was his father's bed, in which the same sword leaned upright against the end of it. Russetfur pushed the food towards Blaze.

"Here, eat this. There's wine there as well if you fancy it." Blaze had to process what his father had just said. Wine? For him? He had never had the drink before, partly because he was too young. He looked at his father to see if he had been mistaken, but he said nothing. Instead, he was eating breakfast, still with the expressionless look upon his face. It wasn't going to do him any good starving, so he started to eat what his father had given him. It was delicious; the same honey soaked bread Smokey was eating earlier and fresh fruit salad.

He gazed at the wine thirstily. He wasn't sure whether to drink it or not, considering he didn't know what it tasted like. He looked across the table at his father. He was sipping some wine out of a gold cup studded with jewels.

Father's drinking it so it must taste good" he thought.

His thirst got the better of him, so he picked up the beaker and pored himself a cupful. He brought the cup to his lips and took a cautious sip. It was much better than he had expected. It was delicious; cool, dark, and sweet, yet besides this, a feeling he had never felt before swept over him. He felt much older than he had before.

This is what adulthood feels like. I might like it better than I thought.

He drank the rest very quickly. His hunger and thirst now satisfied, he looked up to face his father. He too had finished his meal.

"Father," he started out shakily. "I'm sorry for what I did today. I meant-"

Blaze hadn't finished when his father held up his paw to silence him.

"Blaze. You are a young cat with a warrior's spirit way beyond your age. You have no need to either explain or apologise to me. I know since you were a young one that you were a born warrior." Blaze wasn't sure what his father was talking about. It's not like he had won a battle or something similar. All he had done was catch a fish without permission.

"Today your sneaking out without permission, tomorrow, you could be leader. What I'm trying to say is son, is that I'm not going to be around forever. You are my son, therefore, the next leader in line to rule this clan. I'm not as young as I used to be Blaze, and any day now, trouble will come to the forest, and it

may claim my life."

Blaze could keep silent no longer. What was his father talking about? He hadn't heard him sound so serious in all his life.

"Father, I think I might have missed something. How do you know that this is what will happen?" He had a million questions to ask, but he thought better of it.

His father let out a deep sigh, and relaxed into his chair.

"This may come as a shock to you, Blaze. I understand if you choose not to believe me, but before you do so, I want you to listen to what I have to say."

Blaze saw that his father had a troubled look across his face, one of which he hadn't seen to often.

"Two nights ago I experienced of what I believe was a premonition." Russetfur paused briefly and took a deep sip of his wine. He wasn't sure how to make sense of what he had seen.

"It was a terrifying dream which had seemed so real. I woke up sweating and sore all over. In it, I saw a horde of creatures; each with weapons, marching to a destination that none seemed sure about. The leader was a huge wild dog; unlike any I have encountered. He was horrible; blood, dirt, dust, covering his whole body. It was so real, I could even smell the scent of blood hanging about the air. The leader was directing his horde towards a land of plenty; a land of which I believe is surrounding us. Our home."

"I am starting to worry; they said they would arrive in two days time, which is tonight."

"Father, why haven't you warned any one? Surely we need to be ready. We need to warn all of our clan of the coming danger! We are under threat, and you have done nothing!" Blaze, who hadn't spoken thought his speech, suddenly stood up and yelled.

After he finished, he realized what he had done, and sank back slowly into his seat.

"I-I-I'm sorry father. I didn't think. *Not the first time either*, Blaze thought.

"Once again, don't apologize; it is not your fault. The blood of your warrior ancestors runs through your veins, and I can tell that you are eager to protect the clan. But think young one, is it wise to head straight into battle, without no plan or no strategy? This battle is just not making any sense. Should I follow my instincts and plan for a battle that I don't know will happen? Or should I pass it of as just another dream. I didn't tell anyone about it, for fear that they wouldn't believe me. Who's ever heard of a cat that can see the future? Not me, or at least not until a few nights ago. No one will believe me." For the first time Blaze could remember, his father looked weak and frail. His head looked down in defeat, not something that he would expect of his father. He must really be confused about this. Why else would such a strong and noble leader break down like this?

"No father." Blaze stated firmly. "I believe you"

Russetfur looked up, surprised at his son's words.

"Blaze, all I want to do is protect the clan, and I'm not about to let anyone harm it. I have no fear of dying. I will pay the cost of my life to protect what I love; and I'm sure that I will. I have seen my destiny, and I can't change that." Blaze saw a glint of sorrow in his father's eyes, but at the same time, determination. What he had just said reflected both of these. It was as if he new that his end was near. He shook that thought away like an annoying bug. How could he possibly imagine life without him?

"I understand." Blaze told his father.

"Thank you Blaze, for everything. I new I could trust you. I will make an announcement at the feast tonight about what we have spoken about. I won't tell about the dream, I'll just generally give them a warning. You'll see what I mean later. For now, you should go and get some rest, you deserve it." Blaze stood out of his chair and bowed his head in respect.

"Thank you for giving me your trust. It means a lot to me." Blaze felt a stab of worry hit his gut, but at the same time, he felt great. All doubt left him for good, and he felt stronger than he had ever been. All that he had needed to build his confidence was trust. He strode out of the chamber proudly, his father watching him leave.

"Be strong, young warrior." Russetfur whispered. "You have some tough times ahead of you. I know I didn't tell you all the truth, but I know you will pull through once I leave this world forever."

4 - The Great Spring Feast

CHAPTER 3

"Blaze, wake up dear. The feast is starting" The pale apricot cat sat on the bed besides Blaze. She put one paw on Blaze's shoulder and shook him gently. Blaze tiredly looked up from his pillow to see his mother standing over his bed.

"How long have I been sleeping?" Blaze groaned

"Long enough. Come now Blaze the feast is about to begin. Everyone has already taken their seat at the table." Rosie stood back up and left the room without another word. Blaze, now alone, sat on the end of his bed and stared at the door of which his mother had exited.

She must still be angry with me.

He didn't like his mother angry like this. It was not like she was yelling or raising her voice, but the way she said so little bothered him. He tried to shrug this thought away, and only think of the feast, but it was proving difficult.

After talking with his father earlier on, Blaze had gone straight to his bedroom to avoid any more trouble. He found he was quite tired lying on his bed and he had fallen asleep almost instantly. Still exhausted, Blaze decided he better hurry up and get downstairs. Drowsily, he stood up and stumbled over to the door.

~

Blaze was the last to make it to the feast. He scanned the hallway for a place to sit, but as far as he could see, all the seats were occupied.

"Blaze over here! I've saved you a seat!"

Blaze was surprised to hear the she-cat Snowpelt yelling over the loud noise of cats in conversation. He turned his head to where the voice had come from, and saw the pretty she-cat standing up and waving to him. Blaze made his way to her, trying not to be noticed by anyone. When he got there, he sat in the seat Snowpelt had saved in-between herself and Smokey.

"Hey Blaze." Smokey meowed. "Snowpelt's had this seat saved before anyone had even been seated. You better thank her." He signalled with his paw towards Snowpelt. Blaze turned his head towards the she-cat.

"Hi Snowpelt! Is this true? You didn't need to go through the trouble for me, but thank you for doing so."

"Hello Blaze. It was no trouble. It was just that I hadn't seen you all day. I was starting to worry."

Snowpelt trailed off at the last words and looked down. Her cheeks had blushed to a pale red. Blaze felt a pang of guilt. What had he done now? He had noticed Snowpelt had been acting strangely around him lately, and he had no clue why.

If it were serious, she would tell me. He told himself. Besides, she couldn't be angry, she had been saving this seat for at least an hour.

He took a quick glance towards Snowpelt, who was still looking down at the table. Everyone considered

Snowpelt to be the most beautiful cat in the clan. She had silvery-white fur freckled with pale black spots, which seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. Her eyes were a clear ice blue – the complete opposite to his own eyes of fire.

The noise in the hall grew louder, taking Blaze out of his thoughts. Everyone looked up, including Snowpelt, towards the Kitchen. Out of its doors came Dinn, followed by many of his helpers. Dinn was carrying two huge cauldron-like bowls, while the rest were carrying an assortment of cutlery, flasks, and silver platters which were covered by lids. Lovely aromas started to fill the room as the dishes were placed on the table and uncovered. Everyone stared at the food eagerly, and some young kittens started to grab the food, only to be stopped by their mother.

