



P.J. Leonard

Sick

Deluxe Edition

TICK
by P.J. Leonard

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Tick is dedicated to Erin Hunter, for her wonderful books of inspiration and words of encouragement. Thank you, all of you.

P.J.
Leonard

Tick

Chapter One

Curiosity

There was no mistaking it: the London Underground map had his name on it.

This wasn't just any old Tube map, either. It was one of those big, framed maps that stood proudly near the entrance to Bank station, where all clueless tourists could gape blankly at its tangle of colours. He wasn't a tourist to London – anything but! Yet here he was, staring at the map, his name looking back.

And it wasn't just random graffiti with his name misspelt and barely readable. No. Even that wouldn't have been surprising: he was none too popular in some quarters around the city. His name was there, on the Northern Line, between Tufnell Park and Highgate, printed on the Map where Archway should be.

He blinked hard, glanced around at the empty streets soaking in warm yellow lights, and

looked again at the map, following the black line upwards: *Kentish Town, Tufnell Park...*

Tom Verbrisser.

Tom shook himself down, loosening his tie and pulling his trenchcoat tighter around him. A breeze rattled a smashed milk bottle in the kerbside, the stench of sour milk stinging his nostrils. He'd had a drink, and a sip of that cocktail Muezza had bought him, but that was it. A drink. He definitely wasn't seeing things, and he knew that part of the tube map like his own home, because Archway *was* his stop for home. It had said Archway that morning when he'd left, hadn't it?

Tom drew himself up: only one way to find out what this was about. He'd find a guard and ask him if this was some kind of joke: yes, that was it. A joke. Everyone in London knew Tom Verbrisser. *Obviously.* With one more look at the map (yes, still there), he descended into Bank station.

The ticket hall, however, rang with the sound of silence, completely deserted. Tom frowned. He looked at his watch, the diamonds reflecting

the buzzing strip lights. It was Friday night, and this was Bank Station. So where was everyone? *If this is a joke, it's a very elaborate one.*

Shaking his head, he reached into his silk-lined pockets, looking for his ticket, when he saw another Tube Map pinned to the wall. His name was there, too, looking as inconspicuous as everything else on there. Tom's palms perspired. He grabbed a handful of tube maps from a leaflet holder, flicking each one open.

His name.

Tom Verbrisser,

Tom Verbrisser,

Tom Verbrisser.

On every last one.

He forced a laugh, and tossed the maps on the floor. He fumbled for his ticket, loose change clattering across the tiles. Finally he found it, and charged through the gates. His own laughter echoed in his ears.

He stared forcibly at his shiny shoes as he descended the escalators, stairs and pathways to the platform, yet from every single map of the

Northern line he tried to ignore, his name leapt out at him, coaxing him, teasing him.

Finally, he reached the platform. The stale breeze buffeted his mess of black hair and sent his trenchcoat flapping. The sign on the other side of the tracks declared, all too clearly, that he was a station.

Kentish Town, Tufnell Park, Tom Verbrisser, Highgate...

Taking a deep breath, he reasoned with himself. This was a practical joke, certainly, but it must've been an expensive one. Then again, he knew plenty of people in the City who could afford this kind of thing, and many more who would want to make him squirm. Jackson, maybe? He'd never taken kindly to Tom's outbidding of that old Dockland property, then turning them into flats. Jackson had big plans for a Youth Centre. *Huh. Good load of profit that would make, Jackson...*

A bead of sweat trickled into his eyebrow, and he dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. A dark shape moved in the corner of his eye, and he jumped aside.

*Just another person joining the platform.
That's all. No need to panic.*

The man looked sidelong at Tom with curious beady eyes. Tom bit his lip, forcing his stare forward. Damn, he recognises me. There was no chance of asking him if he could read the map now, not if he wanted to look sane. What could he say? 'Excuse me Sir, I'm Tom Verbrisser: yes, *the* Tom Verbrisser. Pardon my interruption, but I appear to be a Tube Station.'

It was that darned newspaper article that had been printed last month: '*High Rise: Meet Tom, son of the late Gareth Verbrisser, who is taking up the family mantle of Real Estate development and already reshaping London's skyline.*' Why oh why had he agreed to be interviewed? True, a lot of people loved his relentless buying up of derelict land and crumbling buildings, wiping it clean and resurrecting it – but a lot of people hated him for the exact same reason, and now they had a face to put to the name. Not helpful when out in public. Just the other day he left work to find his beloved Porsche ravaged, with a note stuck in the wiper reading;

'Homewrecker! I lived for 26 years in that place you called a 'hovel', and what did you flatten it for? A tennis court?' And so on. Fortunately that madwoman had left her name on that note. Tom sued her dry, and used it to pay for repairs to the Porsche, and buy that pair of designer sunglasses he'd been eyeing up. A happy ending if there ever was one.

The breeze picked up, and a train rattled by, slowing to a stop. He caught a brief glimpse of his reflection in the window: he looked tired. And old. Much older than eighteen. *Well, good. It makes me look more like an adult. Which I am. No kid runs Real Estate.* Tom boarded, bombarded by the sheer number of maps plastered everywhere. Every one of them with his name. The doors slid shut, and they were off. The familiar noise of the wheels thumping over the rails soothed him:

...clack-clack, clack-clack...clack-clack, clack-clack...

Tom looked around. Five other passengers were scattered around the carriage. A couple of them stared idly at the maps. They didn't look

puzzled at the sudden changing of Archway's name. Were they seeing what he saw? Perhaps he really was hallucinating. If so, it was certainly a very realistic one: even the map he could see through the murky windows to the adjacent carriage had his name on it, obvious even from here.

Several stops later, they pulled up at Tufnell Park. Tom looked at the familiar platform, and the station name on the gleaming Underground roundel. As the doors closed and the train departed, Tom sat forward, bag on his lap, clammy hands clenched tight together. The next station would be *Archway*: his stop. Not *Tom Verbrisser*. *Archway*. He would alight and escape this stupid nonsense. If it was a joke, it had long ceased to be funny, and if he was meant to be scared...well, job done there, he'd go to the office tomorrow, take it on the chin, and they'd laugh about it years from now. He looked out the window, the black wall and grimy wires racing past in silence. His own hazy reflection stared back.

...clack-clack, clack-clack...clack-clack,
clack-clack...

The tunnel opened abruptly to harsh white light.

Tom Verbrisser Station.

Tom couldn't hold back a weak, quivering gasp. As the train slowed, it became all the clearer: the ribbon above the platform, the Underground roundel...all bearing his name as boldly as every other station he passed. The layout and decor was clearly Archway, but if he hadn't known better, he would've said this was *Tom Verbrisser Station*, and nothing else.

The doors hissed open, and he gulped back the lump in his throat. He stepped gingerly over the gap, placing his foot carefully on the platform as though expecting it to fall through. No, it was as real as anything else. He emerged alone, and looked dumbly around. Everywhere he looked, he saw his name. His spine tingled. The train pulled away, leaving him alone again. He put a shaking hand on the nearest *Tom Verbrisser* roundel sign, and stroked his fingers along it. It was real, and judging by the film of

grime that came off on his fingers, had been there for a while. *That had said Archway this morning when I left for work, I'm sure of it.*

Maybe the station had been renamed after him after all. He was fairly well known, he reasoned, and he did live near here. But if that were true, why hadn't he been told? And why would the powers that be suddenly alter all the maps in the space of one day?

He shook his head. It *wasn't* true! It couldn't be! This...this was precisely what the joke was, of course! It was no secret how ambitious Tom was, and many quipped about how heavily Tom was leaving his mark on the capital. Many thought he was delusional. Desperate to fill his father's huge shoes. What better way to prove that than making him believe a Tube Station was being renamed in his honour? He looked up at the security cameras. Maybe he was on one of those comedy shows. Being watched by millions of giggling people in their homes right now. It was just a matter of time before a camera crew and a smiley pair of showbiz presenters with tans in several shades

would bombard him and tell him he's been stitched up live, or something like that. Well, either way, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of looking like a fool. Whistling as casually as he could muster, he looked for the 'Way Out' sign.

No 'Way Out'. In its place, in identical black and yellow fashion, *Tom Verbrisser*, and an arrow pointing the way. Still attempting to whistle, he followed the signs, leading him the usual way to the exit. He fed his ticket through the gate, and emerged out into the cool, dark night.

Thank God that was over. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath of the smoke-tinged air and surveyed the familiar surroundings of the nearby factories and chimneys. Only a short walk to home, now. Nobody around to laugh at him or claim the joke was theirs, luckily. It was over. He took a step to home – and stopped, suddenly, jarring his knee. One thing caught his eye that made his heart sink.

It was a road sign: one that read '*Flehmen's Junction: 1 mile*'. At least, that's what it

should've said. Tonight, it read *Tom Verbrisser*, with an arrow pointing into a dark, weed-strewn alley.

Tom ground his teeth. This was ridiculous! It was late, he was tired, and he had a long day of planning ahead of him tomorrow. *I won't play this game any longer!* He turned away from the sign, and headed the way for home. Mere steps later, he stopped again, turned, and glared at the sign.

Tom Verbrisser.

His breath rose before him as a plume of steam.

Try as he may, he couldn't walk away: his curiosity was too strong. What was all this about? He wouldn't find out if he walked away, that was for sure, and surely the signs wouldn't be there in the morning? This was his only chance...

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he muttered under his breath. He plunged into the alley, tripping over the weeds and loose concrete slabs. The distant hum of rushing cars on the nearby A-Road and Flehmen's Junction gave him a reassuring sense

that he was still in reality, though he half-wished he wasn't.

The alley ended, bringing him into a loading yard. Freight trucks loomed around him, flecks of mist licking around the corners. Where now? Then he spotted his name across the yard, in old rundown letters, over the boarded up entrance to the Old Dairy factory, long since abandoned.

Tom snorted, and made his way towards it. *Of course.* Now it was beginning to make sense. He'd brought the rights to the Old Dairy some time ago, with plans to sell it on to the highest bidding budget supermarket when the chance came along. Rarely, for Tom, it didn't go as planned: a big supermarket opened up just down the road shortly after, ruining his chances. It wasn't a big loss, though, and the building came cheap. Something would come up for him one day.

So what was all this about, then? he wondered as he used a rusty crowbar to pull off the chipboard covering the door. Perhaps it was some airhead environmentalist or activist with an axe to grind, to show him he's leaving this

building to rot instead of doing something useful with it. *What do they want me to do? Turn it into a rainbow-making factory?* He chuckled at his own thoughts.

Part of him, too, was angry. Truth was, all this buying of property wasn't him – not directly, anyway. Try as he may, he couldn't escape his age, and had gone through his Dad first, who guided him. Business had frozen over since he'd passed away and they sorted the will out, but still: the Old Dairy was just a project. He didn't *ask* to be given it. Whoever cobbled together this joke spared no expense but neglected the research.

The chipboard splintered apart and clattered to the ground. He threw a cautious glance around the yard. He was alone, that was for sure. He grabbed the door handle, and with a creak and a groan, it opened, and he stepped inside.

The stench of sour milk hit him hard, making his eyes water. Rubbing the tears away, he noticed it wasn't as dark as he thought it would be: the huge windows lining one wall let in the

glaring floodlight from the 24-hour factory next-door, making the dusty milk bottles glimmer. What shadows there were, though, were inky-black, and shifted and shimmered with shapes that were darker still. Perhaps he wasn't as alone as he'd hoped. He cleared his throat.

"Hello?" he croaked.

Light flashed fleetingly from the farthest, darkest corner, followed by the sound of glass rolling over the rough, debris-covered floor.

"Who's there?" Tom demanded, more confidently, "I should warn you; this is private property. Get out now, or I'm calling the police."

No answer. Tom bounded over, blood pumping in his ears. He didn't care who was behind this whole charade, or why: whoever it was would pay dearly for wasting his time.

He reached the edge of the shadow, where the darkness seemed to stretch on forever. The sound of the rolling bottle still chinked away, finally coming to a rest when it tapped his shoe. Tom leaned down, dusted his shoe with his cuff, and looked at the glass bottle. It was covered in

dust, save for one space where it had been pushed: a cat's pawprint.

"What?" Tom mouthed. He peered into the darkness.

Two cat's eyes, green and wide, stared back.

With a heavy blow to the back of the head, he was gone. Images swam by in dissolved, confused waves: the silhouette of a man, the caterwauling of many cats, headlights and a blasting horn rushing towards him:

*...clack-clack, clack-clack...clack-clack,
clack-clack...*

Chapter Two

My Territory

“AAAAAAAAGH!”

Tom launched upright, fighting to free himself. Something huge and thick tangled around him, suffocating him. Lashing out, the binds fell away, and he breathed again. His heart pounded, and it was a while before he noticed he was in his own bed, in his own room, and a pale dawn crept through his window.

He slumped back onto his pillow. Just a dream. A silly, harmless dream. Sweet relief washed over him, and he broke into fits of laughter. *I was starting to believe it!* Letting out a long, rattling sigh, he glanced up at the clock on the wall. Twenty past eight. Nice and early, too. In his head he was already planning his day: head up to the shop for the papers; cook a full English breakfast; work on his presentation; catch up on his shows recorded last night...

It was only when Tom rolled out of his Kingsize bed that things started to go wrong. His bed was massive –precisely why he’d brought it – but he never recalled it being *this* big. When he reached out a leg to plant on the floor, he found only air. He lost his balance and tumbled out, falling further than seemed right before finally hitting the floor. Luckily, he landed on his feet.

Staggering, he looked up at his bed. It towered over him. So did his desk, walk-in wardrobe, wall-length fish tank and everything else. Why did he feel so small? He tried to turn his neck, but he felt sore all over. He tried to stand up, but his back legs wouldn’t support him properly, and he slumped back on all fours.

Bewildered, he crawled out of his room, pushing his way through the crack in the door, and made for the bathroom. The door was closed, and he couldn’t reach the handle. Well, if his dream had been strange, this was shaping up to be far, far worse.

He looked down the stairs. They were a big and bold feature even when he felt his normal

self, but from this new angle they looked positively hill-like. Reaching an arm out, he tried to lower himself down to the next step – until he caught sight of his arm.

Black fur. No hand: only a paw.

With a yelp of surprise he tumbled forward, crashing down each and every step until he landed painfully and awkwardly in the foyer. His umbrella tumbled over and struck him over the head. *Ouch!*

Groaning in a voice he didn't recognise, he clambered back up, and looked wearily around his own home. The house was a present from his father when he'd turned eighteen, which outdone the Porsche for his seventeenth. Normally, it was his own trendy bachelor pad: a paradise of the latest styles and the shiniest gadgets. Now, it all looked big and intimidating, and he felt as uneasy as he had done last night – *or rather, in my dream*, he corrected himself. His already huge wall-mounted plasma TV looked like it was the size of his driveway, standing in pride of place in a lounge bigger than a school hall, scattered with

expensive furniture ten times the size any of it should be.

He turned to look at his kitchen – and froze. The side of his steel-finish oven, looming like a monolith over the kitchen, showed a cat in its reflection.

“Puzzle?” Tom said in a high-pitched squeak.

Tom looked behind him, expecting to see his pet cat Puzzle standing on the doormat, cat flap swinging behind her. But she wasn’t there. And yet the cat’s reflection remained in the oven. Tom gulped as an impossible, ridiculous truth wrapped itself around him, more suffocating than his duvet had been.

He walked forward. So did the reflection. He walked right up to the oven’s shiny surface. A black cat with a white muzzle and chest gaped back at him with lime-green eyes.

“H-Hello?” Tom ventured. As he spoke, the reflection’s mouth opened in a small *meow*, revealing sharp teeth. He raised his arm, seeing his own black fur and paw as clear as day, and pressed it against the steel, touching the reflection’s own paw.

“I...I don’t...no...” he shuddered, “I’m a cat! I’M...A CAT!”

He bashed his head against the metal, the noise pounding in his ears.

“Wake up!” he growled, “This is a *dream!* You’ve got work to do! *Wake up!*”

“Woah! Take it easy, kit!” said a voice, “You were almost cleaved open by the BigMetalSnake last night. I didn’t save you just to have you beat yourself up.”

Tom spun around, vision swaying. Panic welled up inside him. He could feel the fur on his back stand on end – then flatten again when he saw Puzzle standing there in front of the door. Instantly Tom felt a comforting calm trickle through him at the sight of his pet.

Puzzle had stripes just like a tiger; the specialist seller had told him the official name for the breed was Toyger. He warmly recalled their first meeting in the pet store. Tom had fallen love with her straight away. Even she seemed to like him, and she had curled her tail into a question-mark shape in greeting. With that, Tom named her Puzzle, and she’d become

the perfect companion around the house that kept him from feeling lonely – when she was around, of course. She was a cat, and she behaved as all cats did, but even so she spent a lot of time out and about, and when she came back it wasn't too out of the ordinary to see her injured one way or the other. Just what did she get up to?

“Puzzle?” Tom said slowly, “You're...you're talking. Can you understand me?”

Puzzle rolled her eyes and padded into the kitchen. Up close, Tom could see just how much bigger she was than him. Lean muscles rippled under her gleaming fur as she moved.

“Understand you?” she said, “Listen kit, you were in the middle of Smoky territory, knocked out, splayed across those dangerous metal bars that the BigMetalSnakes speed along, with one charging towards you. That's pretty hard to understand.”

“A BigMetalSnake?” Tom repeated, wondering what she could possibly mean, “Do...do you mean a train? Was I nearly ran over by a *train*?”

“A train? If that’s what you call it, yes,” said Puzzle, brushing past him and heading to her feeding bowls.

Tom let out a long shuddering breath. So that was what those blinding lights were that he’d seen after being struck over the head. He hadn’t imagined any of it...it had been *real*. That tall man must have knocked him out, and the sound of all those cats surely had something to do with this. He winced. *Will you listen to yourself, Verbrisser? This is useless! Trying to make sense of something that doesn’t – can’t – make sense! When will this nightmare end?* He took another breath, calming himself. No point panicking. Got to search for clues, answers.

“You rescued me?” Tom turned to face Puzzle, whose muzzle was buried deep in her bowl. He couldn’t believe he was talking to her. He’d talked to her before, obviously, but just the idle chit-chat anyone gives a pet. He never expected to have an actual conversation with her. The feeling was bizarre...though not completely unpleasant.

“Yep,” she said between mouthfuls of dry pellets, “I was patrolling our borders when I smelled something strange: you. I saw you just in time, and grabbed you and brought you here. You looked pretty beat up. Did Smoky Clan do that to you?”

“Smoky who?” Tom frowned, wondering why on Earth his pet cat’s territory stretched all the way to the railway.

Puzzle purred with laughter; “What?” she turned to face him, “You don’t know what a Clan is? Every cat around here belongs in one. Hmmm. Perhaps they do things differently beyond our borders. Speaking of which, you need to get back to where you belong.”

Tom didn’t reply. Puzzle went on.

“I couldn’t let a cat die, stranger or not, but now you’re okay, you need to leave my territory. Not just for your safety, but mine. My pet doesn’t like company, and he seems to just about tolerate mine.”

It took Tom a while before he realised she was talking about him, and he felt a pang of guilt. He really loved Puzzle, but he’d been so

busy lately that he'd barely had time for himself, let alone her.

"Who knows what he'll do if he finds you here, but I don't think he'll take it too well," she said, looking around fearfully, "Especially as you slept in his sleeping nest. He didn't come back last night; he does that now and then. He could be home any – woah, hang on! How...how do you know my name?"

"Puzzle...it's me," Tom said carefully, "It's Tom, your own – I mean, pet."

"Excuse me?"

"I've been turned into a cat," he added, hardly believing himself, "I can't remember much of what happened before I was knocked out. One minute I was following these signs into the Old Dairy, the next thing I know...I'm in my bed, looking like this."

Puzzle said nothing, only stared at him with her piercing golden eyes. He'd always liked Puzzle's eyes, but never had he seen them so full of thought and meaning. It unnerved him.

"I...I can prove it," Tom went on quickly, "I know your name; I know your favourite

sleeping spot is that rug in the box room; you've hated it when the post arrives ever since you slipped and fell on a letter that one time you came through the cat flap –"

"I knew it."

Tom let out a sigh of relief. "You've got to help me, Puzzle," he pleaded, "I don't know what's happening to me – if this really is real, I need to turn b–"

Puzzle leapt and struck him to the cold kitchen tiles, pinning him down with strong paws.

"Ah!" Tom squeaked, "Puzzle, what're you – ?"

"I could smell my pet's scent on you when I found you," Puzzle growled in his ear, "I was suspicious then: you reeked of Smoky Clan too. And – what a surprise! – he didn't return to the nest last night. Coincidence, kit? I think not..."

"You're right, it isn't a coincidence, Puzzle, because – OW!" Tom yelped as Puzzle dug her claws into his stomach. He wriggled free, and scrambled to his four paws.

“Puzzle, come on, it’s *me!*” he begged between hard breaths, “Tom *did* return home last night – you’re looking at him. I mean...why else do you think I headed for the bedr – I mean, sleeping nest as soon as I arrived? How could I have known where it was?”

Puzzles eyes narrowed.

“You did seem to know your way around very well...” she said slowly, “Even more amazing as you were barely conscious.”

Tom said nothing, for fear she may lunge at him again if anything else. How did she get so strong? True, he was half her size now, but still, Puzzle was a pampered house cat...wasn’t she?

“Maybe you are Tom,” she said carefully, “And maybe you aren’t...”

Tom opened his mouth to protest, but Puzzle raised a paw.

“I’ll have to think this over, kit, think of a way to prove if you are who you say you are. Here’s one idea.”

She turned, and opened a nearby cupboard. Balancing on her hind legs, she rummaged

inside, and pulled out a box, the contents spilling across the floor.

“Hey!” Tom yelled, “That muesli’s expensive, you know!”

Puzzle ignored him. “Don’t touch this,” she ordered, indicating the mass of oats and chunks of fruit rolled across the tiles with her tail, “It’s a test.”

Tom blinked in bewilderment, but nodded.

“I’ll be back at sundown,” she said, padding towards the cat flap, “Stay in the house, if you know what’s good for you: other cats around here will be less understanding than me.” “Where – where are you going?” Tom stammered.

“Things to do, places to see; I’m a busy cat,” she said, then added smarmily, “If you really are Tom, you should know all about that, right?”

“But...” Tom searched for an excuse to make her stay, “I’m hungry. What will I eat?”

Puzzle’s lip curled in amusement; “You’re a cat, aren’t you? There’s a garden with mice out back – eat what you find. But don’t you *dare* touch my food,” she growled, nodding at her

food bowls and the pouches of food stacked next to them, “That’s *my* food, and this is *my* territory. Count yourself lucky that I’m letting you hunt at all.”

And with that, she pushed her way through the cat flap, and was gone.

Tom sighed. *Great.* The phrase ‘stranger in your own home’ was being taken to a whole new level here. His tiny cat-form made his house cathedral-like in size, and equally as foreboding. Even his own pet cat was ordering him around – he couldn’t even eat the cat food, which *he’d* paid for! That stuff was pretty pricey, too – only the best for his dear Puzzle. *Well, just you wait, missy, he grinned inwardly, the second I get back to being a human (or wake up, whichever came first) you’re going right on to a cheapo budget brand.* It served her right for being so ungrateful. ‘*My territory*’...how dare she!

His stomach rumbled. He literally couldn’t remember when he last ate: that blow to the head had left his memory patchy. Well, he wouldn’t want to eat stinking cat food anyway,

and he *definitely* wasn't going to hunt (and what did she mean, saying there were mice in the garden? He paid a top gardener to keep it in perfect shape)! No, he may *look* like a cat – indeed, he may actually *be* a cat – but he was still human. Still Tom Verbrisser. He would eat like he always did.

He looked at the oven. The monstrous metal behemoth towered over him. Cooking something was a no-no in this form. Shame: he had a fine steak rump in the fridge; now it would spoil. He gazed longingly at the muesli splayed around his paws, but resisted. Maybe that was the test Puzzle had in mind, and besides, she scared him slightly.

He looked at his paws. The simplest thing he could make that could count as a proper meal was a sandwich. He looked up at the bread bin, perched high next to the toaster, and began calculating a route to it: jump on the chair, then the table, onto the oven, over the sink...and getting some slices of ham and some pre-grated cheese out of the fridge would be a doddle.

Yes, this could work, he thought as he instinctively bunched onto his hind legs, ready to leap onto the chair: perhaps being a cat wouldn't be so bad.

He jumped, and smashed his head against the side of the chair.

Chapter Three

Sour Milk

Tom stood back, admiring his handiwork.

The simple act of making a ham and cheese sandwich had turned into a terrifying quest of leaping over the chasms of the kitchen, wrestling with the bread bin, returning to ground level with two pillow-sized slices of bread in his mouth, accidentally closing himself in the fridge and smashing some of his most expensive crockery in an effort to get a small plate.

He'd built up a collection of bruises and cuts, but he wasn't as beat-up as his breakfast: the bread looked as shredded as the cheese, which lay scattered more around the plate than on it. He'd used his razor-sharp teeth to pick up the ham, which had somehow ended up being half-eaten between the pack and the bread. Clearly he was even hungrier than he imagined, which was saying something.

Tom licked his furry chops. *No matter*, he thought with relish. *Food is food*. Mouth watering, he tore a big chunk of bread off in his mouth – and after two chews spat it out. It didn't taste like the soft, doughy bread he loved: it tasted spongy and starchy, like a block of polystyrene. His kitty taste buds weren't agreeing with this human food!

Instinctively he ran his tongue along his teeth, removing any bits stuck between his teeth, feeling thoroughly depressed. Not only had all that effort been a waste, but it seemed as though he was more cat-like than he thought, and human only in his mind. But he was still Tom Verbrisser, right? He stared at the sandwich, eyes locked on the thin slice of ham in the middle. Well, he could eat meat fine, couldn't he? Dragging the ham out from between the bread slices and scattering cheese everywhere, he gobbled it up in one go. It tasted as delicious as ever, and he immediately scrambled for the rest of the pack, gnashing his teeth ravenously at the juicy pieces, his instinct to satisfy his hunger taking over...

He forced himself to stop, pushing the pack forcefully away. He rolled his tongue around his muzzle, licking away the debris. *Well*, he thought; *that had been embarrassing*. Just because he was a cat didn't mean he had to act like one. He was better than that: he was Tom Verbrisser! He could overcome animal instincts, cat or not.

But now he needed to drink. Milk seemed like an obvious choice, but he was filled with images of milk spilling everywhere, turning sour and stinking out his beautiful kitchen for weeks. He shuddered: *no thanks*. Water would be just fine.

He leapt onto the chair, silently praising himself for getting it right this time, and jumped and padded his way to the sink. The cold tap gleamed with misty droplets, and even through his fur Tom could feel how icy cool it was. Instantly his throat felt dry. Placing his paws awkwardly on the handle he twisted – or at least tried to. It was jammed tight.

He cursed himself. Why hadn't he got a plumber to look at this drippy tap? That was

why he'd closed it so tight: the dripping drove him mad in the night.

He tried headbutting it, and tried using his teeth, but it remained stubbornly still. Finally, in sheer frustration, he threw his whole body at the tap. It spun open, and he landed in the sink, freezing water blasting in his face.

“Aaaaaagh!” he shrieked, scrambling against the blast of water that seemed to tear at his fur. He leapt up onto the draining board, and spun the tap shut. Breathing heavily, he felt disgusted at being soaked. Sure, if he had been walking to work and some stranger brought a bucket of water down over him, he'd be none too pleased, but this...this felt *wrong!* He could feel the cold water trickling through his heavy fur and spidering over the skin beneath...*ick!*

The solution came to him as naturally as blinking, and he shook himself vigorously from nose to tail-tip, not stopping until he felt dizzy. Catching a reflection of himself in the drip-flecked chopping board, he saw his black and white fur sticking out in damp spikes. He sighed. Being a cat was tough.

Turning back to the sink, he turned the loosened cold tap until a gentle stream poured out, and he licked rapidly from it. From some reason lapping up the water came more naturally than sipping it, scooping great dollops into his mouth. Before long his thirst was quenched.

Now what? Turning off the tap, he looked in dismay across the messy kitchen: the muesli; the massacred sandwich; the smashed crockery. Nothing he could do about that for now. What did cats do beyond eating? Well, if Puzzle was anything to go by, a *lot* of sleeping, and going out. He'd never felt more awake, and he wasn't allowed to leave the house. Great.

Making his way back to the floor, he racked his brain, trying to remember what he was meant to be doing today before the minor bother of turning into a cat sidetracked him. The mix of the blow to his head last night and the shock of this morning had left his mind more full of holes than a slice of Swiss cheese. He knew he had to prepare some kind of presentation...but what for? Why? When was the deadline?

There had to be something he could do to refresh his memory. Maybe if he could remember what had happened before this whole mess started, he might find a clue as to how he ended up turning into a cat? It was a long shot, but worth a try.

Clambering up the staircase one huge step at a time, he pushed his way into his bedroom and unzipped his workbag with his teeth. His papers were scattered across the thick rug, and he realised with warm relief that he could still understand English. Still, without his memories, the pile of papers meant little, as if he had just found a pile of old schoolwork he boxed up and left in the attic to collect dust. Some of it echoed deep within his memory, particularly when he pawed through some details of nearby Jacobsen Park, and some notes made in his handwriting, dated only yesterday, regarding a will-reading, but that was about it.

Tom whiled away the hours rifling through the papers, the idle hope that some of it would leap out at him fading all the time. What could he do? All he knew for sure was that this

presentation he needed to give had a deadline, and it was soon, and seeing as he'd taken time off to prepare, it was surely important. This was a nightmare: he couldn't work on something urgent if he didn't know what it was! And even if he did know, what could he do? He was a cat!

A sharp scraping noise from downstairs launched him to his paws, his now-dry fur sticking up again. Then a voice called:

“Hey kit, I'm back. Where are you?”

Tom looked up at the high window. The sky was flushing pink, the windows of the houses opposite reflecting a hazy sunset. How long had he been up here? Well, he thought glumly as he padded downstairs, however long he'd been given, he now had one day less.

He stopped halfway down the stairs, and looked down at Puzzle from between the banisters. She looked absently around the house, her eyes wide.

“Well, it looks like Tom really is gone,” she said matter-of-factly.

Don't sound too put-out, he thought bitterly. Didn't she care that he was gone? Didn't she

miss him? He shook himself – what was he on about? He was *here!* He was a cat, not invisible! But he didn't point that out to Puzzle: she wasn't convinced yet; he needed to play this tactfully.

“And you needed to spill breakfast cereal over the floor to find that out?” he asked, clambering down the rest of the stairs.

“Well, sometimes Tom goes away for a few days,” Puzzle explained, “when he does, he usually sends someone around every morning to clean the nest.”

“You mean Marsha?” Tom put in. Marsha was indeed the cleaning lady he hired to maintain the house and feed Puzzle and the fish whenever he went on holiday or business trips. Nice woman, he recalled fondly: reminds me of Mum.

Puzzle nodded. “If she didn't turn up to clean, then Tom didn't plan this. He really has gone missing...”

Still no sadness: she sounded curious if nothing else. *Come on, Puzzle!* Tom yelled in his head, *I treated you well enough, didn't I? I*

thought you liked me... he pushed the thought down and cleared his throat.

“Or turned into a certain animal?” he ventured. She didn’t reply. She scanned the kitchen, looking from the broken plates to the ragged sandwich to the puddles of water splattered in nooks and crannies. At last she turned to face him.

“You really aren’t much good being a cat, are you?” she said, her eyes glittering with humour.

Tom walked up to her side. “It’s me, Tom, I promise,” he assured her. With a sudden flash of inspiration, he added, “I know how you like to be petted.”

She peered down at him, considering.

“Now that is something only he would now,” she said, tone guarded, “Go on.”

“Err...” he mumbled awkwardly, “you’re going to have to lean down a bit. You’re taller than I am now; it makes things a bit...difficult.”

Puzzle crouched, tucking her front paws under her chest. Tom gulped. He had to get this right: his stomach still stung from when Puzzle last clawed him.

He lifted a shaky paw. Fear was impulsively making sharp claws extend from the tips. Well, that wouldn't work: he'd risk cutting Puzzle, and that would hardly reassure her. He sighed, resigned to the obvious. He'd have to use his tongue. He'd seen other cats groom one another with tongues, he knew it was natural and normal, but all the same, he felt hugely uncomfortable. Swallowing his pride, he ran his tongue backwards along the fur on Puzzle's neck, spiking up the hairs. Puzzle's back arched contentedly, and Tom proceeded to lick the hairs down, then back up again. Puzzle gave her front arms a luxurious stretch, and purred deeply. With every lick Tom felt more comfortable with grooming Puzzle, and it soon felt as natural as a handshake.

Finally, Puzzle stood up, and Tom stood back, slightly apprehensive. But she looked at him with dancing, curious eyes.

"Only Tom knows I like my fur stroked backwards," she whispered, looking at Tom as though seeing him for the first time, "It's...it's really you, isn't it?"

“Hi Puzzle,” he said sheepishly.

Puzzle leaned forward and ran her tongue over his head and ears. A shiver pulsed down his spine. It felt...*nice*. As Puzzle groomed him some more, he felt oddly happy, in spite of everything. A rumble rose deep in his throat. Was he *purring*?

As soon as the grooming had started, however, it was over. Puzzle brushed past him and headed for her feeding bowls.

“Wait,” said Tom, “Don’t eat that.”

Puzzle turned to face him, unsure if that was a threat. Tom shrank back.

“Cats...cats can eat raw meat, right?” he asked

Puzzle relaxed. “Of course,” she drew herself up proudly, “I hunt raw prey, after all. The stuff you feed me’s okay, but nothing beats the fresh stuff.”

Tom winced, and headed for the fridge.

“Don’t give me that!” she snapped, “I don’t eat all of them. I leave some for you by your door. You’re welcome, by the way!”

Don't remind me, Tom thought with a shiver. He recalled the dead sparrow he'd trodden on last week, the bones crunching under his shoes. He dragged out the steak, and pierced the wrapping with a claw.

"Care to join me?" he asked, "There's plenty of it."

Puzzle looked at the steak hungrily, but seemed uncertain. Tom had once told her off for scavenging two rashers of bacon he'd left in an open pack. At the time, he'd thought nothing of it, but seeing things from a cat's eye now, he could sympathise. *Got to take food as it comes, I guess*. He hoped he hadn't upset Puzzle too much.

"Come on," Tom encouraged, "I'm hardly going to tell you off now, am I? You've got the size advantage." Tom even stewed over the thought that Puzzle was in charge of the house now: if she was to force him out the house, he'd be powerless to fight back. She wouldn't, though, would she?

Luckily Puzzle didn't seem to be thinking that way: indeed, as she padded over and

munched deeply on the succulent steak, she seemed to be lost in thought. Tom joined her, eating in silence. This was the first time he'd shared a meal with someone since...since...he frowned. He couldn't remember the last time he ate with someone else, and he couldn't blame memory loss for that. At least turning into a cat had done one good thing: it had brought him closer to his one and only proper friend.

Finally, Puzzle spoke up. "So, what happened to you?" she said through a mouthful of red meat, "How did you end up like this?"

Tom gave a hollow laugh. "Your guess is as good as mine," he said, "All I remember is following some cryptic signs to some dark place, being knocked unconscious, then waking up here. I...I owe you my life, Puzzle," Tom suddenly realised. She'd mentioned her saving him earlier, but he'd been too in shock to appreciate it, "If it weren't for you, I'd be in two pieces somewhere on a railroad. Thank...thank you."

"Don't mention it," she said gruffly, "Like I said, I couldn't just let a strange cat die."

Tom mulled over what Puzzle said as he tore off another chunk of steak. That was right – Puzzle hadn't known she was rescuing Tom, but she rescued him anyway. Why?

“Someone wanted you out the way,” Puzzle said, cutting through his thoughts, “What are the chances you just so happened to lie unconscious on a BigMetalSnake track? No, somebody put you there on purpose...”

Now Tom was even more confused. Was it the man who'd knocked him out? The caterwauling cats? The maker of those signs? Someone didn't want him around, that was for sure. But who? He wasn't popular with many people, but turning him into a cat and leaving him at the mercy of a train was...well, *unusual* to say the least.

“Thirsty?” Puzzle asked, “Here, my drinking bowl is full of milk. You can share with me if you like.”

Tom blinked. “S-Sure,” he stammered, and he stumbled over his front paws to join her. Puzzle's eyes glimmered, amused at Tom's clumsiness in his cat body.

Puzzle leant over the bowl and lapped deeply. Tom patiently waited his turn. While he waited, he was again struck by the sensation of how odd this all was, yet strangely pleasant: he was a cat, talking with his own pet cat and sharing a bowl of milk with her. Had someone told him yesterday this would happen, he would have laughed in their face and then moved a safe distance away. But now...

Puzzle straightened up, happily licking flecks of milk from her muzzle.

“Your turn.”

He lowered his head, and slowly lapped at the surface. The milk tasted fine, but it smelled slightly off. A sour whiff shot up his nostrils, up into his head...

...and it all came back. The sour milk smelled identical to the odour of the Old Dairy, the rattling bottle in the kerb, and the drink he'd had before the bizarre journey home. Everything came washing back to his memory in a barrage of colourful images.

He sat bolt upright, spraying milk across Puzzle's flank.

“Hey!” Puzzle yelled, licking furiously at her fur, “What’s wrong with you?”

“I remember,” Tom spluttered, milk dripping from his chin, “I remember what happened yesterday. I think I know who did this to me.”

Chapter Four

Cream of the Crop

Tom smiled at the battered photo in his hand. A teenage boy and girl, arm in arm, smiled back at him, leaning against an old oak tree. The sunlight dappled around them, throwing warm shades of yellow and green far into the tree-filled background. His hair had been longer then, and those spots were long gone...in fact he'd changed a lot in two short years.

The girl in the photo had long, silky honey hair draped over one shoulder. And her *smile*...the rest of the photo had faded and dulled with time, but her smile remained as brilliant and shining as ever. Had she changed since then? If she had, he didn't know. Months after that photo had been taken she was gone, never to be seen again. Where was she now?

His heart gave an extra hard *thump*, and he shook himself. This was no time to get sentimental. He'd brought the old photo along for luck, nothing else. Today, at last, was the reading of his father's will. It had been a month since he'd passed away – of a heart attack while on some business trip in some far-flung Asian country, negotiating land rights – and Tom's life had come to a stand still. He hadn't mourned, not really: he hadn't seen his Dad for years, seeing him for mere days at a time around Christmas, and even then he was always on the phone. Tom didn't blame him for that; he was a busy guy. Work is important.

No, the real cause of the stand-still was that business had ground to a halt since the Managing Director of Verbrisser International Land Development and Estate Agency had suddenly died, and nobody knew quite what to do – not even the higher realms of the board: his Dad liked to keep as much of the business to himself as possible. They lost their head, quite literally, and went into shutdown. Tom lost all

of his sub-contracted work in London. All very inconvenient.

But, at last, a will had been found, and the reading was today. Whispers had been abound: that the son was to inherit. Tom clenched his hands together to stop them shaking with nerves: this great empire of his father's creation was but moment's away. He straightened his tie: he'd put on his best suit for the occasion, not just for the sombre mood of his father's Last Testament, but also because he knew the press would be here, curious to know the fate of this mighty global company, and sure enough he could here lens shutter's clicking away from the back of the room. Tom begged his nerves to calm, and he made a show of idly drumming his fingers together. This will reading was, surely, a formality, a foregone conclusion. He had nothing to be worried about. He could almost smell the leather in the back seat of the Rolls Royce, the uncorking of wine on private flights to Dubai...

He chanced a look behind him. He sat on the front row, and could see the rest of the

congregated crowd behind him. The great and the greater were gathered, even a couple of famous entrepreneurs, waiting to hear what piece of the meat Gareth Verbrisser had carved out for them. Aside from them, however, Tom recognised none of them, and Tom silently berated his father from keeping him on the fringes of his work, stuck in London. He'd have to network like crazy to make contacts with these people...

...all except one, that was. There was one person he knew very well, but not in person: he'd seen him in numerous press photos with his father, side by side, arm in arm, smiling as they cut ribbons and posed in hard hats while holding up blueprints. And here he was, in this room.

Muezza Ailuros. He had a dark, leathery tan, a crooked smile, and eyes hidden behind huge sunglasses. He held a striped black-and-blue cane in his sun-toughened hands, and his suit and tie were a blinding white, with a canary yellow shirt. The whole shebang was rounded off by a cream trilby hat, complete with a sky-blue feather. The whole get-up looked tasteless

and tacky, and he reminded Tom of some cheap 1960s American cop show gangster: cheesy and not in the least bit threatening. He turned, made eye contact with Tom, and his smile widened. He tipped his hat to him. Tom nodded, and turned away.

So, Muezza was here too. It was to be expected, Tom supposed, but still: now Tom had a genuine reason to feel nervous. His Dad had never had an official partner, but everyone knew Muezza was the unofficial second-in-command. Whenever his father took a rare holiday, Muezza took over. Whenever Tom snuck a peek at this Dad's email inbox, most were from Muezza. And most important of all, Tom hated him. He had no real reason to, of course – business is business – but something irked him about this man, even moreso now he was in the same room.

At last, an attorney emerged from a back room, and the hall fell deadly quiet. She took to a lectern, and with little fanfare, jumped straight into the will reading.

Tom wasn't mentioned in the beginning. At first this made him almost sick with worry, but then it became clear that it started with the minor parts of the will. The attorney read slowly and clearly as Gareth's Last Testament shared out the spoils of his father's work: subsidiaries and valuable contracts in Brazil and China, holiday homes in the Mediterranean, small branches of the business in Japan and the East Coast of the USA. Tom wasn't worried: he knew the extent of his father's empire. This was all minor pickings for the vultures.

"And lastly, we come to the matter of the cornerstone of my business: the ownership of my first and largest business: Verbrisser International Land Development and Estate Agency." The attorney read crisply. She allowed a brief pause as everyone instinctively leaned forward. Tom could feel sweat beading on his forehead.

"Even now, as I write my will, I am torn," the attorney read on, "on the one hand, there is my son, Tom. He is young, but he has been involved with my business since he first joined

me for work experience, aged twelve, and has fought for every inch of the work he does in London. He practically runs my operations in the capital, and has done so competently for a year.

“But on the other hand, there is Muezza. A man after my own heart, we have worked together for more years than I care to count, and with his expertise I’ve extended my business into corners of the world I once only dreamed of. I never thought I’d meet a man who had as much ambition as myself, and though we clashed on issues now and then, we always resolved things amicably – especially when I reminded him who paid him.”

Light chuckles through the room. Tom took the opportunity to glance at Muezza from the corner of his eye: he too was laughing, though it seemed forced: the lines on his face deepened and his smile was without warmth. Tom gave a wry grin: perhaps things weren’t so smooth between Muezza and his Dad after all.

The laughter faded, and the attorney resumed; “I am torn. Breaking up the company

is out of the question: it simply wouldn't be right after all I've done building it from nothing to cut it down the middle, and besides, neither party would be happy with the result, and would commence to destroy each other. No, one owner must be decided, who will control Verbrisser International to the full. Therefore, I have set out a challenge."

Murmurs of intrigue bubbled around the room, and chairs creaked. Tom raised an eyebrow.

