

WARRIORS

THE DARKEST HOUR

 HarperCollins e-books

*This book is for Vicky Holmes and Matt Haslum,
who helped find Fireheart's destiny.*

Thank you.

Special thanks to Cherith Baldry

CONTENTS

[ALLEGIANCES](#)

[MAP](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

Rain fell steadily, drumming on the hard black Thunderpath that...

[CHAPTER 1](#)

Watery shafts of light sliced through the bare trees as...

[CHAPTER 2](#)

As Fireheart bounded across to Bluestar's den, Speckle tail spun...

[CHAPTER 3](#)

Something was prodding Fireheart in the side. With a muffled...

[CHAPTER 4](#)

All was darkness and cold. Fireheart had never been so...

[CHAPTER 5](#)

Firestar jolted awake in terror. He was lying in the...

[CHAPTER 6](#)

Twilight was thickening the shadows under the trees by the...

[CHAPTER 7](#)

A raw, damp cold pushed its way through Firestar's fur...

[CHAPTER 8](#)

The snow had stopped by the time Firestar and Bramblepaw...

CHAPTER 9

Firestar made his way thoughtfully back into the camp. Glancing...

CHAPTER 10

Sorrelkit was curled up in a mossy nest near the...

CHAPTER 11

Firestar emerged from the forest near Sunningrocks and paused to...

CHAPTER 12

Firestar paused at the top of the hollow before leading...

CHAPTER 13

The squall was soon over. Firestar led his cats home...

CHAPTER 14

“Firestar,” meowed Graystripe. “I want to ask you something.”

CHAPTER 15

Graystripe growled deep in his throat and gathered himself to...

CHAPTER 16

“No.” Graystripe’s voice rasped in his throat.

CHAPTER 17

“Quick—the stepping-stones!” Firestar hissed.

CHAPTER 18

“Disappeared?” Firestar echoed in alarm. “What happened?”

CHAPTER 19

Firestar leaped up the slope leading into WindClan territory from...

CHAPTER 20

The sun had begun to set over the river, turning...

CHAPTER 21

Firestar woke to see the den floor washed by the...

[CHAPTER 22](#)

Dismay kept Firestar's paws rooted to the ground as he...

[CHAPTER 23](#)

Firestar stared, speechless with shock, as Scourge turned away and...

[CHAPTER 24](#)

When Firestar emerged from his den the following morning, the...

[CHAPTER 25](#)

After they said good-bye to Princess, Cloudtail went off to...

[CHAPTER 26](#)

Firestar wondered if the rest of his Clan had noticed...

[CHAPTER 27](#)

It was the time before dawn when the moon had...

[CHAPTER 28](#)

The first faint streaks of dawn were showing as Firestar...

[CHAPTER 29](#)

Firestar opened his eyes. He was lying on the grass...

[CHAPTER 30](#)

The clearing fell silent. Blood glistened on the grass as...

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[OTHER BOOKS BY ERIN HUNTER](#)

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[ABOUT THE PUBLISHER](#)

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

FIRESTAR—handsome ginger tom
APPRENTICE, BRAMBLEPAW

DEPUTY

WHITESTORM—big white tom

MEDICINE CAT CINDERPELT—dark gray she-cat

WARRIORS

(toms, and she-cats without kits)

DARKSTRIPE—sleek black-and-gray tabby tom
APPRENTICE, FERNPAW

LONGTAIL—pale tabby tom, dark black stripes

MOUSEFUR—small dusky-brown she-cat
APPRENTICE, THORNPAW

BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE, TAWNYPAW

DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE, ASHPAW

SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat

GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom

FROSTFUR—beautiful white she-cat, blue eyes

GOLDENFLOWER—pale ginger she-cat

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom

APPRENTICES

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

THORNPAW—golden-brown tabby tom

FERNPAW—pale gray with darker flecks, she-cat, pale green eyes

ASHPAW—pale gray with darker flecks, tom, dark blue eyes

BRAMBLEPAW—dark brown tabby tom, amber eyes

TAWNYPAW—tortoiseshell she-cat, green eyes

LOSTFACE—white she-cat, ginger splotches

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

WILLOWPELT—very pale gray she-cat, unusual blue eyes

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

ONE-EYE—pale gray she-cat, the oldest cat in ThunderClan, virtually blind and deaf