"Oooo I wanna sum o' dis!"

"No, not until grace has been said."

Blaze could not see his fish on the table, but he guessed it would be brought out afterwards as the main course.

Cling, Cling, Cling

A spoon lightly tapping on a glass bowl brought all attention towards Russetfur. All the cats fell silent, waiting for their leader to speak. Once Russetfur was satisfied with the noise level, he placed his spoon back on the table.

"Good Evening to all. It is my great pleasure to allow the cats of my clan to join together and feast. As you are all aware, it is the first day of spring. We have always celebrated this season to be the season of life, warmth, and time of plenty. We are gathered here tonight to savour what this forest has to offer. We may not have another time like this one in the world we live in. Us cats have always had a custom to enjoy the life we live while it's at its best. We have all lived in harmony for some time now, with no trouble whatsoever. I just want to remind you that evil may strike at any time, and we must not let ourselves forget our skills because of this peace." He stopped in his speech and stared at all of the cats. In all the clan, there were around two hundred members, each and every one trusting their leader.

"It is my wish that all cats start to train for battle, in case of trouble. It is unusual for us to gain years of peace, without having to pay the price. This harmony cannot last forever, and every beast knows it. There is one more thing concerning this matter. I know our duty is to protect the clan even at the cost of your lives, but there is a time when you must not when to back down. It's better to run and remain alive than for all to die in battle. If I ever give the signal to run, no beast is to question my order. No beast is to stay and fight." He glared at Blaze on his last sentence. Their eyes met momentarily, and Blaze knew at once that he was directing his last statement at him.

Russetfur's face changed from serious to happy as he looked away.

"This concludes my speech, and on a happier note, I shall now say grace."

All the cats, slightly shocked by the seriousness of their leaders speech, slowly dropped their heads and closed their eyes.

"We give thanks to all who lent a paw,
And contributed to this feast,
The cooks, the gatherers and many more,
There's too many to name each beast.

I mustn't forget the forest,
For without it we could not survive,
It provides us with shelter, vitals and safety,
With its help we have began to thrive.

Let good fortune find us,
In the upcoming season of spring,
Let the peaceful times continue,
Safety, we hope the forest shall bring.

Let us now all enjoy ourselves,
And put on big broad grin,
Savour what we have,
And let the feast begin!"

Everyone opened their eyes and immediately started to dig into the food. Blaze took a moment to stare at the food. There was so much to choose from, and he didn't know where to start. The two huge pots in the centre of the table were filled to the brim with delicious looking soup, which the chef was dishing out into bowls for everyone. Spread around the soup was a wide range of different foods; savoury and sweet. Big chunky pasties, salads with a mango dressing drizzled over, scones with golden honey as a topping, Blackberry cream tarts, and many more mouth-watering dishes that Blaze told himself he would try. Flasks of mint tea, dandelion and rose petal cordial, and wine were scattered amongst the table so everyone could reach.

Between every two cats a loaf of almond bread was placed on the table to share; still slightly warm from the oven. Blaze turned to look at Smokey who was already stuffing himself with bread and soup.

"What are you doing staring at the food like that Blaze? It's not going to jump into your mouth while you sit there." Talking with a mouthful of food, Smokey passed the bread to Blaze. "And besides, if you don't hurry up, I'll eat it for you."

Blaze stared at the soup "What flavour soup is it?"

"It's Dinn's creamed vegetable soup! The best soup I ever did taste in my opinion."

Smokey leaned over the table and poured himself some mint tea from the flask.

"Smokey, you think all food is the best you've ever tasted. If you don't stop eating so much that stomach of yours will burst!"

"Well it never has before, and I hope it doesn't too soon, or at least while food's a plenty."

Blaze shook his head and dipped some bread into his soup. It tasted wonderful. The mixture of the cream and vegetables was an odd flavour, but delicious all the same. Now he knew why Smokey loved it so much. As his friend did earlier, he poured himself some mint tea and sipped it.

As the food at the table decreased, Blaze was starting to wonder when his fish would come out. He had been looking forward to the fish that had caused him so much trouble.

"An' now fo' wha' ev'ryone 's been waitin' fo', the pièce de résistance!"

Blaze turned his head to see Dinn and Tulip, Dinn's young assistant, standing outside the kitchen door. Between the two of them they carried a huge platter, in which was so big that they needed two to carry it.

Every cat cheered as the cooks placed it on the table and uncovered it. The smell was overwhelming, and even Blaze found himself on the edge of his seat. Amongst herbs, fruit, and dressing, the fish lay. It was a golden brown colour with some kind of delicious smelling sauce smothering it. Dinn cut off a small piece and sampled it.

"Mmm... 'tis good!... I think We 'ave ou'don' ourselves... 'aven't we Tulip?!" He meowed in between chews. He cut off a further slice and handed it to Tulip. She quickly took it and tasted it.

"We certainly have!" she meowed and sat down. All the cooks had come out of the kitchen and taken their place at the table. They too had been looking forward to it.

Dinn sliced the fish up into even pieces, then served a piece into each dish. He placed the first into the

cat that was closest.

" 'ere, pass this roun' de table"

The cat passed the dish over to the next, and kept doing so until each and every cat had a share. Every cat dug into the food at Dinn's last words,

"Ea' up ev'ryone! Wha' ar' you ull waitin' fo'?!"

Blaze took a huge bite out of his fish, sauce trickling down his chin. It was the best he'd ever tasted; lightly spiced and very moist. As he looked around, he could see that the others were enjoying it also. It was worth the trouble

"Blaze, I think your starting to turn into Smokey!"

Blaze turned to his left, to see Snowpelt talking to him. She gestured to her chin with her paw as she spoke.

It's all right. She's talking to me.

He got the idea immediately and reached for a nearby napkin. He wiped his chin with it as he replied, "Speak for yourself miss! You have cream all over your garment!" He pointed to a cream patch near the collar.

"Oops, I didn't realise." Snowpelt reached out to take the napkin out of Blaze's paw. For a moment, they stayed there; paw in paw, looking into the depths of each other's eyes. Blaze felt warmth build up within him, but it drained out almost instantly as Snowpelt quickly looked away, avoiding Blaze's glare. She wiped her pale blue garment down and looked out in to the distance, as if she was staring at something he couldn't see.

"I-I-I'm sorry." Snowpelt meowed.

"Snowpelt, you didn't do anything" Blaze started, but realized she didn't hear him as she had already left the table. He saw the door she had gone through swing shut.

"What was that all about?" Smokey had finished eating, and turned to face Blaze.

"I'm not sure Smokey" Blaze didn't turn to face Smokey; his gaze was on the door Snowpelt had left through.

"I think you'd better talk to her." Smokey meowed quietly. This time Blaze looked at Smokey.

"I'm not sure. She doesn't seem too happy to be around me. Maybe I should leave her alone" Blaze saw a glint of amusement on Smokey's face. How could he be smiling at this?

"Trust me Blaze, the last thing on her mind is anger. I think you should go; it might cheer her up. I'll stay here, I'm going for seconds!" With those last words, he stood up and strode over to the leftover fish. He started to dish some fish out, but all he gained was a slap on the paw by Dinn, who must have been keeping a close eye on it.

"Geroff o' de fish ye great glu'on! You mus' ask me firs'!"

"Ouch! Well your gonna have to do it for me now that my paw has just about dropped off!"

I wish my life were as simple as his. Eat, Sleep, that's all he ever does. I've got the weight of the whole clan on my shoulders. What about father's premonition? Would it come true? I have to stop thinking about it. Right now all that matters is that I go and talk to Snowpelt.

With his mind still racing, he got up and slowly made his way through the door, up winding corridors and steps, and finally, stood outside the bedroom door. He was not sure why he had come here. He didn't know where she had gone, but somehow, he was drawn here. He slowly opened the door and inched his way inside.

Alone in the room was Snowpelt, sitting on the end of her bed. She didn't look up at him as he entered. He walked over to the bed and sat besides her.

"Snowpelt." He said quietly, not wanting to disturb her too much. "What's the matter Snowpelt? Please tell me. I'm sure I'll understand"

Snowpelt looked up and stared at the wall, still avoiding his gaze. "I'm not sure that you will." Blaze felt

shocked at her words. They had always been friends, and they had never kept secrets from each other. "OK." Blaze didn't want to pressure her. He didn't know what else to say. "That's fine Snowpelt. You don't have to tell me."