"I have kept a property vacant for this occasion: Jacobsen Park. Both Tom and Muezza know it well, for very different reasons. As you well know, the Park is derelict, and in desperate need of renovation. You both have three days to draw up what you would plan for Jacobsen Park, and present it to a board of trusted advisors at my London Office. Details will be handed to you presently. Whoever my advisors select as the better of the two presentations will be handed full control of Verbrisser International.

“This concludes the reading of the Will and Last Testament of Gareth Verbrisser.”

“The usual, please, Barry,” Tom reached for his wallet, “Actually, make it a double.”

“A double, eh, Tom?” Barry grinned as he reached for a bottle of amber liquid and a tumbler glass, “What’s the celebration?”

“Half-celebration,” Tom corrected, loosening his tie, “Half to wind down. It’s been a tough afternoon.”

“You do look rough around the edges,” Barry admitted, scooping ice cubes into the glass.

“You have no idea,” Tom muttered, more to himself than Barry. He slumped himself onto a barstool and slacked his tie, “Why do people bombard you with questions when they’ve been in the same room as you and heard all the same things?”

“I’m guessing you just came out of that will reading, then,” Barry poured the drink into the glass and slid it across the bar to Tom.

“No sense hiding it,” Tom shrugged. Sipping on his drink, he relayed the events to Barry.

“But like I said, this is a half-celebration,” Tom raised his glass, “I haven’t got my Dad’s company yet, but nobody does a presentation quite like Tom Verbrisser. It’s my speciality. And London is my territory.”

Barry snorted. “You could say that again. I’m more likely to see a sign advertising a Verbrisser development than a London double-decker these days. Have you heard that game? You have to see how far around London you can get without seeing your logo. The longest I’ve ever heard anyone manage is one mile.”

Tom detected a hint of sourness in Barry’s voice, but he let it pass: he was used to sour grapes from everyone by now. He put it down to jealousy, pure and simple. “You let me know where that one mile is and I’ll get right on it,” Tom replied. Barry gave a short laugh and began buffing the mahogany bar with an old rag. Not for long: Barry stopped, and turned to face Tom again.

“Can I ask a kinda personal question?” he titled his head.

“Go for it. You wouldn’t be the first today, not by a long shot.”

“Well...why? Why do you want your father’s old job so much? I mean, surely what you’ve got going now is enough: London’s plenty I’m sure, and you don’t seem to be troubled for cash.”

Tom didn’t get a chance to answer, because another customer called for service further along the bar, and Barry bustled away. Which was just as well, because Tom couldn’t think up an answer. He mulled over his drink. *I’ve got loads of reasons*, he told himself, *haven’t I?* The ice chinked lightly in his glass. His mind wandered to the challenge ahead of him: a presentation on Jacobsen Park. Tom pressed the old photo in his pocket. That Park meant so much to him. Of course, it had been a proper park of trees and streams back then. It had suddenly fallen out of maintenance when the local council could no longer afford to upkeep it. He’d had no idea his father had snapped it up. Was this his father testing him? To put aside his own sentiments, and focus on what a

proper redevelopment of the Park would be? Flats, retail parks, shopping centres? He clutched the old photo tighter.

The doors swung open, and heavy boots clunked across the wooden floorboards. Tom looked up, and his heart sank. Muezza Ailuros stood at the entrance, still in his gaudy suit, now flanked by a huge shed of a man in a suit and sunglasses. *Bodyguard, huh?* Tom's lip curled, *either this guy really is important, or he just wishes he was.*

Tom turned back to his drink, but he could hear Muezza approaching, steel soles stomping across the bar. A hand squeezed his shoulder.

“Ah...Tom Verbrisser, isn't it?” Muezza rumbled, his voice so deep it made Tom's drink ripple, “Gareth's boy? May I join you?”

He didn't wait for a reply. A stool scraped across the ground, and Muezza heaved himself next to Tom. He signalled for Barry, and rattled off a list of ingredients.

“And a drop of milk,” Muezza finished. Luckily Barry was used to complex cocktails,

and was already fetching bottles from around the bar. Muezza turned to Tom.

“That was quite the face-off this afternoon, eh?” He said jovially, “Still! No hard feelings, eh?” He roared with laughter, and slapped Tom hard on the back, nearly making Tom bring up his drink.

“No hard feelings?” Tom turned on his barstool to face him. Up close, his face looked more leathery and scorched than ever, “You make it sound as if I’ve lost, Mr. Ailuros. Let me give you some advice: just because I’m young doesn’t mean you should take me lightly. I have time, and time is all I need to show my true colours.”

“I’d expect nothing less from Gareth’s boy. But I must disagree,” Muezza shook his head, perched his cane between them, and took off his sunglasses. His eyes were bolting blue and diamond-hard, as though they were endlessly focussed on something impossible, “When time’s on our side, we can prepare, steel ourselves. We are anything but ourselves. It is when we are pushed, with no time, and few

choices, that we're forced to make big decisions on the spot that our true colours show."

There was a pause. Tom didn't know how to respond to that, so he sipped on his drink. The heat of his hands had made the ice cubes melt slightly.

"I'm intrigued to see what your true colours are, Mr. Verbrisser," Muezza added quite suddenly.

Tom stared at him. What was that supposed to mean? Was it a threat? Muezza said nothing more; he only looked up at the T.V., his eyes smiling, until his drink arrived. It was in a tall glass, topped with a lemon slice and umbrella. It was a thick, creamy-white colour. Muezza took a long sip, his blue eyes brimming with relish.

"Ah!" he gasped as he came up for air, licking his lips clean, "Excellent! Keep the change, Sir."

He handed a twenty-pound note to Barry. Barry couldn't help break into a smile.

“Thank you, Sir,” Barry bowed slightly. With a meaningful look to Tom, he turned away.

“Care to try?” Muezza pushed the tall glass to Tom, “It’s a favourite of mine. I call it Cream of the Crop; not just because of the colour, but because when you drink it, you feel like you’re the most important person on Earth!”

Muezza roared with laughter again, and would have toppled from his stool had his bodyguard not been there to save him. *That explains a lot*, Tom thought with a grin.

He looked at the drink. Well, why not? He’d seen Muezza take a long swig, so it couldn’t be too hard a drink. He pulled out the umbrella and lemon slice. No fancy stuff for me, thank you. Had he not known better, he would have thought he was holding a normal glass of milk.

He took a small sip. It was sweet and moreish, with a small hint of almonds. He had to admit, Muezza had good taste. He took a deeper mouthful, and licked his lip clean. He

was just about to order one for himself – when the aftertaste hit him. The sweetness dissolved away to a wall of sour. The milky flavour rotted in his mouth, sending fumes into his nostrils and making his eyes water. He wolfed down the rest of his own drink, swilling it around his throat to rid himself of the flavour.

“Powerful stuff, eh?” Muezza grinned, laying his hand on his shoulder, “Takes some getting used to. Here, let me buy you one.”

“No thanks,” Tom pushed Muezza’s hand away, “I must be getting back. Early start tomorrow.”

“Ah, yes,” Muezza’s grin only widened as he stood up, “Well...may the best man win.”

Muezza offered a hand, and Tom shook it. His grip was firm, crushing his knuckles together. Tom didn’t react, and didn’t do the same back: he wasn’t a child, and this wasn’t about who had the strongest grip. The stakes were Jacobsen Park, something which meant more to Tom than all the properties in the City, and who walked away with it would be decided on Tuesday.

Muezza released his hand. He turned, and headed out the bar, making for Bank Underground Station.

Chapter Five

Friend?

“...which brings me right up to now.”

Tom took a deep breath as he finished recalling his story. Puzzle listened to it all with intent. When he finished, she slowly washed herself: licking her paw and running it over her head and neck, deep in thought. Tom reluctantly did the same, but didn't pull it off with the same ease as Puzzle did. Idly he wondered if he would ever be tempted to do what all cats did, and wash himself *all over*. With just his tongue! Ugh. But then, he hadn't been fond of his drenching earlier...

“So you think Muezza turned you into a cat?” Puzzle asked at last.

“I don't know,” Tom admitted, “But he's definitely in on it. That drink – *Cream of the Crop* – he said it makes you feel like you're the most important person on Earth. I drink it, and

hey presto, I envision signs with my name on. Centre of attention.” He added bitterly.

“But why would that lead you to the Old Dairy?”

“I’m not sure...” Tom would stroke his chin ponderously if he could, “Cream of the Crop tasted milky, the signs led to the Old Dairy...there’s a link there, a bizarre one, but a link nonetheless.”

“Bizarre is the word, there,” Puzzle barely held back the amusement in her voice.

“This isn’t funny!” Tom snapped, “Can’t you see what’s happened? Muezza has turned me into a cat so I won’t be able to make it to that meeting on Tuesday. He wants his competition out of the way, the coward!”

“So?” Puzzle tilted her head.

“*So?*” Tom repeated with a gasp, “Puzzle, this deal means everything to me.”

“Why?”

“Because...because it’s the Park.” Tom said at last. “I have memories there. Good memories, when I still had friends. When I still

had...” He trailed off. Puzzle stared at him with powerful eyes.

“The Park?” she asked, “As in the Big Green to the east?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it green any more, but yes.”

Puzzle tensed, and suddenly looked ready to pounce on Tom. He instinctively backed away.

“What did I do this time?” he squeaked.

“I know what you do for a living, Tom,” Puzzle spat, “What you do as a human. Taking up old territory, nests of cats, many of them my friends: you’d wipe it clear, and put those hulking great human nests in their place. Poor old Malt from five yowls away has had to up and leave her home three times in as many moons, poor thing.”

Uh-oh. Tom could see where this was going, and it wasn’t a good place.

“Puzzle, I can expl—”

“So what do you plan to do with the Big Green, Tom?” Puzzle towered over him, teeth bared, “The whole of Leafy Clan are still clinging to what’s left of the trees and bushes

there. If you plan to move even a loose twig from there, so help me, I'll side with this Muezza character and do what I can to keep you a cat!"

"Puzzle, *please!*" Tom shrieked, feeling a desperate *meow* escape his throat, "You've got it wrong! *I'm* trying to save the park: I want to plant new trees, clean up the garbage – it's Muezza who wants to bury it all under a slab of concrete and flashing lights, not me." It was a lie, of course – Tom was sure his father has testing him to see if he could put aside his feelings for the Park – but Tom needed Puzzle on his side. He'd need all the help he could get.

Puzzle slid back her sharp teeth, but her fur remained on end.

"How can I believe you?" Puzzle growled, "I find it hard to trust the word of a human."

"Take my word as a cat, then. Jacobsen Park means as much to me as it does to you or your friends," Tom sighed, letting his flanks relax, "I want to save it...and I need your help."

Tom felt horribly exposed: he was so used to talking in doublespeak, saying one thing but

meaning another and using tactful words in his day-to-day work, that to talk openly and honestly, to a *cat*, made him feel all too vulnerable.

Slowly, Puzzle's fur flattened, and she lowered herself down. "Well...okay, I believe you. But that doesn't mean I forgive you for all you've done," she licked a paw and stroked it across a fresh-looking gash behind her ear, "A lot of cats hate you for ruining their homes, and I've had to fight a fair few of them off to keep them from getting to you."

Tom's skin crawled. He envisioned his front garden full of wildcats, eyes shining in the moonlight, pushing through the cat flap while he slept...and there was Puzzle, clawing each and every one and sending them straight back out.

"You...you fight for me?" Tom said quietly, "But...why? Don't you hate me too?"

"I don't *hate* you," Puzzle glared at him, "You just...I just you're think stupid, that's all. But you're my pet, Tom, and a good friend – when you're not tapping away on some noisy gadget, that is."

“I’m your friend?”

Puzzle gave him a light cuff over the ear.

“Yes, *friend*,” she repeated, “Heard of those? And friends look out for each other.”

Tom felt a strange prickle of warmth through his fur, tingling all the way to his paws.

“So, what’s the plan?” asked Puzzle, walking back into the hallway. Tom chased after her, his short legs struggling to keep up with her sweeping stride.

“No idea,” Tom admitted, “I’d say I’d go after Muezza, but where does he live? He might not even be in the country by now.”

“Won’t your workplace have some sort of...what do you call those things...those thin shards of wood you scrawl those markings on...”

“Paper?” Tom put in, “Oh, you mean a file – no, we’ve never had any contact with Muezza. He just appeared yesterday, ruined my life, and disappeared again. Strange guy.”

“Why would he go through the trouble of turning you into a cat if he just wanted to get rid of you?” Puzzle watched the cat flap, as though

expecting something to burst through it at any second.

“Looks less suspect, I guess,” Tom shrugged, “A cat being run over causes less of a fuss than a human being knocked down.”

Puzzle winced.

“Sad but true,” Tom added, “That’s just the way things are.” Tom remembered those cat eyes glaring out from the darkness of the Old Dairy, cold and accusing. His fur prickled.

“Those cats must know something!” Tom hissed.

“Who?”

“The ones at the Old Dairy; I remember seeing one before I blacked out, then all those caterwauling cats...before the train came...” he shuddered. Puzzle stood back a step, her ears laid flat in fear and anger.

“I *told* you, Tom, that’s Smoky Clan territory!” Puzzle growled, “They’re dangerous!”

“Exactly,” Tom padded towards the cat flap, “That’s why I need to – *ouch!* What did you do that for?” Puzzle had headbutted him to the

floor, sending him sliding across the laminate wood and into his reeking jogging trainers, “There’s other ways to get my attention apart than hitting me!”

“Try telling that to Smokies,” said Puzzle, “Maybe it’s because they chose a stinky, slimy factory land for territory, but they’re shifty felines, not be trusted with your leftover furballs.”

“All the more reason to go and have a word!”

“What do you plan to do, Tom?” Puzzle spat, “Stroll into their terrain, up to their Leader Billow, and ask politely if she’ll change you back? They’ll tear your ears off if they don’t laugh themselves to death first.”

“I can offer them things,” Tom retorted, shoving his reeking trainers aside, “I can give them food, land...whatever they want.”

“Shame you didn’t do that for us,” Puzzle muttered bitterly, “So what? They may be mad cats, Tom, but they’re still just cats. What makes you think they can turn people into cats when they like?”

“They might have info.”

Puzzle stood between him and the cat flap.

“I won’t let you go and get yourself killed,” she grunted, teeth bared as she glared down at him.

“Then come with me.”

“To *that* place? Never!”

“Fine.”

Tom launched forward, skidding under her legs and bowling through the cat flap. The cold night air hit him before the colder, harder concrete slab. As he staggered to his paws, he heard the cat flap swing forward again, and claws closed around his neck.

“Get back in here!” Puzzle hissed, lifting him up by his scruff.

“*Get...off!*” With the noise of ripping fur and a jolt of sharp pain up his spine he broke free, and sped off down the drive, through the gap in the garden fence, and bolted down the night-swamped street, not daring to slow down or look back. He felt light-headed with what he thought was relief and exhilaration – he was free, and these legs could belt along at speeds he wouldn’t even manage at a human sprint. Then

he felt a warm trickle down his neck, and realised he was bleeding where he'd torn free from Puzzle.

After turning a few more corners, he slowed, then came to a stop under a streetlamp, where two silent, dark suburban streets crossed. Ducking away into the nearby bush where he'd be less visible, he started licking his paw and rubbing it on his wound. Luckily, it didn't feel deep, and already the bleeding was stopping, though he still felt giddy.

Stupid cat, he thought. And just when he thought they were getting along. She had told him they were friends, too! Well, some friend she turned out to be...she wouldn't even *help* him. What was she so scared about? She was a big cat, and whether she was in another cat's territory or not, he couldn't imagine her having any trouble. Well, *he* wasn't scared. Even if he was, it wouldn't matter. When Tom Verbrisser is after something, he goes for it, and woe betide anyone that stands in his way.

He'd never forget the moment he turned into the man (or cat) he was today, he recalled with

relish as he recognised the familiar street signs; what had turned him from the average loser to big-time winner, the award-winning toast of London, with the entire capital at his feet (or paws).

Recalling the street name and where it was, he mapped out a route to the Old Dairy in his head. Off he trotted into the amber-glowing darkness, losing himself in memories.

* * *

It was nearing the end of his first year in secondary school. Tom remembered his Mum and Dad getting into a big argument about what school to put him in, and his mother eventually won, wanting him to go to a local comprehensive to ‘keep his feet on the ground’, whatever that meant.

Tom had always been well turned-out at school. He always seemed to have uniform that fit when others had blazers hanging over their hands or trousers dangling around their ankles. He always seemed to have new stationery and

bags while his classmates had pencils no longer than their thumbs and backpacks with one strap snapped off. But he'd never really paid it any mind, never appreciated why, until the day of his work experience.

That day, he awoke to find a suit tailor-fitted to his size hanging from his wardrobe, with a note stuck to the sleeve: *Kitchen, 7:30*. Tom checked his clock: 7:15. He swore, and had the most hurried shower he ever had, throwing on his suit before he was barely dry. He stumbled into the kitchen at 7:35, and his father peered at him from over his newspaper. Wordlessly, his father laid down his paper, knelt in front of Tom, and carefully straightened his tie.

“First rule of work, son: never be late.” He said it without anger, but without warmth too.

“Yes, Dad.”

Now his Dad smiled. “The second rule is: when you're in charge, you make the rules. I think I'll let you off this time. Come on, have some breakfast. We'll leave in ten minutes.”

And right on time, they were out the door in at 7:45, and Tom climbed into the passenger

seat of Dad's vast car. He'd rarely been allowed in here: Mum usually dropped him off at school in the more modest family car. Dad's car was for work and work only. Inside, everything smelled of that smell he came to associate with his Dad back then: that smell of newness, of money. It was the smell of importance.

Within an hour, they were pulling up to his father's head office in central London. Looking back, Tom realised how comparatively modest his father's earlier offices were, but to a twelve year old boy, they were nevertheless eye-opening: three floors of steel and glass, perched atop a set of stone steps leading to a frosted automatic door with the words *Verbrisser Estate Agency* pressed into the glass in bold, gold letters.

The inside was a hive of activity: smartly dressed men and women striding from one desk to another, clutching papers and folders. They passed a meeting room, and Tom caught a glimpse of a map of London covered in multi-coloured dots. But what impressed Tom the most was how everyone greeted his father:

everyone he passed gave him a snappy “Good morning Mr. Verbrisser,” and of the one-or-two that stopped to talk with him over something Tom couldn’t understand, Tom could feel something radiating from his father. He couldn’t find the words for it then, but now he knew it all too well: power. The way he held himself, the way everyone greeted him with a respect with the tiniest hint of fear...Tom saw his father in a new light that day. He imagined the “Good morning, Mr. Verbrisser’s being aimed at him. It felt good.

Finally, they reached his father’s office on the top floor. It was spacious, with a busy but organised desk, a luxurious chair, a view overlooking the City of London, and that smell of importance.

Tom stood quietly while his father busied himself with taking off his jacket and checking his mail and answerphone. When Tom feared that he may get too engrossed in his work and forget Tom was there, he looked up, and considered him.

“I’m ready to work, Da...er, Mr. Verbrisser.”
Tom spluttered.

His Dad gave a hearty laugh. “I’m not an army general, Tom! You go ahead and call me Dad. Hmmm, work, let’s see...”

His Dad set him to work doing menial tasks, taking papers from one person to another. He wasn’t surprised he wasn’t doing anything important. But still...the was meant to be work *experience*, and he didn’t feel as though he was experiencing a great deal. But he held his tongue. There was something about working in this office with these adults, striding from one room to the next with important papers under your arm. It gave Tom a buzz he’d never felt from school.

Later that day, as they were travelling back, Tom broke the silence in the car:

“Can I go again?”

His father didn’t answer. In fact he spent the rest of the journey home in silence. Tom wondered if he’d said anything wrong. He didn’t want to make things worse, so he shut up too. When they pulled into the driveway,

however, his father turned to look at him. Well, it was more than simply look at him; he seemed to be sizing Tom up, considering every single aspect of his son carefully as though getting ready to draw him from memory. Tom didn't budge. Finally his Dad broke the tension with a properly warm smile.

“Saturday. And remember the first rule of work.”

Chapter Six

The Cobbies

Tom's paws pounded through a greasy puddle, rippling the orange lights in its reflection. The red eyes of a car's hazard lights blazed in the distance, rounding the corner and slipping away from view. He looked wildly around: the parked cars, the trimmed hedges, the occasional splash of colour from a lit-up window, it all looked the same. He was sure he knew these streets, but seeing the world from cat's eyes, everything seemed so much bigger and scarier, not at all familiar.

In spite of his thick black and white coat, he shivered, shaking off a few pellets of dew. This was hopeless. He considered retracing his steps back home, but knew he couldn't: what would Puzzle do to him? Besides, he didn't have time to waste: it was Saturday night, and he only had until midday Tuesday to turn back into a human and stop Muezza winning the company. In fact,

the sooner the better: he needed to plan his presentation, too.

But a cold fog was rolling in, and the streetlamps seemed to be nothing more than ghostly orbs suspended in the air. Tom gnashed his teeth in frustration. What little hope he had of finding his way through the suburban maze had vanished, and on top of that, he was starving.

To his luck, however, many aromas clung to the night, each as delicious as the last as each house settled in for an evening meal. Tom's stomach growled, and he thought longingly of the good food crammed in his kitchen. There was nothing for it: he'd have to scavenge something. With a grimace he recalled waking up on occasional mornings to find his bin bags at the end of the drive had been torn open in the night, old bits of food strewn everywhere. Would he have to resort to that?

But one smell rose above all the others and wiped such worries away. It was a smell soaked with flavour, and whatever it was, there was a lot of it – and more importantly, out in the open.

He bounded ahead, following his nose. Perhaps someone had left a bowl of cat food out for their pet? At this point, he'd even take that.

Such thoughts were struck from him, however, when the smell led him right up to an abandoned, creaky old house. No wonder the smell seemed outside: the glassless windows gazed at him, revealing nothing but darkness within. Well, at least he knew where he was now, and even as a human this place scared him: officially, this was 19 Bubastis Drive, but to everyone else, this was the House of Horrors. Tom had long ago decided never to touch the place: it was just too creepy, and even if he did, its reputation was so widespread nobody would dare take it up. It was dead land, in more ways than one...

But that *smell!* It was so good, just too good to pass up. Kids often broke into the house and camped overnight as a dare. Some of the tough kids from school did it once, and didn't stop boasting about it for months. Perhaps there were a group in their now, cooking something over a makeshift fire. No firelight, though.

Maybe a gas stove, then – kids were pretty savvy with gadgets these days...

His stomach gave another stubborn rumble, and willed his legs forward. He'd just have a look. That couldn't do any harm, could it? If it looked too risky to steal any food, he'd leave. No harm done. Easy.

He looked up at the door; boarded up many times, and broken into just as much. It creaked as it clung to its splintering hinges. The bottom corner was torn away where it had been kicked. He slipped inside.

The house was silent, and pitch-black, though his cat-eyes seemed to see through the darkness quite clearly: the half-collapsed staircase, the peeling wallpaper, the gaping mouth of the antiquated fireplace...and not a human to be seen or heard. Yet still that smell was as strong as ever. Remembering the last time he let his curiosity lead him down an unknown trail, he padded warily across the damp lounge carpet, to the centre of the spacious room. There, he stumbled across a small pile of scrap food: cold chicken legs; bits

of ham; some stolen pouches of cat food, clawed awkwardly open. He had to admit that even this looked appetising, but this wasn't what was causing the smell. He walked around the scrap pile and there he found what made the luscious aroma.

Dead mice. And rats. And the occasional bird.

Tom squeaked in horror, and turned away. *Why?* He yelled in his mind, *why does this smell so nice? This is vile!* Were his animal instincts telling him that these killed creatures were actually more *delicious* than anything else he'd scented on the way here? He turned defiantly away, fighting his gut feelings. He'd take something from this pile of scraps any day, even the cat food –

“Who's there?”

Tom froze. The call came from somewhere in the house, echoing around him.

“Oh, way to go Tips,” A different voice scolded, “You expecting an answer or something? What if it's prey? You'll scare it off!”

“Leave it out, Apples: I didn’t see you catching anything when we did our rounds. Don’t want to get those pretty claws of yours dirty or – ow!”

Tom scrambled wildly around, crashing into the mound of food. He tumbled towards the door, stopping only to shake off the string of sausages knotted around his tail. He belted for the exit, and –

“Oof!” he crashed into a wall of fur and stumbled back onto the carpet, sending up a plume of dust. He descended into a sneezing fit, staggering blindly around until he cornered himself. When he shook the last of the dust from his muzzle, he gazed blearily around, watching in despair as big cats emerged from the darkness, eyes glowing, closing in. His throat closed up in fear; he couldn’t even explain himself or cry for mercy.

A lithe black cat with white paws and splats of white fur on his nose and tail stepped forward.

“Hey there!” he said brightly, “I’m Tips. What’s your name, kit?”

“Tips, you furball!” a dusty coloured cat pushed Tips aside, “This cat is a *stranger*. He could be dangerous. Maybe even spying for the Smokies.”

“Oh, come now, Apples,” a booming voice came from the back (Tom presumed it was the huge cat who’d blocked his escape), “Look at him! Poor thing looks as though it would faint at the sight of a Smoky cat! Dangerous? I think not.”

“Maybe so, but he’s still in our camp, stealing our food,” Apples insisted, fixing Tom with big, dark eyes.”

“I – I’m not stealing anything!” Tom’s throat came unstuck at last, “I’m just hungry, I smelled food and I followed it. I didn’t eat a thing. Look, I’m sorry, I’ll just go.”

Another cat stepped forward, a wide-shouldered tabby; “Go?” he rasped, “Just like that? I don’t think so. A stranger comes wondering into our midst, reeking of humans, snoops around, then wants to leave suddenly? Highly suspect, I say!”

There was a murmur of agreement, and the pack of cats closed in around Tom. He backed further into the corner, looking desperately for an escape route.

“Hold up there, Clawdius,” said Tips, sniffing the air, “That’s not all he smells of. Let’s see, now...”

Tips walked straight up to Tom and sniffed his fur, even giving him a couple of licks on his neck-wound. Tom stayed deadly still, feeling the fur on his back stand on end.

“Puzzle?” Tips whispered, then louder, “He has Puzzle’s scent on him. Why does he –”

“Because he’s my brother.”

Every cat spun around to see a cat silhouetted in the nearest window ledge, looking down on the scene with golden eyes piercing the night.

“Puzzle?” Apples flicked her tail in frustration, “He’s your brother? Really?” She looked from the big, graceful Toyger cat perched above to Tom, who quivered in the corner. It was obvious what Apples was implying.

“Half-brother,” Puzzle added, leaping down and pushing her way through the crowd of cats to stand by Tom, “He’s from a younger litter. His name’s Tick. He’s not as young as he looks, he was just the runt of the litter.”

Tom bit back a protest, knowing it was best to play along.

“Well...your *brother* just waltzed into our camp and helped himself to our scrapstock.” Clawdius croaked.

“I told you, I didn’t –” Tom stepped forward, ready to argue, but Puzzle silenced him with a bat of the paw, scooping him behind her.

“I’m sorry,” Puzzle bowed her head to the cats, “Tick was abandoned recently; luckily I recognised my own scent on him. He’s still new to the territories and our ways, so please forgive him.”

Tom was instantly thrown a lot of sympathetic glances. He had to hand it to her, Puzzle was good at lying – or was she? Her story wasn’t a million miles from the truth.

Apples’ hard glare finally softened, and her ears perked up again. “Well...alright. I trust

you, Puzzle. If Tick needs any extra training, I'd only be too glad to help."

Tom couldn't help wondering if that was a friendly offer or a disguised threat. Tips stepped forward, bowing his head to Tom, his eyes sparkling with energy.

"Welcome to Cobby Clan, Tick!" he beamed, "All these cats are part of our Clan. We just prefer to be called the Cobbies."

By now the group was breaking up, some huddling into smaller groups to gossip, others heading to the scrapstock to eat.

"You're so hungry I can smell it," said Tips, his voice full of concern, "Come on, let's get you a bite to eat."

"We'll join you in a moment, Tips," said Puzzle warmly.

"Okay!" Tips bounded away to join the other cats around the food, chatting animatedly and fidgeting.

Tom let out a deep breath. "Thanks Puzzle, that was a cl –"

Before he knew it he was wheeling through the air, limbs flailing, and then he hit the floor, Puzzle's front paws pinning him firmly down.

"Next time, thank me by listening to me!" she hissed, eyes raging, "You're lucky you just ran into *my* Clan! If you'd met any other cat, you'd have little to be thankful for."

"Ouch! Okay, okay, I'm sorry!" he squealed, "I won't do it again!"

With a grunt, she let him go, and padded forward a few spaces. "Now we'll have to play along with this story," Puzzle sighed, "In case anyone asks you, I'm a Bigtail, the third highest rank in the Cobbies."

Tom forced himself to digest the facts: Bigtail, third highest. Seeing how many cats there were, it seemed like a lot of responsibility. No wonder she was out and about so much. Tom scrambled to his paws and sat next to Puzzle.

"You *can't* let these cats know who you really are," she continued quietly, "I've had to fight some of these cats away from trying to get to you – my own Clan! That's how much they

hate Tom Verbrisser – the Nestbreaker, they call you.”

Nestbreaker...

“Right,” Tom said quickly, “So I’m called Tick now, am I? Why?”

“Because you’re small and annoying,” she replied flatly, and she stalked away to join Tips at the scrapstock. Tom sat stunned for a moment, then followed her.

“Help yourself,” Tips said, pushing a cold, half-eaten chicken drumstick his way.

“Th-thanks,” Tom said weakly. Feeling a few eyes watching him, he knew he couldn’t get out of it: he leant down and tore off a chunk of meat with his sharp teeth. To his surprise, it tasted good, and he happily wolfed down another couple of mouthfuls before his ears picked up the conversation between Tips and Puzzle.

“She wants us there before moonpeak,” said Tips through a mouthful, “Not all of us, though: just you, me, Malt and a couple of others. A junior ranking cat, perhaps.”

“What’s the problem this time?” Puzzle sighed wearily, “I hope Sir Paws isn’t getting Odd-Eye worked up over something petty again. Remember when he wanted to declare all-out war against the Leafies? Because he found their scent all over our territory?”

“Yep, turned out to be all the autumn leaves sweeping across the streets from the Big Green,” Tips replied with a chuckle, “As if that wasn’t bad enough, he’s made the same mistake *every* year. We should make an event out of it: the Annual Fight-Picking Festival.”

“No need to invite the Smokies to *that*,” said Puzzle dryly, “Maybe that’s what this meeting’s about. I guess she wants us at the Cobby headquarters?”

Tips nodded.

“Isn’t this your headquarters?” Tom ventured, curious to the workings of the Clan.

“Oh, this old place? Nah,” Tips said, drawing himself up with pride, “We have lots of camps all over our territory, all around this maze of human nests west of the Big Green.

Our headquarters to the far west of our land; Cobby Farm, where Sir Paws lives.”

Tom knew the farm well; it wasn't too far from Tom's house, well inside the suburbs. The farm was surrounded on all sides by roads, railways, houses and factories, yet it remained this little piece of the countryside, nestled quietly amongst the hustle and bustle. He'd tried many times to convince the owners to sell up and leave, offering generous sums of money, but they'd have none of it. Some people were just too set in their ways.

“It has a big old barn and all kinds of places to hide and hunt, and the humans don't seem to mind us visiting,” Tips went on, “they seem to like us catching the rats.”

“We'd better get going,” said Puzzle, eyeing the cold moonlight spilling through the windows. We'll call on Malt on the way. Let's see...” she cast her gaze around the cats milling about, “Apples, will you come with us to H.Q.? It might be important, for once.”

Mumbling, Apples skulked over, clipping Tom over the ear with her bushy tail.

“I’ll take Tick too,” Puzzle added.

“What?” Apples growled, “You can’t be serious? We need to take someone useful.”

“Hey!” Tom snapped, “I can be useful! You haven’t even given me a ch—”

“And what’s more, he’s not even a Cobby,” Apples went on, not even acknowledging him.

“Not yet,” Puzzle corrected calmly, “I intended to introduce Tick to Odd-Eye at some point: this seems as good a time as any. And you know as well as I do that the Cobbies need new cats, thanks to the Nestbreaker.”

Tick blanched in fear, but it was hidden under his fur, so nobody noticed. Apples gave a shrug.

“Alright,” she said grudgingly, “I guess everyone has to start somewhere.”

“Then it’s settled: Tips, Tick, Apples and I will head for Cobby Farm,” said Puzzle crisply, “We’ll meet up with Malt on the way. Clawdius, you’re in charge of Oldnest Camp while I’m gone.”

Tom heard a “Will do,” from somewhere nearby.

“Swiftly? Lightfoot? Where are you?”

Two lean cats sped from the darkness so quickly they might as well have appeared.

“Yes, Puzzle?” they chanted in unison.

“You two are our fastest cats. I’m sending you as runners to our Alley-copse Camp and Over-river Camp: ensure all is well, gather news, then head to the Farm so you can relay anything important to Odd-Eye and Sir Paws. We’ll see you there,” she added with a bow of the head. Swiftly and Lightfoot returned the gesture, then leapt towards the doors, moving so fast that Tom could feel the musty air swirling where they’d been. Tom looked at Puzzle with admiration and pride: his own Puzzle commanded with such ease and authority. It was easy to why she was third highest rank in this Clan.

Puzzle turned to look at him, and he quickly looked down at his paws, feeling his face prickle with embarrassment. She walked over, and he looked up into her eyes, shining in the darkness.

“Something on your mind?”

“Nothing. It’s just,” he struggled to find the words, “well...thanks. For rescuing me. Again. And...I’m sorry for running away.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said, purr rising in her throat, “Comes with the responsibility of being a member of a feral Clan. I’m no exception,” then she added, “and you won’t be either.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you, every cat is a member of a Clan around here,” she explained, “And if you’re not a member, then you’re not Tick: you’re Tom Verbrisser. And that really isn’t a good person to be amongst these cats.”

Tom looked around at the cats chatting happily in groups, cleaning themselves and each other. How many of them had he turfed up from their homes? How many of them had tried to get to him as a human? He suddenly felt even more small and vulnerable than before.

A tail brushed under his chin, and he leapt in shock. Puzzle chuckled.

“Come on,” she said, summoning Tips and Apples with a flick of her tail, “It’s time I introduced you to our Leader.”

The cats bundled towards the door, squeezing in single file through the gap and out into the night. The fog had cleared, and the air was icy and as clear and crystal as the winking stars. As Tom followed Puzzle, Tips and Apples through the streets, leaping over low bushes and creeping across empty backstreets, he felt curiously happy and peaceful, and his own worries were pushed to the back of his mind.

Chapter Seven

Roundabout Rescue

They'd been walking for about half an hour, sneaking through gardens, past the local shops and through wooded alleys. They met cats here and there, and the group stopped for chit-chat and Clan gossip, before Tips eagerly introduced Tom to them.

"H-hi," Tom would stammer in a small voice, "I'm T...Tick."

"Tick?" One fat old cat sitting on a garden table roared with laughter, "Oh my, how terrible! Your pets must really hate you!"

"Yeah, *really* hate me," Tom mumbled as they moved on.

After pushing their way through a coppice thick with thorns and bracken, they emerged at the top of a grassy embankment, overlooking a roundabout. Every morning, it was thick with

rush-hour traffic, but it was late, and the tarmac was clear, bathed under the glow of the streetlamps, the lights snaking away down the branching routes.

“Why do humans even bother?” Apples sighed, “I mean, I know their rumbler’s paths take up a lot of room, but this is just greedy.”

“Humans are just strange creatures,” Tips replied, as they scampered down the slope towards the roundabout, “Don’t try to make sense of them. I mean, these are the species which don’t speak a word to each other all day, but put one of those funny gadgets up to their ears, and they’ll chatter ‘til their throats are hoarse.” Tips shrugged. “I just can’t take them seriously.”

“You don’t take anything seriously,” Apples teased.

“And proud of it!” Tips declared, “Come on, race you to the rumblepath edge!”

“You’re on!”

Tips and Apples charged away, leaving Tom and Puzzle alone, padding at a pace Tom felt more comfortable with.

“They don’t *hate* humans,” Puzzle explained, “Can’t you see? Tips and Apples have pet collars, as do I.”

It was true: Tom had picked out a fine leather collar with a twenty-four carat gold name tag for her the moment he gave her a name.

“We’re all fond of humans in fact. On the whole, anyway,” she added, eyeing Tom, “We just find them...bizarre. They’re lovable idiots, basically.”

“No argument here,” Tom said dryly, thinking of some of the people he’d worked with in the past, though he missed the glint in Puzzle’s eye as she said it.

“What’s a rumbler?” he asked, though he could guess the answer.

“You call them cars,” Puzzle explained, “And a rumblepath is a road.”

“Rumbler? Huh,” Tom snorted, “My Porsche doesn’t rumble; it purrs.”

“Tom, I’m a cat; I *know* what a purr sounds like,” said Puzzle curtly, “Your Porsche *doesn’t* purr. When you bring it to life every morning, it

sounds like it has the mother of all furballs stuck in it's throat."

"You know, I don't get it," Tom frowned, "How come you cats have your own words for things, yet you know some words humans use? You know 'cars', and 'throat', and you mentioned 'office' at my place."

"Just listening to humans talk, I guess," Puzzle shrugged, "It's just another language, and we spend a lot of time around them. We share a lot of words, too: maybe cats and humans had more in common in the past than we do now."

Before he knew it he was at the edge of the roundabout, where Apples and Tips stood arguing and swatting each other playfully.

"I was first!"

"Nuh-uh! You cheated, you tripped me up!"

"Only because you pushed me out the way!"

"Quiet, you two!" Puzzle snapped, "It's time to focus. Pay attention to the rumblepath."

Apples and Tips scrambled to attention, their ears pricked. Tom did the same, straining for the sound of cars. He could hear the distant

hum of the dual carriageway, but nearby, all was still.”

“Clear,” Puzzle whispered, “Cross to the island.”

The cats stepped cautiously out onto the tarmac. Tom could feel the heat of the road stinging the pads on his paws. They sped across to the roundabout island, well before a car’s headlights blazed into view and made its way past. They walked carefully across the arranged flowerbeds, heading for the other side.

“I can’t see the other side,” Puzzle squinted at the far verge, shrouded in darkness, “Tips, scout it out, will you? Make sure we’re not walking into a deep puddle or marsh.”

“Will do,” said Tips. His ears swivelled left and right, and he darted across, the shadows swallowing him up until only his white paws, nose and tail tip could be seen.

“All fine here,” he called, “Bit of human trash, but apart from – AAAGH!”

“Tips? Tips!” Apples ran out into the road.

“Look out!” Tom yelled, as Apples’ dusty pelt was illuminated by headlights fast racing

towards her. She froze, her eyes wide in horror. The horn of the car wailed –

Tom leapt out into the road and barrelled into her flank. With a meow of shock she bolted away. Tom looked into the rushing headlights, bringing back memories of the oncoming train. He ducked, paws over his head, waiting for the strike...

It didn't come. The car's raging horn and engine rattled his ears, then faded away. He dared to open one eye – then clamped it shut again, as the swirl of fumes made his eyes water. He spluttered as he staggered to his paws. Teeth clamped around the scruff of his neck and lifted him up. Next moment his paws found solid ground on cool, dewy grass. He coughed vigorously and licked his paw, rubbing it in his sore eyes. Suddenly he felt a tongue licking the old wound on his neck, as well as another on the grazes along his left flank. He opened his eyes, blinking away the sore tears. It was Tips and Puzzle.

“That was a very stupid thing you did back there,” Puzzle said between licks, “Stupid...but

brave. Apples would certainly have been killed by that rumbler, but you were small enough to slide underneath it.”

“It’s all my fault!” Tips said breathlessly, rubbing his head against Tom’s, “I only yelled because I stumbled into a ditch. I’ll never get promoted to Bigtail if I carry on being such a kit.”

“Is Apples okay?” Tom croaked.

“I’m...fine,” said Apples, as she came limping towards him, “Just sprained my leg, that’s all. It...it would’ve been a lot worse, had it not been for you. Thank...thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Tom managed a weak smile, then looked at Puzzle, “Any cat would do it.”

Apples gave Tom a few affectionate licks on the muzzle, which Tom awkwardly returned.

“Got to hand it to you Puzzle, he’s won me over,” said Apples, drawing herself up and licking her paw, “He’s already a Cobby cat in my book.”

“Not until Odd-Eye says so,” said Puzzle, “But I’ll be sure to mention this to her when she decides.”

After taking a moment to recover and shake the smell of smoke from their fur, they headed up the nearest street. It zigzagged up a steep hill, where the houses seemed to stand on top of each other like layers of wild mushrooms. Slipping through the rungs of a spiked iron fence, they crossed a playing field, dark and silent, heading for a quaint little house on the corner. Tom recognised it as the caretaker’s house: the gnarled old man tended to the football and rugby pitches, trimming the grass and repainting the white lines back when Tom was at school, and Tom half-suspected he was still at it even now. The house was a red-brick bungalow, with a bright porch-light shining alone, like a lighthouse. The stopped short of the garden fence, and Puzzle leapt up onto a flat part, her neck arching forward.

“Malt?” she called, “You here? It’s Puzzle.”
No answer.

“Maybe she’s already left for the farm,” Tips suggested.

Apples was about to say something, when they heard a muffled meow, and a scratching on the inside of the front door. Somebody have an exasperated moan, then there were footsteps, and with the chinking of keys the door creaked open.

“Your friends here?” A creaky, friendly voice croaked, as a dark shape slipped out the door, “Okay then, see you later, my dear.”

A cat leapt up to the garden fence, and touched noses with Puzzle in greeting. Her thick, rhinestone covered collar flashed under her fur like half-buried diamonds.

“Good evening Malt,” said Puzzle, “How’s the prey?”

“Plentiful, thank you,” said Malt. She was a Siamese cat, with a chirpy voice and bright blue eyes to match.

“It’s a good thing your pet let you out,” said Apples as Malt and Puzzle leapt down, “This meeting sounds like it could be important, for once.”

“Nah, he’s quite sweet, really,” said Malt, exchanging greetings with Tips and Apples, “I’ve always wondered what he’s saying when I leave the nest: I wonder if he’s calling me back.”

Tom felt a chill creep down his neck. Did the other cats not understand human speech? It seemed obvious, when he thought about it, and his ability to understand human talk was no different than his ability to read it, but this really drilled it home. He felt excited and scared by it: it would surely prove useful at some point, but would revealing it to the other cats reveal the human side of him? He’d have to talk to Puzzle alone when he could get the chance, to see what she thought.

“And who’s this?”

Malt’s nearby voice snapped him out of his thought. She was looking straight at him with inquisitive eyes.

“Hi, I’m Tick,” Tom said automatically, “I’m Puzzle’s half-brother; she’s taking me to see the Cobby Leader. And you’re Malt? Pleased to meet –

“Aww, he’s so *cute!*” Malt squealed ecstatically, and she muzzled Tom’s forehead so hard he tumbled backwards, “I want to eat him up!”

Tom stood up again, trying to maintain some kind of dignity, but already he could see the rest of the group barely holding back the urge to descend into fits of laughter. He may have had a layer of fur, but underneath Tom knew his skin was burning a hot red. Thankfully Tips came to his rescue.

“So Malt, he seems nice, your new pet. You settling in well, then?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Malt hung her head, “I miss my old home though. My old owners wanted to take me with them, but...I couldn’t leave the Cobbies.”

