

# The Elemental Battle

By Lavaclaw

Submitted: May 31, 2006

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*I don't know where the text of my story is supposed to go, but I'll try and add it later. Aspen's doing the cover of this book, so I thought you might actually want to read the story. Here goes!*

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/Lavaclaw/34260/The-Elemental-Battle>

**Chapter 1 - Hopeless**

**2**

# 1 - Hopeless

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It was a terribly cold night outside. With the wind blowing ferocious gusts of nettles, small rocks and bits
of dirt that stung like bees, it was truly horrible to any living being forced outside in this sharp early frost
and winds. Fortunately, rat-mother was nice and safe with rat-father inside their cozy burrowed den.
Almost as if the gods themselves wished otherwise to the rat couple, rat-mother agonizingly gave birth to
nine pups.
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Each minute dragged into an hour as rat-mother waited for runt-rat to return. "She should be back by now!" grumbled a disgruntled rat-mother. "I need the food to eat, so I can feed the young'uns," she continued, muttering to herself. Runt, because she was the smallest and easiest to push around, became rat-mother all-important gatherer of foods. Rat-mother's other eight babies were solidly unwilling to stop nursing, and start their own gathering. With Runt around to do all the work, why would they? Rat-mother knew that rat-father should gather all their food while the children were still nursing, but rat-father had left her; willingly or unwillingly, only the Badger god could know. For now, rat-mother could only spare her weakest pup, for it didn't matter if she died; she would die anyways in the wild. It was illogical to have a healthy, strong rat take on gathering too early. "Pathetic, useless excuse for a rat," griped rat-mother. "Why must I always halt your daydreams and get you back to work?" Rat-mother leisurely walked out of their den, in no apparent rush, and called back to her little ones, "I'll be back soon! I just need to find Runt." Rat-mother wandered through the forest, checking all the usual gathering places for Runt. She found many rats, but no Runt.

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Meanwhile, Runt was playing around. Daydreaming, rat-mother would say. Runt would always pretend that she was someone important, searching for an item that would heal her people. She loved this kind of food gathering, but it always ended up she was late returning home to her unappreciative mother and siblings. She couldn't help it though! Pretending was much easier to deal with than her own sorry life. Most rats stared or laughed at her because of her small size and silly games, so she went to remote gathering places, so she could be left in peace.

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Nila crept stealthily through the underbrush. She knew the evil witch was coming to get her. She needed to find a special food, called por-fruit, to cure her small village from the wicked witch's spell. Runt was playing her games again. She was Nila, as she often was, and her mother was the evil witch, and her siblings were the village. She was, in reality, only searching for some seeds to feed her family tonight, but that seemed to bland for her story. The rare and legendary por-fruit was much more suitable.

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Nila spotted a flash of patchy gray fur. *The witch!* thought Nila/Runt. She ran to the nearest patch of heather to conceal her growing fear-scent, and desperately tried to stop trembling. Slowly, Nila realized the evil witch wasn't following her. She cautiously relaxed and poked her head out of the heather patch. After glancing about for a few sluggish minutes, she was about to leave the heather patch, when the fur flashed past again! She hurriedly dove into the heather again, and prepared to wait out the search. Instead, after calming her nerves for a moment, she thought in indignation, *No! I will not tremble like a coward! I will kill this monster once and for all!* With a tiny battle cry, Nila leaped up and tackled the creature for all she was worth.

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In the split second before Runt landed on her `monster' fear struck cold in her heart. It was not the witch, but a hostile cat, and one the rats of the tree-ground knew well. She was a fierce, lone she-cat, known for her ability to take on thousands of rats at a time without suffering so much as a scratch. Her name

was Selic.

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Selic, among other things, was also very agile. She would be on Nila before she had a chance to move, <i>had</i> Nila even had a chance to move. But Nila was already leaping at the cat with a blow intended for the witch hunting her. The she-cat whirled around, alarmed by the small cry, just in time for Nila to land on the back of her head. Nila shredded through matted fur, and the cat let out a yowl of pain. Quick as she could, Nila leapt off of Selic's head, whirled around and fled while the she-cat was still in shock. She whirled around and fled before the vengeful war-cat could recover and attack.

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As Runt fled though the forest, she screamed at everyone she passed by, "Run! Selic is coming! Run!" Most rats fled with her, believing her story, and looking at the amount of blood on her coat. Some, however, thought it was a ploy to get them to leave their gathering sites, or maybe it was just another game that Runt was pretending.