"Why don't we go for a walk? You know...to get some fresh air. It would be nice." Snowpelt seemed to be changing the subject, but at least she had lightened up.

"Sure." Blaze meowed. "Lets go now, while the sun is still up." He strode over to the door, and opened it for Snowpelt. He could see that she was still sitting down. "You coming?"

"You go ahead. I'll meet you at the gates." Snowpelt looked up. She put on a smile. "Thank you Blaze." Blaze felt happier now that she was feeling better. "All right. I'll meet you there." He walked out of the room and shut the door softly.

Snowpelt was left alone in the room, her smile vanished. "If only you knew."

5 - Battle Plans

CHAPTER 4

The sun was just starting to set, a beautiful sight. The land was just starting to take on an orange tone. Blaze stood next to the main gate, awaiting Snowpelt. It was getting late, and if she didn't hurry up, it would be nightfall by the time they got out.

What if she didn't want to come anymore?

Relief flooded over him as he saw the familiar silver-furred cat running towards him.

"Sorry I'm late." Snowpelt meowed when she reached Blaze. "Your mother wanted to talk to me. She said that she saw you going outside and wanted me to give you a message. She wanted to say that she was sorry for the way she was acting earlier on. She just doesn't want any harm to come to you, but she realizes now that you are grown up and can look after yourself." Blaze felt lifted at her words.

"Did she say anything else?"

"Oh yes, I'd almost forgotten. She said be back before dark." Blaze felt great hearing that he didn't have to sneak out anymore, that he had his mother's trust to go when he wanted to.

"Thanks Snowpelt. We better get going, or it'll be too late." Blaze meowed. He called to the sentries to open the gate, and then they both walked out into the forest.

"Why don't we go to the top of that hill over there? There's not so many tall trees spread over it, and we could see the whole forest." Snowpelt meowed "We could even watch the sunset." She added softly.

"That's a great idea." Blaze meowed.

Together they walked down the tall hill they were on. They could have stayed here, but the dense foliage obstructed their view. The hill they were headed to was smaller, but had little trees. As the trees grew fewer, they climbed up the grassy hill. Blaze saw that their shadows were lengthening over the orange-illuminated grass. Once they got to the highest point, they sat with their backs to a broad tree, and looked out into the horizon.

"Wow. It's so beautiful. We can see everything from here." Snowpelt's awe-struck voice murmured; her gaze fixed out on the horizon. "Look Blaze, we can even see the moorlands in the distance. It's so empty; not even a single tree out there. I'm so glad we call this forest our home."

Blaze followed her gaze out into the bare lands to the north. "Me too."

"Blaze..." Snowpelt meowed, almost to quiet to hear. "There's something I've wanted to tell you, but I'm not sure how." Her eyes were still staring into the distance. "I just can't bring myself to it. I-" All of a sudden the expression on her face changed. Blaze didn't ask why, as he thought it might have something to do with what she was about to tell him.

"Blaze, look..." Snowpelt pointed with her paw to something on the border of the moorlands and the forest. "There's something moving over there. What do you think it is? It's moving this way." Blaze rapidly became alert. He looked towards to where she was pointing. It wasn't just something small; it was huge. Sudden worry flooded over him like a wave, and the blood inside of him turned ice cold. The faint sound of a drumbeat rung in his ears. He knew what it was instantly.

The mighty horde in his father's dream.

Hundreds of beasts in silver armour marched towards the forest before Blaze's eyes. It was like a plague of poison amongst the forest.

This can't be right. The forest seems so peaceful. How could such an evil darkness penetrate it?

He quickly turned to Snowpelt, his voice trembling with fear.

"Snowpelt, that's not something, it's someone. Lots and lots of them." Blaze stood up in a start helping Snowpelt up as well. "Please Snowpelt, you have to trust me in saying that this is very bad. We have to warn the clan. Hurry." He grabbed her paw and ran as fast as he could towards the clan, Snowpelt struggling to keep up.

"What is it Blaze? Why are we running? It probably just a large group forest animals in a hurry."

"No it wasn't Snowpelt. That was cruel, hordbeasts, marching in our direction. That can only mean trouble."

"But how do you know? They were to far away to see properly!"

Blaze almost stopped dead in his tracks, but kept running for the sake of the clan. How could she not see the danger? How could she not recognize the darkness amongst the forest? Perhaps she didn't want to see it. Snowpelt and Blaze had lived their whole lives in peace, with no trouble having come to the forest in years.

She has become too relaxed, thinking that they where completely safe, and there is no such thing as evil. Maybe the whole clan is starting to think that way. This is terrible.

"Trust me." Blaze's legs were starting to give way, but he couldn't stop. He had to get home fast. The night's darkness was taking over the sky by the time they saw the familiar red building looming over them.

"Guards!" Blaze yelled into the night. "Hurry, open the gate! Let us in at once!"

"All right, all right. Keep your fur on. Why are you in such a rush?" The voice of Nightfur answered back. All that could be seen of him was his glowing yellow eyes, as his black pelt blended in to well with the shadows.

"There's no time to explain." Blaze panted. "Just hurry!"

Nightfur climbed down the ladder, a white and brown she-cat named hazel following right behind him. Blaze and Snowpelt caught their breath while the gates were opened.

"Keep a strong look out, especially to the north-eastern boundary of the forest, where it meets the moorlands." Blaze yelled over his shoulder, as he and Snowpelt rushed through the gates.

"Um...Ok Blaze" A dazed and confused Hazel answered back. Blaze barged through the hall doors, Snowpelt hard on his paws. Cats looked on in concern as they saw the two run to the opposite end of the hall.

"Snowpelt wait here. I need to go and tell father. Don't say anything yet to anyone. Were still not a hundred percent sure what the threat is, and we don't want to worry anyone." With that, he left Snowpelt standing at the door as he rushed through it, and up the spiral stairs to his father's chamber. Russetfur was sitting on his chair, talking to Kestrel and Boulder.

"So you saw nothing suspicious?" He heard his father questioning.

"No sir, nothing. Everything was normal." Kestrel replied.

"Are you su- Blaze? What are you doing interrupting me?"

"Sorry father, it's very important. I need to speak to you." Blaze responed.

"Very well. Thank you Kestrel, Boulder, you are excused." Kestrel and Boulder dipped their head, then left through the door. Russetfur turned got up out of his chair and strode towards him.

"What's the matter Blaze? You know your not allowed..."

"There's no time for explanations father! While me and Snowpelt were out walking, we saw a horde!"

"No. It can't be. What can you tell me about it." Russetfur's eyes widened with pure horror.

"We were to far away to see properly, but there were hundreds of them. They were on the north-eastern border of the forest and the moorlands. They are probably about an hour or two away from here by now. I remember a sound, kind of like a drum." Russetfur seemed to crumble at these words. He sunk down to his knees in defeat.

"Blaze, it's them. The ones in my dream. I'm not sure what to do. My worst nightmare has become a

reality. When I recovered from the dream, I seemed so sure. So sure I could defeat them. I vowed that that my blood would spill his, and his rain of terror will be no more. Now I feel as though every ounce of courage has been drained from me."

"What did you mean by my blood...don't speak like that." Blaze shook his head and meowed defiantly, helping his father up. "You are the most courageous leader this clan has ever seen, and maybe, ever will. You just have to believe you can do it." Blaze looked directly into his father's eyes.

Russetfur hadn't seemed to pay attention to his words, but was just staring back at Blaze, as though searching for something in his eyes.

"Those eyes...I knew it...It was you..."

"Sorry?" A confused Blaze meowed

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking of how you were just like me when I was younger... Your words have filled me with hope for the future, Blaze. Ok, you're right. We must stand and fight, for as long as we can.

Thankyou Blaze. Your confidence, kindness, and determination will make a strong leader one day. Now lets show this horde what we're made of!"

Russetfur stormed out of the chamber, Blaze following right behind, thoughts rushing through his head. Would they stand a chance? Would they win? Will he ever live to see tomorrow? He was snapped instantly into reality when he heard his fathers loud voice boom across the hallway.