With a pang of guilt Tom remembered Malt was the cat Puzzle had told him about, the one who had to uproot and find a new home three times in three months. Had he been told that as a human, he wouldn’t have cared less. But being here, on the cat’s eye level, made it seem

all the more real. And she thought he was cute...if only she knew.

“We’re glad you didn’t,” said Puzzle, laying her tail on Malt’s shoulder, “You may only be a Smalltail, Malt, but you’re too valuable an asset to the team. And far too nice.”

“You’re too kind, really,” said Malt, picking up her head and looking up at the moon, “Anyway, let’s get shifting: the night isn’t going to wait for us!”

Off they trotted again. Tips, Malt, Apples and Puzzle weaved through the streets with ease, while Tom wheezed along at the back. He didn’t want to hold up the group, but he wasn’t sure how much more running he could take: now he was ten times smaller, the distance to the farm seemed ten times more.

Finally, though, the houses began to thin away, the streetlights becoming sparser and unveiling more of the stars above. The sprawl of narrow streets converged into one larger road, where they trekked along its edge in single file. Tom dreaded to imagine what would happen if a

car came along...when it did, roaring up from behind, lights and thumping music blazing.

“Dive!” Puzzle yelled.

The other cats leapt into the nearby bushes lining the roads, and Tom quickly followed suit before he was squished into a cat pancake. The car whooshed past, swaying the bushes with a blast of wind. One by one, the travellers crawled out of the bushes, thorns and clumps of sticky weeds clinging to their fur. They barely had time to clean themselves when they had to leap in again.

After five more leaps into thorny safety with brief intervals of running along the road, they reached a level crossing. Tom felt his fur prickle as he looked along the dark, straight railway. Images of lights rushing towards him flashed in his mind, and he quickly scuttled on.

The paved road after the crossing soon turned gravelly, the bushes on either side giving way to wild grass and flowers. Rusty, half-open gates led onto vast rolling fields, some with fields of corn thrice as high as he was, and some fields

with slumbering sheep, scattered across the field like tiny rainclouds.

The hill rounded off and led downwards, revealing the gentle valley below. The vast dual-carriageway glittered in the distance like a string of diamonds. Nestled at the head of the valley, sheltered by big oak trees, was Cobby Farm. The farmhouse's windows glowed red and gold in the night, surrounded by the dark shapes of a grain silo, a new, upstanding barn, and further away, an older, neglected barn. Half of its roof was gone, leaving behind a skeleton of beams, and part of one wall seemed to be crumbling away, bricks slumped in a mass underneath.

“That’s our headquarters,” Puzzle whispered, pointed her tail at the old barn, “The heart of the Cobby Clan. Odd-Eye and Sir Paws will be there, and many other cats. Stay close, stay calm, and don’t do anything reckless.”

Tom was too nervous to even think of a retort: he nodded, and legs shaking, he followed the group down the hill.

On the long and hard journey here, he'd kind of been looking forward to arriving at the farm to rest and relax a bit. But now it seemed his troubles had barely started.

Chapter Eight

Smalltail

The cats trotted down the lane, navigating their way around the deep grooves that tractor tyres had left in the dried mud. They took the long way around the farmhouse; “To avoid disturbing the humans,” Puzzle explained, “We think they’re okay having so many cats around, but we don’t want to abuse that.”

They passed the newer-looking barn, as tall as a skyscraper. Tom could hear the animals inside, scuffing around on their beds of hay. And here and there, he heard tiny scuttles in the grass, and the scent of a nervous rodent.

“I’m starving,” Tips groaned, “I sure hope they’ve built up a good scrapstock tonight.”

“Sir Paws lives on this farm, as well you know,” said Malt, “He knows this place like his own whiskers: especially where all the prey nests.”

“Huh. He might hunt when he’s not busy enough declaring war on something.” Tips mumbled.

“Probably on the wind for being too noisy,” Apples agreed. Tips snorted.

“Ssh!” Puzzle hissed, “We’re almost there.”

The old barn loomed over them, the holes in the roof and walls looking like battle scars. The wind howled ominously through them. As they drew closer, Tom could see that one of the wooden doors had been torn clean off. In its place stood two cats; four eyes gleaming like fireflies.

“Halt!” one declared, “Who pads there?”

“Puzzle,” the Toyger said clearly, “And I bring with me Tips, Apples, Malt, and newcomer Tick. Odd-Eye summoned us to a meeting.”

“Password?”

“Prey in the paw is worth two on the scrapstock,” Puzzle recited. Tom saw the shoulders of the two guard-cats relax.

“Come on in, everyone,” said one, “Odd-Eye and Sir Paws have been waiting for you.”

Tom brought up the rear of the group as they marched inside. His heart pounded. What did the headquarters look like? What was this Odd-Eye like? Would they accept him? He shook himself: he was getting too worked up about something that, in the long run, didn't matter. These were cats! *Cats!* Tom Verbrisser didn't get nervous, especially not in front of cats. He had to focus, had to remember why he was here: to get back to being human, to confront Muezza and nail that presentation. At least this farm was near to the industrial estate, where this Smoky Clan lived. Somehow he'd have to find a way to escape the Cobbies' clutches and get to them.

But when he stepped inside, and his eyes quickly adjusted to the velvety darkness within, all that was once again pushed from his mind, swallowed by sheer awe.

Inside, the barn looked like a war-ravaged cathedral, the old beams creaking high overhead, some splintering off into the starry night where the holes were torn. Some cats crouched on the beams, their tails swishing

lazily to and fro, eyes peering down at Tom like searchlights. Below, however, were more cats than Tom would dared to have believe exist in London, let alone locally. Hundreds of cats of all shapes, sizes and fur patterns milled around the hay and dirt strewn floor (at least Tom hoped it was dirt), filling the room with chatter, some quick and urgent, some light and cheerful. A few shot curious glances at Tom as they entered, before nodding greetings to the others.

“Come on,” Puzzle whispered in his ear, “Let’s go find Odd-Eye and introduce you.”

“Oh...okay,” said Tom, his voice barely raising above a squeak.

Puzzle gave her ‘see you later’s to Tips, Malt and Apples. Tom tried to do the same, but all he could manage was a hoarse ‘bye’. Puzzle flicked her tail for him to follow, and they pushed their way through the crowds. Every cat seemed big and scary to Tom, towering over him, their eyes burning into the fur on his back and neck.

Here and there, where the crowd thinned, Tom could see crumbling walls leading deeper

into parts of the barn, each seemingly for its own use. Tom could see fleeting glimpses of rooms where they appeared to be practising fighting moves on each other, another where they were all grooming and tending to one another's fur, another where queen cats tended to their kits, another where older-looking cats stretched out luxuriously on the hay, another seemingly stuffed with plants, flowers and herbs, with a few cats sorting them...Tom couldn't move his eyes fast enough to take it all in. He felt his heart give an extra hard thump: this was *real*, it *existed*, and he was *here*, yet it all felt like a new world! Tom had so much to learn about it, and in spite of himself he trembled with the desire to drink it all up.

They reached the far end of the barn, where the crowd seemed thickest. Against the wall, Tom noticed the bricks jutting out, forming steps leading upwards to where a whole line of bricks stood out, forming a platform that looked over the entire barn.

From the crowd, out came two young cats Tom recognised.

“Swiftly, Lightfoot,” Puzzle dipped her head in greeting, “You were even quicker than usual.”

“There wasn’t much to report,” Swiftly admitted, “Or at least, that’s what we thought until we met up.”

“Yeah, the camps didn’t have much to say,” Lightfoot went on, “Guinevere’s had her kittens in Over-river camp, and that strange Leafy cat’s been skulking around on the border again, but other than that, all seemed normal – except for one thing. Both camps reported seeing a human snooping very close to the Nests, looking for something – or someone.”

“We didn’t think much of it at first – humans poke their noses around all the time – until we met up,” said Swiftly, “Both camps gave the same description of the human.”

Tom felt the tips of his fur turn to ice. “What did he look like?”

“Short, possibly a male, had tanned skin that look like the chairs at my pet’s home, and he wore this dazzling white layer of fur, and he stunk of this fake, metallic scent – I could still

smell it around the Alley-Copse camp when I arrived,” said Lightfoot, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

Tom felt the ice trickle under his skin. No doubt about it, the human was Muezza. What was he looking for? Him? Did he know Tom had survived that fateful night, and was hunting him down to finish the job? If he was, why hadn't he done it when he'd first had him? Despite being surrounded by all these cats, he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder, half expecting Muezza's beady eyes to be staring through the barn door at him. But nobody was there: just more cats spilling into the barn. It didn't help to settle his frayed nerves: Muezza was clearly insane. How had he hidden it from his father all those years? Tom would readily admit that he was competitive and ruthless at work – it was the only way to work – but he'd never actually *kill* someone. Would he? No, of course he wouldn't. He wasn't a monster, he was human, and what's more...ah. No, he wasn't. Not anymore.

“Snap out of it,” Puzzle’s voice pulled him back to reality, “I’ve just spoken to Odd-Eye. She’s curious to meet you.”

Tom wanted to pour his fears out to Puzzle, to warn her that the sneaking human was Muezza, but he couldn’t, not here anyway, with too many velvet ears around to eavesdrop on them. He’d have to explain how he knew who Muezza was, and he knew where that would lead.

“Okay,” he said, barely above a whisper.

Puzzle sliced her way through the tightly packed cats, with Tom trotting in her wake. The scents bombarding Tom’s nostrils grew stronger. Although each cat in the barn had a slightly different scent, there was an aroma underlying them all which they shared. He couldn’t pinpoint it, but the closest thing it reminded him of was the electric tang you taste in the air just before a lightning storm strikes. Was this the Cobby scent? He’d never noticed Puzzle smell of anything particular as a human, but now he had cat senses, she reeked of it.

The crowd thinned away, leaving a clear semi-circle against the wall, where fresh hay lay piled. Crouching atop the hay were two cats: sitting lowest of the two a was huge, ravaged brown-and-black tabby, worn-down by years of hard-living showing in missing clumps of fur and torn ears, but with eyes as hard as flint. He assumed this was Sir Paws, the Clan Deputy who called Cobby Farm home – Tom had seen him once or twice when he was a human, stalking around the farm when he'd visited the owners. He'd looked pretty surly even then. Tom certainly didn't want to get on the wrong side of him.

Above Sir Paws was, Tom guessed, Odd-Eye, the Cobby leader. She was another big cat, but whereas Sir Paws was wide and stocky, she was tall and elegant. Her pure white coat glittered, despite the less-than-spotless barn. She perched, poised and collected, looking down across the cats with her vast eyes – and instantly Tom saw where she got her name from. One eye was an emerald green, but the other was a deep blue sapphire. The effect

made her look beautiful and unnerving all at once, as though each eye saw something different.

“Does that account for everyone?” she asked in a smooth, chocolaty voice, “Is every camp represented? Where is Coco? Ah, there you are. How are things in the Under-ground camp? Dark? I surmised as much.” She raised her voice slightly to address the cats assembled in the group around Tom, “Everyone, the meeting will commence in a few moments. Please inform those who came with you to relax and make themselves welcome. Sir Paws has generously filled the scrapstock room, so there’s plenty for all.”

Sir Paws nodded, his whiskers twitching, “But be resourceful,” he rasped dramatically, “I want to preserve a decent-sized emergency scrapstock, just in case we’re attacked and we need emergency food.”

Even Tom, who was feeling particularly paranoid right now, thought this was a bit silly. Who would attack them? He couldn’t even imagine a group of humans posing a threat to so

many cats, let alone a rival Clan. Tom could suddenly see why Tips and Apples teased Sir Paws so much, although, he imagined with a grin, he'd bet they never did it to his face.

"I'll be staying here tonight," Odd-Eye added, "So there's plenty of time should you want to talk to me face-to-face after the meeting. All clear? All happy? Good. Bigtails dismissed."

The cats dispersed, but on Puzzle's word she and Tom remained. So all the other cats were Bigtails too. Perhaps it was the Bigtail's responsibility to oversee a group of camps, as Puzzle had done, then relay anything back to the Deputy and Leader. Did a lower ranking cat, perhaps a Middletail, oversee each individual camp, and then report to Bigtails? Maybe. The workings of Cobby Clan were unfolding before his eyes.

"Ah, Puzzle," said Odd-Eye warmly, "It's been a while. How's the prey?"

"Plentiful, thank you, Odd-Eye," Puzzle replied. Twice now Tom had heard that

expression. It sounded like a greeting of some sort.

“Hope that Nestbreaker pet of yours isn’t tearing through any more of our territory,” Odd-Eye smiled, though Tom detected a bit of ice in her tone. He forced himself not to shrink away from those green and blue eyes.

“No, Odd-Eye,” Puzzle replied without skipping a beat, “In fact, I don’t think we’ll be hearing from my pet for some time. He’s gone on a *long* holiday.”

“Ah, excellent,” Odd-Eye licked her lips with relish, “That’s one less thing to worry about. And is this the cat you wanted me to meet?”

“Yes, Odd-Eye,” said Puzzle, “His name is Tick. He’s my half-brother. I’ve been teaching him our ways. He’s still new to it all, but he’s a fast learner, and eager to join the Cobbies.”

Puzzle stopped talking, and her eyes, along with the Leader’s and Deputy’s, rounded on him. Puzzle gave him a meaningful nod. Abruptly he bowed his head.

“Pleased to meet you, Odd-Eye,” he blurted out, “I’ve heard a lot about you...a-and Sir Paws. How...how’s the prey?”

He winced, knowing how bad he sounded. His legs shook wildly. But Odd-Eye calmly appraised him.

“Very well, thank you, young one,” said Odd-Eye pleasantly. Sir Paws grunted his greeting, picking carefully through a dead rat. Odd-Eye turned back to Puzzle.

“Sorry, Puzzle, but we have a minimum age for Clan cats,” Odd-Eye stated, “No cat can be Tailed if he or she is younger than six moons.”

‘Tailed’? What was that? Didn’t he have a tail already?

Puzzle looked quickly to Tom, then back. “He’s not as young as he looks, Odd-Eye,” Puzzle said quickly, “It’s just that his father was a small cat. He’s just over one Sun old.”

“Indeed?” Odd-Eye pondered, “Well, he doesn’t sound like a kit, I admit, and –” Odd-Eye pierced Tom’s eyes with her own, looking deep into him, “– yes...he *is* older than he looks.”

Tom gulped. He looked away, busying himself with cleaning his paws.

“I have no doubt he’d make a worthwhile addition to the Cobbies, Puzzle,” said Odd-Eye softly, “And we have no problem with Petters – Scatterleaf knows, a good number of us are – but you know our rules: cats born into Clan culture come first, and there are plenty of those waiting to be Tailed. Tick is an Outsider, and a recent one at that, so he’ll have to wait at the back of the line, I’m afraid. Keep apprenticing him, though, and I’m sure he’ll –”

“He saved my life,” a cat blurted out. Everyone wheeled around to see Apples, standing nearby, clearly having listened to every word said. “Risky of his own doing it, too.”

“Apples,” said Odd-Eye pleasantly, “Normally I’d scold a Midtail for eavesdropping on higher-ranking talks, but this...this is extraordinary. Is it true?”

Tom and Puzzle nodded vigorously. Even Sir Paws peered up from his ratty meal. Apples ran through the events at the roundabout, and how Tom had pushed her out of the way and

ducked under the car. She made him sound more heroic than he'd meant it, and his surviving was sheer dumb luck. Why had he done it? Why had he risked his life for a *cat*? And a cat who, up to that point, hadn't liked him, no less?

Apples finished her story, and Odd-Eye climbed down from her perch to stand over Tom. He shrunk away as she looked down at him with those fearsome eyes of hers.

"I wonder..." she mouthed silently. She closed her eyes, deep in thought. Tom didn't dare move, but looked to Puzzle for help. But she looked as confused as he felt.

"I must start the meeting," Odd-Eye declared. Without a backward glance, she leapt up the haystack, and with Sir Paws behind her, she ascended the brick steps to the high platform.

"What...what now?" Tom padded over to Puzzle, staggering slightly, as though waking suddenly from a deep dream.

“The discussion’s over,” Puzzle said, her voice hard, “You’ll have to wait in line before you are Tailed.”

In spite of everything, in spite of all his worries and wants to get back to normality again, Tom couldn’t help feeling disappointed. Seeing all these other cats, seeing just how widespread this Clan system was...he’d never felt such a strong desire to feel a part of something. But it wasn’t to be, and if he planned to return to being a human soon, it would never happen. He hung his head. Puzzle draped her tail over his neck in sympathy.

“Cobbies! Hear me!” Odd-Eye meowed loud and clear. The bustle of the barn died almost instantly, and Tom felt the hundreds of cats behind him close ranks and move in to better hear their Leader. Tom craned his neck back to look up at her and the surly Deputy.

“Welcome,” said Odd-Eye, her voice loud but warm, full of affection for her Clan, “I apologise for the short notice of this meeting, but I fear things would’ve only been worse had we waited.”

The silence turned tense, the cats holding their collective breath.

“As some of you already know, a runner from Leafy Clan came here not two days ago, informing me that the Scatterleaf place was ready to give the Cobbies a message.”

A mutter shivered through the crowd, as the news relayed itself from cats in the know to those who didn't.

“But...Odd-Eye!” a voice called from the back of the barn, “The Scatterleaf place hasn't been active for seasons! The humans haven't left enough trees to make the signs possible.”

“I thought that too, Simba,” Odd-Eye admitted, “But I investigated anyway, and sure enough, there was a pile of dead leaves big enough to scatter and make several signs – or one big sign. And it was intended just for us Cobbies: of the four Clan trees surrounding the Scatterleaf, it was clearly nearest to ours.

“So, I climbed the Cobby Tree, and dived into the leaves. The sign they scattered across the dirt was clear, and as urgent as a summer thunderstorm.”

Tom felt the whole barn creak inwards, as though the walls themselves were leaning in to hear.

“It said: *‘A great monster we thought ourselves rid of has returned, and he strides among us. He will destroy the Clans.’*”

The walls seemed to burst outwards at the cries of outrage and fear from the cats. The barn was full of the *hiss* of paws clawing nervously at the hay, as meows erupted around Tom:

“I knew it!”

“Who could it be? It could be anyone, anything!”

“I don’t understand; who did we rid ourselves from?”

“Who knows? Many enemies of the Cobbies have come and gone over the Suns.”

Odd-Eye raised her paw for silence, but it didn’t come. Odd-Eye nodded to Sir Paws; he clambered to his paws, and –

“SILENCE, ALL OF YOU!” he roared, “Show some respect to your Leader!”

Tom clung to the ground with his claws, sure he'd be blown away. The rest of the Clan must have thought similar, because the silence came at once, complete and uneasy. Sir Paws nodded to Odd-Eye, and he retreated back to his corner of the platform and curled up.

"Thank you, Sir Paws," said Odd-Eye, her voice barely more than a whisper by comparison, "Cobbies, I share your fears and doubts at this prophecy. I too also wondered who this monster could be, and you're right, Amber: there are many possibilities. Fortunately, the sign didn't end there. When the wind picked up to blow the leaves away, and many of them whipped up and stuck in the hooked branches of the Smoky tree. The Leafreader from Leafy Clan, Lilypad, told me what it meant: our answers lie with Smoky Clan."

Derisive, hollow laughter bubbled through the Clan.

"Smoky Clan? Provide answers to us?" one voice piped up, "You can't be serious, Odd-Eye?"

“Yeah, the last ‘answer’ a Cobby got from them was anything but helpful, right, Fuzzy?”

Tom turned around to see a cat nodding to someone nearby, then turn back to face Odd-Eye – Tom gasped. The left side of Fuzzy’s face was torn away, shining red scars, his eye completely missing. He looked quickly away. This Smoky Clan was insane! How on earth was Tom going to get near to them in one piece, let alone talk to one?

“Maybe the sign was read wrong, Odd-Eye,” a voice sounding like Malt’s suggested, “Maybe it meant the monster *is* from Smoky Clan.”

There were mutters of agreement, but Odd-Eye was defiant.

“Lilypad’s reading of Scatterleaf has never failed us,” she declared, “But even if that were the case, Malt, and the monster we must fear resides in their midst, then I would still intend on confronting the Smokies. They know something we don’t. But I can’t do it alone: I need volunteers, a party to join Sir Paws and I into their H.Q. and get the answers we need.”

An awkward silence swept across the barn, and after seeing Fuzzy's ravaged face, Tom couldn't blame them. The mission sounded downright lethal at best.

"I'll go," Puzzle declared.

"Me too," Tips' voice called from nearby.

"Count me in," that was Malt.

"And me," Apples added.

"Excellent, that makes a round six," Odd-Eye's shoulders relaxed, "You'll all have to stay here overnight: we'll leave at the break of dawn. I also need Bigtails to organise runners from each camp to stay too, ready to relay news back to the nests when we return."

"*If* they return," someone muttered. Puzzle shot a glance over her shoulder, and the snickering died.

"Now, to other business," Odd-Eye declared.

The meeting went on for what felt like an age, as news from across the suburbs was discussed: new nooks and crannies discovered, useful nests of prey, kits born, elders passing, and so on. Tom's attention sagged, picking up briefly when they talked about the man who was

sticking his nose in a couple of nests, but all Odd-Eye said was to stay alert, and to fend this human off if necessary. Tom slipped back into his stupor.

“Now, I have one final bit of business to attend to before I disband the meeting,” Odd-Eye said at last, “Now, I never intended to perform a Tailing at this meeting.”

Tom’s ears perked up.

“But the circumstances are special. This cat has been under the watchful eye of Puzzle for merely a moon, yet already he has risked his life to save one of our own. His commitment to preserve a Cobby, I think, shows he deserves to carry the responsibility on his own. Tick, will you step up to the platform?”

Tom felt his insides turn upside down, felt a hundred pairs of eyes pushing to get a view of this tiny, strange cat that smelled nothing like a Cobby. Puzzle nudged him forward, and he stiffly climbed up the stairs. He slipped and fell twice, landing on his back in the hay. Gasps of embarrassment and barely suppressed snorts burned in his ears, as he finally made it up to the

platform. Up high, he could see every last cat in the barn crammed down below, every one of them looking back. Some were curious, some excited, some angry, some just plain bewildered. Mutters rippled back and forth. He felt dizzy, and he thought he might fall again, but he backed away from the edge.

“I, Odd-Eye, Leader of Cobby Clan, draw upon the force of my Clan to see Tick earn his Tail,” Odd-Eye bellowed, her voice deep and rich, “Do I hear your approval?”

A great *mrrrow* of agreement swelled from the cats assembled, making the barn shake, though Tom couldn’t help noticing a few cats here and there not joining in, instead just glaring silently at him. Odd-Eye and Sir Paws were now on either side of him.

“Tick, do you swear to be loyal to Cobby Clan, to defend the Clan with your life, and to uphold the Code preserved by generations long passed?”

“I..I do.”

“Then crouch before your Clan, and receive your Tail.”

Tom obediently lowered himself, his front paws draped over the edge, looking down at the expectant crowd. His heart pounded against the cold bricks. He felt Odd-Eye's and Sir Paws' tails twine themselves tightly around his, forming a braid of black, white and brown.

"He'll never make it," a whisper shivered through the crowd, "He doesn't have a clue."

"And he looks too young."

"Someone better call a Sickkit; this could be messy."

What are they talking about?

The braided tails loosened, and Tom made to stand up, but paws held him firmly down.

"Cobbies!" Odd-Eye roared, "Are you ready to receive Tick as a new Clan member?"

Another *mrrrow*, and this time they all joined in, even the angry ones looking excited. Sir Paws and Odd-Eye placed their front paws on Tom's back.

"Remember, paws first," Odd-Eye whispered in his ear.

"Wha-?"

Odd-Eye and Sir Paws shoved Tom forward, launching him clear off the platform and towards the parting crowd.

“*Aaaagh!*” he shrieked, as the world whirled into a messy gray-brown blur. Blood pounded his ears. He’d been tricked! He was going to hit the hard ground and he’d be done for. He closed his eyes, waiting for the bones to crack...but wait. He could feel something. As naturally as he knew which way was up, his body was turning in mid-air, correcting itself, ready to strike the ground on all fours. He’d be okay! Wait, no, he was going too fast...this was going to hurt...

His paws scraped against the rough concrete, and he skidded for what felt like a mile, cutting through the dirty hay like a ship through ice. Finally he screeched to a halt near the door. His paws were on fire, and his pads were red raw, almost smoking. He turned around, bringing one up to his mouth to lick— when he saw the crowd.

Every cat gaped at him in astonishment, jaws open wide.

“Wow.” Someone simply declared.

“That was quite a slide,” said another, “I’ve never seen a Tailing like that.”

“Tick!” Odd-Eye called from the platform, “Congratulations! You are now a Smalltail of Cobby Clan!”

Cats from all sides descended upon him, congratulating him, still aghast with wonder at his landing. Nobody was more stunned and confused as Tom was, but it didn’t matter: as he fought through the cats, many of whom made a point of rubbing against him to mark the Cobby scent on his pelt, he felt a step closer to being accepted. One glance further back from those surrounding him, though, told another story: sullen cats gathered in groups and muttered to one another, occasionally glowering at Tom. At first he couldn’t understand why they were so annoyed with him, then he remembered what Odd-Eye had said: many cats had been born into the Cobby way of life, and had waited patiently for their own Tailing. Now Tom, this Outsider, comes from nowhere and jumps the queue.

Tom had to admit, he would've been angry too if it had been him.

Puzzle, Tips, Malt and Apples swam into view, beaming.

"That...was...amazing!" Tips laughed, "How'd you do it?"

"I learnt from the best," Tom nodded to Puzzle, who nodded back. Tom couldn't help noticing a glimmer in her eye.

Even now, having finally joined the ranks and being surrounded by his new cat friends, Tom knew he wouldn't be happy until he'd spoken to Odd-Eye: not just to thank her, but to ask her: why? Even if he had saved another cat, it didn't seem right to promote him so quickly.

Then he remembered the way she looked at him with those eyes before the meeting began, and his heart pitted into his stomach. He was sure she could see right into him, read things he didn't dare say. Then he recalled the Scatterleaf prophecy:

A great monster we thought ourselves rid of has returned, and he strides among us. He will destroy the Clans.

Tom Verbrisser was a home-destroying monster to these cats. The Nestbreaker, they called him. Now they assumed him gone, for a long holiday, yet here we was, walking among them.

A prickle of terror rippled up his spine. Was he that monster? Was he going to destroy the Clans? But Tom wouldn't dare do such a thing! Not on purpose. Especially not now. If Odd-Eye thought he was, then why make him a member?

Tom stared up at the platform, and Odd-Eye looked back at him, her eyes as unreadable as ever.

Chapter Nine

First Duties

“So, how does it feel to finally be one of us, fellow Smalltail?” said Malt sweetly, running her muzzle along his flank.

“Painful,” Tom winced, as he held out his final paw to the Sickkit.

He was in one of the partitions of the barn, the one crammed with herbs and flowers, and a kindly old cat called Muffin was tending to his sore pads. She was a Sickkit, which Puzzle explained was kind of like a cat doctor. She chewed on long stems of yarrow, then pressed the pulp into each of Tom’s tender pads. They stung for a while, then gradually cooled, dulling the pain.

“Yeowch! T-thanks,” Tom muttered weakly to Muffin as she treated his last paw.

“They were just grazes; you’ll feel tip-top in no time,” said the Sickkit, as she stored away the remaining yarrow, “As long as you don’t go

straining yourself, you can go about your business as normal, I'd say."

"And it's a good thing too, because he's got his First Duties to fulfil."

Tom swung round to see a flat-faced, long-haired Persian cat standing at the entrance to the Sickkit's room, flanked by two sneering cronies. They were smaller than the Persian, and identical in their mottled brown-and-white coats. Tom assumed they were twins.

"Saxon," said Puzzle stiffly, sitting next to Tom, "Thank you for the reminder, but he is my apprentice, and he will follow the code of the Cobbies as closely as I will. Rest assured, First Duties will be performed."

Saxon cracked into a smile, his gray eyes glinting with laughter, "Ah, yes. Puzzle. Odd-Eye's very own tail-stroker. Small wonder how this runt's Tailing was pushed through so quickly."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?" Puzzle unsheathed her claws and crouched. Tom recognised that pose: she was ready to pounce. Saxon and his twin sidekicks did the same, and

Tom backed away, sensing a fight was ready to erupt.

“Don’t, Puzzle!” Apples leapt between them, “It’s not worth it. Saxon, you too are a Bigtail, and are no less preferred than the rest of them – yes, Puzzle included.”

“Hmph,” Saxon grunted, sheathing his claws and fangs, “Explain to me, then, how that wimpy furball –” Saxon nodded at Tom, “ – joins the Clan the second he shows his face, yet I’ve been training Holly and Juniper here since birth, they’re more skilled than most Smalltails are, yet are a half a moon overdue their own Tailing?”

“If you have a problem with how Odd-Eye runs the Clan, Saxon, take it up with her,” Puzzle snarled, “It was her decision, and nobody made it for her. She must have her reasons.”

“Yeah, well...what with this ‘Monster among us’ nonsense, I’m not the only cat around here questioning her reasoning.”

A stunned silence swept across the Sickkit’s room. Tom heard Muffin spill a stack of supplies in horror.

“How...*dare you!*” Puzzle seemed to be fuming so fiercely that she could barely get her words out, “You dare to question the word of—”

“Blindly scold me all you want, Puzzle,” Saxon said coolly, “As I said, I’m not the only one. And if our Leader and Deputy lead the Clan into one more bloodbath...well, things will have to change if we’re to survive.”

Saxon and the twins rounded on Tom.

“And as for you, *Tick*,” Saxon rumbled, “I’m sure I speak for everyone when I say I’ll be watching your progress with interest.” He looked Tom up and down with damning eyes, “Good luck with First Duties,” he sneered, and with a flick of his tail, he and the twins slunk away.

Tom remained frozen to the spot, while Puzzle and his friends gathered in a circle to talk urgently. He looked beyond the opening to the partition to see many cats poking their noses in to get a look at him. Saxon was right: the whole Clan would be watching him, whether they meant him well or not. And Saxon wasn’t going to be only cat angry with long-waiting

apprentices due to be Tailed. More than anything, the need to talk to Odd-Eye about it, to ask her why she'd done it, burned more than ever, though part of him wanted to stay away from the all-seeing Leader, who, Tom was sure, knew more about him than he was comfortable with. His Tailing may have earned him friends, but it had also loaded him with enemies. He'd have to do everything right, and not put a paw wrong, to prove himself.

He unstuck himself from his thoughts and approached the circle of cats, their tall backs leaning inwards, deep in discussion. When Puzzle spotted Tom approaching, they broke up, all looking at him.

"Sorry you had to hear that," said Tips, "Saxon's a furball-eating loudmouth. He's always got it in for one cat, but don't worry, he'll get bored and move on."

"But he insulted Odd-Eye," Tom replied, "Why did you put up with that?"

The cats looked awkwardly from one to the other, wondering what to tell him.

“Well...he’s always been a bit mutinous,” said Apples slowly, “It’s just his way, Tick: he used to be a Smoky Cat.”

An image of the ravaged face of Fuzzy leapt up at Tom, and he felt the fur rise on his back.

“What?” he gasped.

“Yep, but he was kicked out over a Sun ago. Too soft,” Tips laughed sourly, “Odd-Eye took him in. He’s been a good cat, if truth be told, but...well, we Clans fight a lot. And I mean *fight*. Be it over territory, prey, pride, test of strength...anything, really. And some of us have met Saxon in battle. To have him eat and sleep among us, it...well, it didn’t sit well with a lot of us. We singled him out, left him out of a lot of Clan activities, and he became very bitter about it, and started mouthing off about the Cobbies.”

“But that was over a Sun ago,” Malt pointed out, “Those old wounds have healed. He’s pretty much one of us now, and nobody singles him out any more. But he still can’t hold his tongue: like we said, it’s in his nature.”

“It’s stupid, really,” Tips shrugged, “I mean, he says Odd-Eye’s unreasonable, but it was her who took him in when nobody else would.”

“So don’t take it personally, will you, Tick?”

“No...no, of course not,” Tom’s mind whirled. Far from comforting him, the story made him more scared of Saxon than ever. He shivered, and turned to Puzzle.

“So what are these First Duties, then?” he said brightly, determined to change the subject and get on with his Clan duties proper. His paws tingled with excitement: whatever it was, he’d do it as best he could. That’d show everyone he wasn’t a wimpy furball.

Puzzle drew herself up, suddenly official in manner.

“First Duties are performed on the night a cat is made a Smalltail,” Puzzle recited, “It is his or her sole responsibility to make sure there’s enough food on the scrapstock for the night.”

Tom’s heart sank. “Meaning...”

“Yep,” said Tips, “You need to go catch us some prey, Tick. And plenty of it,” he added, looking at the swarms of cats stilling milling

about the barn. “And nobody is to help you. Sorry – it’s against the Cobby Code.”

“But I –”

“Speaking of which, I’m starving,” Apples said suddenly, “Anyone else fancy heading over to the scrapstock room before all the juicy bits are gone?”

There was a mewling of agreement, and they all headed out except for Puzzle and Tom.

“You coming, Puzzle?” Malt halted at the entrance.

“You guys go on ahead,” said Puzzle, “I just need to brief Tick here on what to do.”

Malt nodded, and they left.

“Well, you kept that quiet,” said Tom sulkily.

“The Cobbies aren’t a club, Tom,” Puzzle said sternly, “We’re not all fun and games. We’re family, and in a family, there will be chores. This is one of them.”

“But I don’t know the first thing about catching prey!” Tom wailed, “I’ve been a cat for, what, a *day*? Did you learn to catch mice when you were one day old, Puzzle?”

“Keep it down!” Puzzle hissed, her eyes flicking nervously around, “You’re going to give yourself away!”

“I think the game will be up when they realise this cat will sooner run from rats than catch them.” said Tom dully.

“Look, I know this isn’t ideal,” said Puzzle, trying to sound more sympathetic, “But I had no choice. If you want to go see Smoky Clan, I had to make you part of our Clan: you can’t travel alone into their territory, not if you value your life. Stick to the code, and you’ll fit in. Fit in, and as a Cobby we’ll be able to get you to Smoky Clan, with friends to back you up.”

Tom flicked his ears sulkily. Puzzle was talking sense, even if he didn’t want to admit it. “So...if I follow the rules, and do these First Duties, you’ll take me with you to Smoky Clan tomorrow?”

Puzzle muzzled him gently; “I can’t be certain, but I’ll talk with Odd-Eye about it. She’s probably looking for more volunteers, and Scatterleaf knows we’ll need all the help we can get going there.”

Tom mulled it over. “Well...okay. But how am I going to feed so many? Look at them!”

Tom nodded at the doorway, to the hundreds of chattering cats, pushing past one another in an effort to move around.

“Don’t worry,” Puzzle smiled, “No cat expects a Smalltail on First Duties to provide for everyone. Malt didn’t when she was Tailed last moon; neither did I, and I doubt even Odd-Eye did. Besides, now the meeting’s over, a lot of the cats will be heading back to their home camps to relay the news.”

But they didn’t. As Puzzle led Tom towards the barn doors, Tom caught sight of Saxon, Holly and Juniper at the door, gently coaxing cats on their way out to stay.

“Come on, stay!” Saxon laughed jovially, “It’s late, and there’s plenty of room here, and food. At least, there will be, once that new Smalltail gets to work!”

Some groups sped off into the night, yet some were turning right round and heading to the scrapstock room. Then Saxon caught sight of them.

“Ah, Puzzle!” he said with mock delight, “It’s a good thing you’re staying too: seems like we’re going to have a real party tonight.” Then he turned to Holly and Juniper. “What say we go *gorge* ourselves on prey?”

“You know the code, Saxon,” said Puzzle, still as a statue, “One piece each, then spares go to the needy. And you heard as well as I did that Sir Paws wants a reserve pile.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem, surely?” he said, rolling his eyes to the barn roof, “Not with our newest Smalltail here to top us *all* up, eh?” he chuckled deeply, then flicked his tail to his apprentices; “Come on, girls.”

Holly and Juniper brushed roughly against Tom’s sides as they left, rubbing his fur the wrong way, which felt, well...wrong. He could see why cats hated it, and he immediately went to work licking it back down.

“I wonder what Odd-Eye saw in him,” said Puzzle miserably, “Still sees in him.”

Tom had to wonder too, especially as Odd-Eye seemed to be able to see right into him.

“Let’s go,” said Puzzle, leading Tom outside. The cold night air hit him like a wall, along with the nervy rustle of prey in the grass, coming from all around him. He even saw a mouse make a chance dash across the yard, right under his nose, and he almost swiped it up with his paw. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all.

“There’s a small hole in the wall around the back of the barn,” Puzzle explained, “It leads directly to the scrapstock room. You can drop of your catch off that way. Good luck.”

And with that, Puzzle slipped back into the warm bustle of the barn, leaving Tom alone in the yard.

But instead of feeling scared, Tom felt a sudden thrill he hadn’t sensed in years: this was a *challenge*. Nowadays, with his own healthy bank balance and a team of workers in London, he had the power to do basically anything with minimum effort. This was the kind of test that threw him back to his time at school, when things were still hard – and yet somehow more simple...

* * *

Tom burst into the common room, sandwich in one hand and pressing a mobile phone to his ear with the other.

“Well, how am I supposed to get to work without a lift?” he growled. He paused, listening to the tinny voice answer. “Eh? Take a bus? Look, that’s not the point, Martha; I’ll be late....well, my project in Hackney is due to be approved at five...yes, now you see the problem...no, don’t you let anyone else touch it! This is mine, I’ve been working on it all this time, *I’ll* be the one to hand it over.”

Tom sensed someone else in the room with him. He turned, and saw June Williams sitting at a table, chewing through a bowl of pasta and tuna. She smiled, and waved a plastic fork at him. He waved back with his sandwich. Tom suddenly felt very conscious of himself.

“Look, Martha, don’t worry about it,” he said quickly, “I’ve got a free period at the end of the day, I’ll ask if I can leave early...yeah, they

know I work for Dad. Just don't let anyone sign the papers, I want to do that. Okay. Bye."

He snapped his phone shut and slumped into the chair opposite June. "Sorry you had to hear that." He usually made a dash for the common room at lunchtime before anyone else got there, in case he needed to make any important phone calls to the office. He could grab a few minutes privacy then. Not today, it would seem.

June waved his apology aside, taking a swig of orange juice from a bottle. "Like I didn't know before," she teased, her eyes dancing, "Truth be told, it all sounded rather exciting."

"It really isn't," Tom gave a strained laugh. He could feel his cheeks flushing, and he busied himself with tearing the sandwich wrapping open, "Just...work."

"Isn't that enough?" June pressed on, "Nobody in the third year has a job. I mean, Chris has a paper round and Lucy earns a bit of pocket money whenever she helps at her parent's greengrocers, but you...you've got a proper job!"

“It’s not a big deal, really. Just helping out my Dad now and then.”

June raised an eyebrow. “You make it sound like a big deal on the phone, though. That poor Martha woman must still be in shock, getting a telling off from a fourteen-year-old!” She laughed, but Tom could sense a hint of disapproval in her voice. Tom muttered a sorry, and began fumbling in his pocket for his phone to text Martha an apology. June always had this effect on him, making him feel stupid and awkward, reminding him of his place, but never in a mean way. Sometimes, he hated it: he liked being in control, knowing what to say and do, and June made him feel, like...well, a fifteen-year-old boy. But on the other hand...it was kind of a relief.

The common room door swung open, and in poured a rabble of boys, lead by – Tom’s heart sank – Daniel McCulloch. Tom turned away, hoping against hope that they’d be left in peace. June clearly thought the same thing too; she scrambled to strike up the conversation again.

“So, er, do you do anything important at your Dad’s place, then? Do you get paid?”

Tom puffed his cheeks out. “A bit, nothing special, but I’m getting there. Dad’s expanding the business abroad right now and I’m getting more to do everyday. I was given my own mini-budget to work with last month, which is why this project –”

A seat groaned across the floor towards them, and Daniel slumped into it, casually crossing his feet on the table.

“Don’t mind me,” he said, absently picking at his fingernails with his teeth, “Verbrisser’s so full of himself he’s got his own gravity field. I just got pulled in.”

Daniel’s cronies at a nearby table snickered. His very own cheering squad. Tom rolled his eyes. Daniel caught this, and sat up, leaning in, his vast shoulders seeming to stretch the entire width of the table.

“You think you’re so special, don’t you, Verbrisser?” he sneered, “Swanning about the school like you own it, with your flash clothes and new phone every other month.”

“What’s your problem, McCulloch?” June snapped, “What’s he ever done to you?”

Daniel and his minions roared with laughter, and Tom’s ears burned with embarrassment, but June wouldn’t be swayed; she continued to glare at Daniel with bolting eyes.

Daniel, however, ignored her. “Getting girls to fight your battles for you now, Verbrisser? What is she, your receptionist?”

June looked fit to breath fire, but Tom raised a hand. He turned to face Daniel, and held his gaze with what little courage he could muster.

“You sound jealous Daniel,” Tom tried a mocking grin, “Don’t blame me if I can afford things.”

For a split-second, Daniel’s face twitched into an ugly, contorted shape. Then he burst into a wondrously melodramatic bawl. “Oh, it’s true!” he whined between sobs, “I sleep on the floor with the dogs and scour the local bins for food!” He grabbed Tom’s sandwich and stroked it as though it were a pet. “If only I could be more like you! I could eat like this every day.”

He took a massive bite and chewed dramatically. His eyes widened, and he spat out the pulp on the table. “Ugh. Poncey food. I’d rather starve.” He smacked his lips. “Need to get that taste out of my mouth now. Ah, here we go.”

Daniel reached for June’s pasta. Tom was more surprised than anyone to find his own hand lunging forward and grabbing Daniel’s wrist. Even Daniel looked taken back. Tom felt his friends at the other table tense. A crooked grin splintered across Daniel’s face. He pushed Tom’s arm back, forcing it into an awkward angle. Tom held down the urge to show pain on his face, and held Daniel’s stare. He tried to hold to him back, but Daniel was just too strong. He was powerless as Daniel finally slammed his hand down to the table, and he felt a sickening pain lance up to his shoulder. Nursing his arm, he was without answer this time as Daniel coolly reached for June’s pasta once more. June didn’t put up a fight, knowing it to be pointless.

“You think you’re so, so special, Verbrisser,” Daniel sneered through a full mouth, spraying

him with flecks of tuna and spit, “But you’re not. You’ve just got rich parents who pay your way, that’s all. *You* have nothing over anyone, especially me.”

Daniel stood and walked away, taking June’s lunch with him. June and Tom sat in silence for a while. Tom couldn’t bring himself to meet her eye. Then, silently, he slid his sandwich across the table to her, rose from his chair, and left the common room.

Daniel’s words still rang in his ears by the time he arrived at the office. He signed off on his first ever solo project with little fanfare, and he retired to his own desk before anyone could ask him why he was so unusually quiet.

*Powerless...*there was no feeling he hated more, and that’s exactly how Daniel made him feel. Worse still, deep down Tom knew that he was right: it *was* thanks to his parents that he was already rising up the ladder. Would a teenager be working at this agency if his father wasn’t the owner? Of course not.

“Why the long face, junior?” his desk-neighbour, Ashley, nudged him out of his

reverie, “That was a fine job you did on your first project. Better than mine!”