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Rat-mother heard Runt's cry but dismissed it as one of the nearby mothers' babies wailing. As Runt's voice started to fade, rat-mother grasped what she was saying, and who was saying it. "Oh great. Runt's gotten all the rats in an uproar. Again." Rat-mother grumbled, and muttered a few things under her breath. She started trotting back towards the direction of Runt's voice.

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When she had reached Runt, she saw she was back at the den, and right in the clearing before the entrance to the den stood the evil she-cat, reaching into the den, ready to grab one of her younglings. All thoughts of rationalization were banished from rat-mother's mind. She must save her babies! "Graarr!!!" came a real battle cry, born from hatred, and rage, and the instinct that a mother must protect her own. This cry was not born from the base of rat-mother's throat, but so far back as to where all instinct started for a rat. The desire to save her younglings was upon her.

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Selic, however, would not be made a fool of twice. She whipped around at the sound of the cry, faster than the Cheetah god himself, and took on the protective rat head-on. In doing so, Selic left her rear flank virtually unguarded from the rats waiting in the back of the den.

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While the elder rats trembled in the back, trying to save their own skins, Runt launched herself to save her ungrateful mother. She slashed the inside of Selic's back left leg, and listened to the she-cat's yowl of pain with fear of her backlash. When the older rats in the back of the warren stopped cowering long enough to see Selic bellowing in rage, they tried to battle their way through the chaos and mayhem created in a burrow with eight other younglings.

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With so much pain fueling her rage, Selic had set herself to kill the next living thing she saw: rat-mother. "You shall pay, rat," she spat through snarling yellow fangs. She made quick work of the mother. It was simple enough to elude the mother's pathetic attacks, then pin her to the ground. Selic grinned, her muzzle contorted with malice. She leaned forwards, and made a quick clean bite to the rat's spine, as any predator would do to its prey. The world seemed to stop and beat slowly as Runt watched the life leave her mother's eyes. Though Runt did not like her mother, it was she who gave Runt life. She hated to see her leave her life so soon. Runt's eyes hardened to two chips of flint.

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As Runt turned to face the she-cat, Selic, in turn, pivoted to face her. Selic did not waste any time in a staring contest, for the two creatures were no where near equals, and thus did not have any need to try and stare the other down. Ivory fangs glistened forebodingly and ebon claws unsheathed from gray paws, as Selic leapt towards Runt, her claws and incisors seeking Runt's spine for the killing blow. In the same moment the gray she-cat leapt up, as did Runt. Runt landed shortly thereafter on Selic's face, wasting no time in tearing through the previous wound she had inflicted accidentally. Blood spattered Runt's features, as she reopened and deepened the still fresh wound.

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The whole attack merely lasted a few moments, but seemed like a lifetime to Runt and Selic. All the time during Runt's slashes into the back of her head, Selic was twisting her head around and throwing it up and down, as if she thought that her fangs could reach behind her head, or that she could easily dislodge Runt from her brow. Runt was determined, however, not to be done away with so easily. Unfortunately for her plans, Runt was tossed aside several seconds later.

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Real fear crept into Selic's eyes this time, minute as it was. She was no fool. Selic knew when she was beaten. At this moment, Selic knew that she could stay and fight, and win eventually. But what would she gain? Killing one annoying rat was hardly worth the trouble. She turned tail and ran through the forest, probably seeming like she was running away with the speed of a small silver fish in the water. However, she ran quickly because she could, and the pain in the back of her head fueled her short dash.

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Runt landed quite ungracefully in an unblooming berry bush. A soft *huh* escaped her maw as the breath was knocked out of her chest. The sharp twigs easily penetrated her rough pelt, stabbing her haphazardly as her body crashed through the shrub. The leaves grew sparsely on the outside of the bush, but once she pierced the outer layer, only poking twigs met her body. Time came to a stand-still as she struggled to breathe once she reached the base of the plant. Her body was so weak... She could not keep her optics open a second longer. Her mind slipped into unconsciousness.

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Runt came to consciousness surrounded by rats. The only thing preventing her once terrified siblings from ripping her guts out in anger were the kindly rats that she'd saved from Selic by allowing them to shelter in this den.

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"She's awake," someone uttered in a dangerous whisper. This alerted the attention of Bagath, the eldest sibling.

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"Filthy traitor," he spat venomously. Bagath was demanding, and took to dominance like a king to his royal subjects.

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“You killed mother...” said Lialia in a crushed whisper. She was the always fragile second-born. Why she was that way, no one knew, but there had been whispers that Bagath had fought her the moment he came to life, whispers that were soon obliterated by none other than Bagath.