"Every cat join here at once! Listen to what I have to say! Kestrel! Get the guards here now! Boulder, you gather everyone outside the building! Hurry, we have little time to loose!" Cats gathered from every door in the hallway, bedrooms, Kitchen, Sickbay, and Nursery. They all had confused looks upon their face, unsure what had caused the uproar.

Almost as soon as Kestrel and Boulder left, they came back with the guards and several other cats.

They rushed through the main door, just as dazed as their companions Kestrel and Boulder. Everyone assembled close to Russetfur, anxiously awaiting his words. Whispers and murmurs rang throughout the room.

"Silence!" Russetfur yowled. "There is a terrible threat among us! Blaze and Snowpelt have spotted a horde of evil beasts heading this way. By now they will be really close, and we have to be ready.

Willowpelt, take a score and a half of skilled archers. Get to the northern wall ramparts and assemble yourselves in two rows. I'll give the call as to when to fire. When the first line has fired, bend down and reload. The second line will then shoot, bend and reload. Keep doing this until I say. Go now and get ready." The white she-cat Willowpelt hurriedly gathered cats from the group, Kestrel and Hazel being chosen as part of the archers. Once the group was sorted, they left through a corridor on the right, leading to the storage area. By the time they emerged fully equipped with bow and arrows, Russetfur was already giving the next orders.

"Right, now that's the archers are sorted. Blaze, I need to ask you a question." Russetfur turned to face Blaze, who was standing only a few pawsteps away from him.

"Yes?" Blaze answered quickly, he was eager to take on the horde and show them what the clan was made of.

"About how many hordbeasts were there?"

"They were in the distance father, and some were obstructed by the foliage, but my guess would be four, maybe five hundred." He slowed down as realization suddenly hit him.

That's about two to three of them for every one of us, plus I bet they don't have old and young beasts amongst their horde.

"This means were outnumbered" Russetfur meowed quietly, almost to himself.

"Father, what about the old and young? We can't lock them in here because, well, in case...What if they get inside? They'll be trapped." It was hard to think of any bad beast getting within the walls of their clan.

"Yes, that is a matter to address." He meowed. He stopped and brought one paw to his chin, obviously thinking to himself. Every cat was anxious, and the few silent minutes that followed had everyone on edge. Finally, Russetfur spoke.

"I've got it. Blaze, I want you to lead the old and young to the quarry not that far away. Take fifty warriors with you, making a formation so that the young and old are protected in the middle, with the warriors guarding on the outside. Go by the western wall, as it is furtherer away from the moorlands in the northeast. I inspected the quarry a while back, and inside, close to the bottom, there was a small crack, which led to a large tunnel. I want you to take the cats into this cave, and block of the entrance. The tunnel leads to a clearing, which would easily hold a hundred cats. A small underground lake is located in the centre of the clearing, and is safe to drink. The only problem is that there are several other endless tunnels attached onto this clearing, and if any cat were to wander off into these tunnels, they would get lost, and most likely would never be seen again. This is why once the old and young are settled, I want 10 warriors to stay behind and guard the tunnels, making sure no one gets lost. The remaining 40 warriors have a special task. Once everything is done correctly, and the entrance is blocked off so no beast would guess it were there, you are take the eastern side of the clan wall, and sneak to the front of the building. Climb the trees, and when the horde is in range, attack them from a distance. Use rocks, arrows, even sharpened sticks; anything that will harm them. Stay hidden, and the horde will not know how many beasts are attacking them. At the same time, we will be attacking from the north wall with arrows, so they will become confused. You can't take more than fifty warriors outside the building, as it is unsafe to leave our homes walls unguarded. We need warriors to stay behind in case they...happen to break in." Russetfur stopped talking, and saw cats nodding their heads in approval. Blaze was not sure how to feel about being chosen to lead the group.

"That's a great idea father, but are you sure you want me to lead the group? I mean, I'm not sure I'm up to it."

Russetfur walked over to his son and put his paw on Blaze's shoulder.

"Son, I know you are still young, but you are a born leader. I know you are up to it. I have faith in you Blaze, and no matter what happens, I'll be proud to be your father."

Blaze became more assured at his father's words.

"T-thank you father. I'll do my best." Blaze meowed quietly. On a stronger note, he told his father of his worries.

"Father, If you don't mind me saying so, I don't think our main gate is very safe. I mean its strong, but it's not solid, and they could shoot weapons through the bars. I think we should block it of with something."

"Hmmm. Yes Blaze you are right, it's not totally safe. All right, everyone who is not part of the group going to the quarry is to grab anything heavy, or something that will cover up the gaps in the gate. This will also prevent them if they get the idea to force the gates open with something heavy."

Russetfur turned to Blaze

"Now Blaze, you need to gather the warriors to accompany you, and go out the main gate before we block it. All young and old are to gather there as well. You must move swiftly, and get around to the back before the horde gets closer. Leave now, and get there as quick as you can. Arm everyone except the youngsters with a weapon, even the older cats can fight if they are in a tight spot."

Blaze nodded, and started gathering cats.

"Oh and Blaze." Blaze turned around and met his father's gaze once more.

"Good Luck. I trust you to protect everyone. Thankyou." Blaze felt a new warmth burn inside of him, and he felt his courage starting to build.

"I will." He meowed in return, and then yowled out so everyone could hear.

"Anyone wanting to come with me to the quarry, meet me next to the main gate, including the elders and

kits. All warriors must be able to arch, or if not, are willing to look after the kits left behind in the quarry. Also, we need a few kits to carry some extra arrows to make sure we don't run out. They won't need to arch, but they will be the ones restocking kits. If some can manage it, I think it would be best to bring daggers and swords just in case. Nursing mothers may come as well to protect their kits. Before anyone is to meet however, they must be fully equipped, and keep in mind we can only take about 50 warriors. Food must also be taken, we have no idea how long this war will last, and no kit can go without food for too long."

Blaze was surprised at how easily everyone followed his orders. No longer did they treat him like a kitten, but rather as a leader. Mothers started to gather their kits, while many kits started to make their way to the storage area. He caught a glance of his mother talking to Rusty, who was obviously complaining at the idea of walking to the quarry. Blaze thought that since he was to lead the group, he had better get his weapon and get to the gate before most.

Leaving the main group, he walked over to the same corridor the archers had gone through earlier, and walked up a small set of stairs before getting into the storage area. It was a large room, and fairly dusty, as it had been a while since any kit had any use for the weapons. On every wall were shelves, cabinets, and racks containing hundreds of weapons. Blaze pushed his way to the back of the rapidly filling room to where the bows were stored. He picked a bow off of the shelf and inspected it to make sure it was in working order.

After he was satisfied, he grabbed the nearest quiver of arrows and positioned the strap over his shoulder, so he could easily get to the arrows attached to his back. He then grabbed a small sword in its sheath, then exited the clustered room.

When he got back to the hallway, he realized that all the assembled kits had already left, obviously looking for heavy objects to block the gate. He rushed the rest of the way to the main gate, stuffing the sheath into his belt as he did so. Once there, he saw that a group of kits had already started to gather there. It looked as though all the mothers and their kits were already there, seeing as though they didn't have to get any weapons. A few elders were in a small group together, and about 20 warriors were already here also. Amongst the group he spotted Smokey, struggling with his weight in arrows. Wandering what he was doing, he strode over towards him.

"Why are you carrying so many arrows?" Blaze questioned him once he reached him.

"Well as you already no, I'm about as accurate with a bow and arrow as a blind archer! So I decided to be helpful and carry a load of arrows." Smokey replied through gritted teeth.

"Oh come of it Smoke, I no your having a hard time with those. But you can carry them if you want to." Blaze turned around and added over his shoulder with a purr, "All the way to the quarry."

Blaze noticed immediately that many more kits had joined the group during his conversation. Thinking that he had better organize the group before the gates were bolted shut, he yowled –

"Everyone coming to the quarry, could you please listen for a moment!" Many heads turned to look at him.

"I need to know whether or not everyone is here. Dustfur, are all the elders with you?" Dustfur was one of the eldest in the clan, and his once dark grey fur was now tinged with silver. Turning back towards the group of elders, he made a quick count and answered in a frail voice,

"Yes Blaze, every elder is here."

"Excellent. What about you mother? Are all the mothers wishing to come, and all the young kits with us?"

Rosie, like Dustfur, did a quick headcount.