SMALLEAR—gray tom with very small ears, the oldest tom in ThunderClan

DAPPLETAIL—once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat, lovely dappled coat

SPECKLETAIL—pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

SHADOWCLAN

<u>LEADER</u>	TIGERSTAR—big dark brown tabby tom, unusually long front claws, formerly of ThunderClan
<u>DEPUTY</u>	BLACKFOOT—large white tom, huge jet-black paws, formerly a rogue cat
<u>MEDICINE CAT</u>	RUNNINGNOSE—small gray-and-white tom
<u>WARRIORS</u>	OAKFUR—small brown tom LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom BOULDER—skinny gray tom, formerly a rogue cat RUSSETFUR—dark ginger she-cat, formerly a rogue cat APPRENTICE, CEDARPAW JAGGEDTOOTH—huge tabby tom, formerly a rogue cat APPRENTICE, ROWANPAW
<u>QUEENS</u>	TALLPOPPY—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

WINDCLAN

<u>LEADER</u>	TALLSTAR—black-and-white tom, very long tail
<u>DEPUTY</u>	DEADFOOT—black tom with a twisted paw
<u>MEDICINE CAT</u>	BARKFACE—short-tailed brown tom
<u>WARRIORS</u>	MUDCLAW—mottled dark brown tom WEBFOOT—dark gray tabby tom TORNEAR—tabby tom ONEWHISKER—brown tabby tom APPRENTICE, GORSEPAW RUNNINGBROOK—light gray tabby she-cat
<u>QUEENS</u>	ASHFOOT—gray she-cat MORNINGFLOWER—tortoiseshell she-cat WHITETAIL—small white she-cat

RIVERCLAN

<u>LEADER</u>	LEOPARDSTAR—unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat
<u>DEPUTY</u>	STONEFUR—gray tom, battle-scarred ears APPRENTICE, STORMPAW
<u>MEDICINE CAT</u>	MUDFUR—long-haired light brown tom
<u>WARRIORS</u>	BLACKCLAW—smoky black tom HEAVYSTEP—thickset tabby tom APPRENTICE, DAWNPAW SHADEPELT—very dark gray she-cat MISTYFOOT—dark gray she-cat, blue eyes APPRENTICE, FEATHERPAW LOUDBELLY—dark brown tom

BLOODCLAN

LEADER SCOURGE—small black tom with one white paw

DEPUTY BONE—massive black-and-white tom

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

BARLEY—black-and-white tom that lives on a farm close to the forest

RAVENPAW—sleek black cat that lives on the farm with Barley

PRINCESS—light brown tabby, distinctive white chest and paws, a kittypet

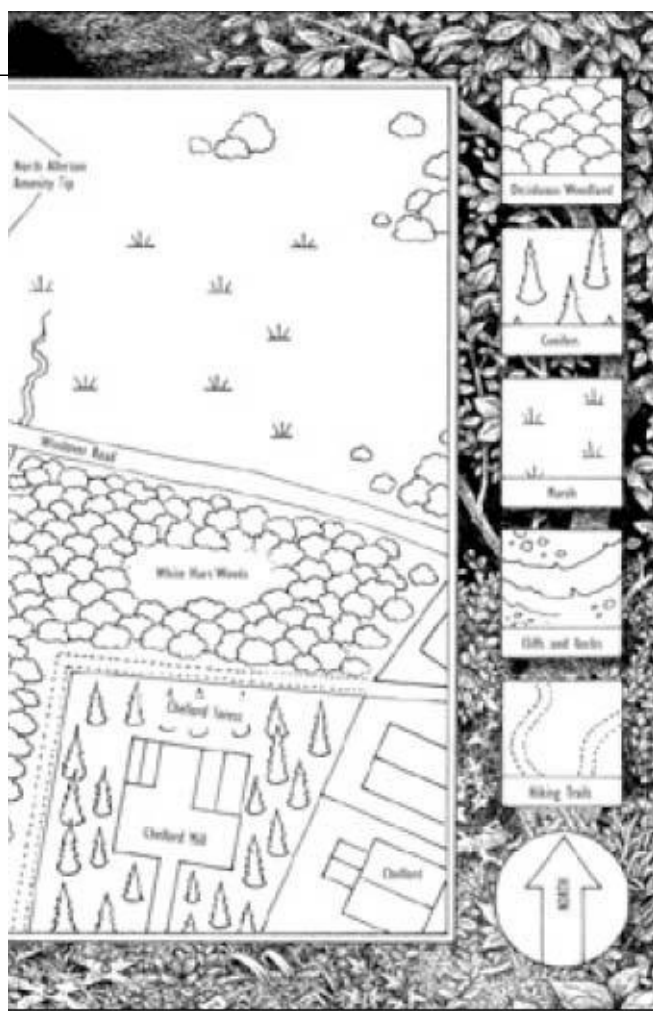
SMUDGE—plump, friendly black-and-white kittypet that lives in a house at the edge of the forest