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“Hush child. She did not mean to; I'm sure,” said a stranger comfortingly to Lialia. He walked up to stand reassuringly next to Lialia.

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“What did I do?” asked a bewildered Runt. She would think that the rats would be *happy* that she had fought off the cat, nearly costing Runt her life.

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“You brought the cat here and provoked it to kill mother!” shouted an emotionally hurt Ragnarok. Being second to last born, he had taken pity on Runt, and helped her as much as he could without Bagath noticing. Now, he was crushed that she'd do something like this and blow away everyone's trust in her, fragile as it was, and betray him in particular.

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"I didn't bring it here! It-it-it just followed me! I saw her in the woods, and leapt at her to attack her and drive her off. When I realized that this was <b>the</b> Selic, I ran as fast as I could, saving as many rats as possible on the way." Runt paused, gulping at the memory. "If Mother," Runt's voice faltered at her mother's name. "had listened to me screaming to run, she wouldn't have gotten into this mess. Even after that, she shouldn't have leapt at Selic. She cannot be driven off, and everyone knows it. I saw the look in Selic's eye as she whipped around to face Mother." Again, her voice faltered at the mention of the rat their family had lost so easily. "She was going to kill her unless I did something. I tried to annoy Selic, and get her to attack me, so Mo-mo-mother could run, but Selic had already killed her before she turned to attack me." Her voice strengthened as she remembered the feeling of rage and hate burning inside her, fueling her desire to destroy Selic. "I vowed to kill her right then and there, but a rat stands no chance of defeating a cat single handedly, especially when that cat is the strongest on in these parts. I leapt at her and got her to run away, but was thrown aside as she turned to run. I don't really know what happened after that..." Runt's voice had faded to little more than a whisper by the end of her speech. It was a sad attempt to convince her siblings of her honesty.

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"Nice try Runt, but you'll never con us that way," sneered Bagath. He knew that when he wanted something, the other rats knew to get it or give it to him.

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"Yeah!" chorused the group of rat-pups, save one. Ragnarok sat quietly in the corner, his green eyes faced downwards. Her story made sense, and would explain the unfamiliar rats that had sheltered in their den, and the cat that had come, and... well everything. Fortunately, or unfortunately for Ragnarok, Bagath didn't notice his lack of support.

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“Get her!” he bellowed, leading the procession of rats that piled on top of Runt. Each and every sibling tussled in the heap, turning it into a living, breathing, squirming pile of rats. Lialia joined in the fighting, but seemed quite hesitant. Ragnarok felt despaired that he would have to attack his sister outright, but with a sigh, he eventually joined in.

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A moment of shock followed as the rats scratched and bit and shouted at each other, all the while the stranger still in the burrow gaped in shock at how one family could be so far apart, and wreaking such havoc. He quickly regained himself, and shouted for all the rats to move aside. He lost no time in picking each little pup up by its scruff, and gruffly tossing it across the room. When the stranger was satisfied that all the little ones had been taken care of, (And by taken care of, he meant thrown across the room) he rushed up to Runt's heavily breathing form, and asked “Are you alright? No wait-save your breath, I'll cover your wounds.” He glanced around, and upon seeing Respa, his eyes hardened slightly, daring her to disobey. “You! Get me some blood-moss!” he barked at the silver female.

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“You're not serious, right?” said Respa in a sarcastic voice. “Me? Get blood-moss? For *her?*” Respa chuckled at the thought. The caring stranger simply looked at her one more time, his blue eyes boring down into her black ones. Finally, Respa was forced to look away. She might be strong, and strong-minded, but this stranger could kill her without a second glance, as she had seen when he tossed her off of Runt so easily. With a sigh, she slowly trotted out of the room, and motioned for Lialia to follow her, followed by a dangerous glare. Lialia quickly got the message, and followed after her into the narrow tunnel way that connected the pockets of air. When they got roughly a foot away from the room that contained Runt and the others, Respa turned to face Lialia. “Go get the blood-moss. Now.” Then she passed Lialia, and went back into the room. She wanted to watch Runt die, and she knew that a pathetic scrap like Lialia would follow an *ant's* order.

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A few minutes later, Lialia showed up in the room, dragging blood-moss by her jaws. Respa quickly

padding over to Lialia, and snatched the blood-moss from her. She dragged the large piece of blood-moss over to the stranger, and dropped it at his feet. Her coal-black eyes gave him a look of pure hatred before she returned to the ranks of her siblings.