"All the kits are here Blaze, and all the mothers with kits younger than 3 seasons are here also. The kits that are older than 3 seasons are coming with us, but their mothers have decided that they are old enough to be with out them. They need to stay behind and help prepare."

"Alright, now I need to know how many warriors are here. If you are a warrior or a cat carrying extra supplies, could you please form a group in front of me so I can count you all." Blaze watched as the warriors grouped before him. It seemed as though the correct amount were here.

"Great! Everyone is here. We don't need anymore warriors." Seeking out a swift warrior, Blaze spotted Boulder. "Boulder, you are fast. Run back to the main building and tell the cats inside that we no longer require any more warriors."

While the group awaited Boulders return, Blaze made a quick scan of everyone here. Felling a little shocked, he spotted the familiar silver coat of Snowpelt. He had forgotten completely about her, being tied up in his duties.

Knowing that she was a capable warrior, he approved of her being with the group, but he couldn't help wish she hadn't come. One part of him felt as though some kind of wall had been built between them lately. She wasn't as open to him as she used to be, and when they talked, it seemed really awkward. The other half of him felt oblivious to all of this, and really cared about her.

Blaze didn't know what to expect from her anymore. He still didn't know what she was about to tell him before she saw the horde. His thoughts were broken by the yowl of Boulder. Snapping back to reality, he realised that the whole time he had been staring at Snowpelt. Seeing the questioning look on her face, he quickly turned to look at Boulder.

"Er... sorry Boulder, could you repeat that?"

"Sure. I've told the cats that we have everyone we need, and are ready to leave."

"Oh... um... thanks." Blaze felt his confidence slowly draining away from him.

What was I thinking? I can't lead all these cats. We're all doomed, and nothing we do will change that. No. I can't think like that. We can do something. We can fight until our last breath has been drawn from our body. I know father thinks it would be better to fight until we no we can't win, then retreat and live. I think differently. What would we have to live for knowing that we ran, rather that face the problem that threatened us? Right now, I've got to be strong for my for my own sake, for my clan's sake, and I will do all I can to protect it.

Rising to his full height, he yowled loudly –

"We are about to face an unknown enemy. We don't know how strong they are, or if in fact they can be beaten. But I want everyone to remember, that although they may have numbers, we have the fighting spirit to protect our clan. This outnumbers any amount of vermin they may have. We must be strong! I know we can do it!"

A yowl of approval met his final words. Feeling a great strength inside of him, Blaze led the group of faithful cats outside the building, into the unknown danger of Blossomtree woods.

6 - The Unexpected Fight

CHAPTER 5

The foliage grew thicker and greener as Darkfang and his horde marched deeper and deeper into the heart of Blossomtree Woods. Darkfang was in an unusually good mood, as not only had he made it to the woods, he had spotted a great red building of stone positioned high up on the tallest hill. *What kind of dim-witted beasts would build it there? Its in full view and just asking to be conquered.*

A wicked grin broadened across Darkfang's face at the thought of taking over the castle and adding many more servants to his rather pathetic collection.

"My Lord, what are the plans for the horde? Surely you can't pass on the opportunity to take over this place. Think of all the food in that place! All ours! I suggest we take them from behind, that way..."

Darkfang slowly turned around, the smile on his face slowly vanishing. The beast that spoke was cut of his sentence by the fearsome look on his leaders face.

"You're a little overconfident, Stripejaw. What makes you think I would need your useless ideas? Listen to me now Stripejaw; I'm the only one who makes the plans, got it? Oh, and as for the food, I SUGGEST you don't go getting too excited. One false move and you'll never need it again." Darkfang made a sudden fierce downward stroke with his sword, burying the blade vertically in the ground. Stripejaw was frozen with fear when he realised what he had done. A small woodland mouse was pinned between the shoulders on the blade, dead.

Taking the hint, he replied quickly, "Y-y-yes my lord. You're the leader, y-you make the p-plans." Stumbling over his footpaws, he took a few hurried steps away from his leader. To break the tension in the air, he started to beat the drum loudly once more. Letting out a furious growl, Darkfang unearthed his blade and shook of the dead mouse. He strode over to Stripejaw like a madbeast, his blade over his shoulder ready to strike.

The whole horde was silent, fearing that if they made one noise, they would share the same gruesome fate as Stripejaw. The drumming slowly drew to a halt as the unfortunate badger realised what was happening.

"You are the most brainless, foolish, mouse-brained idiot I have ever had the misfortune to lay my eyes on! I don't know why I chose you as captain! Don't you realise that one little noise could alert the woodlanders! A mouse babe could do your job better! I guess I'll just have to replace you. Don't worry, I'll make it quick, then you can join countless others who have defied me!" Darkfang swiftly readied his blade for the kill, as Stripejaw was pleading for his life.

"P-please my lord! Sire, please spare me! I'll d-do better next time sir! P-p-please sire! N-no!"

The blade stopped a whisker length from Stripejaw's neck. He could feel the sharp cold of the blade through his fur and on his skin.

"It's your lucky day Stripejaw, I have decided to spare your life. Your pitiful screaming would give away our position. Don't get too relieved yet though, once we conquer this place, I'll decide whether or not you get to keep your life."

Stripejaw had not fully recovered from the shock of being so close to death. Quivering violently, he replied. "T-t-thank you m-my lord. I-I-I won't g-give you a r-reason to doubt m-me again."

Satisfied, Darkfang turned to face his silent horde. Speaking quietly, he growled, "I have a plan, but before I tell you, we must take cover under the shadows of trees and bushes. For my plan to work, no beast can know we are here."

Most of the stunned horde, especially those at the back, did not hear Darkfang's quiet words, but just followed the ones who did into the shadows. Amongst the cover of the foliage, and the darkness of the night, it was almost impossible to see the huge horde.

Happy that they could not be seen, Darkfang recited the plans of attack on the castle.

"The attack will be launched at dawn, when the woodlanders are just waking peacefully.

The last thing on their sorry minds would be an attack." Darkfang used his sword to draw pictures in the dirt as he spoke. His horde gathered around him to see their leader work.

"This here is the castle. Most of us will be attacking from the eastern wall, shooting arrows and javelins. We will need to make lots of noise, and draw the woodlander's attention away from the front gates. Meanwhile, a group of forty beasts will be waiting at the back of the castle, and upon my signal, they will use our nets to climb over the back wall and open the front gates. For cover, they will use a smoke bomb I acquired from the previous land, making sure they cover their mouths with cloth. It's not toxic, but it's not good to breathe in either. The thing is, we can see almost perfectly through smoke, as we have become accustomed to it over previous conquests. The dumb little woodlanders can't do this, and won't be able to fight back, let alone know you are planning to open the gate. This will be your signal." Darkfang cupped his paws over his mouth and mimicked a woodland pigeon. "Once the gates are open, we will flood the castle with sheer numbers, bringing them down within their own home."

Murmurs and nods of agreement from the horde showed that they agreed. Darkfang continued his speech, feeling appreciated for once.

"Right, We need to get a move on if we are going to make it before dawn. As soon as we are at the eastern wall, I want one of you to take a group of 40 beasts to the back wall with the nets and wait for my call. Hmm... Blacktooth shall do. Blacktooth! Come and stand before me at once!"

Dead silence met the leader's words, until a black dog stepped forward and spoke. He wore a gold hoop in his left ear, and a black shell-patch over his right eye.

"Arr, The one yer call Blacktooth is dead lord, yer killed 'im yer self."

"Ah, my loyal sea-dog Saltnose. I forgot all about that worthless scum Blacktooth. Ok, since you were bold enough to stand up and speak to me in front of the horde, I'll give you the mission of leading the group to the back of the castle. If you do the job correctly, and if you survive, I'll promote you to captain. I suppose dog-beasts are the only kind to trust." Darkfang glanced quickly over to the stunned Stripejaw. He was quivering at the thought of what his leader would do to him to make the job of captain vacant. "All right, you know of the plans, take 40 beasts to the back of the castle and standby until the right moment."

Darkfang turned to face his horde and looked over them until he found the location of his slaves. These poor prisoners were made to carry all the supplies while on the march.

"Right, you there, squirrel, where's our nets?" The ragged little squirrel hurriedly searched the supplies, only finding one. "M-my Lord, there is only one net. I t-think your horde l-lost the others when f-fishing." Darkfang growled ferociously at this answer.