MAP









PROLOGUE

Rain fell steadily, drumming on the hard black Thunderpath that led between unending rows of stone Twoleg nests. From time to time a monster snarled past, its eyes glaring, and a single Twoleg scurried along, huddled into its shiny pelt.

Two cats slipped silently around the corner, keeping close to the walls where the shadows were deepest. A skinny gray tom with a ragged ear and bright, watchful eyes went first, every hair on his body slicked dark with the wet.

Behind him prowled a huge tabby with massive shoulders and muscles that slid smoothly under his rain-soaked pelt. His amber eyes glowed in the harsh light, and his gaze shifted back and forth as he expected an attack.

He paused where the dark entrance to a Twoleg nest offered a little shelter and growled, "How much farther? This place stinks."

The gray tom glanced back. "Not far now."

"It had better not be." Grimacing, the dark brown tabby padded on, ears twitching irritably and flicking away the raindrops. Harsh yellow light angled across him, and he flinched as a monster roared around the corner, throwing up a wave of filthy water that reeked of Twoleg rubbish. The cat let out a snarl as the water slopped around his paws and the spray drizzled down on his fur.

Everything about the Twolegplace disgusted him: the hard surface under his paws, the stench of monsters and the Twolegs they carried in their bellies, the unfamiliar noises, and most of all, the way that he could not survive here without a guide. The tabby was not used to depending on another cat for anything. In the forest he knew every tree, every stream, every rabbit hole. He was considered the strongest and most dangerous warrior in all the Clans. Now his sharpened skills and senses were useless. He felt as if he were deaf, blind, and lame, reduced to following his companion like a kitten trailing helplessly after its mother.

But it would be worth it. The tabby's whiskers twitched in anticipation. He had already launched a plan that would turn his most hated enemies into helpless prey in their own territory. When the dogs attacked, no cat would suspect that they had been lured and guided every step of the way. And then, if things went according to plan, this expedition into Twolegplace would give him all he had ever wanted.

The gray cat led the way along the path and across an open space reeking of Twoleg monster where a swirl of color from unnatural orange lights floated on the puddles. He stopped by the entrance to a narrow alley and opened his jaws to draw in the scent of the air.

The tabby halted and did the same, disgustingly swiping his tongue over his lips at the stink of rotting Twoleg food. "Is this the place?" he asked.

"This is it," the gray warrior replied tensely. "Now—remember what I told you. The cat we're going to meet holds command over many cats. We must treat him with respect."

"Boulder, have you forgotten who I am?" The tabby took a step forward so that he towered over his companion.

The skinny gray cat's ears flattened. "No, Tigerstar, I haven't forgotten. But you're not Clan leader here."

Tigerstar grunted. "Let's get on with it," he growled.

Boulder turned into the alley. He stopped short after just a few paces when a huge shape loomed up in front of them.

“Who goes there?” A broad-shouldered black and white cat stepped out of the shadows. Strong muscles were outlined under fur plastered to his body by the rain. “Identify yourselves. We don’t like strangers here.”

“Greetings, Bone,” the gray warrior meowed steadily. “Remember me?”

The black-and-white cat narrowed his eyes and was silent for a few moments. “So you’ve come back, have you, Boulder?” he meowed at last. “You told us you were going to find a better life in the forest. What are you doing here?”

He took a step forward, but Boulder held his ground, unsheathing his claws against the uneven ground. “We want to see Scourge.”

Bone let out a snort, half contempt, half laughter. “I can’t imagine that Scourge will want to see you. And who’s this with you? I don’t recognize *him*.”