“It was alright, I guess,” Tom muttered. Normally he’d be the first in line to bask in praise, but right now his heart wasn’t in it.

“I mean it!” she leaned in, lowering her voice, “You didn’t hear this from me, but I heard that your old man is pretty proud of your work. Apparently he’s going to increase your budget and let you get to work on your own projects.”

Tom nodded absentmindedly – and stopped. *My own projects?* A crazy, wonderful idea began to bubble in his mind, devilishly simple, devastatingly effective. He fired up his computer and fired up the internet. After a quick search through the online records, he found the address he was looking for. He smiled. *Just as I thought.*

“Quick question, Ashley,” he swivelled his chair towards her, trying to sound as casual as possible, “Can you buy council houses?”

“Of course,” Ashley, “That was your Dad’s bread-and-butter when he was starting this

business; buying up council property, sprucing up and selling it on for a profit. Oldest trick in the book, and it still works.”

“What if it already has tenants?”

Ashley grinned. “Remember rule three.”

Tom nodded. *Dad’s third rule of work: everyone has their price.* But even with a bigger budget, he couldn’t just dive into this: Dad wouldn’t allow his money to be used like that. No, he’d have to save little scraps of leftover money from every single project from now on, saving up for his own, top secret project.

Time went by. Tom still suffered from Daniel’s jibes, and for some reason June kept throwing herself into the firing line, but regardless Tom bit his lip every time. *Wait. Just wait.* All the while, he buried himself in his work, quietly delivering on-time and, officially, on-budget. Saved money went undeclared and smuggled into his own account, and slowly, steadily, his goal came closer...closer...

Chapter Ten

Grows and Codes

Closer...closer...and...*jump!*

Tom unsheathed his claws and pounced on his prey. The mouse looked up at him, beady eyes wide, and bolted before Tom could catch it. Tom cursed and swiped angrily at the dandelions, sending all nearby prey scarpering away into the bushes. Like it mattered: he'd been out here for nearly half an hour, yet hadn't caught a morsel. The barn was a good distance behind him, having chased prey up into the neighbouring field, but he didn't dare return empty-pawed for fear of what everyone might say...and looking a failure. Forget the challenge; this was turning out to be a disaster.

A rustle in the nearby tuft of grass caught his attention, and he swung around. *Just the wind* – wait, no, there was something in it: he could a

dark shape shifting between the dandelions. Clearly the prey were mocking him now, seeing how useless he was. Well, two can play clever. Time for a different approach.

Placing his weight on his hind paws, he tiptoed lightly forward, checking himself to ensure he was silent. If he could barely see the prey in that grass, then it stood to reason that it could barely see him, and would rely on hearing. He stood next to the grass, waiting for the perfect moment, still inching closer. Carefully, he reared up and drove his front paws deep into the grass.

Something scuttled wildly, trying to make a break for freedom, but Tom pressed down on it. It suddenly shot out into the clearing: a rat, and a big one at that.

“Not this time!” Tom gasped, and he swung around, paw extended in a hook. He scooped up the rat and pinned it down, driving his claws into its neck. It gave a tiny squeak, and died.

Tom stepped back, as though daring to believe it. He’d actually caught something! Yes! He caught...a rat...

The adrenalin rush quickly faded to disgust as he looked down at the piece of limp prey between his paws. He'd never directly killed a living thing before, apart from when the occasional annoying fly buzzed about his desk. It may have been just a rat, but still, some deep part of him felt repulsed by what he'd done. Was the human Tom Verbrisser coming through again, or did all cats feel this way after their first kill?

Another rustle behind him brought his newfound hunting instincts back. *This is nature*, he told himself, *I didn't feel any remorse when I ate that steak. At least I've hunted and caught this fairly and squarely.*

He turned away, and followed the sound of more prey. Again, after putting up a small fight, he'd caught another one. He was just thinking that maybe he was getting the hang of this, when he turned, and saw a crow picking at his first kill.

"Hey!" Tom shouted, dropping the prey in his jaws, "Get out of it! That's mine!" He launched forward, claws raised, but too late.

The crow picked up the fat rat in its claws and shot off into the sky, heading for the lone tree in the middle of the field.

“Thief!” Tom yelled into the night, “You...you *cheater*! Get your own!”

Dejected, he picked up the other, much smaller rat, and trotted back to the barn before it too was stolen.

“Ah, at last!” Saxon bellowed the second Tom poked his nose through the hole in the wall. Lots of cats were sat lazily around the scrapstock room, chewing on the few pieces of prey left scattered across the floor. His stomach growled loudly. Feeling his fur prickle with embarrassment, he dropped his weedy rat on the floor. He could feel Odd-Eye’s sight burning into his neck. He turned, ready to make a quick exit, but –

“That’s it?”

Tom froze, and turned, pawing the ground. “I’ll get more.”

“You’d better!” Saxon sneered, bits of feathers around his mouth, “You’re hardly

showing yourself worthy of such a meteoric rise through the Cobby Clan so far, are you, furball?”

Tom was glad to see a lot of cats, including his friends and Sir Paws, glare angrily at Saxon. Many more, however, nodded in agreement. Odd-Eye continued to study Tom, her expression yet again unreadable.

“Well, get a move on!” Saxon snapped. Juniper and Holly rushed forward and ushered Tom out of the room, back into the night. There was a swell of laughter, then a heated argument broke out, but Tom didn’t care. Shoulders slumped and tail trailing through the dusty yard, he headed for the nearby pond. He stared into the water. His reflection was barely noticeable in the ripples; a black outline of a cat against a night sky. He slapped the water with a paw, shattering the reflection and sending fish gliding away.

“Tick!” came a call from behind. He turned to see Malt running towards him, followed by Puzzle.

“I know, I know,” Tom sighed, “I’ll get a move on. You all need feeding, after all.”

“Don’t be like that,” Malt said, a sadness in her eyes, “I...I remember when I did First Duties. It was tough, but this...that Saxon!” she growled, “He has a real problem. At least I didn’t have him breathing down my neck, and the barn was nowhere near this busy.”

“So...what should I do?” Tom looked from Malt to Puzzle.

“I...we want to help,” Malt forced the words to come, as though merely saying them were breaking a law.

“But that’s against your code,” said Tom, his attention fully on Puzzle now, “You told me that yourself. And I need to stick to the Code if I’m to...you know, *fit in*.”

Luckily Malt didn’t seem to get suspicious at the cryptic message.

“Believe me, Tick, you’ll sooner fit in if you provide well at First Duties,” she said. Her eyes were set, her voice defiant.

“But you’ll get into trouble,” Tom warned, “Won’t you?”

“Oh, definitely,” Malt said brightly, “But only if we get caught. Besides, what’s a little punishment if it helps out a friend in need?”

Once more Tom felt that familiar warm prickle shudder through him. He caught Puzzle’s eye, and she gave him an amused told-you-so look.

“Thank you,” Tom bowed his head to them both, “So, what are we going to do?”

“First things first, let’s get a look at your hunting technique,” said Puzzle, as her ears swivelled round to the rustling in the nearby grassy knoll, “Go try and catch something.”

Tom obediently padded after the noise, his legs feeling strangely weak under Puzzle and Malt’s watchful eyes. He slowed down as he drew near to the noise, crept forward, and leapt. His claws raked the side of mousy fur, and it gave a squeak of pain, but it darted away before he could grip it.

“Hmmm...” Malt tilted her head in thought as she and Puzzle drew up next to him, “Your jumping is good, but you make a lot of noise when you do it.”

“You’re crouching too much,” said Puzzle, “Remember, a prey’s sight is pretty poor in the dark, but yours isn’t. Don’t worry so much about hiding yourself; concentrate on being as silent as possible, because that’s where they’ll get you.”

“I did try something like that,” said Tom earnestly, “Hold on.”

He used the slow creep-up and catch method he’d used to catch his first rat, and when he showed it to Puzzle and Malt, he caught a vole.

“Nice work!” Malt smiled warmly, “But you don’t need to take that long. Try and find a good balance between speed and technique.”

So it went on, Tom adjusting his stance every time Malt and Puzzle offered advice, often catching their own prey to show him how it was done. Slowly but surely, Tom got into a groove that suited him, and it gradually engrained itself into habit. It finally struck him just how much better he was getting when he caught a rabbit twice his size, with minimal struggle.

“Excellent!” Puzzle gave him a congratulatory lick across the head as Tom

placed it next to the rest of the prey they'd caught, "Now, if you're out hunting for multiple prey, you need to bury your catches, otherwise other predators will snatch it."

Puzzle and Malt demonstrated by scraping dirt over the prey with their hind legs and patting it down with their forepaws. Tom gave a hollow laugh.

"I wish I'd known that before," he mumbled, swiping at a tuft of crabgrass, "That's how I lost my first catch: a crow swooped down and stole it." He nodded at the gnarled tree silhouetted in the distance.

Malt's eyes narrowed at the sight of the tree, "Those crows are always causing problems," she snarled, "Stealing prey, scaring the kits...they even had the nerve to invade the barn once and peck at our hard-earned scrapstock. I'd do anything to get back at them."

"Yeah..." said Tom slowly. He looked from the tree to the prey before them, and a plan webbed together in his head. Quickly, he explained his idea to Puzzle and Malt. Their faces brightened and they nodded in excitement.

“That could work!” Malt squeaked, hopping up and down on the spot, “What do you reckon Puzzle?”

“Well, we’d kill two birds with one stone...maybe more,” she chuckled at her own joke, “Okay then, let’s go.”

Tom, Puzzle and Malt each grabbed a piece of prey in their jaws, buried the rest of the prey, and sped off towards the crow’s tree. As they approached, they slowed down, creeping along in silence. Tom used his fresh hunting techniques to stifle his noise, but he couldn’t avoid the odd rustle of the grass springing between his paws. The tree loomed high overhead, the cawing of the birds mingled with the flap of their wings beating against the leaves. When the grass thinned away to a point where they could no longer hide, they stopped. They placed their prey in a small pile.

“Spread out,” said Puzzle, “Wait for my command to attack.”

Malt and Puzzle nodded, and they parted. Tom found a good hiding place inside deep tractor tyre grooves. He waited, peering over

the edge. Nothing happened: the crows remained cawing merrily away in the tree. Perhaps they can't smell the prey? Maybe it's too far from the tree? Maybe – Tom gulped – they could sense it was a trap? He'd never regarded crows as being smart creatures, but considering the night he was having in the company of cats, who was he to judge?

His heart leapt when he saw a crow take a cautionary swoop out of the tree towards the prey, then headed straight back before it touched the ground. Then another crow did the same. There came a swell of eager caws from the tree, and in a flurry of black feathers the whole nest scrambled from the tree towards the prey.

Shivering with excitement, Tom allowed himself to stand up slightly. He strained his ears, waiting for Puzzle's command. Still it didn't come, and already the crows were tearing into their prey. Tom frowned. What was Puzzle playing at? Panic flushed through him. What if he was too far away to here? What if Puzzle was in trouble, and couldn't call? Maybe he should shout the command...

He was just about to shout out, when there came a confused noise from the crows. It sounded angry: were they fighting? But there were no cat noises amongst the racket. The truth struck him: they were fighting among themselves! There were too many crows and too little food, and they were squabbling over the best bits. Tom heard some sickening *rrrip!* sounds, and a few feathers fluttered above the melee. Then came the command, just distinguishable above the din: “NOW!”

As though launched from a springboard, Tom rocketed towards the crows. Wasting no time creeping up, he barrelled straight in, leaping as high as his legs would let him into the fight. Puzzle and Malt were already there, tearing into the crows, still so confused as to what was happening that they were still fighting each other. He landed on the back of a crow and sunk his claws deep in. With a shriek of pain it flapped its wings, desperately trying to take off, but Tom held firm, raking his claws through the feathers. The crow quickly gave up and lay still.

He could barely draw breath before a beak drilled into the side of his skull, sending him tumbling sidelong into Malt.

“Tick! You okay?” she gasped.

Tom felt something warm trickle from his right ear. “Fine,” he lied, and he plunged back into the fray to free Puzzle from the swarm pecking at her fur. Heart pounding and his bleeding ear ringing, he swiped wildly, occasionally feeling his claws tear out great chunks of feathers.

As soon as it had started, it was over. There was a commanding ‘*caw!*’ and the last remaining three crows took off, feathers streaming behind them with every shaky flap of their wings.

“Yeah!” Malt bellowed after them, “Serves you right! Don’t steal from cats again!”

Tom and Puzzle joined in the victory taunt, then cast their eyes around to assess the damage. They’d lost a few clumps of fur, but as Puzzle brightly pointed out, “it’s nothing that won’t grow back.” Nearly twenty dead crows littered the floor around them. If Tom wasn’t coursing

with adrenalin, he'd be feeling quite queasy at the sight.

“Good plan, Tick,” said Malt as they began to gather their haul of prey together, “These crows were all fattened up and slow because of all the prey they stole. Add this to the other prey we collected, and it should be more than enough to keep the Clan full for tonight.”

They gathered up the Crows in their jaws, taking trips back and forth to their collected prey until it all stood mounted before them, three times as high as Tom. As he stood astride Malt and Puzzle, admiring their hard work, he felt a warm glow swell inside him: they'd risked their own honour in the Clan to help him, and it had paid off immensely, but what were Puzzle and Malt getting for it? Nothing, really, apart from bringing them closer together as friends. Was that enough for them?

“I can't wait to see the look on Saxon's face when he sees this,” said Puzzle, failing to stifle a grin, “Now, Tick, here's what we'll do. You start bringing this in bit by bit to the barn. Malt

and I will wait a moment, slip into the barn through the main doors, and –”

“Admit your shame to the Clan?”

Tom felt his heart give an extra hard pound against his chest, then turn to ice as Sir Paws stepped from the darkness, eyes glinting with fury.

“I am so, so disappointed in you all,” he said, shaking his scruffy head, “Our finest Bigtail, our most promising Smalltail, and our newest Clan member: all breaking the Code. You’d better hope our ancestors aren’t seeing this; they’d be queuing up to claw your fur off. I must say I’m tempted to do it for them.”

“Sir Paws, we can explain,” Puzzle blurted out, and for the first time since turning into a cat, Tom saw her scared, “I’d never given Tick any proper hunting training before. I – we weren’t *helping* him hunt, just teaching him how to do it best.”

“Indeed?” said Sir Paws, eyeing the pile of crows and rodents in disbelief, “And those bits of feather stuck in your claws are just coincidence?”

Puzzle ran her claws through the grass, bowing her head.

“You will all have to be punished for this,” said Sir Paws, “I’ll have to consult with Odd-Eye on –”

“Oh, come on, Sir Paws!” Malt yelled in frustration. Sir Paws fixed her with a leer, and she shrank away, but she pressed on; “You saw the way Saxon was behaving in there, treating Tick like a servant. And you heard how he and some others were telling cats to stay in the barn, just to make his First Duties harder. He...it was *unfair!* Me and Puzzle helping, we were just balancing it out again. And doesn’t the Cobby Code say that you should always help another cat in need?”

Sir Paws looked ready to explode with fury. But he didn’t. In fact, to Tom’s surprise, his eyes softened.

“You speak beyond your years Malt, and I commend you for it,” he said, “But even if I agree with your sentiments, the fact still stands that the ritual of First Duties has been broken,

and a punishment is in order. That is the way of the code.”

Malt opened her mouth to protest, but seemed to think better of it, because she closed it again, and bowed her head.

“Yes, Sir Paws,” she said quietly, “For what it’s worth, we’re sorry. No harm was meant by it.”

“I understand,” said Sir Paws, “Now come on, let’s haul these catches back to the barn: I’m sick of listening to those cats mewling for food like pathetic kits.”

All the warmth and happiness he’d earned from the victory over the crows had evaporated into the night, and not even the astounded look on Saxon’s, Juniper’s and Holly’s faces as they pulled in their mountain of food for the scrapstock could cheer him up. He wouldn’t have minded so much if it was just him being punished, but the fact that Malt and Puzzle were too...he felt terrible. They found it in themselves to help him, not because some Code told them to, but because they saw him, Tom, as a friend. They’d risked themselves to do it, and

who knows what they'd lose because of it. Would they be demoted? Forced to do demeaning tasks? Or – he shivered – get kicked out of the Clan altogether? And it was all his stupid fault, for being so useless. What kind of friend dragged his friends down with him?

Finally, the last of the prey was tossed atop the heaped scrapstock, and the feasting began anew. Tom's appetite had dissolved. He sat in a corner, idly rolling a bone back and forth, whilst Muffin wiped his bloodied ear clean with a few comfrey leaves. He could feel eyes looking his way, could hear mutterings about him, but whether it was for better or for worse he didn't know or care.

Odd-Eye appeared in the entrance to the scrapstock room. She took one glance at the prey, and beckoned to Tom, Puzzle and Malt with her tail. Tails dragging behind them, they followed her. Tom caught a glimpse of Saxon, his old sneer returning: clearly the news that he'd been helped had got around.

Odd-Eye led them into an empty partition, where she turned to face them with her green

and blue eyes. She considered them all for a silent moment.

“Well, what have you got to say for yourselves?” she said at last. Tom flinched: for a fleeting moment he’d hoped the Cobby Leader would go easy on them. No such luck.

“We...we were doing it for the Clan,” said Puzzle, “We didn’t want the Clan to starve.”

“Starve?” Odd-Eye repeated, “Puzzle, these are hardened Clan cats; they can cope with a nagging hunger.”

“We did it to help Tom,” Malt admitted, “We were tired of seeing Saxon and the others bullying him.”

“I am well aware of Saxon’s attitude, Malt,” said Odd-Eye curtly, “And so should you. If you have a problem, report it to a superior, or even me. Having a problem doesn’t give you an excuse to go breaking the Code.”

“They weren’t breaking the Code, Odd-Eye,” Tom said at last, his voice croaky from underuse, “I...I did. I asked them to help me. I just...I didn’t want to let the Clan down.”

Puzzle and Malt tensed on either side of him, but neither dared to accuse him of lying. Odd-Eye considered Tom with her stare, and he forced himself to return it. Then she sighed, and looked at her paws, deep in thought.

“I can’t deny that your actions well intended, if selfish,” she said, “But the Code is broken, and it must be appeased with punishment. Malt, Puzzle, I’m sending you to go clean out the used hay in the nursery and replace it with fresh hay.”

Neither dared to react beyond a respectful nod. Then Odd-Eye turned to Tom, and he rocked backwards.

“And Tom, for your punishment, I’m going to be taking you with us to Smoky Clan tomorrow,” she declared, “Then you can see what a bunch of savages who abuse the Code look like.”

Tom’s stomach did a backflip: “Really?” he said excitedly. Odd-Eye stared at him suspiciously, so he hastily added, “Can’t I help Puzzle and Malt instead?” he tried to sound disappointed.

“No,” she said flatly, “I suggest you go find some rest, Smalltail. You will have a gruelling day ahead of you.”

Odd-Eye departed, and the three of them let out a collective sigh.

“That wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been,” said Malt, once they were sure their Leader was out of earshot, “I remember when Amber was caught sneaking into Leafy territory to see her half-brother. She was on herb-collection duty for a whole moon!”

“I wonder...” said Puzzle, licking her paw thoughtfully, “She is the Leader, so she has to be seen punishing us for what we’ve done, but this is a fairly light. Maybe...maybe she privately approves of what we did?”

“Well, I don’t plan on making a habit of it either way,” said Malt with a hollow laugh, “I’ll go and tell the cats and kits in the nursery to move to another empty room while we clean it out. See you there, Puzzle.” She turned to Tom, and gave him an affectionate lick between the ears. “Thanks for sticking up for us, there. I

think it really helped! I'll see you later, fellow Smalltail."

Malt left, and Tom immediately rounded on Puzzle, bounding up and down in excitement.

"I'm going with you!" he squealed, "I'm going to see Smoky Clan tomorrow!"

"Sssh!" Puzzle hissed, "Keep it down! Well, it's a good thing I hadn't asked Odd-Eye about your wanting to go, otherwise she wouldn't set it as punishment for you."

That caught Tom up short, and he had a flash of insight: what if Odd-Eye *did* know he wanted to go? Was she helping him along? Or, did she think he was this monster, was she trying to get rid of him? Either Odd-Eye was either the most helpful cat he'd met so far, beside Puzzle, or the most dangerous. Maybe he was over-thinking it; he shook the thought away.

"Well, you'd better go catch some sleep," said Puzzle with a yawn, "And make sure you eat something first, you'll need all your energy to —"

"Can I help you and Malt?" he said suddenly. He found himself offering his help

automatically. It just felt right: he was getting what he wanted while his friends were being punished for helping him. It was the least he could do.

Puzzle looked him up and down, and with a grin she nodded; “Okay, if you want. Follow me.”

They caught up with Malt at the nursery, where Tom was hit by a smell of warm milk. There were many female cats and even more kittens scurrying about and playing, even at this late hour. He, Malt and Puzzle helped usher them all into a spare room, and they set about brushing out the old hay, packing it into a tight ball and rolling it out of the barn doors. The cats sitting vigil at the door pointed them to where the fresh bales of hay were kept, in huge cylinders propped up against the new barn. They pulled one onto its side and wheeled it into the barn, into the nursery, where they broke it down into clumps and spread it evenly across the space. When they called the kittens and queens back into the nursery, the queens lay down in the soft hay and stretched luxuriously,

blinking their thanks to Tom and friends. The kits rolled about in the bouncy new hay, laughing and play fighting. Soon they were stretching their jaws in long yawns, and kneading at the hay to mould a good sleeping spot.

Tom yawned too, suddenly aware of how tired he was. When he asked Puzzle where they slept, she raised a paw to a partition near the Sickkit room.

“You and Malt sleep in the Smalltail den,” she said, “The Bigtail’s den is down that way.” She nodded deeper into the barn, near the leader’s platform, where the rooms looked bigger and less damaged. Puzzle bid goodnight to them, and with an exchange of bowed heads and licks, Puzzle left for her den. Malt escorted Tom to the Smalltail den. They passed the Midtail’s den, where Tom spotted Tips and Apples curled up, soundly asleep amongst a mass of cats. Finally they entered the Smalltail den, and paws heavy, they walked carefully through the gaps between the cats, looking for a space. It looked less spacious than the Midtail’s

den, and had less hay lining the floor, but looked cosy enough. Finally, he and Malt found space in a far corner, and wrapping his tail around him, crouched down.

“Sleep well, fellow Smalltail,” Malt whispered, as Tom felt a tail stroke over his ears.

“Good night,” Tom whispered back. As Malt drifted off, Tom took one more look around at the sea of cats around him, their backs gently rising and falling, accompanied by purrs and dreamy paw-swipes in the air at imaginary prey. That electric-like scent seemed fainter now. Tom felt a warmth spread through him: being part of this Clan, and sleeping in this cramped den surrounded by all these other cats...it was so bizarre, but it felt so *right*; the voice of Tom Verbrisser, that told him how stupid this all was, and he should get on with returning to being a human, seeing off Muezza and inheriting his father’s business – it was fading, and as he drifted off to sleep, he felt more like Tick than ever.

Chapter Eleven

On the Trail

Tom trekked through the trees, following the endless snuffles of prey in the undergrowth. But through all the noises and black feathers floating through the leaves, he hadn't seen a morsel.

It wasn't until he looked up into the tangle of branches above, blocking out all sunlight (or moonlight, he couldn't be sure what time it was), that he realised he was lost. Even if he could catch food, he didn't know how to get back. Well, that was clever of him.

He turned, ready to retrace his steps, when he saw a cat peering through the undergrowth at him.

"Hey!" Tom called, "Excuse me, I'm lost! Can you help me?"

The eyes disappeared. "Wait, come back!" Tom yelped, chasing after the dark shadow, plunging him deeper into the forest. He crashed

through a thicket and into a clearing, one he recognised immediately: this was his and June's favourite spot in Jacobsen Park! So, it was still here after all. This wasn't so bad...

But the clearing wasn't empty. Two humans towered over him, wrapped in each other's arms. Tom's throat tightened: it was *him!* And June! But...how can that be?

Then the human Tom turned to face him, and he flinched: the truth was far, far worse. That wasn't his human face sneering down at him, but Muezza. His leathery face wrinkled under his wide smile, and he licked his lips as he turned back to June.

"No..." Tom whispered, then as Muezza led June away, he yelled, "No! June, that's not me! Get away from him, he's..."

His words were lost on a howling wind, beating at his whiskers and pulling at his fur. Muezza and June melted away into the forest, hand in hand, and all around Tom the forest crumbled like dried dirt, giving way to towers of concrete shooting from the ground like weeds. One burst out under Tom's paws, firing him

high into the lightning-tinged air. Then it was gone, and he was falling, tumbling...

Tom lurched awake, his fur damp with cold sweat. Light blinded him, streaming through the dusty rafters: morning. It had been a dream.

“Wha-who?” Malt mumbled groggily, lurching her head around with eyes still shut, “Where’s the fire?”

“Sorry,” said Tom, “Just had a nightmare.” *And this was reality? Being a cat?* He shook the hay out of his fur. *Sunday morning. Two days left.*

“Ah,” Malt yawned and stretched, blinking in the sunlight, “Well, I had a lovely dream! Prey was lining up, begging to leap into my mouth!”

“Sounds wonderful,” said Tom, only half-listening. He looked around the Smalltail den. Half the cats were already gone. Had they returned to their camps and homes already? While most of the remaining Clan were still asleep, a few were sat up here and there, grooming themselves and each other. He licked his paw to wash the wound on his ear, but his tongue was dry. His stomach growled: he

hadn't eaten or drunk anything since leaving his house yesterday evening. He'd been putting off eating his first proper piece of fresh prey. His empty stomach shrivelled at the idea.

"Let's go meet up with the others and head to the scrapstock room for breakfast," said Malt, standing up and stretching her hind legs, the sun glinting on her half-hidden collar, "There should be plenty left after our haul last night."

They padded out of the den and headed towards the Midtail's den. They passed a few cats on the way, still blinking the sleep from their eyes.

"Morning Malt, Tick," they called as they passed.

"Err, good morning," Tom replied, slightly bewildered at their friendliness. Maybe Saxon had made him paranoid: perhaps he wasn't as unpopular with the Clan as he'd thought.

They found Tips and Apples at the Midtail den entrance, arguing once again.

"Look, just because I think they did wrong doesn't mean they're not my friends!" Apples

snapped, “The Code is there for a reason: they broke it, and they got punished, end of story.”

“You’re so mean sometimes, Apples!” Tips retorted, “If I’d have known what Puzzle and Malt were doing to help Tick, I wouldn’t have stopped them – in fact I’d probably have joined in.”

“Better not hear Odd-Eye or Sir Paws hear you say that,” said Apples, and as she turned she caught sight of Tom and Malt approaching.

“Ah! Oh, er...hi, guys. You...get a good sleep?” Apples stumbled over her words, and Tom was sure that under her dusty, silky fur that she was blushing. Tips opened his mouth to speak, but Malt got there first.

“It’s okay, Tips,” she said calmly, “Apples is right; we did wrong, we know that, and we’ve been punished.”

Tips’ tail drooped. “I wish you’d have told me,” he said, “I could’ve helped you.”

Malt gave Tips a friendly headbutt, “I told you, it’s *okay!*” she giggled, “Odd-Eye only had Puzzle and I clean out the nursery last night, that’s all.”

“What about Tick?” asked Apples.

“I’m coming with you to Smoky Clan,” said Tom, trying to hide his excitement with (partially fake) fear.

Tips and Apples stared at him. “Odd-Eye’s bringing you with us?” Apples gasped open-mouthed, “What did you do to earn that? Did you throw sand in a kit’s face or something?”

“He’s new to the Clan,” came another voice, “so it’s part punishment and part initiation.”

They all spun round. It was Puzzle, her stripy Toyger fur gleaming in the mottled sunlight as she padded up to them. Together they headed for the scrapstock room, which still had plenty of prey left, and as they each pulled out their own pieces, the talking went on. But Tom wasn’t listening; he only stared down at the dead mouse lying at his paws. His stomach growled, the smell running up his nostrils telling him how delicious this prey was, and his throat watered. But still he longed to swat it away. He couldn’t possibly eat a *dead mouse!* Or couldn’t he? No, of course not. But he was hungry...

A nudge on the shoulder gave him a start. It was Puzzle, and she gave him an encouraging nod. He could feel other eyes trained on him, too. Well, he had no choice now. Wincing, he tore away the mouse's skin, leaned down, and took a slow bite.

Mmm...not bad. Not bad at all. Soft, juicy, with musky flavours... if he hadn't have known better he could've mistaken it for a mouthful of that expensive raw steak he and Puzzle shared. It coursed into his stomach, demanding more, and he took another mouthful. Puzzle nodded approvingly. Content he'd crossed that hurdle, he sat in silence and listened to the conversation.

"I don't see what we're going to learn today," said Apples through a mouthful of crow, "Even if Smoky Clan knows about this monster thing, they're hardly going to tell a bunch of Cobbies, are they?"

"But this monster threatens us all," said Puzzle as she picked idly at the bits of feather stuck in her claws, "Smokies may be

uncooperative, but they aren't stupid. It's in everyone's interest if they help us."

"I wouldn't count on it," Tips said darkly, pulling another rat from the scrapstock, "The whole reason Fuzzy went over there was to help them clean out their water, and look how grateful they were."

Tom recalled the ravaged face, and his excitement shrunk away in the face of a growing fear no longer fake. He busied himself with another piece of prey.

"I wonder if Saxon knows anything," Malt broke the silence, "After all, he's a former Smoky, and this is an old enemy of ours —" she trailed off as Saxon, Juniper and Holly entered the room, barging through to help themselves to prey. There were no smarmy words for Tom this time, but they still threw him dirty looks as they dragged their breakfast into the far corner of the room, chattering quietly to each other.

"You want to ask him? Be my guest," Tips gave a chuckle.

"Just a thought," said Malt curtly, returning to her prey.

“Yes, it was a good idea,” Puzzle agreed, “But the Scatterleaf prophecy said that this was something we must ask of Smoky Clan themselves, and Saxon isn’t. When we are gifted with a prophecy, it is best to follow it first before any other avenues. I think we all remember what happened the last time a prophecy was defied.”

They all nodded in silent agreement, except Tom, who looked around, bewildered at what they meant.

Sir Paws and Odd-Eye entered the room, and all cats present straightened up and bowed their heads respectfully. Tom quickly swallowed his mouthful and followed suit.

“Ah, good, you’re all here,” said Odd-Eye, “Sir Paws and I will just have our fill of prey, and then we’ll be off.”

“Yes, Odd-Eye,” they all chanted. As the Leader and Deputy ate, Puzzle led Tom over to a corner of the room where the floor dipped down, flooded with water where a pipe had burst. Puzzle lapped at the water, and Tom copied her. It was icy cool and clean-tasting,

and quenched his thirst. Then he dabbed his paws into the water, washing off the flecks of fur and hay stuck to his pads.

“*What are you doing?*” Puzzle hissed in his ear. Tom leapt aside, flattening his ears.

“I’m...washing?”

Puzzle looked at him like he was a piece of prey that had sprung back to life. “With *water*? Ugh!” Then she proceeded to lick her paws and run them over her head, smoothing down her fur. Tom did the same, feeling a little angry with Puzzle. It was alright for her; she’d been a cat all her life! How would she like it if she’d been turned into a human? He was trying, but surely Puzzle couldn’t expect him to shed all his human qualities overnight? After all, he intended to turn back...

Moments later, Tom stood blinking in the pale morning sunlight of a crisp, cold morning, lined up next to Tips, Puzzle, Malt, and Apples. Sir Paws marched out of the barn doors, closely followed by Odd-Eye. In the daylight, her gemstone eyes stood out more than ever.

“Okay everyone,” Sir Paws announced as he marched back and forth like a general before his troops, “I don’t think I need to stress to any of you just how dangerous this mission is. Smoky Clan are hostile, dangerous and unpredictable.”

“And that’s on a good day,” Tips murmured to Tom.

“Quite, young Midtail,” Sir Paws nodded, “So I expect nothing less than strict obedience. No wandering off, no speaking unless prompted, and no getting any clever ideas. Preserve the Code, and it will preserve you.”

Tom may have been imagining it, but Sir Paw’s narrow eyes kept flicking to him as he spoke. Tom felt the hairs on his tail prickle: did he know something? After all, Tom would somehow have to get to Smoky Clan and talk to them without giving himself away to the Cobbies...but how? He wasn’t going to do it with Sir Paws and Odd-Eye breathing down his neck, that was for sure, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that the Leader and now the Deputy seemed suspicious of him.

“Right, fall into standard flanks, and we’ll be off,” said Sir Paws gruffly. The cats shuffled themselves around, and Puzzle nudged a confused Tom into place beside Malt. Odd-Eye and Sir Paws lined up in front of the Smalltails. Behind them were the Midtails, Tips and Apples, with Puzzle the Bigtail at the back. At once, Tom felt protected and safe, yet being closed in by all these bigger cats was nonetheless intimidating.

“On your move, Odd-Eye,” said Sir Paws with a bow of his head. Odd-Eye returned the bow gracefully, then padded forward at a brisk pace. Immediately Tom was caught off guard as Apples nearly crashed into him: “Tom! Get moving!”, but he quickly found the pace, and together the party padded north, up the dew-covered hill, towards the mesh of trees hidden in the grey mist below. Beyond, the tangle of factories and tall chimney pipes loomed in bulky grey shapes, shrouded in a concoction of morning fog and smoke. Tom’s chest gave a sudden leap: this was exciting and scary at once: he was plunging deeper into the unknown.

Saxon stood on the platform, looking down over the barn. Though many of the cats had left to return to their camps with last night's news, there were still many left milling around, working and mingling. Saxon gave a satisfied sigh. Oh, what he'd give to be a Leader! Well, for the time being, he'd know how it would feel: Odd-Eye had left him in charge of the Cobby headquarters whilst the party to Smoky Clan was away. He'd show them all just how good he was: already he'd set a group of cats to go and clear away those dangerous splintered beams once and for all. Yes, Odd-Eye would be pleased with that when she returned...a dark thought floated into Saxon's mind. What if they never returned? Who'd be leader? *Him?*

Saxon shook himself, and descended the platform. *Now now*, he told himself, *don't go getting carried away*. Odd-Eye was a good leader, even if he didn't always agree with the company she kept: Smoky Clan never had this many soft Petters. Still, he'd never forget what he owed her.

He headed outside for some fresh air, and caught the scent of prey on the breeze. His stomach rumbled as he dashed into the grass and devoured the unsuspecting mouse...but it kept on rumbling, getting louder...

That wasn't his stomach rumbling. It was a human Rumbler, an ugly great white one glinting in the sun like a polished fang, throwing up a cloud of dirt as it raced down the hill towards the old barn. It stopped near the door, the rumbling cut off abruptly, and a side of the Rumbler opened. Saxon crouched down, too scared to dash back to the barn. When he saw the human crunch across the gravel towards him, he wish he'd taken his chances. His heart smacked against his ribcage as he tiptoed backwards. The human towered over him, reeking of industrial smells, and Saxon was about to make a run for it, when he looked up and saw that leathery face, toothy grin and bolting blue eyes for the first time.

“You!”

Chapter Twelve

Into the Smoke

The clowder of cats plunged down the dusty path, ducking through holes in wire mesh and pushing through the gaps in the wooden fences.

“There are lots of legged clouds in this field,” said Sir Paws, “They’re mostly harmless, but don’t startle them; they could squash you easily.”

Legged clouds? Tom looked across the field. *Sheep*. He nearly pointed out the animal’s proper name to Sir Paws, but pulled back from edge just in time. The last thing he needed was to draw suspicion. They padded on, crossing a desolate road and coming to the edge of a vast river of tarmac: the dual carriageway. Tips tip-toed to the edge, his ears swivelling left and right as cars raced back and forth. Tom had to sink his claws into the grass to stop himself lifting off whenever a car rushed past.

“Too many Rumlbers to cross over the top safely,” Tips reported to Odd-Eye, “Looks like we’ll have to go underneath.”

This brought many groans and ‘oh no’s from everyone. Even Odd-Eye’s face fell.

“Well, I guess we have no choice,” she sighed, “Lead the way, Sir Paws.”

They fell back into rank and marched alongside the road, hidden in a gorse-covered ditch. Tom wondered how they planned to pass under this road: there were no bridges on the dual carriageway until Flehmen’s Junction, and that was some distance away even from a human’s point of view.

The ditch dipped down further, and the road rose higher, muffling the roar of a passing lorry. They stopped short at a sewage pipe, where a trickle of thick, murky water ran into a puddle flooding the entrance. Even from a distance Tom could smell it, and to say he had to fight back the urge to bring up his breakfast was about as polite he could put it.

The cats looked at the pipe with equal disgust, then set about spraying the trees.

Flushing with embarrassment, Tom looked away.

“What’s wrong, Tick?” asked Malt.

“Erm...nothing,” he said, not daring to look up, then, feeling as though he needed to say more, added, “What are you guys doing?”

“Ah, of course, you wouldn’t know yet,” said Tips, “Well, this big Rumblepath marks the boundary between Smoky and Cobby territory, and this pipe is one of the main paths between the two. We’re just refreshing the territory markers. You know, so those sneaky Smokies don’t get any ideas.”

“I see,” Tom mumbled, and after catching meaningful glances from Puzzle, said, “Do...do you want me to do the same?”

“Best not, young Smalltail,” said Odd-Eye, “You’re starting to get the Cobby scent, but you’re not fully there yet, and we don’t want to confuse the borders. Smoky Clan will take any excuse to expand their territory.”

“Oh, okay,” Tom nodded, fighting back the urge to look relieved. One by one, the cats screwed up their noses and ducked inside the

pipe. Tom filed in between Malt and Puzzle, and spread his legs out to trot along the sides of the pipe, to avoid wading in the acrid sewage. Now and then the whole pipe quaked as a car roared by overhead.

They emerged onto the other side, blinking in the pale sunlight. Tom drew back his lips, welcoming in fresh air – only to choke it back. A new stench hit his nostrils this time: it smelled plasticity and artificial, with a tinge of sour milk to it that made Tom’s blood run cold with icy familiarity.

“Smoky Clan border markers,” Sir Paws sneered, ushering them all deeper into the thin, spiny trees and bushes and away from the smell. When they were hidden under a rosebush, Odd-Eye turned to face them.

“From here on in, we must be fully alert,” she said calmly, “There’s still quite a way to go to their headquarters, and we’ll be challenged by any cat we meet from now on. Stay close, stay quiet, and let me do the talking unless you are addressed specifically. Is that clear?”

The cats nodded, and Sir Paws stepped forward.

“Odd-Eye, may I suggest we roll about in the dirt a bit?” he rasped, pointing a gnarled paw towards the gloopy footpath nearby, “It will hide our scent, and may make us less noticeable to the enemy.”

“They’re not our enemies, Sir Paws,” Odd-Eye pointed out, “But you make a good point: we’ll be able to move around with less hassle.”

Without another word, Odd-Eye bounded out of the bush and rolled around in the clay-like mud. Within seconds here fur had turned from a snowy white to a red-brown brick colour. As Tom and the others launched into the mud to do the same, he had to admit it: Odd-Eye seemed a bit aloof, but she wasn’t afraid to get her paws dirty for her Clan – literally.

With a silent flick of her filthed-up tail, Odd-Eye led the cats pattering up the path. The small, ill-looking trees and bushes quickly gave way to the dark and misty industrial estate. Freight containers loomed up around them, and belching silver chimneys cut eerie silhouettes

through the murk high above. It was a Sunday, Tom realised, so everywhere was silent and still, yet the mist shrouded everything and made shapes look stranger, bigger and scarier.

The cats stuck close to walls and enclosed alleys, avoiding open and exposed places. It seemed to be working: they'd been trekking through the maze of factories for what Tom guessed to be an hour, and hadn't seen another living thing, let alone another cat. Yet, as Sir Paws and Apples used their long claws to tear a shortcut open through a meshed fence, Tom couldn't help glancing over his shoulder. He couldn't shake the feeling they were being watched, and by more than one pair of eyes. Tom turned to whisper this to Puzzle, but she put her tail across her mouth and shook her head, then pushed him through the hole in the fence.

They emerged onto a path where the slabs were crooked and broken, with unruly weeds pushing through the cracks. Something nagged at the back of Tom's mind. When he turned to see the Tube station glowing at one end of the

alley, it hit him: he'd been here before! This was where he'd followed the path towards the Old Dairy. So, they were close. He looked up at the sign standing lopsided over the corrugated walls of the alley. Just two nights ago, the sign had led Tom Verbrisser down into the darkness, leading him towards his feline fate. Now it had returned to what it had said every other day: *'Flehmen's Junction: 1 mile'*. He shook his head in disbelief. The signs had seemed so real. Just what had Muezza done to him? What had been in that Cream of the Crop?

“Tick!”

The hiss in his ear made him almost leap out of the alleyway. It was Apples.

“Come on, Tick, we're falling behind,” she whispered, eyeing Tom with a frown on her furred brow. Tom lowered his hackles, and silently followed in her footsteps, catching up with the rest of the Cobbies in the loading bay.

It was emptier than it had been on that fateful night, made all the more obvious by his tiny size. The Old Dairy loomed up ahead, the

stench of sour milk wafting around him and sticking to the back of his throat.

“Well, there it is,” Odd-Eye whispered, nodding at the Old Dairy, “The Smoky Clan headquarters. Smell that scent of theirs? It’s strong. There must be a lot of them.”

So, the Old Dairy was also the Clan’s H.Q.? Now he thought about it, it seemed obvious, but that didn’t stop a creeping feeling crawl the wrong way up his fur.

“Be on your guard,” said Odd-Eye, “Fall into rank, and follow –”

“AAAAGH!”

A great weight slammed into Tom. He lurched forward, crashing through Sir Paws and rolling across the car park. Grey tarmac and grey sky whirled before him, before claws sunk into his chest and pinned him to the ground. His mind whirled, his attacker towering over him, hazy fangs bared.

“Screech!” Sir Paws bellowed, “Release our Clanmate this instant or feel the wrath of Cobby Clan!”

As Tom blinked away his daze, he got a better look at this Screech. He was an Abyssinian cat, much like Malt, but his face was skeletal, with huge bottle-green eyes and vast bat-like ears. He ripped his glare from Tom to look somewhere out of his sight.

“Bring it on, old timer!” Screech cackled. His voice was harsh and tough, like boots scuffing through gravel, “I’d take on all you soft Petters at once, but I don’t have to.”

“Why’s that?” Sir Paws was nearer, with many more paws padding closer.

“You’re as dumb as you look!” Screech sneered, “You’re standing outside our *headquarters*, and you’ve just *yelled* at the top of your voice! I couldn’t have alerted them better.”

He was right: with his ear pressed to the ground, Tom heard the patter of many paws pounding the pavement, racing towards them.

“Screech,” came a silky, slinky meow, “What’s going on? Who is that under your grasp? Ah...I see we have visitors.”

“Good morning, Tracktail,” came Odd-Eye’s calm but stiff reply, “I must speak with your Leader, Billow. It’s a matter of great importance.”

“What could a Cobby want to say that is important?” Screech peeled back his lips in a snarl, “Whatever you have to say to Billow you can say to us. Better yet, I’ll rip your words out of your throat and I’ll –”

“Silence, Screech.” Tracktail’s command was quiet but clear, and to Tom’s surprise Screech fell silent, though he sank his claws further into Tom’s fur in frustration. Tom squeaked in pain.