"What! You useless horde can't do anything right! I even believe what this pitiful creature says, as it is something you worthless beasts would do! Grrrrr, where just gonna have to make do with one net, although this will slow progress down." He turned to Saltnose in his temper. "Well, what are you waiting for? Winter?! Hurry up and get a move on, and take

that net with you!" Darkfang then mumbled to himself -

"Phweew, Darkfang, your getting yourself all worked up over this horde. They're not worth it." In a much calmer voice, he spoke over his horde. "I've decided to wait awhile until we go to the east wall. We will give the group of forty enough time to get to the back before we go.

We don't want to attract too much attention."

With those final words, Darkfang and his horde sat down. The hours until war were getting slim, and with this on their minds, all they could do for the moment was wait.

~

Moonlight shown through the narrow entrance of the quarry, illuminating the cave with a soft glow. Blaze and his warriors settled the cats to stay there, giving out food, and organising the warriors to stay behind and care for them. Once everything was done, Blaze, as well as other warriors who had family in the cave, went over to his mother and

sister.

"Mother, I hope everything is alright for you and Rusty here. Have you got enough food? Are you comfortable? Can you manage here?" Rosie put her paw gently over Blaze's mouth, hushing him.

"Blaze, my young warrior, you have no need to worry about us. We are safe here within these quarry walls, and we met no trouble on the way here." Rosie removed her paw and rested it on Blaze's shoulder.

"I know you will do your best out there Blaze, and I know you can win. You just have to put your fears and worries behind you, and replace it with courage. You are strong Blaze, and I believe in you."

"Yeah Blaze! Beat up da bad guys! I know ya will Blaze, coz ur my big brofer!" Rusty added

A tear rolled down Blaze's eye as he listened to his family's words. He ruffled the fur on Rusty's head and knelt down to her level.

"Thank you Rusty, I'll do my best to protect my little sister. I have something for you Rusty, it means a lot to me, and has brought me luck over the years. Maybe it will do the same for you." Blaze reached into his pocket and pulled out his amber gem. It shone beautifully in the moonlight. He took Rusty's paw in his own and placed the gem on it.

"Blaze, itz ur lucky stone. Ar ya sur ya wanta giv it ta me?" Rusty's big green eyes shone as she looked up at her older brother.

"Yes Rusty, I do. Promise me you will keep it with you, it would mean a lot to me if you did." Rusty nodded her head at Blaze's words.

"I pwomice Blaze."

"Thankyou Rusty" Blaze stood up and looked up at his mother, who was trying to hold back her tears.

"Mother, I have to leave now. I will be back to get you get you soon." He embraced his mother in a hug, then shook his head and pulled away.

"Hmmp, the way I'm going it sounds like I wont be returning. I will though mother, I promise, I will." He turned away and started to walk towards the entrance. Everyone was waiting on him.

"Farewell." Blaze meowed over his shoulder. Rosie had Rusty embraced in a hug as she watched her son leave. Rusty had the gemstone clutched tightly in her paw.

"Farewell, my warrior."

~

Outside in the forest, it had started to rain heavily. Darkfang knew it was almost time to get a move on, but the rain had made him ferocious. If it didn't stop soon, his plan would fail, as the smoke bomb would not work. The rain had come swiftly without warning, so maybe it would leave in the same manner. Darkfang growled softly to himself as he cursed the dreadful weather.

~

Outside the quarry entrance Blaze and his warriors had been met with heavy rain. They did not let this slow them down however, and they swiftly moved around the bottom of the castle's hill towards the eastern wall. They had blocked the entrance to the cave, and it would be impossible for an outsider to find the entrance if they didn't know where to find it. They had then climbed out the quarry and set off on their march. To Blaze's left, Smokey and Snowpelt were walking along side him. Although all three were dripping wet, and the rain pounded upon their faces mercilessly, they still held their heads up high and braved the weather. Blaze was the leader of the group, and he and his friends were ahead of the other warriors, so they could warn the rest of trouble if they found it. So far they had made it to the corner of the eastern and southern wall, meeting no trouble with the evil horde. Blaze thanked the heavens that they had made quick progress.

"Arr, What are yer doin yer great 'ump of seaweed! Yer gotta be more careful wid that smoke bomb! Arrr yer scurvy dog, pick it up now!"

Blaze, Smokey, and Snowpelt immediately became alert at the loud noise. Blaze quickly crouched down amongst the ferns and ushered his friends to do the same. He put his paw to his lips to indicate silence. Blaze parted the ferns slightly so they could see what was happening. A black dog arguing with a fox, and around two score beasts behind them met their view.

"I'm sorry Saltnose, the rain is making the floor slippery. If it doesn't stop soon, the bomb won't work."

"Arr, I know Bane. If this retch'd rain doesn' go, our plan will fail. Arr, bu' we mus' still continue on with our plans. Ther rain might le' off soon. An' don' go drop'n it again yer foolish idiot."

Seeing that they were getting closer to their hideout, Blaze whispered urgently to his friends.

"We must go and warn the others. We're on a collision course with what seems to be part of the horde. I'm afraid the only thing we can do is confront them head on. If we let them go, they'll try to use that smoke bomb of there's against the castle. It won't work in this

weather, but we can't risk it, in case the rain stops."

"I can't believe they would do such horrible things." Snowpelt whispered

"Me neither" Smokey added

Blaze shook his head at these words.

"I know it's bad, but we can't just stand here talking about how terrible they are. Come on, we have to go now. Crouch down amongst the foliage and make as little noise as possible. We have to move swiftly." Crouching close to the ground on all fours, Blaze led Snowpelt and Smokey back to the group.

Sunheart, A golden tom cat who was in the front ranks, called for the group of warriors to halt, for he had heard a noise in the bushes ahead. Loading his bow with an arrow, he aimed, pulling his bow string taut, ready to fire in an instant. Fearing the worst as the bushes parted, he was relieved to see a familiar face, and lowered his bow.

"Ahh, its only you Blaze. What is the reason of concern on your face? What's happened?"

Blaze stood up to face the older warrior, while Snowpelt and Smokey joined the ranks of the group.

"Sunheart, there is a terrible threat awaiting us not far ahead. It looks as though part of the horde has taken a different route than the rest, obviously to try a sneak attack on the castle from behind. They even brought a smoke bomb, but if this rain doesn't stop, it won't work. I think we can take them on; we're evenly matched."

Sunheart looked dismayed.

"But if we do, we will no doubt loose the lives of some. And what if we loose? Or our numbers reduced too small? What will we do then?"

"I understand the risk Sunheart. But if we try to avoid them, they will just go and attack the castle. At all costs we must not let that happen. We must ambush them." Sunheart, still not satisfied, did not retort.

"Ok Blaze, I will follow your orders, even at the cost of my life."

"Thank you Sunheart, I knew I could count on you. Now we have to let everyone know of our plans."

"I'll do it" Sunheart meowed.

Before long, everybeast new of the attack, and were stalking silently towards their enemy. Once in sight, Blaze ushered everyone to halt amongst the foliage.

He whispered, "Alright. Everybeast get their weapon ready. Wait until I signal, then we'll rush them from behind."

Blaze once again parted the bushes and watched silently. The group of skinny, ragged horde beasts walked by them, completely unaware that they were being watched.

"1...2...3...Go!"

7 - The demon within

CHAPTER 6

At Blaze's command, the group of 40 warriors leapt into battle at full speed. The surprised horde beasts had little time to react to the ferocity of the attack. In a whirl of swinging swords, and shooting arrows, many horde beasts fell. Unfortunately, the horde's heavy armour proved difficult to penetrate, and although Blaze knocked over countless enemies with his sword, he found they kept getting up without injury. The vermin had now gotten over the surprise of the attack, and were battling with full force. All around Blaze beasts were fighting to the death, and the noise that was being made was deafening. A sly fox tried to sneak up on him, but after hearing a loud crackle of branches behind him, he sidestepped swiftly, thwarting the attack. The sharp cold of the blade lightly nicked Blaze's neck as he swung around and dealt a huge blow to the fox's side. Although the small sword did not penetrate the armour, it did leave him winded, and the fox collapsed down onto his knee's clutching his side. For a brief moment, Blaze surveyed his surrounding. Ahead of him, Smokey dominated a battle with a dog. He had luckily brought a sword with him for protection. Smokey utilized both his sword, and the arrow supplies to viciously stab his opponent.

