

## The Elders' Concern

"Lie still, Halftail! Or is your nest full of fleas?"

"How can I lie still? Bluestar has made sure I wouldn't be comfortable on a nest of swan's feathers." Halftail stabbed a crackly leaf with his claw and flicked it onto the bare earth. How typical of Dappletail to be so untroubled by what had happened. Her only worry was when her next piece of fresh-kill would be delivered.

"Pah! As if an apprentice nowadays would be brave enough to fetch swan's feathers," muttered Smallear. Halftail looked at him indulgently. Smallear was the oldest of all the elders, and he always had the best stories. "I remember when I was an apprentice, we all dared each other to steal from the swan's nest on the edge of the river to line our nests."

"Boasting again, Smallear?" Dappletail grumbled. "I seem to remember you came back with feathers that looked awfully black to have come from a swan. Much more like a crow's, in fact."

"Are we going to get any sleep tonight?" A small black-and-white face popped up from a nest at the edge of the den.

"No, Patchpelt, we are not," Halftail informed him. "We need to talk about what Bluestar did today, and how we can best help our Clan through these terrible times."

"Eh? What's that?" came a voice from the narrowest part of the tree trunk that sheltered the elders.

"It's all right, One-eye," Dappletail meowed loudly. "Go back to sleep. We'll be here all night if we try to make her hear," she added in a whisper to the others.

Halftail waited until the other elders had shuffled closer. "So, what are we going to do about Fireheart?"

Patchpelt put his head to one side. "I'm not sure we can do anything. Bluestar's made him Clan deputy, and she won't change her mind because of us."

Smallear grunted as he eased his stiff back legs into a more comfortable position. "Well, she should. Does she have cobwebs in her head? The cat's a kittypet, for StarClan's sake! What does he know about leading a Clan?"

"And he's hardly been here for half a moon," Dappletail added. "This wouldn't have happened in our day. Oh, no."

Halftail looked at them in exasperation. "You don't get it, do you? Even if Fireheart had been born in ThunderClan, he shouldn't have been made deputy. Bluestar didn't appoint him before moonhigh!"

The other cats looked at one another, puffing out their top lips anxiously. "He's right," mewed Dappletail. "Lionheart died yesterday. The new deputy should have been named last night."

"The warrior code has been broken!" Smallear puffed. "We're all doomed!"

StarClan save me from my denmates, thought Halftail. "The warrior code has been broken before, and it will be broken again. This does not need to ruin ThunderClan, but we must prepare ourselves for worse things to come.

Bluestar doesn't know what she's doing!" Smallear burst out. "Just what does she see in this orange kittypet? Is he the best hunter? No. That young cat Sandstorm could track a beetle in a blizzard. The best fighter? Ha, I'd like to see him take on Tigerclaw. Now there's a real warrior. So what exactly makes him so special?"

"If Bluestar knows, then she's not telling us," Dappletail meowed. "But there must be something, if she thinks he could be her deputy."

"You could see he wasn't happy about it," Patchpelt commented. "Any cat would think he'd been asked to jump into the gorge, not share the leadership of his Clan."

"This isn't his Clan!" Smallear's tail twitched crossly. "I'm not even sure it should even be Bluestar's, after this."

"Maybe she appointed him deputy after moonhigh because she knew StarClan would object to him anyway?" Dappletail suggested.

Halftail pricked his ears. "If that's true, then it means she has stopped caring what our warrior ancestors think. Why would she do that? ThunderClan is healthy and safe - no less safe than it has been in the past, for sure."

Dappletail shuddered. "She can't turn her back on StarClan!"

"But she has," mewed Patchpelt in a small voice. "Fireheart is not a true deputy; he was appointed too late, and Lionheart's spirit would never have approved. What can we do? Look at us. We're old, deaf, toothless. We needed a warrior to lead our Clan, a light that would shine forever for all the moons to come. And Bluestar brought us a kittypet."

"I will never give up on my Clan!" Halftail argued. "StarClan is still watching us. If we treat Fireheart like our rightful deputy and give him a chance to learn and succeed, perhaps StarClan will accept him and forgive Bluestar."

Smallear turned away, his joints creaking. "I will never forgive Bluestar," he growled. "And Fireheart will never be our deputy. Not in my eyes."

"Nor mine," muttered Dappletail, and Patchpelt nodded in agreement.

Halftail stared at his denmates in dismay. He had gathered them together to find a solution, a way to rally the Clan in spite of Bluestar's strange choice for the new deputy and the warrior code being broken. But all they had done was uncover even greater depths of despair. Was Smallear right? Was ThunderClan doomed?