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Later, while pressing blood-moss onto Runt's wounds, the stranger started talking to comfort her. "My name's Talon," he said with a rough accent. "What's yours?" Runt was still weak from her battle with Selic, and later, her siblings, and didn't hear Talon's question, or his statement. Roughly a minute or so later, the words were comprehended in her brain, and she answered weakly. "Runt. Not even a name though. Mother says that runts don't *deserve* names."

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Talon gave a small nod to show that he had heard her, but didn't answer. Maybe it was because he just wanted Runt to save her energy for healing. Maybe it was because he was thinking about what he was to do with Runt's siblings. Maybe it was because he had just discovered Runt's worst wound. Whatever the reason, Talon stayed silent, but continued to press moss on her wounds.

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Runt had several nasty cuts. One, the most noticeable, was a deep cut running from under her left chin, up over her face, and ending high upon the rightmost side of her forehead. It was as if Selic or Runt's siblings thought she had a mask on, and had tried to rip it off. *That'll leave a nasty scar,* thought Talon *I'm surprised there's no bone showing.*

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Now, normally, one would expect excruciating, unbearable amounts of pain that went along with such wounds, but Runt was too numb to feel anything. Plus, the blood-moss helped. She felt detached from the world and her family; cut loose from reality. To her, it seemed there was no life left for her. Her family despised her, and what chance did a runt-rat have out on its own? Even Ragnarok thought her a traitor.

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<i>What did I do to deserve this?</i> she thought, asking no one the question on her mind. <i>Oh yeah,</i> she thought. <i>I was born. </i>Runt truly had <i>done</i> nothing wrong, but the world was so unfair to her. No one would listen... No one would care... Runt should just leave her family to its fate. They'd be better off without her and much happier too. If she hadn't attacked Selic in the first place, they'd still have their mother. Runt stopped trying at that moment. She gave up. Her body slowly went limp, and her head touched the ground with a gentle tap. <i>Eventually, these wounds'll kill me,</i> thought Runt.

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Talon immediately noticed his patient give up the fight. He immediately assumed that she had died, but when he saw the light hadn't left her eyes, and that her chest was slowly rising and falling, he knew that she was going to try to die. He stood up, and stopped tending to her. "Get up. Now," he said.

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"Wha-what?" asked Runt shakily, shocked out of her miserable state by the lack of blood-moss being pressed into her side, and by the loud blunt words she had heard.

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"You heard me. I said `get up.' Now get up and defend yourself!" he repeated brusquely. He began circling Runt, allowing her time to get up. He knew on his honor that he would never attack a rat when he or she is down.

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Runt lifted her head, and stared groggily at Talon. "Why?" was all she could manage. She wanted to say so much more. She wanted to say, "Why should I? No one wants me here, and they'd all be happy if I died." Unfortunately, a simple why was all she could manage.

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"Why?! Why?!" asked Talon incredulously. "Don't you ever want to live? To see what life's like?" Talon paused, giving a disgusted look to Runt. "You <i>are</i> a pathetic, useless excuse for a rat." Runt didn't respond after a while, and Talon feared that his last words had only helped her more into her comatose state. A bit of maybe longing, or loss, seemed to creep into his river-blue eyes. Then they hardened into twin pools of stagnant water. His claws reached out, as he darted across the room to scratch the side of Runt's face that was yet uninjured.

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Runt was surprised by the blow and didn't even try to fight back. Her body buckled and bent as it was sent soaring across the room.

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Now, the rest of Runt's litter had gotten extremely bored after a while of watching Runt being cured, so they went to sleep. At the sound of harsh words, and a body hitting the dirt of the floor, they woke up, and heads turned in the direction of the two fighting rats. Most of the rats in the litter saw the fighting, and immediately left, in case someone would make them join the fight. Those rats fled to the sleeping-den. The ones who stayed were Respa, Bagath, and Ragnarok. Respa and Bagath simply wanted to watch Runt die, but Ragnarok, though he felt temporarily betrayed, his friendship with Runt ran too deep to make him abandon her in a time of need. He watched on in horror, helpless to do anything, as he saw the stranger that had been so kind to her, turn and attack.

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Talon, though his anger had fueled his blow, had not expected it to send *any* rat flying. However, when he searched for pity in his heart, all he found was disgust. Talon crossed the room to her unmoving body. He stared at her slightly breathing form for a few minutes, then reached out with a forepaw, and nudged her with one of the claws for which he was named. "Get up," he spat again. He was getting tired of Runt's antics.

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Runt slowly got to her feet. When she was about halfway off the ground, she lunged and attacked Talon's forepaws. She never reached her target, however, for Talon was older and wiser, and could easily evade her sudden attack. Runt also did not have any luck on her side this time, as it was with her previous battle with Selic. Instead, Talon simply stepped aside, and Runt was left looking quite demeaned as her seemingly clever attack threw her off balance, and she landed in a heap of straw, dirt and fur that could have been considered a nest.