Over to his right, Snowpelt was in an intense sword fight with a huge badger. A second badger crept up from behind; ready to swing at Snowpelt with his mace. Knowing instinctively that he had to help her, he struck out impatiently at an advancing dog, right in the bare patch of fur in-between his shoulder and head armour. With his enemy laying dead on ground, Blaze ran at full speed towards the mace bearing badger. Striking just as he had previously, he struck the badger's bare neck fur. Heaving the lifeless falling body aside, he stood back to back to with Snowpelt, to prevent anymore sneak attacks.

"You alright Snowpelt?"

Gritting her teeth with the intensity of battle, all fragments of shyness gone, she replied

"I'm fine thanks. Couldn't say the same to that badger you just slew. How you get though it's armour? To your right!"

Blaze Swung his sword to his right at the oversized rat, who blocked it with his own.

"Like this."

Rolling side ways out the way of the blade, he swiftly stood up behind the rat, striking him like he had the previous two. Quickly joining together again with Snowpelt, he explained the situation while blocking all types of deadly weapons.

"In all armour there is a weak spot, an unprotected patch where the armour is joined. In these beasts armoury, it's the spot where the helmet joins to the shoulder armour; the neck. One sharp blow with a sword there is deadly. We have to be careful though. We bear no armour, and one mistake could prove fatal. Stay close to me and I'll protect you."

"No chance Blaze. Sorry, but I can take care of myself. Slay a few beasts for me will you?"

With those last words, Snowpelt took off, hacking furiously at anybeast in her path.

Momentarily surprised at Snowpelt's skill, Blaze was caught of guard, and an arrow struck him in his right shoulder. With a cry of pain, he fell to his knees, and dropped his sword. Turning his head, he saw the same fox he had previously winded holding a bow; a wicked grin spread broad across his face. Clutching his fallen sword, he slowly stood up, pulling the arrow out from deep within his shoulder. He winced as blood trickled down his arm, dripping onto the grass bellow.

"What's the matter puss? Did you get hurt?" The fox mocked.

Blaze gripped his sword in both paws, despite the pain he was in.

"Shut up fox! I'll show you what a real warrior can do!" Blaze yelled as he raised his sword.

"Die!" Blaze ran at full speed towards the fox; his blade high over his shoulder. The fox just snickered. What a reckless move! Blindly running straight for me he is! With his target closing in, the fox dropped his bow and swiftly drew his sword; mightily swinging a counter attack at his foe. Realising that his sword had made no contact, he stood still in fear.

The cat had vanished!

In reality, Blaze had jumped high into the air; so fast that it had been undetected by the fox. Pointing his sword downward, he came back down towards the dazed fox, faster with the force of gravity behind him. Smashing his enemy's helmet, he landed besides the fallen fox gracefully in a crouch. Standing up, he surveyed the fallen beast. The force of the blow had completely shattered his helmet, and a twisted look of pure fear was frozen upon the remains of the dead fox's face. After swinging his sword once to shake of the blood, he quickly lunged back into battle.

By now, many of Blaze's allies had become aware of the horde's weakness; a swing of the sword to the neck. As the number of horde beasts declined, they started to panic, and lower their defences. They began to huddle together in a group, realising they had been defeated. Blaze and his comrades surrounded the small group in a large circle.

What's happening? I could have sworn there were more than these. How did their numbers decline so quickly? Blaze wondered to himself.

"Why have you come? Tell me now!" Blaze yelled at a dog that was at the head of the group. He wore an eye patch, and was cowering at the sight of Blaze.

"WHY!" Blaze yelled once more.

The dog answered in a quivering voice, "It wasn't ar idea! Yer can't kill me!"

The dog then whispered to a badger next to him. The badger nodded, then remained still.

"What was that vermin? Tell me what you just told that badger! NOW! I want no more plotting. I am quite happy to kill you all now for the trouble you have caused!"

Blaze raised his sword, and pointed it at the dog. In the moment where everyone had their eye on Blaze, the badger instantly jumped out of his group and dragged an unsuspecting cat from the outside circle. He restrained the struggling cat in his mighty grip, and rested a knife upon her neck.

Everybeast turned their eyes on the scene, including Blaze. He instantly dropped his sword, eyes wide with horror. He wanted to scream, but no sound left his jaws. Angry tears welled up in Blaze's eyes as he saw Snowpelt, shaking violently under the badgers grip. Her eyes closed with fear as the knife was pressed firmer against her neck.

"Ha! We've got you." The badger yelled madly. "One move and this pretty cat is dead!"

The dog, who had been quivering only a moment before, stood up calmly and strode over to the badger.

"So, what's yer decision cat? Ar yer gonna attack us, and le' this poor, poor creature die?" The dog menacingly raised a sharp claw, running it down the side of Snowpelt's face.

"NO! don't touch her! I'm the leader, It's me you want!" Blaze yelled, collapsing onto his knees.

The dog continued like he hadn't heard Blaze's desperate cry. "Or, will yer save this cats life, an' surrender? What'll it be, cat?"

Blaze's rage built up inside of him as salty tears fell to the ground. Claspng a clump of grass in each paw, he looked up, staring the dog straight in the eye.

I don't know what to do. If I attack, Snowpelt will die. If I surrender, they will carry out there plan, and many more will die. Father, I need you.

"Don't surrender Blaze! My life is nothing compared to the whole clan's sa—" Snowpelt fell quiet as the badger tightened his grip, and forced the knife even harder against her skin. Blood started to trickle

down her shoulder. She said no more; if the knife were pressed any firmer, she would die.

"But, Snowpelt. I-I can't let you die! It's my fault. No, I won't let it happen, these vermin will pay the price!"

As Blaze stood up, something changed inside of him. He no longer felt any threat. His vision became blurred and red, and all he could see clearly was the badger and Snowpelt.

Smokey, who had been near Blaze, witnessed something he never thought he would see. His friend's eyes had turned red, and he could actually see a fire brewing inside them. He felt scared for his friend, and for every onlooker. He wasn't the same creature anymore.

Blaze, all feelings gone, lunged at the badger with a speed he never knew he had. He jumped into the air, and brought his claws down upon his enemy. The horror struck badger dropped Snowpelt just as his armour was torn to shreds. As Blaze landed, he surveyed the bloody scene. The badger was dead, ripped apart by his claws. On the floor, next to the badger, lay Snowpelt. Breathing heavily, she clutched her shoulder, eyes wide with fear. Blaze raised his paw, and saw the blood dripping from his claws.

He stared once more at Snowpelt, and saw the wound he had inflicted upon her shoulder.

Blaze's feelings started to rush back to him, and his eyes became clear once more. He was confused, scared, and angry. Seeing his blood soaked paw, he took a step towards Snowpelt. The she-cat moved away, shaking horribly.

"D-did I do this?" Blaze muttered to himself. He saw that all the horde beasts, including the dog, had fled. This was the least of his concerns however. Everybeast's eye was on him.

Smokey, who never had been the brave one, took a slow step towards Blaze.

"You mean you don't remember?" Smokey took another step forward.

"N-no. All I r-remember...was getting angry. T-then everything w-went red."

Smokey had never in his life seen Blaze so scared. He decided that his old friend was back. Every cat stood still as Smokey approached Blaze. Slowly, he put a paw on his shoulder.

"Blaze...it's alright. I can't explain what just happened, but your back. That's all that matters right now." Smokey meowed soothingly.

"No Smokey, your wrong! I hurt Snowpelt, and I'll never forgive myself for it! If that badger hadn't have dropped Snowpelt, she would have died!" Blaze retaliated. He was feeling tortured inside; he had never imagined that such a terrible power lay dormant within him.

"But she didn't, and you should be grateful for that." Smokey replied.

"Snowpelt." Blaze stood up, paws still quivering. "I'm sorry. I don't know what overcame me." With those words, he strode away. He couldn't bear to look Snowpelt in the eye any longer. He muttered over his shoulder, "Boulder, you've always been trustworthy. I want you to take Snowpelt back to the quarry. Make sure she gets the best possible care. If anyone asks, she was injured in battle."

"Yes Blaze." Boulder slowly moved towards Snowpelt, and heaved her onto his back. Snowpelt didn't struggle; her unmoving icy glare rested upon Blaze. As the two cats left, Blaze turned around and nervously faced his followers. The cats were beginning to relax, but were nonetheless still tense.