“Let the stray go,” Tracktail ordered him.

“He’s not a stray,” said Odd-Eye, “Tick is a Clanmate.”

“A Cobby?” Screech lowered his face to Tom’s and sniffed at his ears, making Tom tremble in fear, “He doesn’t smell like one. Is this how desperate your Clan has become?”

“Screech! Do as your Deputy says now!” Tracktail snapped.

Screech released Tom and swatted him aside like an old piece of prey. He landed at Puzzle's paws, and immediately felt a tongue swiping over his fur. Wincing in pain and embarrassment, Tom looked up. They were surrounded by cats. They were all shapes and sizes, but all had a look of hateful darkness in their eyes. The stench of sour milk and plastic made Tom's eyes water.

The cat Tom took to be Tracktail stepped forward. She was a leopard-like Bengal cat, with oily-black eyes and long legs. "This is poor form of you, Odd-Eye," she said smoothly, "Turning up at our headquarters unannounced is an invitation for hostility. You were lucky you were first spotted by a cat as benign as Screech."

Cold laughter shivered through the circle of Smoky cats, and Screech licked the blood from the tips of his claws, a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"My apologies, Tracktail," said Odd-Eye with a bow of her head, "But I'm sure we

remember what happened the last time we sent a runner ahead of a party.”

“Oh, yes!” a jet-black cat next to Tracktail chuckled, pawing at the collar of cat teeth around his neck, “How is Rosie these days? Pass on my thanks for the fangs.”

“Why you little –” Tips crouched down, ready to spring, “Come over and say that, Slick, you yellow-furred coward!”

Apples stood in front of Tips to calm him while Slick made jeering taunts, chinking the teeth around his neck.

“Enough!” Tracktail suggestively drew her tail across her neck, and the Smokies fell silent in a heartbeat, “I won’t have this Clan act like dogs in front of guests. Tips, is it? My apologies. Slick was duly punished for his act against Rosie. Weren’t you?”

“Yes, Deputy,” Slick bowed his head, and Tom spotted the many holes in his ears. Tom shuddered: this Clan punished violence with violence. No wonder they were this way; they knew nothing else. Even Tracktail, who seemed to be fairly smart and reasonable, gave him the

creeps somehow. Then her attention fell on him, and her eyes rounded. Tom shrunk back.

“You there,” she said, “Cobby Smalltail. What’s your name?”

“T...Tick. Um...how’s the prey?”

Ignoring his question, Tracktail nodded, as though this answered something. Suddenly all Smoky eyes were on Tom, and whispering bounded back and forth through the circle. The mood shifted from intimidating to curious, though it barely felt any better: Tom could just about guess what was being said, and he prayed silently nobody said a thing. One false word giving Tom away could bring everything crashing down, and he’d be lucky to get out alive, let alone as a cat.

“Follow me,” said Tracktail, “All of you. Billow has been expecting you.”

Smoky cats closed in around the Cobbies, herding them roughly towards the Old Dairy. Tips, Malt and Apples threw occasional confused glances at Tom, wondering how Tom’s presence had brought about this sudden

swing in the Smokies. Puzzle stared dead ahead, ears flat.

They passed by the main doors and pushed their way through a mound of planks and old paint cans, revealing a whole in the wall. The Cobbies were pushed inside, into the cool, milk-reeking darkness of the Old Dairy. Once again everything seemed much bigger and scarier than Tom remembered, for more than one reason. The Smokies shoved them over to the centre of the factory floor.

They were at the foot of where two conveyor belts crossed. Perched on top of them was a crate loaded with empty milk bottles, organised into a glittering throne.

“Bow in the presence of Billow, the Smoky Clan Leader, greatest of all Clans!” Tracktail commanded. The surrounding crowd of Smoky cats meowed in celebration.

“I only bow to one Lead –” Sir Paws began, but Odd-Eye shook her head vigorously.

“Just do it,” she said stiffly, as though merely saying it was costing her a great deal. Amidst much muttering, the Cobbies bowed. When

Tom looked up again, the milk bottle throne was occupied by a huge, foggy-grey cat with flashing eyes of milky-whiteness. Her paws drooped luxuriously over the edge of her throne, revealing long, thin claws.

“I am Billow,” she announced, her voice cracking and breaking through layers of dust, “And you, Odd-Eye, are trespassing. Explain yourselves.”

“I assumed I needed no explaining,” said Odd-Eye boldly, “Your Deputy just told me you expected us.”

“For different reasons,” said Billow, and with a flush of hot fear Tom saw her white eyes glint at him, “But we’ll come to that later.” She looked over the group of cats assembled before her, as though picking the juiciest bit of prey from a scrapstock pile. “You must have an urgent cause to risk come here with so many fine, strong Clanmates.”

“The risk affects us all, Billow,” Odd-Eye retorted, “I received a Scatterleaf prophecy. The first in a long time for any us.”

Billow’s eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

Odd-Eye explained the prophecy aloud, how a great monster thought gone had returned, and was in their midst, with plans to destroy all Clans. When she mentioned the monster, Billow's eyes gave Tom the briefest of glances, her lips curling with menace. Tom looked feverishly around: cats everywhere. Nowhere to run.

“Ah, but Odd-Eye, you admit yourself that this was a prophecy for the Cobbies!” Billow shook her head in disappointment, “The prophecy may make reference to all Clans, but that doesn't make it our burden. Why come to us – of all Clans, why turn to us for help?”

“I was getting to that, Billow,” said Odd-Eye. She stayed cool and collected, though Tom could sense her patience fraying from being treated like a silly kitten by Billow. Was the Smoky Clan Leader winding her up on purpose, hoping for an excuse for a fight? Regardless, Odd-Eye recounted how the leaves blew up into the Smoky Clan tree, translating into seeking their advice.

“So, here we are,” said Odd-Eye, keeling down and tucking her paws under her chest, “We’re not sure whether it means you know something about the monster, who it is, or dare I say it, whether he is one of your Clanmates. Care to shed some light on the subject?”

Furious whispers ran back and forth through the crowd of Smoky cats, tinged with outrage that the Cobby Leader would dare suggest one of their own were a monster. Billow, however, didn’t seem upset. On the contrary, she looked ready to burst into laughter.

“Oh, but Odd-Eye, monster is such a strong word!” Billow sneered, “You do not understand his plans. He won’t destroy us: he will unite us, all under the mighty banner of Smoky Clan!”

Tom frowned. Whoever Billow was on about, it wasn’t him.

“What?” Sir Paws growled, padding forward but pushed back by two vast cats, “Billow, talk sense: this was a *prophecy*. They never lie: last time one was defied, the strongest cat the Clans have ever seen was killed. This monster *will*

destroy the clans, Billow! Who is he? How do you know him?"

Billow roared with laughter, and her Clan echoed her mirth, "But my dear Cobby deputy, you have just mentioned him! The very cat who defied our ancient Scatterleaf signs survived, and he is leading his Clan, our Clan, on to greater things."

A deadly silence fell over the Cobbies. Sir Paws shrunk away. "You can't mean..."

"Yes," Billow leered at the Cobbies, "Your 'monster', our visionary, is Muezza, former leader of Smoky Clan."

Tom felt the floor open beneath him. No! It couldn't be! This is impossible! The sound of his fellow Cobbies' meows of anger and disbelief was a dull roar in Tom's ears, until Billow's harsh voice cracked through.

"Yes, Cobbies, it is true! That mighty cat you all feared, hated and respected lives on! And that's not all."

The Cobby Cats fell silent, eyes fixed on Billow in terror and fury. Tom staggered

slightly on his four legs. What more could there possibly be on top of this?

“Yes,” said Billow, “Muezza continues to lead Smoky Clan to greater heights, but he has an accomplice working on the inside, planning a swifter demise of the other Clans. Isn’t that right, Tick?”

Hundreds of cat eyes swung around to glare at him. The look in the eyes of his Clanmates, even from Puzzle, made Tom wish Muezza had finished him off when he’d had the chance.

Chapter Thirteen

Fallout

Tips was the first to step forward. His eyes shined with sorrow.

“Tick?” he said slowly, “Is...is it true?”

“What?” Tom frowned, “No! She’s lying! I mean, I knew Muezza before, but –”

“You did?” Odd-Eye padded forward now, her eyes cold, “Why did you not mention this before?”

Tom cursed inwardly. Why had he said that? The shock that these cats not only knew Muezza, but feared him and presumed him dead, but had returned to lead the Smoky cats against all else – and they presumed he was a *cat!* Was he? He didn’t know what to believe anymore – it had all shaken him to the core. Everything was falling to pieces, and this time Puzzle wasn’t rushing forward to save him. He scrambled for gather himself.

“Well, I didn’t think I needed to,” Tom ventured; that was half true at least. “I mean, how did I know this Muezza guy was so important to you?”

“Liar!” Tracktail spat, leaping up to sit at her Leader’s side, “Every cat, from barely-seeing kitten to the wisest Elder, knows the legend of Muezza as surely as they breathe. And you are clearly working with him: we can all smell that tinge of human on him. And is it coincidence that all this comes to the Cobbies the moment *Tick* joins?”

Tom felt white hot fear trickle down his spine at the way she said *Tick*, the way it dripped with sarcasm. Yet...at the same time, something about what the Smoky deputy had said irked him. What was it?

“How did you know *Tick* had only just joined us?” Malt demanded.

“Simple,” said Billow, “He was here. He was in this very building, with Muezza, discussing how to best get into your Clan. It was all planned: infiltrating Cobby Clan, earning your trust, then destroying you from the

inside. All to make Muezza's takeover easier. We've been very pleased with your work so far, *Tick*."

"It's not true!" At last Puzzle rushed to Tom's defence, standing over him and glaring up at Billow, "I've been his mentor all this time, and I've barely let him out of my sight. Tick is a good cat; he can barely catch his own prey, let alone harm another cat!"

The Cobbies nodded in shy agreement.

"You haven't a shred of evidence, Billow!" Puzzle went on, "All you're giving us is your word, and to be honest, that isn't much to go on."

The Smoky cats hissed in anger, flexing their claws. The other Cobby cats winced and reeled at Puzzle's daring. Billow, however, looked at the Toyger cat with cool, thoughtful eyes. She chinked the milk glasses of her throne, and her Clan obediently fell silent.

"Puzzle, isn't it?" she said, "Ah yes, I've heard much about you. I find it ironic that you stand over the traitor to your Clan, demanding

evidence, when you are the biggest piece of evidence of the lot.”

Puzzle reeled, her ears swivelling downwards. Tom could feel her legs shaking. Billow turned her attention to Odd-Eye, Sir Paws and the other Cobbies.

“You say you mentored him. Don’t any of you find it odd that out of all the cats in your Clan, only one cat knew who Tick before he appeared out of nowhere?” Billow said slowly, “And isn’t it strange how that one cat is the Petter of every Cobby cats most hated human?”

Tom closed his eyes, ready for the hammer to fall.

“Enough with the riddles, Billow,” Odd-Eye snapped, “What are you trying to say?”

“Do I have to spell it out?” Billow shook her head in disbelief, “Very well. Tick is T –”

BANG!

Cats scattered in all directions as a window behind them smashed. A cat bashed into Puzzle, who in turn knocked into Tom and sent him sliding across the dairy floor.

BANG! Another window shattered, and a black cylinder spun through the air and slid past Tom. It belched vast plumes of smoke into the air. *Smoke bombs*, Tom thought as he scrambled away from it – only to see another cloud of smoke rushing towards him, cats pelting feverishly in all directions.

BANG! Another window broken, another smoke bomb. He had to get out of here, and run as far as his furry legs would carry. But where to? Who was friend or foe? He swung around, leaping aside as a couple of huge cats barrelled past. But the floor was smooth, and he slipped and slid through the smoke.

“Puzzle!” he yelled, clambering to his paws as cats brushed past, jostling him to and fro, “Puzzle, where are you?”

He thought he heard some cat shout his name, but was it Puzzle?

“Malt? Is that you?” he looked wildly around, peering through the grey smog, seeing nothing but dull cat shapes flittering by, “Tips?”

Tom turned and leapt up onto the nearby conveyor belt, next to Billow’s abandoned

throne. He hoped to get a better view from here, but it only seemed worse: the smoke was much thicker up here, and he could barely see his own paws. He was about to leap down, when a shape moving through the smoke caught his eye.

“Puzzle?” he called, but no, it couldn’t be. It was much too big for that. It was roughly human shaped, and heading straight for him...

Tom’s heart pitted in his stomach. Yes, things had definitely taken a turn for the worst.

Muezza strode through the murk, and as he drew near, Tom could see he was wearing some sort of visor over his eyes – smoke goggles. He was also wearing expensive looking leather gloves and held a long knife in one hand. Tom shrieked, and turned to run, but Muezza dived forward over the conveyor belt and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. Tom was whirled round to look into that ugly, leathery face. His bolting blue eyes shone through the goggles and smoke.

“Well, well, well,” Muezza chuckled, “How the mighty have fallen. Enjoying your time as a cat, Master Verbrisser?”

Tom hurled a whirlwind of curses at him. “You...you...turn me back into a human now! Come on, you coward, we’ll fight this out fairly.”

“Oh, but we *are* fighting fairly, Tom,” said Muezza, and Tom realised with a jolt that Muezza had understood what he’d said, “Go ahead, use anything at your disposal! So will I.” The knife glinted in his hand.

“You’re insane, Muezza!” Tom gasped, “You’ve turned me into a *cat* and now you’re going to kill me? Just for my Dad’s business?”

Muezza roared with laughter, “Poor little Tom, this isn’t just *business*! The picture is far bigger than you could imagine, but I guess you’ll never live to find out. Goodbye, Tom Verbrisser.”

He raised the dagger high into the smoke. Tom winced, waiting for the strike – then came a whirring noise. He opened his eyes. The conveyor belt had groaned into life, rushing past under Tom’s tail. Muezza, who had been leaning on it, roared in anger as he toppled over, dropping Tom on the floor. The belt dragged

Muezza away, out of sight, and with a clatter and crash, Tom heard a muffled roar of pain.

“Tom!” At the sound of his own name being called, he whipped around. It was Puzzle, leaping down from the nearby control deck.

“Puzzle!” Tom gasped, rushing forward. Relief tingled through his blood at the sight of the Toyger cat, “Was that you?”

“Yep,” she coughed up a lungful of smoke, “You were lucky the controls seemed obvious and the pull-thingy wasn’t too rusty, otherwise you’d be dead right now.”

Tom nuzzled up to Puzzle, feeling a huge wave of gratefulness wash over him. Yet again, his pet cat had saved his life. How could he ever repay her? No amount of luxury pet food would be enough.

Puzzle gave him one quick lick between the ears. “Come on,” she said gruffly, “It’s only brought us a bit of time; Let’s get out of here.”

“Right,” Tom obeyed, and he followed Puzzle through the smoke, trusting her completely to lead them out of this place. After wandering aimlessly through the smoke for

what must have been only a minute but felt like hours, though, it was clear that Puzzle was as lost as he was.

“This is useless,” said Puzzle as they passed the same shard of glass for the third time, “This smoke’s stinging my eyes, I can’t – Aaack!”

She hissed as three shapes burst out of the smoke. It was Screech and Slick, accompanied by a mountain of a ragamuffin cat.

“Look, guys, it’s the traitor and his friend,” Screech broke into a sinister smile, “What say we teach them a lesson the Smoky Clan way?”

Slick jangled his teeth-collar, cackling in agreement. “How about you, Brick?”

The huge cat called Brick nodded in stoic silence, licking his lips. Puzzle steadied herself, ready to take on all three of them. Tom reluctantly did the same, when Slick, Brick and Screech looked beyond them, eyes wide in terror. Tom wheeled around. Muezza was charging through the smoke, knife glinting in his grip. He lunged at Tom, who leapt aside – too late! The knife sliced at his back leg. He

yelped and staggered away, crashing into a pile of milk bottles.

“You can’t run forever, Tom!” Muezza roared, “I’ll get – wait, don’t you – *get back here!*”

Something clamped around Tom’s neck. He struggled madly to free himself, until he heard Puzzle growl through a mouthful of his fur:

“It’s me! Stay quiet, we’re getting out of here.”

With Tom clamped tightly in Puzzle’s jaws they bolted, the wind seeming to carry her paws forward, while Muezza’s taunts echoed away behind them. At last they came to a wall. Puzzle paced along it, looking for an exit – what they found first was another Smoky Clan cat. Puzzle dropped Tom to the floor, and spat and hissed at the cat, but the Smoky cat merely raised an urgent paw.

“Wait!” she whispered, “I’m not your enemy. My name is Pipes, a Bigtail for Smoky Clan. I’m here to help you out of here.”

“Oh, is that so?” Puzzle’s fur slowly flattened, though she kept her battle stance, “How can we trust you?”

“I can’t explain now,” Pipes looked nervous, knowing she was putting herself in as much danger as Puzzle and Tom were in, “But...look, Puzzle, when you rescued Tom here from the railroad, didn’t you notice how he had an extra-strong Smoky Clan scent?”

Puzzle’s eyes narrowed, then widened. “Was that you?”

Pipes nodded. “I smelled you were near. I left my scent near the border so you would investigate.”

“Why? Aren’t you all in league with Muezza?” Tom looked up at the slender Sosoke cat, and with a jolt added, “And how do you know my real name?”

“No. And I’ll explain later,” Pipes whispered, her eyes darting around, “But can you *please* follow me? We need to get out of here before your friend shows up.”

“And *your* friends too,” Tom added bitterly. He turned to Puzzle, “What do you think, should we trust her?”

Footsteps were clunking across the floor towards them. “We don’t have a choice,” she sighed, “All right, Pipes. Lead the way.”

Pipes turned and scampered up a tower of stacked boxes. Tom sized up the first jump, ready to leap, but –

“You’re not doing any jumping with that leg of yours,” Puzzle snorted, and before he could protest, Tom was once again fastened in Puzzle’s teeth. She launched nimbly upwards, one box after the other. Tom had to catch his breath between each of her powerful leaps. The smoke thinned, and pale daylight streamed in from somewhere overhead. Puzzle jumped up to the final box, and they were stood at the brink of a window high above the ground overlooking the loading bay. Down below, cats were streaming from the Old Dairy in all directions. Pipes nudged the window open and leapt onto a nearby truck. Puzzle followed her, and together they navigated their way down to the ground.

Puzzle laid Tom on the floor again, and blinking the hot, stinging smoke from his eyes he proceeded to lick the wound on his hind leg. The sharp sting was starting to dull, but when he tried to place weight on it, a sent a spasm of fiery pain up his spine in protest.

Pipes looked from behind the wheels of the truck, across the car park. Distant fleeing paws still pattered the ground like rain.

“Everyone’s still in a panic,” she reported back to them, “They may not pay attention to us, but its best not to risk it. Maybe we should head south, for the trees on our border – no Smoky Clan likes to go there, even as a refuge.”

Tom wasn’t so keen on the plan: how could they be sure Pipes wasn’t leading them straight into a trap? But Puzzle seemed to be more willing to trust the fellow Bigtail, even if she was a Smoky, and Tom had to admit it, there was something about this cat that was a bit different. Well, she was the first Smoky cat who hadn’t tried to throttle him yet.

“All right, let’s go,” Tom got gingerly to his paws, “Lead the way.” But Puzzle put a paw in front of him, blocking his way.

“You’re not walking a pawstep!” she said, a hint of amusement in her voice, “Not on that leg!”

“I’m not going to be carried again!” Tom protested, staggering and collapsing on his weak leg, “It’s...it’s...”

“Embarrassing?” Puzzle added, “Tough. Better to be wisely embarrassed than to be proud and stupid.”

Still sulking, Puzzle once more picked Tom up in her teeth like he was a tiny kit, and she and Pipes slinked stealthily away from the chaos of the Old Dairy, weaving through the gnarled chicken wire and oily backstreets of the factory labyrinth. Gradually the noise fell away behind them, and they relaxed, finally coming to a stop when they reached the safety of the trees. Tom could hear the reassuring rumble of Rumlbers – no, wait; cars – rushing by on the nearby dual carriageway.

The coast seemed clear. As Pipes had said, no Smoky Clan cats had headed this way, but neither had any of the Cobbies. His heart sank as he thought of them. Were they all okay? Had they escaped the attack, or had Muezza or some other bloodthirsty Smoky cat got to them first? He'd hoped to meet up with them after, explain everything to them, come clean: he was *not* their enemy. Dare he say it, beyond his own mission to return to being human, he wanted to help them too. But would they believe him? Would they ever trust Tom Verbrisser, the Nestbreaker? As Puzzle lowered him into the mud, he caught a reflection of himself in a brown puddle, and he hung his head in shame, his whiskers rippling the surface.

“So,” said Puzzle crisply, “Tell us, Pipes. Why are you defying your Leader?”

Pipes drew herself up, puffing her chest out with pride.

“Make no mistake, Cobby Bigtail, I am faithful to my Clan,” she declared, “But that’s precisely why I’m doing this. Billow may think Muezza is leading Smoky Clan on to better

things, but...I don't know. Something doesn't smell right."

"Isn't that obvious?" Puzzle snorted, "The guy just attacked your headquarters!"

Something about Puzzle's words irked Tom, but he couldn't quite pin down what it was. Pipes shrugged.

"He'll probably just explain it away to Billow, say he was trying to get to Tom and the Cobbies." said Pipes, "Honestly, Billow wouldn't mind tearing half of our territory down if it meant taking another Clan down with it."

"So you don't trust Muezza's word to lead your Clan to greatness," said Puzzle, "Fine, but why save us?"

"I was here, the night Tom turned up in the Old Dairy as a human," said Pipes, shuddering at the memory, "Muezza had told us to expect him, that he'd be leading him straight into our headquarters. We've seen the process a few times before, when he turns someone into a cat, but I've never seen him so riled up, Tom. I figured you were standing in his way of something."

“I am – well, *was*,” said Tom, but before he could explain, Pipes rushed on.

“When Tom was turned into a cat, Muezza said we could either keep him as a Clan Cat – his memory would be too ravaged to remember being human, he said – or kill him. No offense, Tom, but you’re a bit of a runty cat. Not good enough for Smoky Clan, Billow declared, and she had you sent off to be crushed by the BigMetalSnake.

“I saved you, flagging up my scent on the border so Puzzle would come looking, because if Muezza is that so worried about you that he turns you into a cat, wants you killed and comes crashing into the Smoky headquarters to personally to finish the job, you must pose some sort of threat to him. Tom, you may be the only one capable of stopping him destroying the Clans.”

Tom couldn’t help it: questions rolled from his tongue in quick succession.

“How did Muezza turn me into a cat? Can it be reversed? How many has he done it to before? Is Muezza a cat or a human? What’s

Muezza's plan? Why does Billow think his plan to destroy every Clan will be to Smoky's benefit? Where —"

Pipes shushed him with a flick of her tail, her eyes wide with panic.

"I've said too much," she said, "And I smell Clanmates approaching, searching for you. Look, I don't have all the answers, but the wise old cats in Leafy Clan will be able to tell you everything. Head there, I'll try to stall the search parties. Now go. GO!"

Before Tom could mew a protest, he was once again pulled into the air by Puzzle's teeth, and off they swept through the undergrowth, swift and silent.

"The Leafy border is some distance away," Puzzle growled through gritted teeth, "Leafy cats won't be best pleased to see us trespassing on their land, but I'd rather take my chances with a Leafy Clan cat over a Smoky any day."

They reached the edge of the dual carriageway, where another ooze-belching pipe offered a route through.

“The Rumblepath should slow Muezza down a bit if he’s chasing us,” Puzzle said as once more the stinking darkness swallowed them, “He’s human, so his size will make him harder to move around.”

The nagging at the back of Tom’s head suddenly unravelled itself, and an all-too-obvious question that should have occurred to him much earlier finally came clear:

“Puzzle? Tracktail said that every cat knows who Muezza is. Why didn’t you recognise his name the first time I mentioned him to you? We spoke about him back at my house, remember?”

They emerged blinking into the daylight, and Puzzle gently lowered Tom into the ground. Tom looked up into his pet’s face; she looked confused.

“Who?”

Tom looked up at Puzzle. He frowned. “Muezza, Puzzle.”

“Oh, right, him.” She seemed absentminded all of a sudden. *That’s so unlike her...* “I don’t...know,” Puzzle said slowly, as though realising this for the first time herself, “I’ve

heard stories about Muezza from the day I first joined the Cobbies, terrible stories. But...the *name* didn't stick in my head for some reason. Still doesn't. Every other cat seemed to use his name to scare their kits into doing chores, but me, I just found the name – what was it, Muezza? – just plain forgettable, and every time I heard his name uttered, it would soon slip away again, like prey made of water.”

Tom looked carefully at Puzzle. He would've assumed she was lying, hiding something, if she didn't look so openly dumbfounded. Something very strange was going on.

“That human...” Puzzle said, eyes reflecting the sky, “I could understand him. Was...was that him?”

Tick's ears flicked. He nodded.

Puzzle gave a long, strained blink. “I see. That won't be difficult to remember. Muezza the human.”

Distant caterwauls from the other side of the road snapped them out of their thought.

“We should get moving,” Puzzle said, “Aim to get to Leafy headquarters by sunset. Let’s just hope we can get some answers from them.”

“But what about the others?” Tom looked over his shoulder as Puzzle picked him up, “Will Odd-Eye, Sir Paws and the others be okay?”

Puzzle gave a small laugh.

“They’re Cobbies,” she said as they headed south, back into the web of houses, “The hardiest Clan of the lot. Not even a mad human can stop us: you of all people should know that!”

Puzzle laughed through her mouthful of Tom’s scruff, making his fur shudder. Tom only wished he could join in. He hoped against hope they were alive, but if so, what did they think of him now?

“Puzzle?” he asked after a long silence, “Do...do you believe me? That I’m not working with Muezza?”

She laughed again, giving Tom a playful swat over the ear, “Of course I do. I mean, for

one thing, why would Screech, Slick and Brick attack you if you were in league with them?”

“Good point.”

“But that’s not the main thing. You’re my friend, Tom, and I trust you. Simple as that. Ah, here we are. This little copse has lots of mice in the undergrowth, can you hear them, snuffling away? Come on, let’s hunt a midday meal.”

Chapter Fourteen

Trust

Odd-Eye crashed through a bush, rolled blindly through the leaves and out of sight. Sir Paws staggered ungainly behind her.

“Odd-Eye!” he called, “Where are you? You okay?”

The Cobby Leader launched out from beneath the pile of leaves that had buried her, and spat out a few twigs.

“In a way, yes,” she said, looking calmly about her, “And in another way...well, if I had been expecting bad things from that meeting, I’d never have guessed it would’ve been *that* bad. Where is everyone? Did you see them escape?”

“Tips and Apples were fighting off Tracktail and a couple of others when I saw them,” said Sir Paws, “I think they escaped. I think I saw Malt helping a Smoky Cat out from under a pile

of milk bottles.” He tutted. “The nerve of that Smalltail!”

“She sees good in everything,” Odd-Eye said approvingly, “There is darkness clouding Smoky’s eyes and hearts but not every one of them are as bad as Screech or Billow. Pipes ran into me on the way out. She told me she’d make sure Puzzle and Tick were taken to safety.”

“And you trust her?” Sir Paws didn’t try to hide the disbelief in his voice.

“Completely,” Odd-Eye nodded with finality, “She’s by far the most good-natured of all cats in Smoky Clan. She’s the reason Fuzzy still lives, remember?”

Sir Paws grunted, but before he could say any more, the bushes behind them exploded. Odd-Eye and Sir Paws launched back, claws raised. Two cats emerged: Tips and Apples.

“Thank goodness we found you!” Apples gasped, “We thought —”

“Sssh!” Sir Paws hissed, “You could attract Smoky attention with that racket! And you

Midtails should know better than to sneak up on your superiors!”

Apples didn't apologise: her hackles raised, and he spat back: “Well, excuse me! I'm finding it hard to stick to the Code when everything else is being turned on it's head.”

Odd-Eye stepped between them.

“Now that's enough,” she said firmly, “We're all under a lot of strain at the moment, and bickering isn't going to help.”

Sir Paws and Apples avoided each other's gazes and muttered apologies. Odd-Eye looked around.

“Where's Malt?”

Tips looked around the clearing. “We thought she was with you,” he said, his voice tense, “Apples and I did a quick scout around the Dairy but didn't see her, so we thought she got away.”

A cloud of terror descended over the Cobbies. Sir Paws and Odd-Eye exchanged dark looks. Tips stared fretfully at them.

“You...you don't think she's...”

“Dead? No,” Odd-Eye shook her head fervently, her eyes closed and giving a silent prayer that she was right, “Smoky Clan are savages and torturers, but they’re yet to descend to the level of murderers...not in this generation, anyway. Most likely she’ll be captured, used as ransom against us.”

“But what about that human?” Apples shuddered at the memory of the towering figure in the layer of white fur, blade in hand, “What if he got to her?”

“I don’t know who he was or why he was there, but whatever he was doing there he looked as if he had a purpose. Whatever that was, I doubt it was to do with Malt.”

Apples looked satisfied at her Leader’s reasoning, but still Tips looked troubled.

“Where are Tick and Puzzle? Did they get captured too?”

“They’ve been escorted out of Smoky territory by a friend,” said Odd-Eye, “They’re not coming here, but rest assured they’re safe.”

“It’s not Tick I’m worried about,” Apples sneered, a hint of hurt in her mew, “That

traitor...he can be flung to the foxes for all I care!”

“Oh?” Odd-Eye blinked at Apples in surprise, “And would a traitor risk his life to save one of those he wishes to betray, Apples?”

Apples reeled, as though Odd-Eye had shouted the words. “Well...no, I guess not. I’m sorry – I...I didn’t want to believe it.”

“You shouldn’t,” Odd-Eye muzzled the dusty Midtail affectionately, “But don’t feel ashamed for being fooled. Smoky Clan is a dark place, and Billow has a silver tongue. Think about it: she rallies the whole of Smoky Clan into praising the apparent return of Muezza and all the greatness he’ll bring them, and in the same breath make the Smokies hate Tick for helping him. Manipulation. Billow thrives in it. She could make you believe the moon was made of milk if she wanted.”

“It isn’t?” Tips sounded genuinely disappointed. Sir Paws shook his head, a rare smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

“You should trust in your friends,” Odd-Eye said to the Cobbies, “Trust breeds truth. Tick

may hide many secrets, but I don't think he does so for any dark reason. He and Puzzle are following their own path now. We must believe in them to do what is right."

"They won't be meeting up with us?" Tips sounded crestfallen.

"Not now," said Odd-Eye, "But we'll see them again soon. Meanwhile, we must focus on what is happening to us, here and now. Gather around."

The four cats gathered in a huddle.

"So, Muezza is back in town, is he?" Sir Paws murmured thoughtfully, "And helping Smoky Clan. He can't be far from here."

"Muezza..." Apples shuddered again, "All those stories...they gave me nightmares. I didn't think he was this monster from the Scatterleaf prophecy."

"Not even I saw that coming," Odd-Eye admitted, "But it's no surprise that Billow thinks Muezza will bring her Clan to greatness: Muezza was Smoky Clan leader when she was just a kit. She must see him as some kind of hero."

“He’s going to destroy all the Clans, isn’t he?” Tips trembled, “What does he want? Revenge?”

“I don’t know,” Odd-Eye shrugged, “But we must plan and prepare for the worst. Tips: you must return to Cobby Headquarters. Alert the Clan, have the fittest runners send word to the nests to fortify the defences and alert the strongest cats.”

“Got it.”

“Apples: your dusty fur and stealth skills will work well for spying. Sneak around Smoky Clan for a while. Try and find Malt, and gather some information about Muezza’s plans if you can, but *don’t* try anything drastic on your own – if you sniff danger or need help head straight back to Headquarters.”

“Yes, Odd-Eye.”

“Sir Paws and I are going to head to City Clan,” Odd-Eye explained, “Spread the word of Muezza’s return, and put them on alert.”

As they were about to head their separate ways, Tips turned back after a quick afterthought.

“Odd-Eye? What does Muezza look like?”

Odd-Eye turned back to face him, her eyes so hooded with darkness they almost looked the same colour.

“Believe me, when you see him, you’ll know it’s him.”

The Cobbies separated, each looking over their shoulders.

* * *

Pipes snuck back into the Old Dairy unnoticed, skirting around the shadows of the darkest recesses before approaching the centre to make it look like she’d returned from the same way everyone else had fled.

Cats were slowly filtering back in, congregating around the human leaning casually against the milk bottle throne, where Billow was once more perched. They eyed the human with a range of emotions on their faces: fear, awe, confusion, respect...but they didn’t dare reveal hatred. Even if he had just ransacked their Headquarters and scared the Clan silly, nobody

would dare to hate Muezza. Only Billow wielded enough power to seem slightly peeved.

“You could’ve warned us, Muezza,” she growled, “At least then we’d have known it was you.”

“How could I?” Muezza idly turned the knife in his hand, then flicked it shut and pocketed it, “I didn’t know either, until I caught wind that Tom had somehow survived. So I paid the Cobby barn a visit to say hi. It was hardly planned.”

As if Pipes found the idea of a human talking their language odd enough, it was even more bizarre when she reminded herself that this human was Muezza, a former Clan leader. Nobody here except Billow and Muezza himself knew how the mighty, terrifying cat of legends came to be this way.

“Even so, I would’ve expected you to be a bit more subtle,” Billow scolded him mildly, “Those windows kept us warm from the cold, and we’re going to be coughing that smoke up for days. Contrary to our name, we’re not that fond of the stuff.”

“My apologies, Billow,” Muezza bowed gracefully, “I’ll admit I became a little hot-headed and got carried away. I will have the windows replaced, don’t worry about that – somehow I don’t think the owner’s in a position to argue.” He allowed himself a small laugh, cold and heartless. Pipes felt a cold shudder wave from tail to nose. “Not that it’ll matter much in the grand scheme of things,” he went on, “Soon, my fellow Smokies, you will have the pick of the finest nests in London.”

Billow gave a long, luxurious blink and a satisfied purr, “True,” she meowed, “And I’ll admit it certainly worked to throw the Cobbies in disarray. Do you think they brought that story of Tom being a traitor?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Muezza scratched his stubbly chin, “But that seed of suspicion had always been there, I suspect.”

“We just gave it a good watering.” Billow nodded.

“Indeed, and that takes the heat off our actual spy. Isn’t that right, Saxon?”

A hundred cat's heads and twice as many ears swivelled to look at the cat that had just slunk out from behind Muezza, flanked by two younger, smaller cats. His appearance brought about many yowls of protest and flinging of cruel jibes, but Muezza silenced them all instantly with a glare.

“Now, now,” he chuckled, giving Saxon a stroke that looked more akin to a scratch, “Saxon may have disgraced the name of Smoky Clan in the past, but he's willing to make amends. When the time is right, he'll be perfectly placed to destroy the Cobbies.”

Saxon lowered his head. Whether he was bowing to Muezza or hanging his head in shame, Pipes couldn't be sure. Muezza seemed to pick up on this too, and he grabbed Saxon by the chin and pulled him up close to his face. Had any other human attempted that on a Clan cat, their hand would've been clawed open. With Muezza, though, Saxon went limp with fear, his eyes bulging.

“And you won’t fail us, will you?” Muezza growled, “Because if you do, there will be no other Clan to hide behind. No hiding from *me*.”

“Y-Yes, Muezza.”

Muezza dropped Saxon to the ground, and as he landed roughly on his pads he gasped for air. The cats around him backed away in shame and disgust. Muezza laughed.

“Let it not be said that Muezza is all take and no give!” he boomed, “In light of your renewed loyalty, Saxon, Billow has agreed to give Juniper and Holly their Tailing tonight!”

The young twins ears pricked up and Saxon’s face brightened, though Pipes couldn’t tell if they were genuinely happy or putting on a face. Saxon bowed his head.

“Thank you, Billow.”

“But first,” Muezza declared, “We must deal with our prisoner. Bring her over here, Brick.”

Brick, flanked by the swaggering forms of Screech and Slick, parted through the crowd, dragging a cat kicking and clawing for freedom. Pipes had to force her fur to remain flat: Malt!

Muezza hauled the Siamese cat up to his face. “Ah,” he licked his lips with relish, “Such a pretty young thing. Just goes to show that the nice ones don’t always get their way.”

“You...you filthy dung-eaters!” Malt squealed, yelling at the rest of the Clan, “After I stopped to help one of your own escape! Where is he? There!” Malt flailed a paw at a bruised cat in the crowd: Ratchet. “The second I pull him out of the rubble, what does he do? Thank me? Let me go? Ooh no, that’s just *far* too noble! He turns me straight over to flea-face there,” she lashed her tail in Screech’s direction, who snarled, “I always knew Smoky Clan were vicious, but I never thought they were dishonourable and backstabbing.”

Tracktail, who sat below Billow’s throne, winced, and she glared down at Ratchet, who bowed his head in shame. Pipes still respected Tracktail; she was as power-hungry and ambitious as the rest of them, but she at least kept to the Code, and hated to be seen as dishonourable.

“No, little Cobby, Ratchet did the right thing,” Muezza tightened his grip on her scruff, “Now we can find out what you know that may be of value to us.”

“I...I don’t know *anything!*” Malt’s voice went higher.

“That’s a shame,” Muezza said mournfully, reaching into his pocket and flicking open his knife, “Because I’d hate to tear open that pretty fur of yours and find your head was empty...”

Malt’s eyes bulged with terror at the sight of the blade, and scrambled feverishly in Muezza’s grip. Muezza slammed Malt down on the conveyor belt, knife to her neck.

“Where’s Tom?” Muezza roared, “Where is he going?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Malt cried, “Who’s Tom? Look, I just came here with my Clan to try to find out what the monster was – please, let me go! We must stop Muezza, he’s dangerous! How...” she paused, a sudden thought striking her, “How come I can understand you?”

“Because Muezza is dangerous *and* cunning, my dear,” Muezza snarled, “Those stories your mother told you about me when you were a kit? I’m much, much worse.”

Malt peered up at Muezza through narrowed eyes, as though her sight was failing her. Then they flew open.

“No...”

“Yes...” Muezza purred, “Now, my little Cobby – Malt, was it? – count your lucky stars, because I believe you; you don’t know where Tom is.”

Muezza released Malt from his grip, but she still lay on the belt, as though invisible chains bound her to it. Her eyes were clouded in confusion; clearly she had no idea that Tom was really Tick. Muezza didn’t read it like that; he smiled through cracked lips.

“Ah, so you understand,” Muezza nodded approvingly, “You’re not being let go: no, you’re too valuable. You’d make a good ransom against the Cobbies for a certain cat.”

In a sudden movement, he swept Malt off the belt like brushing dust from a table. She landed

amongst the Smokies, who immediately grabbed her before she could put up a fight.

“Lock her up in the old office,” Muezza commanded, “Have two cats stand guard at the door. Billow, have one of your best runners send word to Cobby Clan. Let them know we have one of theirs, and she’ll be released unharmed if they hand over that little black and white cat of theirs.”

Billow caught Pipes’ eye, and beckoned her forward with her tail.

“You monster!” Malt yelled as they hauled her towards a dark room in the corner of the Dairy, “You think we Cobbies are weak? That we’d hand over a cat just because you think you’ve got us backed in a corner? My Clanmates will come out fighting, and you know it!”

“Oh, I think fighting will be the last thing on their minds right now, isn’t that right, Saxon?”

Saxon shuddered, and gave a silent nod.

Every watched the Cobby prisoner as she disappeared, screaming, into the shadows. Nobody noticed the pair of eyes gleaming from

a skylight, before whisking away in a flurry of dusty fur.

* * *

Tips bounded up the hill as fast as his aching paws would let him. He slowed down as he rounded the top of the hill, wanting to savour the moment the familiar sight of the Cobby Headquarters came into view. When it did, however, he stopped dead. Something was very wrong. Distressed yowling met his ears on the breeze, and even from this distance he nearly gagged on the scent of fear....and *blood*.

He plunged through the farm fields and raced up to the barn. No cats stood guard. He lunged inside, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, a cold shard of ice pitted in his belly. Great swathes of hay were stained red, and cats were slumped about everywhere, licking their wounds while Sickkits leapt between them, their jaws full of herbs and flowers.

“Muffin!” Tips yelled as the Sickkit shuffled out of the nursery. He ran up to her, “Muffin, what happened?”

Her eyes shined with tears. The herbs in her mouth fluttered to the ground as her jaw quivered. She fell to the ground, paws over her eyes as she cried. Tips muzzled her and licked her wounds.

“It...it was *horrible!*” she yelled between sobs, “He just...he just came from nowhere and attacked us!”

“Who came? Who attacked you?”

Muffin unshielded her honey eyes, wide with terror as they looked into Tips’. He didn’t need to hear the answer.

“Muezza,” he sneered.

“Yes...he is the monster, Tips! But that’s not all,” she looked over her shoulders, as though expecting an attack to burst out at any second, “Tips...he’s not a cat anymore.”

“What?”

“He’s....he’s a human!”

Tips was about to protest, but he stopped. That human who burst into the Old Dairy; he

matched the description of the human who had been sneaking around their camps. Tips asked Muffins for a description, and sure enough, that matched too. He recalled the human yelling something in the Old Dairy and understanding it – it had been speaking cat! The ice shard in his stomach twisted and stabbed at his insides: Muezza really was a human, very much among them, and attacking them. *Just like the prophecy said.*

Questions erupted in his head, but now was not the time to be asking them.

“Muffin, what’s the damage? How many are dead?”

Muffin sniffed, and drew herself up resolutely, “None,” she reported, “Muezza dealt some serious injuries with that blade of his, but we’ve managed to save the worst affected. Luckily there are so many holes in this barn that there were plenty of escape routes, otherwise things could’ve been worse. Then the human who lives in the nest next door came out shouting, and Muezza made a run for it in his Rumbler.”

Tips felt the ice melt slightly, and he breathed a sigh of relief. *None died*, he told himself, *thank goodness*.

“I don’t think he did it to kill anyone anyway,” Muffin went on, “He said it was just a taster of things to come. Before he left, he told us that he’ll spare us if we hand over Tom.”

“Who?”

Muffin shrugged. “No idea. We don’t have a Tom in Cobby Clan, do we? We had a Tommy a few moons ago but he left with owners. I thought he mean Tom as in a tomcat.”

“Maybe,” Tips mumbled, “But...why now? What’s changed? Who –”

He caught Muffin’s eye, and the same thought shot through their minds.

“Tick,” they said together.

“Well, Tick is a tomcat, no doubt,” Muffin licked her blood-matted shoulder, “But what would that monster want with that sweet little kit?”

Tips said nothing. He recalled what Tick let slip at the meeting with Smoky Clan – he knew Muezza. How? Was Muezza his pet? He

remembered how Odd-Eye said Tick held dark secrets. This had to be one of them, and despite her wise words, he found his trust and friendship with the young Smalltail faltering; had he brought this great danger to the Clan?

“Where is Saxon?” he growled, looking wildly around, “He’s supposed to be in charge. Why isn’t he overseeing things? I need to report a message.”

Muffin’s face strained again. “He’s gone,” she said, “Holly and Juniper too. They went with Muezza to Smoky Clan.”