“My name is Tigerstar. I’ve come from the forest to speak with your leader.”

Bone’s green eyes flicked from Tigerstar to Boulder and back again. “What do you want with him?” he demanded.

Tigerstar’s amber gaze burned like the Twoleg lights reflected on the shining wet stones around them. “I’ll discuss that with your leader, not his border patrol.”

Bone bristled and extended his claws, but Boulder quickly slipped between him and Tigerstar. “Scourge needs to hear this,” he insisted. “It could be to every cat’s advantage.”

For a few heartbeats Bone hesitated, and then he stepped back, allowing Boulder and Tigerstar to pass. His hostile glare scorched their fur, but he said nothing.

Now Tigerstar took the lead, treading cautiously as the light faded behind them. On either side, skinny cats were slinking behind piles of rubbish, eyes gleaming as they followed the progress of the two intruders. Tigerstar’s muscles tensed. If this meeting went wrong, he might have to fight his way out.

A wall blocked the end of the alley. Tigerstar stared around, looking for the leader of these cats of Twolegplace. He was expecting an even more massive creature than the broad-shouldered Bone, and at first his gaze swept over the small black cat crouching in a shadowy doorway.

Boulder gave him a nudge and jerked his head in the black cat’s direction. “There’s Scourge.”

“*That’s* Scourge?” Tigerstar’s exclamation rang with disbelief above the falling rain. “He’s much bigger than an apprentice!”

“Shh!” Panic flared in Boulder’s eyes. “This may not be a Clan as we know it, but these cats would kill if their leader ordered them to.”

“It seems I have visitors.” The black cat’s voice had a brittle, high-pitched sound, like the splintering of ice. “I wasn’t expecting to see you again, Boulder. I heard you’d gone to live in the forest.”

“Yes, Scourge, I have,” Boulder replied.

“So what are you doing here?” Scourge’s voice held the faintest suggestion of a snarl. “Have you changed your mind and come crawling back? Do you expect me to welcome you?”

“No, Scourge.” Boulder held the black cat’s ice-blue gaze. “It’s a good life in the forest. There’s plenty of fresh-kill, no Twolegs-”

“You haven’t come to extol the virtues of forest life,” Scourge interrupted him with a flick of his tail. “Squirrels live in trees, not cats.” His eyes narrowed, glinting with a pale fire. “So what do you want?”

Tigerstar stepped forward, shouldering the gray warrior aside. “I am Tigerstar, the leader of ShadowClan,” he growled. “And I have a proposition for you.”

CHAPTER 1

Watery shafts of light sliced through the bare trees as Fireheart carried his leader to her final resting place. With his teeth clenched firmly in her scruff, he retraced the route the dog pack had taken as the brave warriors of ThunderClan lured them to the gorge and their destruction. His whole body felt numb, and his head spun with the terrible realization that Bluestar was dead.

Without his leader, the forest itself seemed different, even stranger to Fireheart than the day he had first ventured into it as a kittypet. No thing was real; he felt as if the trees and rocks could dissolve like mist within a moment. A vast, unnatural silence covered everything. With the rational part of his mind Fireheart realized that all the prey had been scared away by the rampaging dog pack, but in the grip of his grief it seemed that even the forest was stunned into mourning for Bluestar.

The scene at the gorge replayed over and over in his head. He saw again the slavering jaws of the dog who led the pack, and felt its sharp teeth meet in his scruff. He remembered how Bluestar had appeared out of nowhere, flinging herself at the dog, driving it—and herself—over the edge of the gorge and into the river. He flinched again at the icy shock of the water as he leaped in to rescue his drowning leader, and their hopeless struggles until two RiverClan warriors, Mistyfoot and Stonefur, came to help them.

Most of all, Fireheart recalled his dismay and disbelief as he crouched beside his leader on the riverbank, and realized that she had sacrificed her last life to save him and all of ThunderClan from the dog pack.

As he bore Bluestar's body home, with the help of Mistyfoot and Stonefur, he kept pausing to scent the air for fresh traces of dog, and he had already sent his friend Graystripe to scout the territory on either side of their trail, searching for signs that the dogs had caught any of the ThunderClan cats during their desperate race for the gorge. So far, to Fireheart's relief, they had found nothing.