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"Nice try, but you'll have to do better than that to catch me!" cried Talon in a giddy voice, standing dignified in a corner opposite from the one Runt was in. Darting in again, Talon scratched her unprotected left flank, causing fur to rip out as he dragged his claws against the skin.

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Runt was no longer in shock; she was disbelieving. She didn't think this kind newcomer would attack her, much less taunt her. Why did Talon do this? To enrage her? If that was the case, it was working... Jumping to her feet, and completely obliterating the pain in her leg from her consciousness, she lashed out furiously and blindly in Talon's general direction. She didn't speak, but swung her claws and teeth round to try and hurt Talon. Whether any made their mark or not, she didn't know, only Talon would, and perhaps any gods watching. After a few long minutes of her enraged fury of attacks, Runt stopped, panting.

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Runt's siblings looked on at Runt shocked. She had **<i><u>never</u></i>** gone this berserk, no matter what their taunts. *I guess she does have a breaking point...* thought Respa. *I'm kinda glad I wasn't the first one to reach it, because her attack right now would've hurt.* She blinked as she saw Runt stop her attack, and glanced at Bagath next to her, trying to catch his eye, and see what he was thinking. When he finally turned his head enough for her to catch his eye, she saw, disbelief, and shock, and something else—hate.

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“Finished?” Talon asked, not unkindly. None of her blows had landed on him; he was so agile that he'd been nicknamed “Ghost” by his old companions, as he could almost literally pass through any blow like a ghost. Recently, however, he had taken up a quieter lifestyle, and stopped fighting constantly. Why he stopped was a reason he kept to himself. Circling to the left of Runt, he kept wary. *He* was not going to attack again, but Runt didn't know that, and could spontaneously burst into a flurry of motion again at any moment.

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Suddenly, he noticed the three rats over his shoulder, still watching intently. In a whisper-soft voice, he half turned towards them, and hissed, "Leave now, and go with your other siblings." This was not a question at all, and the three rats hastened to do as he commanded, with Respa and Bagath for the first time in their life, obeying a command from another rat.

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Unbeknownst to Talon, Runt <i>had</i> exhausted all her strength in that last attack. The fact that her body was still wet with bright red blood, didn't make fighting Talon any easier. Still panting in the center of the room, she didn't answer Talon in words, just nodded her head. She fought relentlessly to stay standing, and show Talon that she was not weak, not noticing in the least his side conversation with her siblings.

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"Good," said Talon. "Now you must get some rest, so you will be ready fro the morning." Crossing over to her, Talon helped Runt to the nest in the corner. Quickly wiping up most of the blood from Runt's wounds, he also put a sort of ointment on them. Talon then lined the nest with more blood-moss, and left the rest of the moss near Runt's head, in case she should need it during the night. "G'night Runt. Rest up for tomorrow," said Talon as he departed.

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Runt was so tired, and the nest was so comfortable after all that fighting she had done. She could barely feel the pain from her wounds after all that blood-moss, and that strange ointment that Talon had put on her. <i>What was that?</i> she wondered. <i>When he put that stuff on me, he handled it like it was the thousand seed from the legend.</i> She shifted into a more comfortable position, and asked softly, "Where are you going? Will you stay here?" Runt then twisted her paw awkwardly beneath her, so as to

stay awake for Talon's reply.

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Talon had been <i>just</i> about to exit through to the “hallways” that connected to several openings in the burrow, when he heard Runt's question. Inwardly, he groaned. He had been about to deal with Runt's siblings, and get <i>them</i> settled in for the night so <i>he</i> could finally get some sleep. Not that he was really looking forward to that. That one silver rat looked like a cruel sister, and so did that other, large male rat that the silver one always seemed to be near to. After a brief moment, he swung his head to face her, and answered her: “Not to worry little one. I'll find someplace to sleep, and I won't leave you tonight.” He turned back to facing the narrow hallway as soon as he finished his question.

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Runt blinked twice at his answer, and shifted her paw, getting more comfortable by the second. “O-oh-” Runt let out a huge yawn, and settled her head onto her paws. She closed her eyes, and nestled even deeper into the blood-moss, and felt happy, care-free, and joyful, despite her injuries. “Okay.” she repeated, finishing what she meant to say at first, but was interrupted by a yawn. Another yawn escaped her maw, and she fell into a deep sleep. How little she knew of the times ahead.

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