Chapter Fifteen

Pride and Power

They had only stopped for a short catnap in a coppice, and in those precious moments of rest, half-formed images of a dream chased each other around Tom's head...an old oak tree, many faces going from smiling to shocked, June, and three simple words:

'I own you.'

A sketch of a dream it may have been, but he knew it's meaning all too well. Tom Verbrisser's finest and worst hour.

The last flickers peeled away as something warm and wet ran across his face. It was Puzzle, licking him awake. Reality came crashing down upon him once more: he was no longer the endlessly ambitious prodigy Tom Verbrisser, reshaper of London. He was a runty scrap of a cat, called Tick by his own pet cat,

because he was small and annoying. June was long gone, and everything else he'd worked for hung in the balance, poised to come crashing down around him when Tuesday came or Muezza killed him, whichever came first. What had he done to deserve this?

“Wakey-wakey, furry-head,” Puzzle said brightly, as Tom blinked the sleep from his eyes, “I’ve brought us a snack.”

Tom looked down at the two sparrows at Puzzle’s paws. She tossed one to him as she dug into her own. As much as his cat instincts had taken over, and gotten used to the idea of eating freshly killed creatures, he longed for that full English breakfast he’d promised himself yesterday morning. With a mug of sweet tea...maybe some marmalade on toast as well, or a boiled egg with soldiers...he leaned down and tore off a mouthful of swallow. Every inch of him knew it was delicious, but still, that wasn’t the point.

“How long have we been asleep?” Tom asked between a mouthful.

Puzzle took a quick glance at the sun. “About an hour. I’ve just woken up myself; these two were begging to be caught.”

They were in a small patch of trees on a small field surrounded by towering concrete flats; Tom could see a branch bouncing above their head where claw marks were scored in the wood and feathers were snagged in the leaves. As Puzzle stretched and yawned, Tom looked at her. He realised that when he looked at her, he no longer saw his pet, who meowed when she wanted feeding or wanted attention he couldn’t give: he saw a friend, perhaps his only friend, who had saved him numerous times, looked after him, carried him when he was injured and fed him when he was hungry. Tom felt a dull ache across his chest, but it didn’t hurt; in fact he liked the feeling, like something creaky and underused deep inside him was taking a long, stirring stretch. What was it? Was it just sheer gratefulness? Or something else? Something...

Puzzle blinked, and caught Tom looking at her. Immediately he looked away, busying

himself with his sparrow as embarrassment flushed through his fur.

“You really should wash yourself, Tom,” she remarked, as she began licking her paws and running them over her fur, “You look as if you’ve been rolling in a puddle of oil.”

Tom looked over himself. It was true: the white patches of his fur were a dull grey, and his fur spiked together in greasy clumps that reeked like chip fat. His ears perked at the sound of trickling water nearby. Puzzle narrowed her eyes.

“And I mean properly washing yourself,” she said, reading his mind, “Not dunking yourself in some sogging river. I’m not having you reeking of frog spawn when we meet Leafy Clan.”

“You mean...*lick* myself clean?”

“It’s called grooming, but yes.”

“But –”

“But what? You’re not a real cat? Sorry, Tom, but you are. I don’t care that you were a human: it’s what you are right now that counts as far as I’m concerned.”

“Alright! Sheesh, fine...it’s just...I feel...”

“Stupid? Embarrassed?” Puzzle put in. She looked at him with hard golden eyes, then her expression softened, “Don’t be, Tom. That’s just pride getting in the way. Nobody’s going to judge you, especially me.”

Pride? Tom felt a deep nerve twang within him. The words were eerily familiar. Yes, he was ambitious, even ruthless, but he’d never consider himself uppity or above things. He was willing to get his hands dirty, but *lick* himself clean? No way! But...maybe that *was* pride? All cats did it, after all, and Puzzle was right, nobody would care less to see a cat washing itself; it was normal. Even if he wasn’t a cat really.

With a small sigh, he started licking his paws clean, the acrid-tasting dirt peeling off on his sandpapery tongue. With a small purr of approval, Puzzle continued grooming herself. Well, thought Tom as he swiped his tongue down his flanks, this part was easy. But he’d have to clean *everywhere*...this was silly! He could understand if Puzzle wanted him to play up the cat act in front of others, but Puzzle knew

who he was. Why did she seem so set on him trying to be more catlike when nobody else was watching?

His fur pricked as he leaned back to clean the more...awkward parts. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*; the word beat through Tom's head like a drum with every lick. Finally, he was done, and he stood up, the patches of white fur gleaming once more. A strange, warm prickle shivered through him, the kind that reminded him of when he'd come out of a scary rollercoaster or after finishing a speech to a crowd: now he'd done it once, he felt better, more comfortable. Not just with cleaning himself, but more at ease in general. Yes, he'd felt stupid doing it, but afterwards he could see it felt right, natural.

Puzzle blinked at him, her eyes dancing. Then she looked around, head raised, nostrils flaring.

"Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

"I think...yes, this way." Without another word, Puzzle bounded off, leaping through a bush and out of sight. Tom jumped after her,

giving a yelp as thorns clung to his fur. Puzzle trotted across the field, hopping lightly over the low fence and crossing the empty road, Tom blundering in her wake. They stepped into a cool, shaded alley, separating two neat lines of looming houses.

“Now do you smell it?”

Tom sniffed the air, but smelt nothing special. He shook his head.

“Why are you trying to use your nose?” Puzzle tilted her head, “Open your mouth; drink up the scents, Tom.”

“Huh?”

“Try it, you’ll see.”

Bewildered, Tom peeled back his lips, letting air rush through his teeth – and a stream of fragrances and odours rushed in. Alarmed, he gave a throaty cough.

“Didn’t expect that, did you?” Puzzle mewed with amusement, “So, what did you scent?”

“What did I *not* scent?” Tom licked his lips, the smells still lingering in his throat. He thought he could smell everything around him: the turkey dinner roasting in a nearby kitchen, a

freshly cut lawn, a smoking chimney, burning tyre rubber pasted onto the hot tarmac...but overlapping everything else was the sharp smell of stinging nettles and peeling bark.

“That’s the scent of Leafy Clan,” Puzzle explained when Tom pointed it out, “We’re at the border where our territory meets theirs, so we’ll need to renew the markings.”

Puzzle looked at him expectantly, and once again Tom felt those nervous pangs of shame rise up inside him – but this time he forced it down. *No*, he told himself, *so what if I feel stupid?* He remembered how he’d felt after cleaning himself, how he’d felt better afterwards; he was sure the same would happen again here. No point letting his pride get in the way all over again.

“Sure.” Tom nodded resolutely, and together the two Cobby Cats sprayed fresh territory markers on one side of the alley, the Leafy Clan markers on the other side. The sensation of feeling exposed and embarrassed were still simmering in his stomach, but he ignored it, and once again, when he and Puzzle were finished,

he felt right within himself, like he'd just melted a barrier that had stood in his mind for so long he no longer realised it was there. Once again was that warm glow, and it felt...well, *great*.

“Snap out it, dreamer,” Puzzle meowed, her eyes glinting with mischief, “We need to get going. Remember, constant vigilance in Leafy territory. They’re more reasonable than Smoky cats, but that doesn’t mean we’re welcome. Stay close.”

They plunged down the alley as it curled away to the left, heading down a hill. From up here, Tom could see Jacobsen Park – or at least what remained of it. The remaining trees were scattered across the wasteland, clinging desperately to life while garbage piled up around their trunks. Only the centre of the park, far in the distance, remained green and unspoilt, though Tom remembered that patch being much bigger only last year. He swallowed a lump in his throat. This was the place his father had invited Muezza and himself to lock horns over. Had he done it deliberately? Tom never knew his father owned this place. If he had, he

would've begged him to let him have it a long time ago. And now his Dad wanted him to redevelop it, with all the riches going to the grandest plan. He imagined the whole place laid flat under concrete and towers of glass, glowing under miles of neon and spotlights. Then he remembered what Jacobsen Park used to look like, and the idea made him sick.

“Ready?” Puzzle stepped forward, ready to speed down the hill into the Park. Tom took a step forward, but was caught up short when he spotted a second alley forking away to the right, leading the way back to his home. There, printed in dripping graffiti on the side of a bottle bank, were the words *Tom Verbrisser*. A smashed milk bottle lay underneath, the sour tang sticking in his throat and bringing back equally sour memories of the Cream of the Crop. The bitter poison still lingered in his veins, and somehow, Muezza still taunted him with it, reminding him just how far he'd fallen.

“Tom?” Puzzle called, “What is it?”

Puzzle frowned, looking the same way he looked. It occurred to Tom that she probably

couldn't see what he could, and even if she could, she wouldn't be able to read it. A dark wave of fear and anger threatened to sweep him away, when he saw a mouse scuttle from the shadows. In an instant, his worries receded, his concentration firmly on hunting. Using the techniques Puzzle and Malt taught him, he clamped down on the mouse with ease.

“Well done!” Puzzle meowed, tail held high, “Swift, quiet, efficient moves...it's all coming together nicely.”

“Thanks,” said Tom, setting the prey down between them. Puzzle used her long claws to carve up the prey into equal shares, and with their bellies full, they headed towards the Park. The little black-and-white cat didn't even glance back at his name.

On the long trek down the fenced in pathway, his mind wandered back to his fragmented dream, pulling with it the full memory of what happened that day, two years ago.

* * *

Tom and June sat under the oak tree, the leaves dappling the summer sun on their hands and faces. The bulk of the party lay a little way off in the clearing, shrouded in barbecue smoke, laughter, and all under a big banner declaring ‘Congratulations Leavers!’ Tom lazily chewed on a burger in one hand while holding June’s hand with the other.

“We should go join the rest of them,” June said, stifling a yawn.

“What’s the rush?” Tom said thickly through a mouthful of beef and bread, “The party goes on for ages.”

“It’s just...” June trailed off, and was silent for a long time. Finally, she finished, “This is the last time we’ll all be together in one place again.”

“We’ve still got the exams,” Tom pointed out.

“That’s not the same.”

Tom didn’t trust himself to answer honestly. He’d made some decent friends here at school, but frankly, he couldn’t wait to get shot of the place. Most of his year were off to the big local

college, June included, but Tom's future had been set for long time.

"I heard about your Mom," June said suddenly.

"Tom swallowed his mouthful. "Oh."

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"They still talking to each other?"

"A bit. Just sorting out who gets what, mostly."

June paused. Tom sensed her reluctance, but he already knew what her next question would be.

"Who're you going to live with?"

"I'm getting my own place."

"Photo for the happy couple?"

Tom looked up, shielding his eyes with his burger. A cheerful blonde boy was holding a camera up to his face.

"Hey Owen," Tom said brightly, relieved by the interruption, "Just a sec, I just need to make myself presentable." He stood up, helping June to her feet.

"You should've told me," she whispered.

“Why?”

June sighed. “Don’t you ever need anyone to talk to, Tom?” she asked wearily.

Tom brushed the crumbs from his shirt and wiped the flecks of grass off June’s arm, brushing her fine hair over her shoulder as he did so.

“It’s fine. Really,” he insisted, giving her his most winning smile, “Don’t worry about me.”

“Smile!”

Tom turned his smile towards the camera. As he blinked the flash from his eyes, Owen gave his thanks, promised to get them copies, and scampered away into the party. That’s when Tom saw *him*, huddled in his usual group, roaring and howling like gorillas: Daniel.

“He won’t bother us,” June said, sounding more hopeful than sure, “Not today. Who wants to cause trouble on their last day?”

Tom gave a nod of agreement, but deep inside him, something was bubbling up, fighting to break to the surface: *excitement*. After all the years of saving up, all the years of weathering Daniel’s taunts, he was finally ready. Ready to

put his doubters and haters in their place. Tom Verbrisser's finest hour.

He licked his lips. "I have a surprise for you," he said, "You're gonna love it."

June's eyes danced with mischief, and she gave him a light kiss on the cheek, "I'm awash with anticipation."

Tom forced down the urge to blush. "Right...well, let's go then," he cleared his throat, "Don't know about you, but I'm parched."

They delved into the milling throng of leavers. Tom passed deliberately close to Daniel. He could feel the bully's eyes burning on his neck. *Come on, Tom urged silently, come get me. Give me the excuse I need.*

June and Tom stepped into the cool shade of the food tent, and grabbed drinks and polystyrene plates of chips, and stepped back into the sunlight. They joined in idle conversation with a group: plans for the future, times gone by, staying in touch...Tom joined in, but his mind was elsewhere, waiting for his chance.

Finally, he saw Daniel step out of the food tent from the corner of his eye, chomping on a chunky slice of pizza. As he headed in their direction, Alicia landed a question on Tom; “What’re you doing after the exams?” *This is it. Now or never.*

“Short holiday in the Algarve first,” he said, loud and arrogant enough to catch Daniel’s attention, “Then I’m starting a proper full-time job at the London office of Verbrisser International. Not a moment too soon, if I’m frank: they need someone to run that place!”

“Still all the big talk for someone so small!” Daniel snapped in his ear. *Gotcha.*

“Listen to yourself, Verbrisser,” Daniel screwed up his face and put on a whiny, nasally voice that Tom was sure sounded nothing like him, “I’m Tom Verbrisser, everybody look at me! I’m so rich and powerful because Daddy gives me pocket money and I lick stamps at his office!” He dropped back into his usual growl. “Face it. Full-time job or not, Daddy’s still holding your hand.”

The crowd stepped back, ringing them in. The history between the two of them was well known, and Tom could sense them spoiling for one final showdown. *I won't disappoint.*

“You think so?” Tom said casually, looking at his fingernails.

“I know so.”

“I haven't been standing still these past few years, McCulloch,” Tom smiled, walking slowly within the human ring, “My Dad's moved on to bigger things, working abroad pretty much all the time now. The London branch is pretty much mine when I start next month.”

Daniel rolled his eyes, playing it up to the crowd, “Big deal,” he huffed, “The apprentice earns his stripes. You're still under your master.”

“Aren't you listening?” Tom drew out every word with relish, savouring the attention, almost shivering with the anticipation of delivering the hammer blow. He spotted June, flashed her a grin, and turned back to Daniel. “True, I've been working under my father's shadow, but it's still work, and he doesn't know all the work I

do. From my own ‘pocket money’ and leftover scraps of my budget, I’ve been saving up, working on my own project.”

“And what’s that?” Daniel steered, “Building a statue of yourself?”

The crowd bubbled with laughter. Even Tom joined in.

“Not quite,” he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out some pieces of official looking paper. “This,” he declared, brandishing the papers over his head for all to see, “Is a title deed. Documents that officially recognise me as owner of a property.” He held them out to Daniel. “Take a look. Notice anything familiar?”

Daniel narrowed his eyes, wondering where on earth this was going. He snatched the papers, and flicked through them.

The sight of Daniel’s face falling from mocking grin to wide-eyed disbelief was pure gold to Tom. He fervently wished Owen was getting pictures of this.

“But...” Daniel stammered, looking from the papers to Tom and back again, “This...this is my address!”

Tom’s grin stretched wider, revealing a few teeth. “And?”

“You can’t do that!” Daniel spluttered, throwing the papers to the dirt. *No matter, they’re just copies.* “We...we live in a council house! You can’t buy someone’s house while they’re living there!”

“Everyone has their price,” Tom winked at June, too pumped with adrenalin to read her expression, “And you’re my tenants now. And, I’m so sorry, but you’ve been behaving unacceptably towards your landlord for, ooh, years, I’d say. I’m kicking you out.”

A stunned silence fell across the crowd. Daniel’s face drained of colour, and his mouth open and closed like a fish.

“You’re lying,” he said, his voice tight.

“Feel confident enough to try me?”

They held each other’s gaze for what must’ve been ten long seconds. Finally, Daniel snapped, his brow beading his sweat.

“You...you can’t!”

“I can, and I will,” Tom said coolly, making to walk away, “I want the place empty by Friday.”

The fallen bully’s face was a treat. All the emotions crashing across his rapidly paling face as it worked furiously to think of a way out...Tom had waited for so long for this moment, and the wait had been worth every second.

“You can’t...” Daniel repeated weakly, now more of a plea, “We have no money, we’ll be homeless! What...what can I do?”

Daniel McCulloch at my mercy. Pinch me, I’m dreaming.

“Oh, where to start!” Tom pondered loudly. “How about apologising?”

Daniel blinked; the tiniest smile flickered across his face. Tom read his thoughts straight away, and before Daniel could open his mouth, Tom waggled a finger at him.

“You don’t get off that easily,” Tom hissed, pointing at the floor, “On your knees.”

A whisper shivered through the crowd. A shadow of Daniel's former anger broke through. "You can't be seri—"

"KNEES, NOW! OR I COME AND THROW YOU OUT ON THE STREET PERSONALLY!"

Daniel fell to his knees as though he'd been struck down.

"I'm sorry," he blubbered.

"Say 'I'm really sorry I bullied you, Tom. I'm jealous of you, and you're so much better than me.'"

"I'm really sorry, T—"

"LOUDER!"

"I'm really sorry I bullied you, Tom!" he wailed, tears welling in his eyes, *"I'm jealous of you, and you're so much better than me! Please let my family keep their home!"*

Tom leaned in, so only Daniel could hear.

"Remember all those years ago, when you called me weak and powerless?" Tom breathed in his ear, "You picked on the wrong person to test. I'm Tom Verbrisser. If I want something, I go for it, and yes, I'll do it on my own if I have

to prove a point. I suppose I should thank you, in a way, Daniel. You pushed me to reach for my own power, and boy, does it feel good.” he lifted the teary Daniel by the chin so they were eye to eye. “I want you out of my life. If you or your pathetic little friends so much as make eye contact or breath a word around me or June, you and your family will be out of there faster than you say *eviction notice*.”

Tom slid the half-eaten slice of pizza out of Daniel’s hand, and took a great big bite. “I own you.”

Tom stood up, surveying the crowd. Their expressions were priceless: a mix of awe, fear and...was that respect? But there was one face he didn’t see, the only one he was looking for. Craning his neck, his spotted her walking away, towards the oak tree.

“June, wait!” He barged through the crowd, chasing her down.

That would be the last conversation he ever had with June. After that, he never saw her again.

Chapter Sixteen

Vents and Pipes

Apples watched from the skylight as Muezza, Billow and Tracktail retreated to the upper level of the Old Dairy for a private meeting.

That traitor! Her ears burned as she thought of Saxon, standing there next to that bizarre human, backstabbing the Clan who'd taken him in. He hadn't raised a paw to help poor Malt as she was dragged away to be locked up. Oh, if only the thick glass hadn't blocked her hearing: she would've loved to hear that big-talking bundle of fluff's excuses. Apples allowed herself a grim sneer of satisfaction as she recalled Muezza picking him up by the neck, scaring half of his fur off. Two wrongs really did make a right. So there really had been a traitor in the Cobby's midst, but it wasn't Tick....well, maybe.

There was nothing she could do for Malt now, not while she was so heavily guarded.

She'd have to bide her time, wait for the best moment to spring her Clanmate loose and make for Cobby territory. In the meantime, she'd carry out her Leader's other demand: gathering information.

That human. He seemed to be key to all this. She hadn't heard a word, but the body language said it all: this was no ordinary petter. Cats did one of two things around humans: lounge around to demand attention, or scarper into the shadows. But this...this was different. He seemed to be *talking* with them. Who was he?

She padded lightly across the rooftop in the direction they went, looking for some sort of entry point. But the roof was littered with all sorts of chimneys, funnels and vents: any one of them could lead to their meeting room, and or could drop the spying Cobby in the middle of the Smokies.

Her ears swivelled at the sound of echoing rumbles from a nearby airing shaft. She poked her head inside. It was dark and dusty, the sides made entirely of metal. She could just about pick out Billow yowling with laughter.

Apples gulped, the dust tickling her nose. If she jumped down into the shaft, she'd cause such a racket that she'd be found for sure.

Before she could think of a plan, two firm paws pulled her back, and a slender tail gagged her mouth.

"*Mmmm!*" Apples mumbled in alarm, flailing in blind panic.

"Ssssh!" a voice hissed in her ear, "Calm down. I'm a Smoky Clan cat, but I'm not your enemy. My name is Pipes. I want to help you, and your friend Malt. I'm going to let you go now, okay?"

Apples' mind worked fast: *Pipes*. The one who escorted Tick and Puzzle to safety. Well, if Odd-Eye trusted her... she nodded, and the tail around her mouth fell away. Apples turned to face Pipes. She would've looked like a dainty Sokoke cat if it weren't for the telling dark circles around her eyes and toughened clumps of fur that told the tale of a tougher life.

"Why are you helping us?" Apples said slowly, "What's in it for you?"

Pipes ears drooped, “My clan, for starters. It’s all been wrong since Muezza came back, and there’s only one clan who can challenge him, as far as I can tell.”

Since Muezza came back? Where was he then? But Apples had no patience for questions just then, not while Malt was in danger. She turned back to the airshaft. “I need to get down this thing without making a noise. Any ideas?”

Pipes winced. “I have one, but you won’t like it,”

“What? Tell me! I’ll do it,” Apples bounced on the spot eagerly.

Pipes had been right: she didn’t like it. A minute later, she was being lowered down the shaft by her tail, clamped firmly in Pipe’s jaws. She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from yowling aloud in pain.

Finally her paws touched a solid surface, softened by layers of dust, and Pipes let go. She licked her tail rapidly as it throbbed with a dull ache. She looked around the cool, airy vent shaft, leading away into the darkness, where the voices swam up to her in eerie whispers. She

looked up to see Pipes' eyes glowing down at her. They exchanged a nod, and Apples padded softly and slowly through the vent. The voices grew louder and clearer, until finally she came to a grille. Peering through the gaps, she saw a dank old room, the smashed window smeared with dirt and grease. The human sat behind a scratchy old desk, with Tracktail and Billow perched on either side like giant ornaments.

“But that could take moons!” Tracktail clawed the desk, eyes flashing.

“Not if I can help it, dear Tracktail,” the human said smoothly, “We will let the humans have their playground. Then I take the money and run, leaving it to crumble. You just watch; the whole area will be a derelict festering pit before you can say ‘fresh prey’. The perfect environment for the Smoky Clan, wouldn’t you say?”

“He’s right,” Billow nodded, “No other Clan can thrive in human squalor like we do, not even City Clan. Plus, Muezza will have more of that human money to buy up even more land for

territory – the Cobby headquarters, for instance.”

The human and Billow laughed darkly, and Apples shivered, blinking dust from her eyes. A terrible thought invaded her mind. *This human...could he be...*

“Are you sure other humans will let you, though?” Tracktail licked her shoulder nervously, “After leaving such a huge chunk of territory to rot, will they really be stupid enough to let you do it all over again?”

“Stupid, no. But greedy yes,” The human’s white teeth flashed in the gloom, “This money stuff talks. Anything – *anything* – can be brought at the right price.”

Tracktail still didn’t look sure. The human kicked back in his seat, folding his legs and perching his paws on the table.

“Relax, Deputy,” he chuckled, “The plan is foolproof. Smoky Clan will be the greatest of the Clans, because there won’t *be* any other Clans. And it’s not as if the fight will be difficult, either! Look at how easily I’ve got our greatest rival, the Cobbies, running scared.

Your runner Pipes will be delivering my ultimatum to them as we speak. Leafy Clan are weak, and City Clan are pampered lumps, no better than Petters.”

“I guess you’re right...” Tracktail sighed. “But what about Tom? He —”

The human slammed a vast fist onto the desk. “Tom is an *insect* compared to me!” he snapped, “I can crush him any time I want. But I just need to catch him. Nothing I cannot handle.”

Apples detected the slightest hint of panic in his voice. She frowned. *Tom...* she didn’t know any cat called Tom. In fact, the only Tom she knew was Puzzle’s nasty Nestbreaking pet, Tom Verbrisser. Could it be him? Possibly. But so what? Puzzle had said he was on holiday, and Cobby reports to the barn last night backed that up: Tom hadn’t been seen at his nest for some time now. Apples shrugged it off. They had to be talking about some other Tom.

“Enough of this chit-chat,” The human declared, opening a bag and pulling out a container, “I’m starving.”

The human shook the container teasingly between the Smoky superiors, whose eyes were glued to it. He opened it, and tipped the contents out onto the table – fresh chicken. Billow and Tracktail dived at it, burying their muzzles in the meat and slurping greedily, while the human chomped viciously at a large chunk. Apples' stomach growled. Without thinking, she curled back her lips to savour the smell. Instead, a mouthful of dust rushed in, tickling her throat. She tried to swallow it down, but too late – she gave an almighty cough, echoing through the vents, and into the room.

Three pairs of cruel eyes snapped up to meet hers, and in that split second, she saw – not two pairs of cat's eyes, but three. That human had the eyes of a cat, she just knew it; she could feel it in the deepest, darkest corners of her mind, where her fears and nightmares lurked. It could mean only one thing. The one thing she already knew but refused to believe.

Muezza.

She turned and ran for her life. Blood pounded in her ears, blocking out the yells

coming from in front and behind her. Light streamed from up ahead, where the airshaft was. She slowed, coiling her haunches and leapt for all her worth. Her claws curled around the lip, and she clung there, trying to scramble up and out, but the metal walls were too slippery. Pawsteps were pounding behind her, hunting her down. Her claws peeled back: she couldn't hang on. Pipes appeared, and in a heartbeat grasped Apples' scruff and pulled her up. A cat that sounded like Tracktail yowled below, and claws wrapped around Apples' tail, trying to pull her down. Screeching, Apples tried to flick her off, but it was no good: she sunk lower. Pipes growled in protest, her grip loosening. Apples kicked out with her hind legs, and felt her leg connect with a skull. Tracktail yelped, and her grip fell away. Pipes pulled Apples up onto the rooftop.

“Oh, we're in trouble, so much trouble!” Pipes hopped on the spot as Apples caught her breath, eyes wide in panic, “My Clan's going to find out I've been helping the Cobbies, and I'll

be exiled for sure – or worse! Let’s get out of here!”

Pipes turned, looking ready to run as far as her legs would take her. But Apples darted in front of her.

“No!” she snapped, “I’m not leaving without Malt!”

“What?” Pipes eyes grew even wider, “Have you got butterflies in your brain? We should be trying to get as far away from here as possible: they’re going to raise the alarm any second now, and by sunset we’ll be lying on the scrapstock!”

The calm and collected cat had lost her nerve, and when Apples thought about all the vicious Clanmates she’d betrayed and would have to face, she didn’t blame her.

“No, this is the best time, the Clan is confused,” Apples said with a calmness she didn’t feel, not after what she’d seen, “It’s the last thing they’d expect. If we leave now, they’ll just guard Malt even more tightly, and we might never save her.”

Pipes licked her shoulder, “I...I suppose you’re right. Tracktail probably scented it was

me helping you up that shaft, so I'm exposed already." She sighed, shaking her head, her eyes dulled with sadness at the thought of losing her Clan, "I must be mad. Alright, I'll help you, but on one condition: I need protection from Cobby Clan afterwards."

"Of course." Apples bowed her head.

"I'm not leaving Smoky Clan!" Pipes was keen to get the point across, "It's just until this whole nightmare ends. If it ever does," she added in a glum mumble.

"I understand," Apples nosed Pipes flank reassuringly, "Now, let's go. Lead the way, Pipes."

The two cats bounded across the Old Dairy rooftop, grimly aware of a raucous caterwauling swelling beneath them.

"Is there a way into Malt's prison from up here?" Apples called as they ran.

"Several," Pipes replied, "If we'd been minutes later they'd have guards by now. I'm just trying to remember which is the least obvious one...ah, here we are."

They skidded to a halt at another gauze planted in the roof, the lattice gauze already torn open. They dived inside, following the cool passage slanting downwards. A strange sound soon floated through Apples' ears: the pathetic crying of a cat as it pawed weakly at a wooden door.

“Malt!” Apples gasped. Pipes slammed her tail against her mouth.

“Sssh!” she hissed, looking around at the labyrinth of routes, “Okay, you go that way, I’ll go this way. I’ll distract them. Don’t move until I point my tail at you, no matter what. Then get Malt out; your escape route will be obvious. Got it?”

“Got it.” They separated, Pipes’ light pawsteps fading away as Apples descended steeply in another direction. Finally, she came to yet another gauze, though this one overlooked another room entirely. The other room had been bright and cheerful in comparison to this. It was almost pitch black, and the reek of damp and filth nearly made Apples gag. As her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness, she saw Malt

below, curled up at the foot of the door, her collar glinting like tears. Slick and Screech sat on either side of the room, glowering down at their captor with satisfied malice.

Crash! Pipes pounced into the room from the roof in a flurry of dust, landing on Slick's back. Chaos broke out as the three Smoky cats crashed and spun into one another in a vicious whirlwind of claws and teeth. Pipes scored her claws along Screech's side while whipping Slick with her long tail. Malt shrunk away into a corner, eyes flashing in terror. As Screech staggered back in a daze, Pipes charged at Slick, slamming him into the wall. The damp-weakened wall crumbled away, making a hole. Slick lay beside it, still but breathing.

"Traitor!" Screech roared, launching at Pipes. They rolled across the floor, Screech's teeth planted firmly in Pipe's neck. Apples longed to leap in to her rescue, but the signal didn't come. Should she go in anyway? Or would that ruin the plan?

Before she could make her mind up, the door flew open, and Muezza towered in the entrance,

looking down at Screech and Pipes locked together. Billow curled around his feet.

“Pipes!” Billow snarled, “What are you doing? Why aren’t you delivering the message to Cobby Clan? Why –”

She broke off as Billow spotted the open vent in the ceiling, and the unconscious Slick slumped against the wall. Billow’s eyes narrowed into slits.

“You’ve betrayed me...” her teeth flashed, her voice rumbling like rumbler’s wheels over gravel.

“A traitor in Smoky Clan?” Muezza sneered, “I will not bear the shame. Let me take care of her.”

In one sweeping move Muezza stepped forward, scooped up Pipes and pulled his blade from his pocket.

At last, Pipes’ tail jabbed at where Apples’ hid. Apples fired out at speed, claws extended. Muezza turned – and she scraped her claws deep across the human’s leathery face.

“AAAAAGH!” he roared, dropping Pipes and the blade as he clutched his face, writhing

about in agony. Apples landed next to Malt, who sprang up in shock and disbelief.

“You okay?” Apples heaved.

“Me?” Malt looked at Apples as though her pelt had changed colour, “Oh, um...what?”

Apples glanced over Malt’s shoulder at the hole in the wall, leading into darkness. Pipes had been right: the escape route really was obvious.

“Let’s get out of here, quickly,” Apples nudged Malt in the shoulder towards the hole, “Pipes, let’s –”

Apples turned to see Pipes being pinned down by Billow, who was at least twice as big as her.

“Go!” Pipes shrieked, “Get out of here!”

Apples glanced around. Screech, Slick and Muezza were recovering, and any minute now they would descend upon Pipes with teeth, claws and blades. Apples flexed her claws, and she lunged forward, bashing sidelong into the Smoky Leader. She was sturdy and heavy, and barely budged, but nonetheless rounded on Apples, teeth bared and ears flattened in fury.

Pipes managed to scuttle away, but bumped into Screech, who swiped her across the face. Blood splattered out in a wide arc, and Pipes slumped on the floor.

“No!”

Apples charged at Screech, ready to tear his ears off if it came to it, but Malt got there first, leaping from nowhere and bowling into the Smoky cat in a surprise attack. Muezza stomped out of the shadows, swinging his blade at Apples, who leapt back – and felt something heavy slam her against a wall.

“See how you like it!” it was Slick. He spat in her face and slunk away, leaving the swaying silhouette of Muezza towering over her.

“Say goodbye, Cobby,” he snarled, teeth glinting, “Don’t feel bad. The rest of your Clan will be with you soooooof!”

A long tail had wrapped itself around his neck, and he whirled this way and that as he tried to shake the cat off. Apples’ sight returned: Pipes! As Muezza crashed around, he knocked and kicked into every cat in the room, throwing Billow, Screech and Slick into

disarray. Finally he stumbled into a pile of chairs, and Pipes leapt away just in time as they crashed down around him.

Apples dashed to meet her as Pipes staggered forward, Malt limping up to them.

“You okay?” Apples glanced over Pipes. Her left flank had been deeply torn and matted with blood, though to Apples relief it seemed to have stopped bleeding.

“Never better,” Pipes wheezed, giving a pained wink. Malt stretched and shook her bad paw, tentatively putting weight on it. Neither of them looked up for running, but what choice did they have? Already the yowling of angry cats were rushing towards them on all sides. They all nodded in silent agreement, and bolted through the hole.

They blinked in the hazy late afternoon sun, but didn't stop, not even to draw in the hazy afternoon sun. Following the route they took that morning, they ran as fast as their tired legs would carry them through the twisting alleys and murky shortcuts, leaping over fences and ducking under crumbling walls. All the while

the furious howling of cats snapped at their hind legs, falling behind then catching right up again when Apples had to stop to let Pipes catch her breath or let Malt give her paw a short rest.

Finally, when the trees loomed into view and sound of the big rumblepath met their ears, the chasing cats seemed to fall away. They slowed down, catching their breath. They exchanged glances; exhausted, terrified...but with a glint in their eyes. They had escaped! They were safe! They were –

The brief sensation of victory fell away when a leopard-like cat stalked out from the bushes, blocking the only path out of Smoky territory: Tracktail.

Apples, Malt and Pipes shuddered to a halt before the deputy. None of them were up to a fight, and Tracktail's muscles were tensed, looking as fresh as if she'd just awoken from a catnap. She looked coolly from one to the other. The only sound was the ragged, thin breaths from the escapees, a mixture of exhaustion and dread.

“Pipes, I’m disappointed in you,” said Tracktail, “Of all the cats in Smoky Clan whom I expected to turn traitor, you were the last. You have dishonoured the name of Smoky Clan.”

“I have not!” Pipes’ eyes were bright, throwing caution to the wind and staring defiantly at her deputy, “I am the most loyal of all Smoky Clan cats! What honour is there to be had putting our faith in a cat who prefers walk as a human, who encourages underhanded tricks like seizing a cat who rescues them?”

Tracktail looked to Malt, who shrunk away.

“Yes, I saw that,” she remarked, giving Malt a small bow of the head, “I apologise on behalf of Ratchet. Rival Clan cat or not, such an act of selflessness should have been rewarded, not punished.” Tracktail sighed, looking into the sunset, “You’re right, Pipes. Muezza has Billow and the whole of Smoky Clan eating out of those stinking human hands of his. I’ve seen his vision for the future. I’d sooner die than see it sink to the level that *human* wants to drag us to, no matter how much territory it gives us.”

Apples' paws prickled. Could it be? Her thoughts were dashed when angry caterwauls restarted behind them; the chase was still on.

Tracktail looked around her, and at the cats before her, her eyes swirling with rapid thoughts. Apples tensed, ready to dash one way or the other.

"Pipes, follow these two back to Cobby headquarters," she said quickly and quietly, "Do what you will: join them, help them, try to stop Muezza, I don't care; but you won't be welcome in Smoky Clan unless Muezza is stopped. Understood?"

"Yes, Deputy."

Tracktail touched noses with Pipes. "Then go, quickly now...and good luck."

Staggering in disbelief, Apples followed Pipes and Malt into the trees, peering back at Tracktail. Was it a trick? But Tracktail ran a long claw down a cheek, drawing blood. She caught Apples' eye, and she nodded. Apples' nodded back, and ploughed towards the rumblepath, back to Cobby territory.

“Malt! Apples! What happened to you?” A cat leading four others bounded over the field to them, stopping short at the sight of Pipes, “What are you doing with a Smoky Clan cat? Did you catch her spying?”

“No, Simba, she’s with us,” Apples sighed wearily, “I’ll explain later. Did Tips return okay? Oh good, he’s running the headquarters. We need to speak to him. Yes, we know Saxon deserted us, but that’s the least of our worries.”

The patrol escorted them back to the barn, where every cat moved with an extra sense of purpose and urgency than before: the fighting-practice room was the busiest of the lot; cats trotted to and fro with fresh hay, prey and herbs, and even the kits had ceased their play to help their mothers patch a hole in the wall with planks of wood.

“Apples! Malt!” Tips’ voice broke out over the hubbub, and before Apples could spot him he leapt out of the crowd and bowled her over.

“You’re okay! Both of you!” he laughed, delirious with relief, “I can’t believe – oh,

you're hurt? Oops...sorry, Apples. And who is this?"

Wincing as she climbed back onto her paws, Apples gave Tips a playful cuff across the ear and introduced Pipes. Together with Malt, they explained everything that had happened: Saxon's return to Smoky Clan; Malt's imprisonment; the meeting; Malt's rescue and Tracktail letting them go.

"If it hadn't been for Pipes, I think all three of us would have been on Smoky Clan's scrapstock by now," said Apples, blinking gratefully at her. Pipes blinked back, though her eyes were pained. Apples could only begin to guess what she'd given up. Would she ever join her Clan again?

"Cobby Clan cannot thank you enough," Tips said with a graceful bow of the head, "We respect your wishes to remain a Smoky Clan cat, but you are welcome here for as long as you want. I'm going to address the whole barn soon, and I'll let them know what you've done for us."

“Thank you.” Pipes bowed back, and the pain in her eyes receded a little.

“You’re calling a meeting? What for?” Malt tilted her head. Tips explained what had happened while they’d been away.

“Muezza’s attacked here already?” Pipes licked her shoulder, “Then he will launch another attack as soon as possible.”

Malt, Apples and Tips fixed her with six wide eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Pipes held their gaze, “Cobby Clan is the biggest threat to his plans, whatever that may be. Now they’ve lost their hostage, there’ll be no bargaining – just an out-and-out fight to get what he wants.”

That echoed somewhere in Apples’ head; it tallied with what Muezza had said in that meeting.

“But we don’t have what he wants!” she protested, “He’s after this Tom, whoever that is.”

“Be that as it may, we’d do well to take the fight to them,” said Pipes, “I don’t know who

this Tom is, but if Muezza wants to stop him, I'm going to do all I can to hold him back."

"A distraction!" Tips clawed the hay in anticipation.

"Exactly," said Pipes, "Keep Muezza and the Smokies distracted while your other friends in Cobby Clan travel around and try to solve this mystery."

"That works just fine for us," Tips snarled, flexing his claws, "This time, we'll be ready for them."

"Hold on, Tips, think about what we're agreeing to," Apples swatted her tail through the air, "Is Cobby Clan willing to risk lives just for the sake of a *distraction*?"

"Well, let's put it to a vote. I'll start the meeting. Apples, will...will you come with me onto the leader's platform? I'm kind of nervous."

Apples' eyes flashed with amusement, and the two Midtail cats leapt up onto the platform.

"Cobbies! Hear me!" Tips bellowed. A lot of cats were confused to see the two Midtails calling a meeting, and a few of the Bigtails

grunted and shook their heads, but eventually the barn congregated below them. Apples watched Tips' legs quake. At first he just stood there, forgetting why he had called a meeting in the first place. With the occasional prompt from Apples, though, Tips slowly explained all that had happened, from the moment they left for Smoky territory that morning. Once he got into it, his legs stopped shaking, and he even answered some of the questions some cats threw at him, with help from Apples.

Many shrieked in horror when Muezza's name was brought up: some buried their heads in the hay when Tips told of his return, and some cats collapsed when he declared he was a human – the one who had attacked the barn, no less. Such rumours and suspicions had been simmering in the barn since the attack, twisting into what felt like a bad joke. So, naturally, many scoffed and sniggered in disbelief at the news, but fell to stunned silence when Apples explained all the evidence, like how he could talk to cats, and they way he commanded Billow and her Clan like it was his own. When the

disbelief subsided, and the realisation that the human who'd attacked them had once been the Clan cat of nightmares dawned on them, they fell deadly silent. Now they knew what they were up against, would they still be willing to fight, Apples wondered?

Apples contributed the rescue-side of the story, and when she finished, many cats turned to Pipes to thank her. Apples let her shoulders relax: even with the recent betrayal of Saxon, there were no hard feelings in the way they greeted the Smoky cat.

Finally the subject of the upcoming attack from Muezza and the Smokies came up, and Apples was nearly knocked off the platform from the yowls of defiance that met her.

“We’ll teach them a lesson!”

“We’ll be ready for them this time!”

“If I see that Muezza-human-thing again, my teeth and claws will be fighting with each other over who gets him first!”

“And those Smoky cats! Shame on them for sinking even lower than ev – oh, no offense, Pipes...”

Tips called out over the din; “All cats who wish to retreat, raise your tail.”

Not one tail went up.

“All cats who wish to battle, raise your tail.”

Every tail in the barn pointed to the rafters, all eyes staring resolutely up at Tips.

“Then it’s decided. We must prepare. If you need a job or training, ask a Bigtail or a Sickkit.”

The meeting dispersed to much babbling and bustle.

“You were good,” Apples said to Tips as they descended back to ground level.

“My legs feel like water!” Tips gave a shaky laugh, “Thanks for your help. By the way, I was thinking that a couple of us should head to City Clan to bring Odd-Eye and Sir Paws up-to-date, and to see if we can find a way to bring Muezza down once and for all. I’ll go, and —”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Apples snapped, “Look around you, Tips. I never thought you’d be the kind of cat to rally the whole Clan together, but here you are. They need you here.”

Malt and Pipes padded over to join them.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tips grinned, “Do they look like they need encouragement to fight? They need me like a cat needs a rumbler.”

Apples surveyed the barn. He had a point: if she’d thought the Cobbies moved with purpose and urgency before, it was nothing compared to now: cats sharpened their claws and cut their teeth on whetstones collected by a patrol; the best fighters demonstrated new moves to eager crowds, and Sickkits were experimenting by bashing herbs together to make ever-stronger remedies.

“Well...alright,” Apples nodded, “You go, Tips, but I’m staying.”

“Me too,” Pipes stepped forward, “If it means fighting my own Clan, so be it. They already know I’m a traitor; there’s no point hiding and running any more.”

Apples gave Pipes a comforting muzzle.

“I’ll go with you, Tips,” said Malt, limbering her legs one by one, “I still feel like I’m in that prison. A good run in the open air might be just what I need.”

After a quick rest and a pick at the bulging scrapstock, Malt and Tips were on their way, the evening sunshine beating down on their necks and backs. They took one last look back towards the barn. Apples and Pipes stood in the doorway, tails waving in farewell

“I don’t know if we’ll see them again,” Apples shuddered. Pipes licked her on the shoulder.

“Don’t think like that. They’ll be okay, I’m sure of it.” Pipes said gently. But Apples noticed her suppress a shudder of her own.

Malt and Tips flicked their tails at the barn, turned, and headed up the hill, out of sight.

Chapter Seventeen

Dapple Glade

As they padded through Jacobsen Park, Tom recalled the name the cats used for it: the Big Green. Big? He couldn't disagree with that: he and Puzzle had long since passed the collapsed gate that welcomed them into the Park, and still it stretched away before them in sweeping slopes. But Green? Unless you counted the stunted weeds growing through the cracks in the mountains of garbage, or the murky green puddle they'd just passed, no. Brown, grey or brick-red, maybe, but not green. Tom remembered when it used to be, though, and his heart sank at the sight of a dumped fridge where a grand oak tree once stood, and a desolate field swirling with dust where bluebells once carpeted it in springtime.