Now, skirting a bramble thicket, Fireheart set down his lifeless leader once more and raised his head to drink in the air, thankful to taste only the clean scents of the forest. A moment later Graystripe appeared around a clump of dead bracken.

"Everything's fine, Fireheart," he reported. "Plenty of broken undergrowth, but that's all."

"Good," Fireheart meowed. His hope rose that the dogs that had escaped the fall into the gorge had fled in terror, and the forest once again belonged to the four Clans of wild cats. His Clan had lived through three terrible moons, when they had become prey in their own territory, but they had survived. "Let's keep going. I want to check that the camp is safe before the Clan comes back."

He and the RiverClan warriors took up Bluestar's body again and carried it through the trees. At the top of the ravine that led down to the camp entrance, Fireheart paused. He briefly remembered the early morning, when he and his warriors had followed the trail of dead rabbits that Tigerstar had laid to lure the dog pack to the ThunderClan camp. At the end of the trail they had found the body of the gentle queen Brindleface, slaughtered to give the savage dogs a taste for cat blood. But now everything seemed peaceful, and when Fireheart tasted the air again he could detect only cat scent coming from the camp.

"Wait here," he meowed. "I'm going to take a look."

"I'll come with you," Graystripe offered instantly.

"No." It was Stonefur who spoke, flicking out his tail to bar the gray warrior's way. "I think Fireheart needs to do this alone."

Flashing a grateful look at the RiverClan deputy, Fireheart began picking his way down the

ravine, his ears pricked for any sound of trouble ahead. But the strange silence still reigned over the forest.

As he emerged from the gorse tunnel into the clearing, Fireheart paused to glance warily around. It was possible that one or more of the dogs had never made it to the gorge, or that Tigerstar had sent ShadowClan warriors to take over the camp. But all was quiet. Fireheart's fur prickled with the strangeness of seeing the camp deserted like this, yet there was no sign of danger, and still no scent of dogs or ShadowClan.

To be sure the camp was safe, he rapidly checked the dens and the nursery. Memories came unbidden: the bewilderment of the Clan as he told them about the dog pack, the heart-pounding terror of the chase through the forest with the breath of the pack leader hot on his fur. At the foot of the Highrock, listening to the wind whispering through the trees, Fireheart thought back to the time Tigerstar had stood here, boldly facing his Clan as they discovered the true depth of his treachery. He had sworn undying vengeance as he was sent into exile, and Fireheart was sure that his bloodthirsty attempt to set the dog pack on the cats of ThunderClan would not be his last attempt to fulfill his oath.

Last of all Fireheart prowled cautiously through the fern tunnel to Cinderpelt's den. Glancing through the entrance, he saw the medicine cat's healing herbs neatly ranged beside one wall. The strongest memory yet flooded over him, of Spottedleaf and Yellowfang, who had been ThunderClan medicine cats before Cinderpelt. Fireheart had loved them both, and grief for them swept over him again to mingle with his grief for his leader.

Bluestar is dead, he told them silently. *Is she with you now, in StarClan?*

Retracing his steps along the fern tunnel, he returned to the top of the ravine. Graystripe was standing on watch while Mistyfoot and Stonefur gently groomed the dead leader's body.

"Everything's fine," Fireheart announced. "Graystripe, I want you to go to Sunningrocks now. Tell the Clan that Bluestar is dead, but nothing more. I'll explain every thing when I see them. Just let them know that it's safe to come home."

Graystripe's yellow eyes brightened. "On my way, Fireheart." He spun around and tore off through the forest, heading for Sunningrocks, where the Clan had gone to hide while the dogs were following Tigerstar's trail of rabbit blood to their camp.

Stonefur, crouching beside Bluestar's body, let out a purr of amusement. "It's easy to see where Graystripe's loyalties lie," he remarked.

"Yes," Mistyfoot agreed. "No cat ever really thought he would stay in RiverClan."

Graystripe's kits had been born to a RiverClan queen, and for a while he had gone to RiverClan to be with them, but in his heart he had never left ThunderClan. Forced into battle against his birth Clan, he had chosen to save Fireheart's life, and the RiverClan leader Leopardstar had banished him from her Clan. Her sentence of exile, Fireheart reflected, had freed the gray warrior to return to where he truly belonged.