"I apologize for my anger, I can do no more. I am still willing to lead you all to the battle ahead, that is, if you still trust me." Blaze looked down at his last words.

"I trust you Blaze." Smokey spoke up. He then turned to face the group. "And I hope everyone else will to. We have come too far to quit. Who's with me?"

A mighty cheer came from all the cats; all traces of nervousness gone.

See Blaze? We're all still loyal to you. Lead the way. Smokey meowed.

Blaze, proud to have such faithful friends, replied, "Thank you. I'll do my best."

The rain had now stopped, and Blaze led the group onwards. He showed no signs of worry on the outside, but on the inside, he was still torn. For the sake of the clan, however, he pushed on.

~

"I can't believe I got away from that lot!" An oversized rat sighed heavily. Catching his breath, he looked down at the fish net tied around his waist. He had been the rat in charge of keeping the net safe, so that the group could use it to climb the castle wall. He then looked up, and realized that six other beasts had escaped with him.

The seven beasts, not being the most loyal of creatures, had sneaked away from the battle sight once the odds had turned against them. Not stopping once to see where they were going, they kept running until the roars of battle had died away to a dead silence behind them. Now, relieved that they had escaped unharmed, the beasts surveyed their surroundings. With a sudden shock of realization, they saw that they were at the very place their group had been bound for; the southern wall of the castle. The large rat turned to the others and spoke, "Well, out of forty, seven beasts actually made it to the destination. Not bad if you ask me – ouch!" A badger struck the rat on the head with his fist.

"Not bad? Thirty-three beasts die and you call that not bad!"

Rubbing his throbbing head, the rat retorted. "Wow, I'm surprised Ragear, you can count!"

"Of course I can count you idiot! Look, I would love to stand here all day and fight, but we're in enough trouble as it is! You don't seriously think we could return to Darkfang like this do you? We haven't even got the smoke bomb with us. It was lost in the battle. Well, we could just go ahead; those woodlanders in the castle couldn't be much of a bother. All their warriors are outside, so it'll be easy. I'm not scared like you lot, why, I wish there were a woodlander right here so I could rip out its throat!"

Just as he had finished his sentence, the bushes rustled behind them.

"Arrrggggg! It's those woodlanders; they've come to finish us off! Run!" Ragear screamed.

"Arr, keep yer fur on. 'tis only us." The bushes parted to reveal Saltnose, and the rest of the horde beasts that had escaped when Blaze lost control.

"Er, erm... oh it's you Saltnose, how did you escape." Ragear shifted from paw to paw, trying to hide his embarrassment. Deciding not to question Ragear's ridiculous actions, Saltnose answered, "We overwhelmed 'em! Those stupid woodlanders ran wit' ther tail between ther legs, well those that we 'adn't slain o' corse."

"But chief, I thou-" The beast who spoke was cut short by Saltnose's cold glare. He was too proud to admit defeat amongst the rest of the group. He didn't bother asking the others how they had escaped, because he was already certain of the answer.

"Great work chief! Well, since we have already taken care of all the warriors, why don't we go ahead with the plan? It'll be easy to open the front gates of a castle with no warriors defending it. Look, I even kept hold of that net so we can climb the building!" The rat who had been fighting with Ragear earlier spoke.

Although he knew in the back of his mind that the warriors remained alive, Saltnose's pride got the better of his judgement.

"I don't see why not. Those pathetic creatures wont know what 'it 'em!"

Saltnose paced over to wall. He raised his paw, and ran it down the red barrier.

"Give me the net." He ordered, his gaze straying to the topmost point of the stone wall.

The rat threw Saltnose the net, his lightning fast paw shooting out to catch it. For a few moments, the dog glared back and forth between the wall and the net, analysing the distance. Taking a step back, he launched the netting, making sure to grasp tightly to one end. A gap in the other end neatly wrapped itself around a protruding boulder on top of the wall. Saltnose gave it a sturdy tug to test if it was secure.

Once satisfied, he turned towards his companions.

"Ragear, since yer were so eager ter rip out ther throats o' ther woodlanders, I'll let yer go first. Go on, unless yer afraid?" A mocking smile widened upon the dog's mouth. However, when the badger stood still, his anger started to seep through.

"Well, what are you waiting for? That was an order! Stop acting so cowardly!" Saltnose took one step towards the badger.

"I'm not a coward! It's just, well, Darkfang said we had to wait until his signal. We can't deny his orders; he'll rip us apart!"

Slowly, Saltnose took another step towards Ragear.

"Huh, typical. Everybeast following Darkfang's orders like their life depends on it."

"But it does! You know Darkfang, he'll kill anyone who defies him. And why should I listen to you anyway? You're no more special than any of us." Ragear was getting impatient.

Saltnose's temper was rising. Angrily, he strode at a swifter pace towards Ragear, raising his voice slightly. He didn't want to alert any woodlanders that may be awake. "In case you don't remember, I was put in charge to lead this group. I was the one Darkfang trusted. And why weren't you chosen? Because you're a brainless fool who doesn't know your place in life! Right now, I have just as much authority as Darkfang, and not just in status. If I wanted to, I could kill you now, then it wouldn't matter who you took orders from anymore, would it? Now I suggest you do as I say, unless you prefer your head detached to your body!" Saltnose was standing directly in front of Ragear now, his hot breath blowing down, ragged and uneven, upon the badger.

Up close like this, Ragear realised how much bigger Saltnose was. However, he was not about to let himself be embarrassed yet again because of this creature.

"If we defy Darkfang's orders, he'll have our head anyway, you included."

"You still have this blind faith for Darkfang. Tell me this, don't you think it'll be a better idea if we snuck in during the night and open the gates? Everyone would be asleep, and there would be no need for a smoke bomb. If they have any sentries, we would just kill them before they have a chance to scream. Then, we could just open the gates for the others. Don't you think that's a little easier than battling our way through the whole clan during the day? Even if they were distracted, someone would notice us. Sometimes I think Darkfang is losing his edge, he is no longer fit for leader." Saltnose trailed off. He was afraid that he might have raised his voice a little too high. However, when all stayed silent for a few minutes, he relaxed.

Ragear, who was now starting to see the dog's point, agreed. Besides, who would want to put his life at risk, if there was a way around it?

"Alright Saltnose, I'll go. I prefer my head the way it is." Striding over to the net, Ragear carefully started to climb. He couldn't help but think he was being used as some sort of experiment by the dog.

"Good. Hurry up then. If it's safe, then signal the rest of us to follow." Saltnose growled.

I knew it! I'm only being used to test if it's safe. I'm just a disposable rag to him. If something happens to me, they'll just run away with their tail between their legs. Ragear thought to himself as he struggled to climb the wall.

He didn't retaliate however, as he was already halfway up the fragile net. It was only designed to hold fish, not the weight of a badger. It did hold his weight however, and he managed to scramble his way to the top of the wall.

Stepping onto the battlements on the inner wall, he surveyed his surroundings. In front of him, a huge building towered high into the stars. From this angle, he could not see the gates. Before calling the others, he decided it would be best to first take a glance at the gates. He would have to see how many, if any, lookouts they had. It was then he realised he would have to get down onto the floor. Being up so high, he would be easily spotted by any lookouts. It was too high to jump, so he looked around him for

another way to get down. To his relief, he saw a flight of steps to the right of him, leading safely down to the bottom. This meant that the sentries would undoubtedly climb the wall to keep watch.

Ragear, swiftly but cautiously, descended the stairs. Only when his aching paws touched the cool, well-kept grass, did he relax. Now that he was on the floor, behind the immense building, the chances of being spotted were reduced. Taking a few steps, he closed the distance between himself and the castle. Positioning his back against the wall, he slowly inched his head around the side. The scene shook him. Many cats had positioned themselves high up on the battlements, next to the main gate. They held arrows in their paws, and seemed to be surveying the area with caution.

However, this was not the only thing that made Ragear's fur stand on end with annoyance. The main gate – the most important aspect in his leader's plan – was blocked. Anything from household furniture to kitchen utensils were piled up high in front of the gate. Not only did this make it impenetrable from outside attacks, there was no way it could be opened either. In the midst of battle, there would be no time to clear the mess.

The assault on the castle had been thwarted.