Tom and Puzzle walked on in respectful silence, as though they were in a war museum. They rounded a corner of rusty road signs – and

Tom felt his skin prickle at the sight of a place he knew so well, yet barely recognised. An opening with dusty bits of tent canvas flapping in the wind, tiny tufts of grass dotted here and there, clinging to life. A rusty mass of twisted metal where the barbecue area once was. And there, just a little way off, was the gnarly oak tree, now a burnt out skeleton riddled with graffiti. His mind swam with memories of that day, wonderful and terrible, the knowing that things were coming to an end. And here – right here, under the oak tree – was where he and June parted ways.

“Tom? Where are you?” Puzzle peered from behind a stack of bricks, “Come on, pick up the pace! I don’t want to be loitering around here when it gets dark.”

“Coming,” Tom called. He turned back to the tree. “If I ever get out of this mess,” he muttered, “I promise I’ll make everything okay again.” He turned, and with Puzzle leading the way they delved deeper into the miserable Park.

“S-Stop! Who goes there?” a shrill call echoed around them. Puzzle stood protectively

over Tom, who didn't protest. Their eyes darted from one pile of looming garbage to another.

"I'm Puzzle, and this is Tick," the big Toyger called crisply into the dirty air, "We're from Cobby Clan. We mean no harm. We wish to speak with your leader Twig: we have news."

The silhouette of a cat popped up from atop a leaning tower of smashed cars.

"Ah, Cobby Clan!" the mystery cat called down to them, "Hi there! Yes, Twig said to expect visitors from your way. Hold on..."

The cat cautiously clambered her way down from the top car. She perched her hind paws on a car door...and it swung open.

"Oh—" The cat tumbled downwards in a fit of yelps, hitting everything on the way down. She disappeared inside the bottommost car, its horn giving a quick blast. Then all was still once more.

"Umm...hello?" Puzzle called, "You okay?"

The cat leapt nimbly out from the broken windscreen, shaking the dust out of her fluffy ginger curls.

“Well, that was fun!” she said brightly, “That’s the fifth time this week...or is it the sixth? I’ve lost count. Oh, hey!” she leapt down to greet Puzzle and Tom, “P-leased to meet you both! I’m Berrybunch of Leafy Clan – I was made a Smalltail just last moon.”

“Congratulations,” Puzzle purred.

“Thanks!” Berrybunch shuddered with excitement, throwing fighting moves through the air, “I’m going to be the best cat ever! I’ll be brave, fearless – *eeeek!*”

She’d kicked a nearby car, and the bonnet sprung open. Berrybunch bolted behind Puzzle in alarm. Tom could barely keep a straight face, and neither could Puzzle.

“Sorry, what was that last one? Fearless or furlless?” Puzzle’s voice trembled with giggles. Berrybunch shrugged, laughing nervously.

“The road to greatness is long and full of challenges,” she declared dramatically, “So I give myself the task of leading you safely to our headquarters.”

“We’d be honoured, young Smalltail,” Puzzle bowed her head, and Tom did likewise.

With nods of the head exchanged, Berrybunch led them deeper into the territory, humming merrily to herself, tail held high. Tom had to admire her for being so cheerful in such a bleak place. Perhaps she was too young to remember just how beautiful her territory used to be.

Berrybunch led them deeper into the park. When the last stack of tyres gave way, the black blots of tall trees loomed in the darkness ahead. The shrinking green heart of Jacobsen Park. The patch of nature barely stretched wider than a small football field, but when Berrybunch led them through the thick bushes they were completely immersed, and if Tom didn't know better, he could've been fooled into thinking the trees went on forever. Great twisting branches looped with thick vines cast mottled shadows over moss-laden rocks that reared up from the ground like great monoliths. Berrybunch navigated her way expertly through the labyrinth of plunging paths and caves, but Puzzle and Tom went more slowly, their smooth pads slipping over the lichen where Berrybunch's rough pads clung with ease.

They paused at the edge of a babbling brook. The crystal water tumbled playfully over the smooth pebbles.

“Nearly there,” Berrybunch whispered, leading them upstream. After a short walk following the meandering brook, a wall of bracken blocked their way. Berrybunch pushed her way through, and Tom and Puzzle did likewise, the soft fronds stroking through their fur. They emerged, blinking, into an enclosed glade filled with streams of sunset light. Cats trotted here and there over the packed down grass, talking in quiet, relaxed tones. Laughing kits played in thick tufts of buttercups, their mothers watching over them. A pile of sandy rocks occupied another corner of the glade, forming a hive of small caves and platforms. And in pride of place in the centre was a low, smooth tree stump, big enough to be a table – which was exactly what it was. The scrapstock of birds and mice lay piled at one end, but at the other was also a pile of berries and nuts. The brook curled freely through the centre of the

glade, snaking away through the bushes at the far side.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Berrybunch smiled at the sight of Tom’s gawping, “This is Dapple Glade, Leafy Clan’s headquarters. Hey, I bet Twig will be in his cave! Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

The three cats set off down the middle of the glade, and Tom felt eyes swinging their way. After the disastrous visit to Smoky Clan, he couldn’t suppress a nervous shiver, but the look in the eyes of these cats was pure curiosity, not a hint of malice. One cat, in particular, seemed to be especially interested in these new arrivals; a lanky cat with long silky hair pushed her way through the assembled cats to get a better look at Tom and Puzzle as they passed.

Within a dozen pawsteps they were on the other side of the glade, the tangle of rocks and caves looming over him. A cat curled up on the second highest platform unfurled and stretched, jaws parting in a wide yawn. Her fur was a beautiful patchwork of black, copper and white, though a tinge of grey around her cheeks and a

slight cloudy look in her eyes suggested she was old.

“Back from exploring so soon, Berrybunch?” the cat chuckled good-naturedly, “You usually don’t come back from your trips into the Wastes until way past dark...hello? Who’s this?”

“Visitors, Lilypad!” Berrybunch’s fur bounced with excitement, “This is Puzzle, and this little one here is Tick. They’re from Cobby Clan, just like you said!”

“So I did,” said the cat. Standing up and shaking her fur, she turned to Puzzle and Tom. “Greetings. I am Lilypad, the Leafy Clan deputy. One moment, I will get Twig for you – he’s probably still asleep. We had a long day yesterday keeping those Smokies off our borders.”

Lilypad limped into the highest cave. Moments later, she emerged standing astride a great tabby cat with bark-coloured eyes. Standing tall atop the rocks, he looked big and intimidating, but when he spoke to Tom and Puzzle, his voice was warm and hearty.

“Welcome, my friends,” said the Leafy Clan leader, “Puzzle and Tick, isn’t it? You both look asleep on your paws. Come, join us for our communal feeding. There’ll be plenty of time for talk after dark.”

Had Tom been a human, the night in the glade would be nothing but a shadowy mass of black and navy-blue. But thanks to his cat’s eyes, Tom could see as clearly through the dark as though it were merely twilight. He and Puzzle joined Twig, Lilypad and a group of Leafy cats as they gathered around the tree stump, with the rest of the Clan huddled in groups around them. The scrapstock was passed evenly around with a portion of berries and nuts, and soon the air was filled with much happy talking and laughing. Neither of the Cobby Cats felt in a rush for answers just yet, and after the mayhem of the day, it was nice to unwind. Stomach full, he watched and listened in silence as Twig retold of the previous day’s escapades.

“So while Tracktail had flanked us from the east, she didn’t realise that her group in turn

were about to get a surprise attack – from Dewdrop’s group here.”

The cat with the long silver hair that Tom had seen earlier puffed her chest out.

“What happened then?” a small cat with a rich chocolaty coat was on tenterhooks, eyes fixed admiringly on his Leader.

“Well, Mossylog, with Tracktail’s team occupied, it was down to good old Rustle and I to take on the rest of them – there must’ve been about twenty of them, by my reckoning...”

“There never was!” a black cat Tom assumed to be Rustle sniggered, “I’d say it was more like forty.”

“You were both seeing double after that wimpy Ratchet clobbered you over the heads!” Lilypad put in, and they all fell back laughing. It was infectious, and Tom and Puzzle found themselves soon joining in.

Slowly, the Leafy cats around them bid a goodnight, and filtered away into the bushes.

“Are they heading back to the nests?” Tom asked Twig. For the first time, Twig’s eyes looked pained.

“Oh, Tick...we don’t have any nests beyond Dapple Glade, not anymore. You are seeing Leafy Clan in it’s entirety.”

A flush of ice washed through Tom as he watched the cats curl up under the branches and in the tall grasses. Sure, by anyone’s estimate there were still a huge number of cats – at least a hundred – but when Tom thought back to the seething Cobby barn and the heaving Smoky dairy, along with all the scattered nests and camps across each terrain, Leafy Clan were tiny by comparison. He didn’t need to ask why it was like this. If Muezza had his way, they would be nonexistent within a blink.

The thought of Muezza brought him crashing back to reality with a harsh bump, and was wide awake. Twig nodded at him.

“I understand, young Tick,” he said gravely, “You wish to talk. Come, join me in my chamber. You too, Puzzle, Lilypad.”

Tom nearly tripped over Mossylog as he turned from the tree stump.

“Oh! Erm...s-sorry about that,” Mossylog blurted out, eyes darting every which way apart

from at Tom. Before Tom could reply, Mossylog darted away into the bushes, tail between his legs.

“Don’t mind him,” Lilypad smiled as they marched over to the caves, “Mossylog is always shy around newcomers.”

Twig, Lilypad, Tom and Puzzle leapt up the stones, Puzzle helping Tom up the higher jumps. When they arrived at the entrance to Twig’s cave, Tom looked down over Dapple Glade. A few cats remained in the open, grooming each other and talking whilst sharing the last scraps of prey. Fireflies danced in the air and fizzed in the canopy, highlighting the quivering bundles of fur snoozing under every bush.

“So,” said Twig crisply as he dragged out his own personal supply of prey to share, “Lilypad told me all about the message the Cobby Clan received from Scatterleaf. We expected your arrival; Odd-Eye said she’d send word to all Clans once she knew what this monster from the prophecy was.” Twig drew up close to the Cobby cats, his eyes burning with reflections of

fireflies. “Do you know who it is that has returned to destroy us?”

Puzzle glanced briefly at Tom, then back to Twig. “Yes. But the answer is far worse and more complicated than we ever imagined. Please be seated. This may take a while.”

Puzzle told them everything, from the moment they arrived in Smoky Clan to the revelation of Muezza’s return as a human. All the while Twig and Lilypad listened intently, not even reacting when Puzzle revealed Muezza to be the monster of the prophecy. Much to Tom’s relief, she left out the bits when Smoky Clan nearly blew Tom’s cover, as well as knowing how she knew Muezza was a human through Tom. He wondered idly if the rest of Cobby Clan had put the clues together and figured it out too. He hoped so, for their sakes: it would be all the more dangerous if they were running scared from a supposed cat only to get scooped up in a human’s hands.

“Pipes led us out of Smoky Clan, and told us to come here for answers,” Puzzle took a deep breath as she finished, and lapped from a small

puddle in the rock to wet her dried throat, “So...he were are.”

Lilypad tucked her paws under her chest, wrapping her tail neatly around her as Twig spoke. “This is grim news indeed, and one the Clan will not bear well. When Muezza was the leader of Smoky Clan, he would invade great swathes of our land and dare us to defy him. This was when the destruction of the Big Green had merely begun, and his Clan were more suited to the decay that crept in to our land. Yes, our Clan suffered greatly under his rule, and our older members will imagine all too clearly the chances of it happening again, possibly finishing us off.”

“So Muezza really was a cat, then?” Tom blurted out.

“Yes, the most powerful and terrible of us all,” said Twig, “I am too young to remember what happened to Muezza, but Lilypad recalls it all clearly.”

Twig turned to his Deputy with a prompting nod. The Deputy opened her eyes, staring directly at Tom. As he looked into them he

flexed his claws on the bare rock, trying to grip onto something for fear of getting lost in their endless depths. Like Odd-Eye, she too seemed to see something within Tom – not just his own secrets, but maybe things not even he knew of himself.

“Please, take a piece of prey and settle in,” she purred, “These are the answers you’re looking for, and it may take a while. This is the story of Muezza.”

Chapter Eighteen

MUEZZA

“Nobody knew exactly where Muezza came from, but two things were certain: he wasn’t born native to a Clan, and neither was he a Petter. His wild, bolting blue eyes and blue-black fur seemed altogether foreign, different.

“As a young kit he roamed the streets, abiding no Code or territory laws and taking prey as he pleased. By the time he came to the age of being Tailed, he already held notoriety through the four Clans, but at this point he was nothing more than a nuisance, a curiosity to talk about when gossip was dry.

“Now, this was many Suns ago, when the Park was full of life and green. The Scatterleaf area was always full of leaves to drop, and there were many messages to guide us, as individual Clans and as a whole. One day, a pile of leaves had stacked outside of the four trees representing each Clan – it was unheard of! It

could only mean one thing: a message for an outsider; Muezza.

“Despite his roguish attitude, Muezza enjoyed the attention, and seemed mildly interested in a message. He accompanied myself and the Leafreaders from the other Clans, and he leapt into the leaves to scatter them, creating his own prophecy. The message was confusing and muddled, but all we could make of it at the time were two bright lights blaring down on a lone cat. The Smoky Leafreader, Kerb, read the lights as being the floodlights that overlooked their headquarters, and that could only mean one thing: Muezza was to join Smoky Clan. The rest of us weren’t about to argue – at least now the rogue would be given some structure and stop skulking around our territories! Ambition glinted in Muezza’s eyes as he followed Kerb back to the Old Dairy, but we thought nothing of that – what young cat *didn’t* have ambitious aims? The rest of us continued to study the Scatterleaf, letting the wind naturally move and skew it, hoping it would clear it up, but it didn’t.

“If the rest of us thought the presence of Muezza would recede after finally being accepted into Clan life, we were sorely mistaken. His rise through the ranks was swift and, dare I say it, deserved: fighting off a swarm of rats from a nest earned him Smalltail. Saving Kerb from humans who catnapped him earned him Midtail. Working to extend Smoky territory into Flehmen’s junction, fighting off foxes and other rogue cats as he did so, earned him Bigtail and responsibility over a handful of nests.

“Unfortunately, there can only ever be one Deputy and one Leader: Sootfang and Fumefur were still young, and were going nowhere. Those were scary days to be around Muezza; he shivered with tension, flexing his long claws at any cat that dared to upset him. And as for battle...he had no fear of shedding blood.

“But after a few moons he seemed to calm down – Bigtail he may have been, but he was an unofficial third-in-command, and he had plenty of responsibilities to keep him busy.

“Then the big yellow Rumlbers came: the first to begin tearing up the trees. They hacked into our northern borders, leaving chaos in their wake. We watched on in horror, helpless, and it was some time before anybody noticed Muezza looked on at the destruction too, from his side of the border. But he didn’t seem worried by it: he didn’t even look pleased or gloating. No, he just watched the Rumlbers work, day by day, his face as blank as the stone we sit upon.

“During that time, Kerb told me of a day when Muezza came skidding into the Old Dairy, declaring that Leafy Clan were on their territory! Sootfang and Fumefur whipped up a counterattack party immediately, and with Muezza they headed into the ravaged land that was once our border. The party split up, Muezza insisting us Leafies were hiding, waiting to pounce. He stuck by his Deputy and Leader.

“What happened next...I still can’t believe this to be true, and I fear the memory of it may have ultimately shocked poor Kerb to death. Muezza led Sootfang and Fumefur out into the

open as a big Rumbler trundled up behind them. The three cats leapt away: the Leader and Deputy jumped into this big orange drum. Kerb heard their yells: ‘Hey what is this stuff? It’s all grey and sticky!’ ‘I don’t like this, let’s get out of here. Muezza? Where are –”

“They were the last words they ever spoke; Muezza had leapt on top of the big drum, and pulled at a lever. The drum began to spin. The yowls and shrieks of the cats were soon silenced as they disappeared under the churning waves of grey slop. Muezza made a run for it, and Kerb emerged from his hiding place to try and pull back the lever to stop the drum. But he was never as strong as Muezza was, and he pulled at that thing for what felt like hours until a human came and shooed him away. That was the end of Sootfang and Fumefur; until his dying day, Kerb swore he could still hear the cat’s screams in the walls of the concrete nest built on that land.

“So Muezza finally became leader of Smoky Clan, blaming the deaths of his predecessors on Leafy Clan. Kerb never spoke a word until his

dying day, muted by the terror of what he'd witnessed.

“I would like to say that was that, but Muezza wasn't satisfied. No, this cruel cat with blood on his claws wanted more. He pushed the boundaries of Smoky Clan further into Leafy and City territory, fighting tooth and nail for every inch. Many cats died, but Muezza was victorious in every battle. And still he wanted more. He looked up to humans as being a prime example of prosperity and success, and he envisioned leading his Clan to equal heights. He became delusional, drunk with his own power. One night, he even strode into Cobby Clan's barn, ready to call a meeting as their Leader. He would have been torn to pieces had Muezza not been so terrifying and Odd-Eye so forgiving. He tried walking on two legs, tried to learn the human language. It was disturbing to watch: even his own Clan would whisper to others of his madness.

“Then, one night, he made his way to Flehmen's Junction alone. He stood in the middle of the road, attempting to stop a

Rumbler – he wanted to see how it worked, and if he could use one! I realised that night what the Scatterleaf told of. Those lights blaring down over Muezza weren't the floodlights over Smoky Clan H.Q. They were the bright eyes of the Rumbler as they struck him.

“If only that had been the end of Muezza. If only the leaves told of his death. Alas, they spoke not of his end, but of his beginning, for not even a Rumbler could kill him. I daresay he'd never felt so alive as he staggered back onto his paws. Rumbler's surrounded him, crunched together in a crooked line, steam billowing from their lids. Leafy patrols that witnessed the scene told how Muezza strode around the wreckage with a gleam in his eye, looking for something. After a short while, he found it: he pulled at a Rumbler door. A human slumped out on the road, unconscious. Muezza leaned in over the human's face, and a shadow fell across the two of them. When it lifted seconds later, an entirely different cat lay where the human had been, and where Muezza the cat had been...there was now Muezza, the human.

He roared with laughter as he looked himself over, stoking his leathery skin with his new, long fingers. Blue lights flashed in the distance. Stealing the former human's clothes, he stole away into the trees, his laughs trailing behind him.

“Naturally, the patrols refused to believe what they saw; they blamed the darkness and the Rumbler's fumes, and they convinced themselves and everyone else that Muezza had died at last. Normality seemed to return to the Clans – or so it seemed. I was certain of what happened: the Scatterleaf prophecy hadn't predicted Muezza's end, but his beginning: the moment he would truly become the monster he threatened to be. Somehow that collision with the rumbler must have brought about an epiphany in that disturbed head of his, and activated this gift – or rather, *curse* – where he could drink the humanity out of a human, and become one.

“But did Muezza's new ability finally give him cause to up and leave us at last? Those of us who knew of his survival thought so, and the

story of Muezza's death was bolstered by his lack of presence – cat or human. But Smoky Clan have kept the secret well hidden. Billow and Tracktail emerged to lead the new generation of Smoky Clan, but Muezza was always there in the background, helping them. His gift needed feeding: too long without gleaning the humanity off another victim and he'd turn back into a cat, as he found out one night whilst I watched his human form writhe through the woods, disappear and emerge as a cat once more from beneath the pile of loose human fur.

“He soon found another victim, and another: Smoky Clan's ranks were bolstered with cats who had no recollection of their human life, their last memories drained away by their new surroundings. Muezza, meanwhile, was making inroads in his new human life, finding work that gave him money, which he used to supply and feed his growing Clan. It was the perfect partnership. At last all that extra territory Smoky Clan gained was being well used by

growing nests, sprouting everywhere like weeds.

“Eventually, a breaking point was going to come. Muezza could see that. Smoky Clan couldn’t continue to grow without attracting attention from actual humans. Muezza had to think fast: Smoky Clan thrived in industrial land and neglected, rundown places. The Big Green was turning into precisely that all around Leafy Clan, but we held our borders, reminding Smoky Clan that even a paw inside our land would bring about bloodshed, however much it seemed like paradise to them.

“But then Muezza found his solution when humans put Big Green up for sale. This would give him a threefold victory: he could buy the land and turn it into whatever he liked, thus making yet more money in the process. Leafy Clan would be no more. And after leaving the land to deliberately degrade and decay, Smoky Clan would be there to expand into the new territory.

“So there you have it. Now you know who Muezza is, how he came to be, and what he

means to do to us all. He won't stop at Leafy Clan; he'll pave over every last one of us, and further. He just wants more, more, more. He will not stop. He truly is the monster that will destroy all Clans.”

* * *

Lilypad finished talking, and head bowed, she lapped at the puddle to soak her dry throat. Puzzle and Tom sat opposite, faces frozen in horror and disbelief. Tom couldn't bring words to form in his mouth. It all fitted, it all made sense, yet now the truth had been revealed, it seemed far worse than what Tom could have imagined. This beast – this murderer! – had somehow wormed his way up to become his father's right hand man. He'd never liked Muezza; something had always seemed off about the guy, but never could he have even imagined such a bizarre truth behind this man – or rather, *cat*.

So Muezza had trapped him to steal his humanity, not just to remain as a human, but to

stop Tom from clinching his father's business and Jacobsen Park, so he could expand Smoky Clan. And it was Verbrisser *International*: how many more wildcat Clans across the world did he enjoy playing God too? How many other people had Muezza done this to in the past? Were there cats in Smoky Clan that had once been human too but had long forgotten their roots in those dark surroundings, unaware their ringleader stole their life? Tom privately thanked his lucky stars that he'd managed to get away and cling to who he really was; he guessed that staying at home for the first day, as well as being around Puzzle, had helped him to cling onto his memories. And yet his heart sank: no mention had been made of cats turning back to humans after being a victim of Muezza. Was there any way back? For all he knew he could be chasing an impossible hope.

“But...” Puzzle stammered, as though trying to find fault in the story, “But Lilypad, the prophecy says that the monster will destroy the Clans. How can that be, when Muezza is helping one out?”

“He *will* destroy all Clans, Puzzle,” Lilypad said, her voice sharp and dark, “Think about it. With no other Clan to contest against, Smoky Clan will cease to exist. When they become everything, they’ll be nothing. And it would only be a matter of time before the Clanship between them breaks down, and soon all that is left is a mass of rogues scrapping over leftovers in a miserable tangle of concrete and sewage.”

Puzzle shuddered at the thought.

“There must be something we can do!” she mewed desperately.

“There is,” Twig grinned, “Something has happened to Muezza recently that has caused him to panic. What it is, we’re not sure, but he’s making mistakes because of it. He’s lost his secrecy, as you know: he used to operate in the background, hiding behind the Smokies: now the word is out of his return. And his focus has shifted from growing Smoky Clan to searching, looking for something, or someone. If we can find out what – or who – is causing Muezza to worry, we *might* be able to exploit it.”

Tom felt Puzzle's eyes flick fretfully his way, but she wasn't the only one. Once again Lilypad watched Tom carefully, awaiting his next move. He looked down at his shaking paws.

"It's no good, Puzzle," he shuddered, "I...I have to tell the truth."

"T – Tick, what are you talking about, eh?" she laughed nervously, giving him a cuff around the ear, "Poor little thing, it's way past his catnap."

"I know what I'm doing, Puzzle," Tom raised his voice, more confident this time, "You heard what Twig said. It may be our only hope."

Puzzle looked down at Tom, her eyes pleading, "Don't do it..." she hissed, "You'll only make things worse..."

"What are you two wittering about?" Twig smirked, "You Cobby Cats are a quirky lot."

Tom turned to Twig, chin raised, paws together.

"Twig...I am not Tick. I am not a Cobby Clan cat." The words sounded unnatural, "My name is Tom Verbrisser, and I am one of his

human victims who escaped Smoky Clan thanks to Puzzle here. I am what Muezza is looking for, and I am why he is panicking: because I think I can stop him.”

Chapter Nineteen

Gathering Night

Apples and Pipes perched atop the brink of the hill, watching night roll in from the east. A brisk breeze from the north rattled through the barn and buffeted their fur. Pipe's nostrils flared, and she peeled back her lips to taste the air.

"They are coming," she meowed, "I can smell them."

"How far are they?"

Pipes licked her lips. "I can't tell, but they're moving quickly. I...I don't think they're beyond the big rumblepath yet."

Apples nodded. "Good. That'll slow them down, whichever way they choose to cross it. Come on, let's go warn the others."

They turned and headed back into the warm barn. The air crackled with tension, and many tails swished nervously through the air. Apples bound up to the platform. She didn't need to

call the Clan to attention: already the entire barn had their eyes trained on her.

“They are coming,” she repeated, “They will be here before long. Do you all know the plan?”

Silent nods.

“Have the kits and queens been taken to Over-river Camp? Do you all know what to do if a retreat is called?”

More nods, but this time a fiery growl broke the silence; “Retreat? Never! Our Clan is worth thrice their number. We will have them beat with one paw tangled in tail.”

It was Fuzzy. His scars stretched along his taut face, his one eye flashing with hunger. Yowls of agreement broke out around the barn, and Apples felt their spirits rise. Fuzzy had the right idea, Apples decided with a grin. Time to change tack.

“Smoky Clan have gone too far this time,” she bellowed, “Never has one Clan launched all-out war on another. Muezza or no Muezza, they need to be taught a lesson. And there’s only one

Clan strong enough to teach them. Who is that Clan?”

“COBBY CLAN!” the barn roared to the first stars.

“Who are we?”

“COBBY CLAN!”

The nerves had burned away, leaving raw energy coursing through their limbs as they bellowed their feral screams to the skies.

“All right!” Apples shouted over the noise, “First team, stay here and await the call. Second team, head for your hiding places. Third team, follow me. We will meet our enemy on the hill.

Apples leapt down from the platform as cats shuffled out of the barn, tails held high. She met up with Pipes.

“I’m staying here, right?”

“Yes. You’re in the last line of defence, but we may call on you if the battle gets hairy.”

They nodded to one another.

“Good luck.”

“See you later.”

They parted, and Apples led a vast clowder of Clan cats clomping across the night-dark grass, up the hill. Once more Apples stood on the brink, staring at the inky blots of Smoky territory in the distance, watching the darkness creep up from the trees below.

Darkness? That was no darkness. The Smoky Clan cats came pouring from between the gnarled trunks and thorns, swelling up the hill in a hissing swarm. Apples felt fury and fear ripple through the ranks behind her: whatever number they were expecting to battle, this was at least double that. Just how could such a vile terrain support so many cats? The ground quaked under the sheer number of paws stomping up the hill.

Apples peered through the murky mounds of fur bounding towards them. No Muezza. She shredded the grass underpaw. Even if this whole battle brought Smoky Clan's attention away from what was important, she really hoped Muezza would fall for the trap too. Had he seen through their trick, and headed off after the others?

She shook herself down. It didn't matter. These Smokies were a threat either way, and this battle had been building up long before Muezza emerged on the scene.

The Cobby cats crouched, fur and ears flat, growls rising in their throats as the enemy rolled near. Just as Smoky Clan drew within pouncing distance –

– they stopped.

Caught up short, Apples nearly tripped over her paws to pull out of her battle leap. Smoky Clan fanned out in a long line, facing the flanks of Cobby Clan. They snarled and bared their teeth and claws at each other, but neither side moved an inch.

“What’s going on?” Apples yelled at the Smokies, “Aren’t you here to fight?”

“That depends!” Billow stalked out from the rows of sneering faces, “It all depends on your answer.”

“Answer to what?” Apples snapped irritably, “What’re you mewling about, you miserable piece of scrapstock?”

The smoky cats astride Billow flinched, awaiting their Leader's torrent of fury to unleash itself. But it didn't. In fact she threw her head back in a cackling, cracking roar of laughter.

"Are your memories that of a fish?" she said, "Muezza left you with an ultimatum. So, will you hand over Tom?"

Apples bristled. "Enough of this Tom business! We don't know what you're on about."

"Oh, is that so?" Billow's lip curled, "How about a Tom Verbrisser?"

Apples felt her insides knot up. Murmurs shivered through the ranks behind her.

"What in the name of Scatterleaf..." Apples couldn't help spluttering a spasm of laughter, "Drinking all that sour milk has sent you loopy, Billow! Tom Verbrisser is a *human*. We hardly speak for him; what makes you think we'd be protecting him? I can't think of a human I'd be less inclined to care for."

"You are wrong in so many ways, Midtail," Billow said in a dangerous, soft whisper, "Tom

Verbrisser is not a human. Muezza turned him into a cat using his gift, and he now roams amongst your lot. You know him. You're quite fond of him, I gather. You call him Tick."

Apples felt the ground beneath her paws crumble away. The knot in her stomach disappeared along with all her insides, replaced with cold, hard ice.

"N-No..." she gasped, "It...it can't be..."

"I tried to tell you," Billow cracked into a broken grin, "Doesn't it all seem obvious now? How he's *always* around Puzzle, his strange way of talking and moving...how he just *appeared* from nowhere, the very moment Tom disappeared?"

Apples tried to block the words out, but they drilled into her mind...yes, it did make sense. Cold, suffocating sense. She looked down at her paws.

"So, there you have it!" Billow bellowed to the stunned Cobbies, "Demonise us all you will about harbouring Muezza, at least deep down he is one of us. It is you who have the true monster in your midst, the one of your feared prophecy.

Tom Verbisser, the Nestbreaker; the one who tears down camps, rips families apart and leaves you sleeping alone with nothing but the stars for company while he sits snugly in his big nest.”

Anger boiled up in the Cobby ranks once more, but this time it wasn't aimed at the Smokies. Billow's silver tongue worked its terrible magic, her words lapping around their ears.

“So, what will it be? Lead us to him, and you will be unharmed. We will take care of him, and us Clans will be rid of that terrible human once and for all.”

Silence. Jaws clamped shut. The wind whipped through the still lines of Cobby cats, tugging at their fur and swirling dead leaves around them. Apples looked up from her paws, looking their leader straight in the eyes.

“No.”

Billow flinched. Claws stretched to their full extent, she took a step forward. “What did you say?”

“NO!” Apples roared. “Now you listen to me, all of you!” she looked at both opposing

forces as she spoke, “Billow may say that Tick is Tom Verbrisser. She is probably right. But do you know what? It doesn’t matter.”

Gasps bubbled up behind her at these words:

“Apples, how can you say such a thing!”

“That Tom Verbrisser is a menace.”

“Remember Under-bridge camp? Wonderful place, best camp outside the barn...gone! And for what? So that *monster* could build some more of those ugly nests for humans to lounge around in!”

“LISTEN TO ME!” Apples shouted over the yowls of fury. They subsided, and all eyes trained on her: some confused; many angry. “I of all cats know how much damage Tom Verbrisser has done. Because of him, I was separated from my littermates forever. I...” she paused, swallowing down a choking sob, “I know it’s tough to believe, but maybe...maybe he isn’t as monstrous as we think. He saved my life, don’t you remember? And that night he was Tailed, he stayed and fed us all, even in the face of all our sneers. And he’s out there right

now, trying to find an answer to the real problem – Muezza!”

“Muezza is not your enemy!” Billow retorted, “He will unite us all, bring untold prosperity to the Clans!”

“Oh really? And his idea of uniting Clans is to make them fight each other?”

Billow snarled, but took a step back. Apples turned to her Clanmates.

“I’m not asking you to forgive Tom,” she pleaded, “But if we must punish him, let’s do so on our own terms, not by selling ourselves out to Muezza and his friends here,” she pointed her tail at Billow, who bristled and snarled, “And consider this; at least Tom is trying to atone for his past mistakes. He has come down to our level, into Clan life, and has he turned tail and run back to his nest? No! He’s stuck by us, he wants to help...”

Apples words sounded hollow in her own ears, and she watched in despair as her Clanmates bowed their heads, eyes hooded. They didn’t believe her...did she even believe herself? Tom had saved her life, yes, but she

nursed a hard, heavy hatred for the Nestbreaker, one that wouldn't be budged. She pictured the tiny black-and-white cat, and imagined her claws shredding him to pieces; sweet, satisfying revenge flowing in her veins.

No! How could she think such a thing? She wanted to hurt Tom so badly, but was that wrong? To do so would be siding with the Smoky Clan and Muezza, wouldn't it? Her thoughts crashed into one another, her mind was a mess: the confused mutterings and mewls behind her told her Clanmates were as torn as she was. Billow sensed advantage, and sneering wickedly stepped forward again, her Clan following behind her.

“So Tom is ‘out there now’, is he? He is not here? No matter. Muezza suspected as much, that's why he's gone elsewhere to hunt him down.”

Apples thoughts crumbled further: Muezza hadn't fallen for the trap! This whole battle was going to be a pointless waste, and what for? To help a lying monster who she wanted to hurt herself?

With no warning, Smoky Clan cats crashed into her like a wave, claws and teeth tearing at her fur. She yelped with pain, and shook her dazed mind clear, swinging herself free and delving into the ranks of Cobbies. Battle had been joined, but her Clan were no longer in a fighting mood, their fury blunted and bent. Even as Apples raised her tail to signal for the second team to help, before she was pummelled to the ground by Brick, she knew they had already lost.

* * *

“Tom Verbrisser? You?”

Tom nodded. He’d barely raised his head when a claw struck him deep across the cheek, sending him spinning onto the puddle.

“What –?”

“MURDERER!” Twig had reared up, face twisted with untold rage. He lunged down at Tom, and he tried to scabble away, but Twig caught his tail, dragging him back and twirling him around, bringing him eye to eye with the

Leafy Clan leader. His breath reeked of mashed berries and woodpigeon.

“Tom!” Puzzle’s shriek was cut short with a soft *thump*.

“Twig, what’s going on?” Tom blurted out in a fevered panic, “What – what did I do?”

“What did – oh *ho ho ho!*” Twig bellowed big booms of laughter. Tom heard the bushes rustling below: Leafy Clan were waking up to see the commotion. “That is rich, *Tom Verbrisser*. What did you *not* do?”

“I don’t understa – *ooof!*” Twig landed a strong blow to Tom’s stomach, and he keeled over, retching up the Leafy Clan’s food. The world swirled, his eyes seemed too big for their sockets. “I want to help!” he gasped weakly.

“Steady, Twig,” Lilypad held her tail in front of him.

“Help us?” Twig choked on the words in disbelief, “Can you undo all the damage you did to Big Green? Can you bring back the nests of cats we’ve lost to those hulking great Rumlbers who tear our home down? All those dead kits and their mothers, all the elders looking forward

to enjoying the respect and freedom they earned after all their Suns of service?”

“*That wasn’t me!*” Tom could feel the side of his face beginning to swell, stretching his skin painfully, “*I never had anything to do with the park!*”

“LIAR!” Twig boomed, “I’ve seen you stalking around here with those plans, talking to the other humans. So what’s your big idea this time, Verbrisser? You plan to cage us all up and make us Petters? I’d rather die!”

“You’ve got it *wrong!*” Tom tried to raise his little voice to a yell, painfully aware of all the eyes of the Leafy Clan cats gathering below burning into his fur, “This place means a lot to me too! I...I knew someone once, and I lost her. This place reminds me of her. I don’t want Big Green to be flattened! That’s what Muezza wants to do! I want to clean the place up, plant new trees –”

“*Enough!*” Twig bellowed, “I don’t believe a word, and even if it were true, your plan is selfish and typically human. I know your type Tom; I spend many days gazing beyond our

shrinking borders in despair watching your kind in all its foul glory. You spend each and every day caring for nothing but yourself, living in your own bubble, not caring what damage your greed and want does to others. And even when you think you're doing something good, something selfless, it isn't – it's still for your own benefit, your own ego. You don't care about anyone else, cat or human. As long as you get what you want, nothing else matters.”

Tom opened his mouth to retaliate, but the words faltered in his throat. Twig was being so unfair, but his words hit him hard, the truth in them pitting in his stomach. Did he really care about these cats' problems, or was he just here to get at Muezza? Did he want to restore Jacobsen Park just to make himself feel better? He didn't want to believe it, tried to convince himself there was a kernel of goodness in him. But however hard he looked in himself, he found nothing: only rot.

Then he turned to look at Puzzle, her eyes glinting with the light of fireflies and stars, and everything fell into place. No, there was one

other he cared about. He wasn't entirely rotten. He could change.

He turned to Twig, lifting his chin, and was about to say so, when several things happened at once. The bushes near the rocks rustled, and two cats tumbled in – Tips and Malt! Every cat swung their eyes and ears around to face the newcomers, who looked up at the rocks to gaze open-mouthed at Tom and Puzzle.

But before any cat could utter a word, the bracken on the far side of Dapple Glade trembled, and in stepped a wave of Smoky Clan cats, teeth and claws bared.

Then chaos broke loose.

Chapter Twenty

Ravines and Rooftops

Tom toppled from the rocks as Twig shoved past, and stone and leaves whirled before him. Something snagged his tail before he smashed his skull on solid ground. He swung in mid air, Puzzle clutching his tail in her teeth.

“Gotcha!” she growled.

Not for long. Claws raked along Tom’s cheek and snagged in his ear, dragging them both down. He crashed onto the grass below, and – *oof!* – Puzzle crashed on top of him. She scrambled up, pulling Tom to his paws. “You okay?” she eyed the side of his face. Tom felt warm blood trickling down his ear and along fresh scars on his left cheek.

“I think so,” he wheezed. He gazed around. The Glade had descended into a whirlwind of churning pelts, flashing claws and fearsome

glares, vicious yowls erupting as Smoky collided with Leafy.

“They’re attacking here too!” a distressed gasp met Tom’s ears. He wheeled around. It was Malt, Tips just behind her, padding up to meet them.

“What are you two doing here?” Puzzle yelled over the noise.

Two Smoky Clan cats leapt from the seething battle and bowled into them, hurling Tom into the rock face. Once again the breath was knocked out of him, and he staggered on swaying ground as Tips tussled with a dirty white pelt and Puzzle pinned down another, her teeth sank in his neck.

“What do you filthy rats think you’re doing?” She demanded, growling through a mouthful of scruff, “Creeping around other’s territory is bad enough, but this is all-out war you’re declaring!”

The Smoky Clan cats wrestled free, and made for Tom. Tips, Malt and Puzzle formed a barrier before him.

“You don’t like it? Don’t blame us,” one Smoky Cat hissed, and he nodded at Tom, “Blame your friend Tom Verbrisser there for causing all this.”

Tips and Malt looked over their shoulders at Tom, and he shrank back against the rock. Blood mingled with sweat, dripping down his face.

“What does he mean, Tick, you’re –” Tip’s confused eyes rounded, and the truth hit him like a rock, “No...you can’t be...”

Malt, the cat Tom had uprooted from her home three times, looked at him with eyes brimming with despair. It was the worst blow he’d suffered that night.

Puzzle stepped between them, running her tail over Malt’s and Tips’ shoulders.

“Yes, he is Tom Verbrisser, my pet,” she said as calmly as she could muster, “But it’s more complicated than you think. Let’s get out of here first, and we’ll explain when we’re safe.”

They looked from Puzzle to Tom, and slowly, they nodded. Together, they turned to face the ongoing battle. Clumps of fur flew

through the air, in place of the fireflies that had long since deserted Dapple Glade. Tom's heart pounded so fiercely that he could see it fluttering the white fur on his chest. With Puzzle in front of him and Tips behind him, they plunged into the fray. Tom peered through squinted eyes as they ploughed through the cats, pelts and claws pressing down around him. The mingled scents of sweet Leafy Clan and acrid Smoky Clan stung his nostrils, making his eyes water.

"Yeowch!" Long claws sank into his flank, dragging him down and away from his friends. A paw smashed into his chin, making him bite down on his tongue. As he gagged on the pain, two brutal eyes burned into his, the stench of Smoky Clan wafting into his ears.

"You're mine, now Verbrisser!" It was Slick. He dragged Tom up to his paws, only to strike him down again with a vicious swipe. Tom blinked blood from his eyes. A few whiskers fluttered into the grass, and his nose throbbed. "I'm taking you to Muezza, but first..." he

licked his lips, jangling the teeth on his collar, “I’m going to have a little fun.”

Tom swung out with his claws. Slick leapt effortlessly aside, rolled, and slammed into Tom’s flank. Now he was on top of him, teeth bared. Slick clamped his jaws into Tom’s upper lip, biting down on a tooth.

Tom gasped. “No! *No – AAAAGH!*” A long fang ripped from his mouth. Fire shot into through his skull, and hot blood filled his mouth. Confused shapes darted around him. Slick grunted as something heavy slammed into him, disappearing into a flurry of swirling greys, blacks and browns.

“Tom!” a shout pierced his ears. He glanced wildly around, the surrounding battle sliding in and out of fur. A slender shape of mousy fur weaved it’s way to him: Malt. “Tom, what did he do to you? Where’s Puzzle?”

“No time!” came Tips’ fevered call from somewhere, “The Leafies are losing; we need to get out of here before we’re taken too!”

Malt glanced wildly around, then down at Tom. “Come on,” she breathed. She turned,

draping her tail over Tom's shoulders, and led him swiftly through the maze of whirling paws and snarling faces. At last, a wall of green faced them: the bushes! They were nearly out! But with one step forward, two dark cats slid before them, kicking up dirt and dust.

"Ratchet!" Malt shrieked, *"You yellow-furred, backclawing little –"* Malt launched at him, leaping high, and slamming down hard on Ratchet. The other cat dived at Tom. Tom rolled to his side, claws extended, and dashed them across the cat's length. She yowled, and sped away, tail between her legs.

Tom turned just in time to see Ratchet bolting away too, Malt padding back towards him, eyes flashing. "Now let's get out of here," she grunted.

Casting one last look across the battle for Puzzle, Tom turned and barrelled into the bracken after Malt and Tips.

"We're not safe yet," Tips gasped, their paws pounding over old leaves and twigs, "The battle will be over soon. Quickly, let's find a hiding spot before they send out a search party."

The bushes opened out onto sprawling woodland. Everything shimmered in cold moonlight. The air was fresh and cool, and the bushes muffled the noise of the battle behind them. If he didn't know better, Tom could've believed all was peaceful in Jacobsen Park. But his wounds told a different story: his face felt ravaged, blood still seeping from his cheeks and ears, and when he opened his mouth to take a nervy breath, more blood spilled from his lips. The gum where his tooth had been felt raw and torn, and when he pressed his tongue to it a sharp pain lanced through his head. Tom imagined Slick weaving his tooth into his necklace, laughing and telling all his Clanmates who he'd taken it from. Tom's claws sunk deep into the moss as they padded over a soft hillock.

Victorious yowls sounded behind them. Maybe Leafy Clan had won? Maybe they could go back and fetch Puzzle? Tom didn't care if it meant facing Twig again, and getting twice as many injuries. More than ever he needed her at his side.

“That was Smoggy’s voice,” Tips whispered, “Smoky Clan have Leafy Clan beat. They’ll be looking for you, Tick. Or should I say Tom?” the spike of anger in his voice made Tom’s neck fur prickle, mingled with the cold fear that Puzzle was in real danger. Before Tom could reply, Tips turned to Malt, “We should hide. Search parties will be crawling everywhere any second now.”

Malt was already heading for a thick bush. Tips and Tom followed, and up close, Tom saw it wasn’t a bush at all, but a tree, with its trunk and roots delving into a ravine, obscured by brambles and gorse. The edge of the woods lay nearby, and Tom could taste the stench of decay and rust from the nearby dump, even over the tang of his own blood.

“I saw them head this way!” Ratchet’s yell echoed around them.

“First one to bring that Verbrisser to me gets first pick of the scrapstock for a moon!” Slick declared, followed by the distant thumps of many paws.