With a nod of acknowledgment to the RiverClan warriors, Fireheart took up Bluestar again, and the three cats maneuvered her body down the ravine and into the camp. At last they could lay her down in her den beneath the Highrock, where she would remain until her Clan had said farewell to her and buried her with all the honor that such a wise and noble leader deserved.

"Thank you for your help," Fireheart meowed to the RiverClan warriors. Hesitating for a moment, knowing only too well the significance of his invitation, he added, "Would you like to stay for Bluestar's burial ceremony?"

"That is a generous offer," Stonefur replied, showing only a flicker of surprise that Fireheart should admit members of a rival Clan to something so private. "But we have duties in our own Clan. We must be getting back."

"Thank you, Fireheart," meowed Mistyfoot. "That means a lot to us. But your Clan will think it

strange if we stay. They don't know, do they, that Bluestar was our mother?"

"No," Fireheart told her. "Only Graystripe. But Tigerstar overheard what you and Bluestar said to each other on...on the riverbank. You must be prepared in case he chooses to reveal it at the next Gathering."

Stonefur and Mistyfoot exchanged a glance. Then Stonefur drew himself up, his blue eyes gleaming defiantly. "Let Tigerstar say what he likes," he meowed. "I'll tell RiverClan myself today. We're not ashamed of our mother. She was a noble leader—and our father was a great deputy."

"Yes," Mistyfoot agreed. "No cat can argue with that, even if they did come from different Clans."

Their courage and determination reminded Fireheart of their mother, Bluestar. She had given them up to their father, Oakheart, the RiverClan deputy, and the two cats had grown up believing that they had been born in RiverClan. At first they had hated Bluestar when they learned the truth, but the morning, as she lay dying on the riverbank, they had found it in their hearts to forgive her. In the midst of his pain, Fireheart was relieved beyond words that his leader had been reconciled with her kits before she went to StarClan. He alone of all the ThunderClan cats knew how much Bluestar had suffered, watching them grow up in another Clan.

"I wish we'd known her better," Stonefur meowed sadly, as if he could read Fireheart's thoughts. "You're lucky to have grown up in her Clan and been her deputy."

"I know." Fireheart looked down sorrowfully at the blue-gray she-cat lying so still on the sandstone floor of the clearing. Bluestar looked small and helpless now that her noble spirit had left her body and gone to hunt with StarClan.

"May we say good-bye to her alone?" Mistyfoot asked tentatively. "Just for a few moments?"

"Of course," Fireheart replied. He padded out of the den, leaving Stonefur and Mistyfoot to crouch down beside Bluestar's body and share tongues with their mother for the first and last time.

As he skirted the Highrock he heard the sound of cats approaching through the gorse tunnel. Hurrying forward, he saw Frostfur and Speckletail creep timidly into the clearing, hesitating in the shelter of the tunnel before they dared venture back into the camp. With the same wariness, Brackenfur and Goldenflower followed.

Pain stabbed Fireheart's heart to see his cats so wary of their own home, and his eyes sought out one warrior in particular—Sandstorm, the pale ginger she-cat he loved. He needed to know that she was unhurt after the crucial part she had played in luring the dog pack away from the camp.

Fireheart spotted his nephew, Cloudtail; the white warrior was carefully escorting Lostface, the young cat who had suffered terrible injuries from the dog pack before they attacked the camp. Next Cinderpelt came limping through the entrance with a bundle of herbs in her mouth; and pushing her eagerly behind her were Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw, the two newest apprentices, who were also Tigerstar's kits.

At last Fireheart saw Sandstorm padding along beside Willowpelt, while Willowpelt's three kits bounced around them, happily unaware of the crisis their Clan had endured.

A purr swelled in Fireheart's throat as he ran toward Sandstorm and pressed his muzzle into her flank. The pale orange warrior covered his ears with licks, and when he looked up at her he saw a warm glow in her green eyes.

"I was so worried for you, Fireheart," she murmured. "I couldn't believe the size of those dog packs. I've never been so scared in my life."

"Nor have I," Fireheart confessed. "All the time I was waiting, I kept thinking they might have caught you."

"Caught me?" Sandstorm pushed away from him; the end of her tail was twitching, and for a heartbeat Fireheart thought he had offended her, until he saw the sparkle in her eyes. "I was running."

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