“Quickly!” Malt hissed, “Get in!”

He followed her and Tips, pushing through the layer of thorns and into the canopy of the sunken tree. As silently as they could, they jumped lightly from branch to branch, lowering themselves into the damp ravine below. Tom could hear the brook below, frothing and sloshing it's way through the outcrops of slimy rocks.

Tom's paws met soft, peaty earth, and the darkness pressed on his eyes so tight that only the sounds and scents Tips and Malt were near. He could feel their tension, brittle and spiky, bearing over him. Sweat run down the blood crusting on his scars.

"L-listen, I owe you two an expl –"

"*Ssssh!*" Malt's tail gagged his mouth. Paws thundered over head.

"Which way?" a nasally sneer from above.

"I dunno, do I?" A thuggish grunt. Shadows rippled over the brambles above, "This ain't my territory."

"They could be anywhere by now!" a shuddered hiss, accompanied by the angry thud

of paws, “Okay, let’s split up. Oilface, come with me. Smoggy, go with Blockhead.”

The pawsteps faded away, one group delving deeper into the trees, the other heading for the dump. A long silence stretched out as they waited. Then, up close:

“Who’s there?”

All three spun round, splaying leaves and dirt. Two dark shapes shifted in a nearby fissure in the rock face, and out strode Twig and Lilypad.

“Twig!” Malt bowed her head, followed by Tips. Tom backed away, “Our apologies. We didn’t realise you were hiding here too. Do...do you want us to leave?”

Twig shook his head. “*You two* are welcome,” he said pointedly, glaring at Tom. Tips glanced at Tom, his eyes working quickly. What was he thinking? Tom didn’t try to look pleading or defiant: he simply stood there, his scars aching as Tips searched him with his stare. Then he turned back to the Leafy Clan leader.

“Sorry, but he’s with us,” he said, bowing his head once more, “If he leaves, we do too.”

Tom felt a wave of gratitude pulse through him. Lilypad blinked slowly, and muttered silently. Twig grunted. “You realise who he is, don’t you?” he growled, “He is Tom Verbrisser.”

“Yes, I am,” Tom admitted, “But it’s more complicated than that.”

“You’re a greedy murderer and that’s all there is to it!”

“*NO!*” Tom’s patience frayed: he was tired, bruised and battered, cats were baying for his blood and his best friend was...well, he had no idea what had become of her. “Look, I want to be out there right now looking for Puzzle, but I owe my *friends* here an explanation, and they’ll get one. You can listen or you can ignore me, Twig, I don’t care. You have sat through Muezza’s story: now listen to this *monster’s* story.”

And without waiting for a reply, Tom launched into his story from the beginning.

* * *

“See sense, Noodles,” Odd-Eye sighed for the umpteenth time that night, “Muezza threatens us all. City Clan are no safer than the rest of us.”

Odd-Eye and Sir Paws crouched in an alley, looking up at a scruffy Persian cat, big in many ways, sprawled luxuriously atop a skip. He yawned, dangled his front paws over the edge, and took a few noisy slurps from an old can of tuna.

“Mmm, tasty,” he swiped his tongue around his muzzle. His voice was deep and rich, “You sure you won’t have some?” he nodded at the tins open before Odd-Eye and Sir Paws. The greasy scraps reeked of everything but fish.

“No thank you, Noodles,” Sir Paws said curtly, “Now please: answer Odd-Eye.”

Noodles stretched into a wide, lazy smile. He flicked his tail, and two City Clan cats pattered out from behind a pile of bin liners: Moonlamp, a sandy tabby Midtail with wide, curious eyes, and Alley-Oop, a grumbling Smalltail with spotted Ocicat fur. They scooped the tuna tins from before Odd-Eye and Sir Paws,

and gobbled the contents greedily. Odd-Eye peered at the she-cat's pudgy bellies: surely they couldn't be hungry? This Clan had grown fat and lazy on human leftovers.

"In your own time!" Sir Paws snarled at Noodles.

Odd-Eye ran her tail across Sir Paws' shoulders. "Steady now."

"I'm sorry, Odd-Eye," Sir Paws twitched with impatience, "but we've been standing here since sundown and we've gotten nowhere. I know so many ways to open a tin can that I think I've forgotten how to hunt – which explains a lot!"

Noodles such grinned, "Such anger, Cobby Deputy. How I run my clan is my business. Now, my answer. I believe you are fretting over nothing. Muezza is a problem to his own Clan and no other; just because he has made his presence known doesn't mean he is any more of a danger than he was yesterday or the day before."

"But –"

“He is one cat, Odd-Eye,” Noodles said soothingly, “Even the most powerful of cats can’t pose a threat to an entire Clan, and your Clan are anything but weak.”

Odd-Eye dipped her head at the compliment, but worry still tangled the fur on her brow. Noodles slid down from his perch on the skip, grunting as he hit the floor, and ran his tail over Odd-Eye’s neck.

“I thank you for your warning,” Noodle’s deep voice rumbled through Odd-Eye’s skin, “We will look out for him, and yes, Sir Paws, we will attack if necessary. You may see City Clan as soft, but our territory brings as many dangers as it does comforts.”

At that moment, a metal door creaked open, and harsh, unnatural light streamed over them. A human bared down over them, brandishing a big stick with a fluffy end and yelling in a high-pitched, scratchy yowl.

“Run!” Noodles commanded. Alley-Oop and Moonlamp streamed out of the alley after him, Odd-Eye and Sir Paws hot on their tails. The Cobbies followed the City Clan cats as they

waved through the maze of alleys, onto a zig-zagging fire escape stairwell and clambered upwards. Odd-Eye had to hand it to them: they may look out of shape, but the Cities could certainly shift when the moment took them.

Up and up they climbed, the metal stairs clanging under their paws. Smells streamed from the windows they passed: some mouth-watering, some eye-watering. The wind buffeted her fur, peeling away the grimy, dirty feel that clogged Odd-Eye's pelt. And still higher they went, the night sky stretching open overhead. At last they reached the rooftops, and the City lay open before them.

A gasp caught in her throat: the vast towers of the Big City glittered in distance, their mosaic of lights melting into the stars. All around them the rooftops heaved and dived like waves, smoke and steam drifting idly from the tall and stout chimneys littered everywhere. They cast a haze, rippling the sight of the rumbler's glaring eyes of white and red far below. Odd-Eye had never considered human nests to be especially pretty, but she had to

admit, in its own way, the City was beautiful. Looking at Sir Paws next to her, his wide eyes flashing with the lights mingling with the stars, she could tell he was impressed too.

“It’s getting late,” said Noddles, “We should head back to our headquarters. You’re both welcome to join us, if you like.”

“That is very kind of you,” Odd-Eye pulled her eyes away from the Big City, “I hope it isn’t a burden.”

“Not at all! We have plenty of give, as you can tell,” Noodles gave a good-natured chuckle, his belly jiggling, “Let’s go.”

They weaved, leapt and scrambled over the uneven rooftops. Odd-Eyes senses buzzed with how quickly everything shifted around them. One minute light drenched them, the next they were plunged into darkness. A tasty scent hit the back of her throat, rapidly replaced by something rotten and fetid.

“Yo, Boss! What’s up?” A cat stepped from the shadows. Odd-Eye recognised him: it was Pads, the City Deputy. He was a handsome Russian Blue cat, trim and bright-eyed. His

smooth grey fur blended perfectly into the concrete and gravel. His nostrils flared, and he sniffed the air. “Do I smell Cobby Clan?”

“Yes, Pads,” said Noodles, “Their Leader and Deputy. They’re our guests for the night.”

“Cool!” Pads nodded to Odd-Eye and Sir Paws, “Follow me; the headquarters are just over there.”

Pads bounded away, and instantly Odd-Eye saw why he was so in shape. He leapt across the vast chasm between rooftops, almost seeming to fly, and landed with plenty of space to spare.

“Show off!” Noodles called.

“You’d know, Boss!” Pads shouted back, and they both laughed.

Noodles turned to Odd-Eye and Sir Paws. “Don’t worry, we don’t expect you to jump that far. This way.”

He led them to a wide, flat metal vent that formed a bridge across the street humming far below. “We can’t get into the vent, so we have to climb over it,” Noodles explained.

“What?” Sir Paws snorted, “You’re kidding. The wind’s howling, that thing won’t have any grip, *and* it’s so far to the ground that the humans look like beetles.”

“We get by. Look,” Noodles pointed with his tail, and sure enough, Moonlamp and Alley-Oop were nearly at the other side. Noodles eyes glinted mischievously, “You don’t want a soft City cat showing you up now, do you Sir Paws?”

A growl rising in his throat, Sir Paws barged past Noodles and stepped carefully out onto the vent. His claws clattered on the metal. Odd-Eye followed him, the wind tugging her sideways, then whipping quickly in the other direction. She staggered, and Sir Paws propped her up with her tail. Together they crawled carefully across. Odd-Eye didn’t dare look down, but she didn’t need to: the street noises were almost silent, reminding her just how far she could plummet.

Before she knew it, her paws hit solid concrete again. Noodles was right behind her.

“Ah, home at last!” he licked a paw and stroked his long whiskers with relish. Odd-Eye looked up. In the centre of the flat rooftop stood a collection of four huts that looked like human nests, only smaller. Noodles, Alley-Oop and Moonlamp led their guests to the biggest one, while Pads leapt back and forth over any obstacle he could find.

“It’s quiet,” Noodles whispered, “Very quiet...” They rounded a corner, and an open door gaped before them.

Pads stopped his jumping around, and froze beside his Clanmates. “Where’s the guard patrol?”

They exchanged brief glances, then barrelled into the Clan headquarters. Odd-Eye shot after them, Sir Paws at her side. Her sight quickly adjusted to the cool darkness within. Crowds of cats were present, but something was very wrong, and it was clear straight away what it was: every pair of eyes were clamped on the problem. A leather-skinned, white-coated human stood tall over the Clan, holding a cat in one hand, and grasping a blade pointed at the

cat's neck in the other. His teeth glowed in the night.

“Good evening, Odd-Eye,” he said silkily, “We really need to talk about Tom.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Stay Rotten

Tom crashed across the opening, shouting after June. Finally, when he caught up with her, she stopped and turned. They were right in front of the old oak tree again, but the atmosphere couldn't have been more different. Mere minutes ago, they had been lounging in it's shade together, not a care in the world. But now, June glared at him with a disgust she'd only ever reserved for Daniel. Tom stepped back.

“What...” he scrambled for words, “What’s wrong?”

“*What’s wrong?!*” she repeated shrilly, “Well, if you can’t see what the matter is, then there really is something wrong with you.”

But Tom was having none of it: he was too pumped with adrenalin, too giddy with just how well he'd pulled off his revenge to begin

apologising. Especially when he didn't know what he was apologising for.

He shrugged. "Enlighten me."

June jabbed a finger back at the clearing, still thrumming with the stunned crowd. "That was...what you just did to Daniel was..."

"Genius?" he offered.

"*Evil!*" she corrected.

"Eh?" Tom frowned, pulling a pained smile, "Where'd you get that from? June, he treated us like scum for years."

"And that gives you an excuse to do the same back, does it?"

Tom paused, sensing the thin ice cracking all around him, but he barrelled on ahead. "Yes. Yes, it does."

Now it was June's turn to take a step back. Her face smoothed out: she didn't look angry now; it was a look of horror. For some reason this hurt Tom even more.

"Well, then you are no better than he is," she said matter-of-factly, "He acted a git, fine, but all you've done is scare him, made him cry and beg."

“And that’s bad how?”

“Is that what you want, Tom?” she was shouting now, “For people to be scared of you? Have people tip-toe around you for fear of your oh-so-awesome power?”

“It’s called respect, June.”

“That wasn’t respect!” she jabbed a finger at his chest, “You *earn* respect. You think Daniel respects you now? You think he hates you less after that stunt?” She lowered her voice, hissing at him like an angry cobra, “I’m warning you; if you keep doing this, all you’ll have is people hating you, and one day it’ll catch up with you.”

Tom swallowed, but recovered in an instant. Tom Verbrisser drew himself up. “Well, that’s just fine by me.”

A silence opened out between them. Without a word, June shook her head, turned, and walked out of his life. Tom stayed until dark, sitting under the oak tree, revelling in his victory. When he’d look back on this day in years to come, however, he’d see it as the day that both made him and broke him.

* * *

“So, there you have it,” Tom ended his story, “That’s how it happened.”

Tips, Malt, Twig and Lilypad sat stock still as Tom recounted everything, their eyes filled with varying degrees of disbelief. When he finished, they remained silent, as though expecting more.

“So...you’re Tom Verbrisser.” Malt said at last. Tom shuddered. There was no anger in her voice, but that only made it worse. He nodded, bracing for someone else to lash out at him.

“I know I’ve done wrong,” he pleaded, “None of this is an excuse. But I understand now, I—”

“*Do you?*” Malt’s voice cracked, “Do you *really* understand, Tom? Have you been woken from your bed to find your nest crashing down around your ears? No? Well I have. *Three times*. You separated Apples from her family, too. You nearly killed Tips. Cobby Clan lost a whole camp under your concrete. How can you

sleep among our Clan knowing what you've done?"

"I..." Tom had no words to say. He hung his head.

Twig stepped forward. "He thinks that just because he's felt a bit of pain tonight, and spent a bit of time in Clan life, that he understands, that he's changed."

"That's not true!" Tom squealed, wincing as his cuts blazed with a fresh stab of pain.

"Isn't it?" Twig's eyes flashed in the darkness, and he sunk his claws into a piece of fruit nearby. Tom couldn't tell what fruit, though, for it had shrivelled into a blackened mush, teeming with maggots. "This is rotten. It will stay rotten. You are no different. Any attempts you make at trying to change or be better are just fake, and you'll always fall back into your old ways."

"But —"

"I trusted you," said a small voice. It was a moment before Tom realised it was Tips. His eyes shone with tears. "Odd-Eye told us all to trust you, that trust breeds truth, and any secrets

you had to hide weren't for any dark reason. But I didn't trust you because my Leader told me to, Tom! I trusted you because you're...you were my friend. I've been so *stupid*! You were faking everything: it was all a lie!"

"I *am* your friend!" Tom pleaded, "That's real, I swear."

Tips fixed him with cold eyes, thin as a paper cut. "I don't believe you."

It was the hardest blow Tom had taken all night, more so than the pulling out of his tooth. Tips turned away to face Malt.

"We have to go City territory now, to tell Odd-Eye what is happening in *our* Clan," he said, voice cold and even, "A battle we're fighting to keep *you* safe, Tom. Don't follow us."

Without another glance at him, Malt and Tips walked away, clambering up the tree. The cat who'd been punished for helping in his First Duties, who he'd made homeless three times; and the first cat in Cobby Clan to accept Tom as a friend, whom he'd lied to, and almost killed without knowing it. They pushed out of the

bramble roof, and were gone. Tom stared down at the darkness enveloping his black paws. His eyes felt hot, welling up with stinging tears.

“So what will you do now, Tom Verbrisser?” That wasn’t Twig’s voice. Tom looked up, blinking back the watery film on his eyes. Lilypad had stepped forward, her mottled fur shimmering with energy. Twig stiffened, looking as if he wanted to scold his Deputy for talking to the Nestbreaker, but said nothing.

She took another step forward, so close that their whiskers touched. “Well?” she whispered, “Do you have nothing worth fighting for?”

She touched noses with him, and a spark flickered in his belly, dispelling the darkness. *Yes.*

“Puzzle,” he breathed. Just the mere thought of his beloved Toyger cat made him feel better. But she was in trouble, maybe worse.

The time for words had ended. He looked up at Twig. Stamping on the rotten fruit, he darted out of the ravine, fresh energy driving him up through the branches, not caring if the Leafy Leader and Deputy followed him. He leapt out

into the woods, and immediately tucked behind another bush as a Smoky Clan patrol passed, heading back to the glade. Keeping his distance, he followed them until they disappeared under the bracken barrier. Carefully, pushing his belly to the ground, he crept through, placing one paw in front of the other as noiselessly as he could muster until Dapple Glade swam into view through the leaves.

His heart did a backflip. The Leafy Clan cats had been shunned into tight bunches, tied together with long strands of thorny branches. The cats yelped as they struggled, the thorns pricking at their fur. Smoky Clan cats swaggered between them, snapping their jaws at their captives and taunting them with cruel jibes.

“Look at ya! Tangled up in your own plants!”

“You’ve all gone soft and yellow-furred on those berries!”

The patrol Tom had followed back weaved their way towards the rocks, where Slick perched. Tom’s tooth glinted on his neck, still

flecked with his blood. Rage boiled in Tom's veins, and it took every scrap of will not to leap out and challenge him.

"Any sign of him?" Slick snarled.

"None, Slick," said the head of the patrol, "We've done a sweeping search of the eastern side of the woods. We picked up a weak scent of Cobbies, but we lost it amongst all the Leafy markings."

Slick's eyes burned, and he ran his claws through his tooth necklace. "Never mind. Our spy knows this territory. She might have better success."

Tom only half-heard the words: he cast his gaze over the bundles of Leafy cats, trying not to get distracted by their saddened eyes and drooping whiskers. *There!* A flash of a tiger's pelt, and Puzzle struggled from behind a bunch of prisoners, wrapped up in a twine of thorns of her own. *They must really think she's dangerous...*

Her scuffling caught the Smoky cats' attention, and they bounded over to her, teeth bared.

“Well, well, it seems we’ve taken *another* Cobby hostage today!” Slick chuckled, “Only this time, I don’t think there will be a heroic rescuer to come save you.”

Tom had no idea what Slick was talking about, and neither, apparently, did Puzzle. She writhed and tossed back and forth, fighting her binds, but thin red marks scored down her back from the thorns.

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Puzzle growled, “You really think Muezza is going to lead you all on to greatness? He’ll destroy *all* the Clans! He doesn’t care about you; he wants what’s best for him.”

“Scatterleaf foretold Muezza earning his gift for the good of his Clan!” Slick bellowed, “And everything is working out just as it should. Your Clan should be cowering at Billow’s paws right about now – if they aren’t already dead, of course.”

“LIAR!”

“Am I?” Slick’s eyes glittered with malice, and he extended a long claw, pushing it under Puzzle’s chin. She held still, gritting her teeth.

“The time of four clans is up, petter Bigtail. It’s time for a new era. And nobody, not even you Cobbies, can stop us.”

“There is one.”

“Oh, really? And who might that be?” Slick’s eyes rounded as she caught Puzzle’s gaze, and he doubled up with laughter, “*Verbrisser?* Stop Muezza and the whole of Smoky Clan? Pull the other paw!”

“You don’t know Tom like I do!” Puzzle snapped, “You don’t see what I see when I look at him.”

Tom’s heart gave an extra-hard thump.

“Oh yes? Well, let me tell you what I see.” Slick bashed Puzzle to the ground and held her down, his necklace jangling. “I see a human-turned-cat, a failure at both. Not even his own Clan will trust him now, not after Billow runs her silver tongue around those sensitive ears of your Clanmates. And stop Muezza? Please: he ran out of here with his tail between his legs, shielded by his friends. And they’ll abandon him once they find out who he is, too. And it’s

just a matter of time before our spy comes dragging him back like the drowned kit he is.”

Tom felt his ears burn. A twig snapped behind him.

Tom wheeled around. Ratchet and another Smoky cat loomed over him, claws extended.

Before Tom could move, paws wrapped around the dark cats’ chests and dragged them away, silent as the wind. Tom didn’t dare move. Then two cats padded towards him – different cats this time. Twig and Lilypad.

Tom tensed, wondering if this new pair was an improvement or not. Twig’s eyes flashed, but not at Tom: he looked over his head to gaze at the sorry sight in Dapple Glade.

“Those...those...” Twig tailed off, chest rising and falling fast. He ground his teeth so loud that Tom’s fur spiked, worried the Smoky cats might hear. But they were still gathered around Puzzle, interrogating her. Tom didn’t like the way Slick kept licking his lips. His open gum throbbed. He couldn’t let it happen to Puzzle, he just couldn’t.

The plan seeded in his brain came to bloom with a flash, and he bounced away.

“Where are you going?” Twig hissed.

“I’ll be back,” Tom whispered, “Wait here.” Lilypad merely blinked as he whirled around and pelted back through the trees, past the ravine and beyond the trees, into the dump. He looked high and low through the mountains of garbage piled everywhere: the mish-mash of stench, from rotting and putrid to acrid and metallic, made him gag.

Finally, he found what he was looking for: an old radio. It was battered, missing a lot of parts, but when Tom turned it on, it buzzed and crackled with noise. Using his paws and teeth, he twisted the tuner and extended the aerial until he found a radio station that had lots of talking. “Yes!” he flicked off the radio, gathered the handle in his teeth, and plunged back into the forest, all four paws scuffing through the earth, leaves whipping at his ears.

Before long, he was back in the barrier surrounding Dapple Glade, and Twig and Lilypad watched him with suspicious interest as

he laid the radio down. His heart pounded, and not just from the run: either this would work, or it would make things far worse.

“What are going to do with that?” Twig sniffed the radio, recoiling at its smell.

“Does it smell like human?” Tom swallowed down the bitter taste on his tongue.

“Down to the last bitter tang,” Twig spat.

Tom took a deep breath: “Good. Now, just do as I say – and trust me.”

Then he leapt up and slammed his paws back down, making a flurry of noise as leaves shook and twigs snapped.

The heads of the Smoky cats swung round to look their way.

“Who’s there?” Slick demanded, “Oilface, Blockhead, go check that out.”

Two cats swaggered their way. Lilypad and Twig eyed Tom in horror and disbelief, but he paid them no mind. Quickly, he turned the radio on, and turned the volume up to full. A man’s deep, booming voice made the growth around them quake. He droned on with the news, but if he was right, the cats wouldn’t

know that, and sure enough, Twig and Lilypad eyed the radio with fear and unease.

“It won’t hurt you,” Tom whispered to them, and he pointed out into the clearing “Look.”

Sure enough, the patrol heading their way had halted, and all eyes in the glade darted nervously around. Slick pawed the leaves, unsure whether to stay still or run for it.

“Make some noise,” Tom whispered to the Leafy Leader and Deputy. Cottoning on, they stomped through the undergrowth and shook the bushes, unnerving the cats even more. Tom moved the radio back and forth, to make it seem as though the human was moving closer, fighting through the barrier. Slick opened his jaws to taste the air, and immediately choked.

“*Gah!* Humans!” he yelled, “Let’s get out of here!”

A lot of the cats were already bolting back through the barrier, towards their territory, but a few hesitated.

“But...Slick, what about the prisoners? And Verbrisser? Our spy may have found him.”

“Forget Leafy Clan! The humans will finish them off! And as for Verbrisser...” rage bristled from his fur, “If *she* finds him, she knows what to do. Now, *retreat!*”

The Smoky Clan cats seemed to shrink with fear, their once vast, fearsome shapes turning to kittens before Tom’s eyes as they darted from the Glade, leaving Leafy Clan alone, confused and terrified.

Twig bounded over to Tom, beaming, Lilypad just behind him. “That was brilliant!” he purred, “Quick, let’s go and free the Clan.”

“You go ahead,” said Tom as he picked up the radio in his teeth once more, “I need to see Smoky Clan off properly with this, to make them think they’re being chased.”

“Good thinking,” Twig ran his tail over Tom’s shoulders, “Good luck; we’ll see you in a while.”

Tom leapt into the clearing along with Twig and Lilypad, but bounded straight after the Smoky Clan cats. *I can talk to Puzzle in a moment: she’s safe now*, he told himself as he crashed into the bushes, the radio so loud that it

vibrated against his chest. A weight lifted from his shoulders: *safe. She's okay.* He charged forward with extra vigour, and ahead he could hear the Smoky cats blundering out of the trees, their terrified shouts echoing around the wasteland.

“They’re gaining on us!”

“Then stop talking and *run!*”

“Back to headquarters!”

Tom stayed well hidden, flicking from skip to tree stump, making sure he stayed close enough to the Smoky cats to keep them scared, but not too close to be seen. The radio echoed through the night, making it sound as though there were many more humans around. He even deliberately bashed into a tottering pile of trash, bringing it crashing down and sending the Smokies into an even greater panic.

Finally, Tom spotted the wire fence, and watched with a satisfied smile as a torrent of cats leapt up and over the fence, streaking away through the murky darkness towards the towers of chimneys and factories beyond.

And stay out! Tom yelled in his mind. Spitting the taste of plastic from his tongue, he turned the radio off and hid it behind a smashed old television. As he turned to head back, he tripped over an old rabbit hole, and caught sight of the burnt out oak tree...

A single leaf, fresh and green, had uncurled on the tip of a branch. The rotten skeleton of the tree was not dead, after all. New life was breaking through the old shell, delicate and vulnerable, but alive all the same.

Tom nodded respectfully to the tree, and headed back to Dapple Glade. All the cats were freed from the thorns, licking their wounds and talking in hushed tones. As Tom weaved between them, their eyes burned on his fur. The stares weren't pleasant, but they weren't hostile either. Twig must have told them what had happened, otherwise they would have clawed his whiskers off by now. Most seemed to be numb with disbelief: was this cat really a human? And had this cat-human just saved them?

Tom didn't dwell on them: he was looking for only one cat. Where was she? Panic dripped into his veins: what if the Smoky cats had taken her? What if they'd done something to her when he'd been busy making noises in the bushes? *No, please don't let it be true...not Puzzle...*

"Tom! *Tom!*" a familiar yowl pierced the air from the rocks, and Tom caught sight of the tiger pelt and golden eyes near the Leader's cave. Relief, warm, delicious relief, flowed through him like a river of sunshine amidst a rainstorm. He bolted through the crowd, leapt up the rocks and buried himself deeply in Puzzle's fur.

"You're okay," his voice cracked slightly, "I'm so glad you're okay..."

Puzzle swiped her tongue over his ears. "Of course I'm okay, you silly hairball!" she chided gently, "There's nothing that can bring Puzzle down."

Puzzle rested her chin on his forehead, her purr rumbling in his ear, massaging his aching head. They stayed like that for what must have

only been a minute, but felt like hours. Tom would have happily stayed there all night, until Twig's call rang through the glade.

“Leafies! Come gather, I have much to tell you.” He jerked his head at Tom and Puzzle, inviting them up to the rock.

The Clan crowded at the foot of the rockpile, all eyes on Tom once more. Tom tried to stand straight, but his pads ached. Puzzle seemed to notice, and forced him to sit down.

“Now, it's true what you have heard,” Twig called loud and clear, “This cat —” he placed a paw on Tom's shoulder, “ — is not Tick, Smalltail of Cobby Clan, but the Nestbreaking Tom Verbrisser.”

Tom felt his insides dissolve as the looks below turned sour, and teeth glistened at him.

“But,” Twig went on, “I admit I made a mistake in judging him so quickly. He knows he's done wrong, and he doesn't want to make excuses or ask for your forgiveness. He asks only to be given another chance to put things right, and he could well be the one who can stop Muezza once and for all.”

Tom couldn't have put it better himself. Slowly, the glares below softened, and one by one, they nodded. A chocolate tail rose into the air.

“Yes, Mossylog?” said Twig.

“Was...was it Tom who scared off Smoky Clan?”

“Yes, indeed it was – his knowledge of human devices came in handy. We owe Tom a great deal.”

“You owe me nothing,” Tom said flatly, “Not after everything I've done. If anything I still owe you.”

Lilypad's eyes sparkled. Twig drew himself up. “Tom, I was wrong. Look,” pierced on the end of his claws was the same rotten piece of fruit he'd compared him to earlier.

“It may be rotten, but it is not the end.” Twig turned to a patch of soft soil between the rocks. He squashed the old fruit into it. “From the old rot, you can feed and cultivate new beginnings, and start afresh.”

Tom understood, and his mind wondered back to the fresh lone leaf on the beech tree.

“We should head to City Clan,” he said. “Tips and Malt headed that way to find Odd-Eye. Maybe she’s found something out by now.”

Puzzle hesitated, her eyes flicking westward. “But...Slick said Smoky Clan had attacked the barn,” she said, “Shouldn’t we head there first? To see if they’re alright?”

“We will send a large patrol of Leafies to the Cobby headquarters to help,” said Twig, “it’s the least we can do.”

Puzzle’s shoulders relaxed. “Thank you.”

Twig nodded, his eyes scanning the murmuring crowd: “Berrybunch! Dewdrop!”

The curly-haired ginger and the silky silver cat emerged at the bottom. “Yes, Twig?”

“You two are our best runners. Accompany Tom and Puzzle to City Clan.”

“Wow, an adventure!” Berrybunch bounced on the spot. Dewdrop smiled, eyes on Tom.

Twig quickly organised a large squad of cats and sent them scuttling out of the bushes to Cobby territory with their orders. He insisted the four travellers grab a few berries and a piece

of prey from the scrapstock to eat before they left. Tom wolfed down the food gratefully, and it wasn't until he licked his lips clean of the last flecks of rabbit did he realise that he'd eaten the fresh prey without thinking twice. Looking around the clearing, seeing the cats bustling back and forth, talking and getting wounds seen to by Sickkits...this was his life now. It all seemed so normal. He may have come out as Tom at last, but he felt less like his human self than ever.

“Let's go!” Berrybunch meowed in his ear. She shivered visibly with excitement. Puzzle and Dewdrop quickly joined them.

“May the prey run freely with you,” Twig called from atop the rocks, “And the leaves of Scatterleaf guide your paws.” He looked at Tom, and nodded. Tom bowed. With mews of best wishes from the Clan ringing in their ears, the four cats bounded out of the Glade, heading east for City Clan. He looked to the horizon. Through the rush of branches, he could see the tiniest flecks of grey light: dawn. *The final day.*

* * *

The Cobby cats scattered in disarray, screaming and yowling. Apples slid on a pool of blood, slamming into the ground. Fuzzy's good eye stared blankly back at her from where he lay on the ground, utterly still.

Apples gasped, and blundered away, joining the cats pounding away from the barn. All around her the horrors of battle swam up to her. Cats injured and bleeding; cats disfigured with huge clumps of fur missing; cats slumped on the ground, completely still.

"Retreat!" Apples yelled again into the night. She looked back down the hill. Billow stood proudly next to the barn door, her Smoky Clan swarming all around it.

"That's it, RUN!" she roared, "The barn is ours, now! And soon, we'll come after you in your nests and camps and Petter homes, and claw your necks in your sleep! COBBY CLAN IS FINISHED!"

She trembled with laughter, the rest of her Clanmates joining in her victorious gloating as they watched Cobby Clan pound away.

Apples looked at the sorry sight, darkness creeping around her eyes. The heart of her Clan had been torn out, and soon the rest would fall. Good cats, friends, had died in vain. And all for what? To buy Tom Verbrisser some time?

Blinking back furious tears, she turned, and followed the fleeing cats up the farm path, away from their lost home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Backslawer

“Never,” Odd-Eye growled, “In all my Suns of being a Clan cat, did I think one of our own kind would sink so low.”

“Or soar so high,” Muezza corrected her coolly, jabbing the knife further into the cat’s neck.

“Let Macki go!” Pads snarled, “You...you dirty, hind-leg walking, stinking little –”

“But I’m not, human, Pads,” Muezza cut across, “Listen. I speak your words. Don’t worry Noodle, I’ve filled your Clan in – they know the story. They know I’m Muezza, and they know I’m not their enemy.”

“What? *You’re* Muezza? But –”

“Your real enemy is Tom Verbrisser, isn’t that right?” his eyes flashed over the crowd, daring them to defy him. The assembled cats looked at the sharp blade digging into Macki’s neck, and nodded, “Forgive my...ah, hands-on

approach, but I'm only trying to help rid you of a threat. You City Clan cats know all about Verbrisser, don't you?"

More nods, genuine this time.

"Don't listen to him!" Sir Paws growled, "He's *Muezza*, for Scatterleaf's sake! How can you trust a cat who isn't a cat anymore?"

"Silence!" Muezza gave a short jab with the blade, and a thin trickle of blood oozed from Macki's neck, matting her fur. He cleared his throat and slicked back the few strands of hair that had fallen over his eyes. His face was one of sombre duty. "Now, I'm asking you, all of you, to find Tom and deliver him to me. My trouble is yours, Clanmates: we must rid our world of this fiend, together. What do you say, Noodle?"

Odd-Eye turned to stare at the City leader. The relaxed, pudgy face had transformed into a fierce, hard-edged one, looking like his leaner, younger self. He raised his chin to look Muezza in the eyes.

"I say you leave. Now."

Muezza's mask of kindness melted away, his leathery skin crumpling into an ugly grimace. He dropped Macki, kicked his way through the cats, picked up Noodle and threw him against the back wall. The thud of the huge cat slamming against the metal wall mingled with the cracking of bones, and Noodles dropped out of sight. Cats swamped over him, rippling with mews and distress and despair.

"I'll be waiting in the old packing room overlooking the river below," Muezza replaced his knife, "You have until midday. After that, I can promise nothing."

He bowed, and left the headquarters. Odd-Eye stood rooted to the spot next to Sir Paws, stunned, watching the City cats gather around their leader. A yowl broke out over all the others:

"He's dead!" it was Moonlamp, "Noodle, no...you can't be!"

"NOODLE!"

The City Clan cats descended into shocked silence, punctured by wails of grief. Odd-Eye couldn't believe what was happening, the room

seemed to shimmer in a surreal haze: she'd known Noodle for so long, seen him endure so many things...and now he was dead, and it it took was a throw from Muezza. *So easy...so cruel...surely they'll see he's the danger now, she assured herself, surely they'll side with us?*

Pads, the City deputy, stood nearby, his head bowed, tears dripping onto his big paws. He wasn't deputy any more. With a sharp intake of breath, the new City Clan Leader drew himself up, his shining eyes glaring straight at her. With a jolt Odd-Eye realised that many more cats were staring at her and Sir Paws now, brimming with anger and sorrow.

"We don't want any more trouble, Odd-Eye," said Pads, walking slowly towards them, "So tell us where Tom Verbrisser is."

"Pads, don't be hasty, now," Sir Paws warned him, "Obeying Muezza will just make things wor—"

"Tell me where he is!" Pads yelled, *"Now!"*

Odd-Eye and Sir Paws backed into a corner as City Clan closed in around them. At that moment, Malt and Tips charged in. Tips took

one look at the scene before him, and sighed: “Not again.”

* * *

Puzzle, Tom, Berrybunch and Dewdrop trekked through the bleak Park in single file. Shards of glass and brick bit into Tom’s pads, throwing up plumes of dust. The night sky washed a pale grey, and the outline of towers rearing into the sky loomed up from the gloom before them: the City. But that wasn’t what caught Tom’s attention: to their left was a hill, smooth with velvety grass, and perched atop the hill were four vast trees stretching into the sky, their thick canopies mingling.

“What’s that?” Tom asked Berrybunch, pointing his tail at the hill.

“Scatterleaf,” Berrybunch whispered, “The heart the Clans. So many fates are decided there, so many important decisions made on the messages it gives.”

Tom felt a ripple of recognition shiver through him. So, that was the famous

Scatterleaf he'd heard so much about. Even the chirpy Berrybunch fell quiet and sombre in it's presence. The Clan cats seemed to respect the place like it was sacred, but he couldn't help feeling cynical. How could messages be read from fallen leaves? He'd always been sceptical about that stuff...but then, he *had* been turned into a cat.

As these thoughts sailed though his mind, a brisk breeze whipped up and pulled at the fur of the travelling cats. From atop the Scatterleaf, a stream of brown and orange leaves streamed down the hill and flew past Tom's nose like a flock of birds. They seemed to whisper...

You...must...fall...

They passed, sailing on the wind, heading south. The other cats stared at Tom as though he'd just appeared on the spot.

"What?" Tom squeaked.

They looked at each other, as though wondering how much to tell him.

"Nothing," Puzzle said at last, before turning and padding away, "Come on. The sooner we get to City Clan the better."

Jacobsen Park finally came to an end, and once more they were consumed by a tangle of streets weaving between buildings. But this wasn't like Cobby territory, where quiet streets meandered lazily through quiet, leafy estates. The roads hummed with traffic, even at this early hour. Traffic lights blazed their colours, mingling with lit windows and the street lights. The tall buildings hunched tightly over the roads and pressed right up to the cracked pavements, littered with road signs and posters.

Tom knew these streets well. Many of his first development projects were here. They passed one of his swanky studio apartment blocks. How different it all looked from a cat's perspective – he felt small and insignificant in the face of his work, and yet...after everything he'd seen, his work didn't seem insignificant...it seemed pointless.

They waited for a quiet moment, and as one they darted across the street, seeking refuge in an alley. The stench of old takeaways and chip fat hit Tom's nose like thorns, and judging by

the disgusted expression of his companions, they were none too impressed either.

“Who are you?” a shriek rang shrill through the alley, “What do you want?”

Tom wheeled around, and a cat stood atop a dustbin, his greasy fur raised, eyes glowing in the darkness. So, this was a City Clan cat. Tom had seen these cats around town before and dismissed them for strays. But a whole Clan, living where humans were literally stacked on top of one another? Where did they all stay?

“Cobby? And Leafy? Don’t borders mean anything to anyone anymore?” The cat’s eyes skirted across the group and froze on Dewdrop. After the briefest of pauses, Dewdrop turned to them.

“I know City Clan a bit,” she explained, “Let me handle this.” With a flick of her tail, she and the City Clan cat moved deeper into the alley to talk in subdued murmurs. Tom perked up his ears, and overhead a snippet of the City cat’s words: “We’ve already had four Cobbies visit us tonight!”

Tom's heart gave a jolt. That had to be his friends! But then cold ice crept through his chest: were they still his friends? Tips and Malt would still be angry with him. What would they tell Odd-Eye and Sir Paws? Rather than finding answers, he could be walking deeper into trouble. A fist clenched around his lungs, making it hard to breath.

“You okay?”

Tom turned around. It was Puzzle. He looked into her warm eyes. The fist loosened, and he breathed again.

“Yeah,” he sighed, watching an old piece of newspaper flutter in the fetid wind, “I’m just scared of what we’re walking into, that’s all.”

Puzzle wrapped her tail around him, and pulled him in closer. Her skin radiated warmth through her fur. “Don’t you worry about that. Odd-Eye will think of something, she always does. You’ll be back to being a human in no time.”

“I guess...” Tom trailed off. To his surprise, he hadn’t thought about turning back into human for a long time.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” Puzzle frowned at him.

“Of – course it is! It’s just...” Tom pawed the ground, not daring to meet her eyes, “Well...I’ll miss you, Puzzle.”

“What?” Puzzle snorted, and she clipped him playfully over the ear. Tom felt a strange thrill rush through his head as she did so. “I’ll still be here, hairball! You’re still my pet!”

“Not like that...” Why was this so difficult? He knew what he wanted to say, but if the words to say them existed, they escaped him. “I mean...I won’t be...”

His awkward words were cut short as Dewdrop and the City Clan cat sauntered over. Dewdrop looked very pleased with herself.

“Okay, we’re in,” she declared, looking from Puzzle to Tom, “Odd-Eye is at their headquarters, and she’s waiting for you.”

“She found the answers?” Tom blurted out. It seemed too good to be true.

“It appears so,” Dewdrop smiled, “Roofio here says they’ve cracked Muezza’s plan, and are ready to take him down. But they need you,

Tom. It looks like it's all true: you really are the key to it all."

"They're expecting you," Roofio meowed, already leaping up onto the dustbins and up onto a rusty stairwell, "We'd better hurry."

As they followed Roofio and climbed higher, relief washed over Tom like a river. Those few words had told him so much: that Odd-Eye knew about Tom, and wasn't angry about who he was; that she knew how to stop Muezza and his plan to destroy the Clans; and most importantly, it seemed she'd figured out how to help Tom get back to normal. Because that was the most important thing.

Wasn't it?

They emerged onto the rooftops, where the wind was fresh and powerful. Roofio led them over the obstacle course of tiles and ledges, with Dewdrop bringing up the rear. Tom's paws felt heavy, and his head felt as though it were lined with lead. The end of this crazy adventure drew near. So why wasn't he happy? His time as a cat had been hell! All his injuries and scars still gave him a dull ache with every step. And

yet...had it been all bad? There had been moments, simple moments which, on the surface, didn't seem special, and yet there had been *something* about them: tricking crows with Puzzle and Malt; sleeping in the Smalltail den amidst his Clanmates; hunting with Puzzle; eating and talking with Leafy Clan...

“Almost there,” Roofio meowed, snapping Tom out of his deep thoughts, “Just need to cross this bridge.”

Bridge? Tom stared at the vent Roofio pointed to with his tail. It stretched high above a street, joining onto the building on the far side.

“You must be joking!” Puzzle’s eyes were wide, “You’re telling me you City Clan cats cross that thing to get to your headquarters *every day?*”

“It’s not the only way,” Roofio admitted, kneading the gravel at his paws, “But the other entrance is a long way around, and we don’t have time to waste.” Roofio eyed the sun nervously as it climbed steadily into the sky. Tom could sense Dewdrop tense behind them. Something seemed...off.

Roofio padded onto the vent. Reluctantly, Puzzle followed, with Tom close behind. The vent was cool and smooth on his pads, but the wind howled, and he couldn't grip it. He spotted a trail of claw marks in the surface, scratched right to the edge and into oblivion. A shudder rattled through his bones. Keeping his eyes fixed firmly on Puzzle's tail, he walked steadily forward. He became painfully aware of himself, so exposed and vulnerable up here. One strong breeze would be enough to –

Claws clutched around his tail and swung off the bridge, pulling him down. Heat flushed to his face as he clawed at the vent, but they scraped smoothly over the metal: he slid away, helpless; his paws found nothing but air; he was falling...falling...

“AAAAGH!” hot pain lanced down his spine as needles pierced his scruff. He had frozen in the air: something, or someone, had grabbed him, but he couldn't twist up to see. The weight still clung to his tail, feverishly digging in sharp claws. He was about try and swing it off when it made a terrified yowl: Berrybunch!

“Heeeelp!” she screamed, flailing back and forth and tugging at Tom. The needles in Tom’s neck dug further in, and he groaned.

“Stop fidgeting!” a gasp came from above: Puzzle. A bead of sweat trickled through Tom’s fur and tingled his skin, “Dewdrop, Roofio, help me pull them up!”

There was a scramble above, and Tom lurched upwards. Tarmac and sky whirled before him, and his paws slammed back onto solid metal. He crouched as low as he could to the vent, wanting to feel as much of the hard surface as he could. The grip on his tail fell away, and the vent shuddered as Berrybunch slumped down next to him.

“What happened?” Puzzle demanded, her voice rippling through Tom’s fur.

Berrybunch pulled herself up on her hind legs, but it was Dewdrop who answered first.

“She slipped,” she explained quickly, “The wind caught her around the back legs and sent her over the edge.”

“That wasn’t a wind that hit me!” Berrybunch protested, “It was something solid – some...someone...”

All eyes were on Dewdrop. Her expression changed from wide-eyed and fearful to dark and hooded. A memory resurfaced in Tom’s mind.

“You!” Tom blurted out, “You’re the spy Slick talked about. You’re the Leafy Clan traitor!”

Dewdrop took a step forward. Berrybunch scrambled back, crushing her, Tom and Puzzle together.

“Taken you that long to figure it out, eh, Verbrisser?” she sneered, “Yes, I tried to kill Berrybunch, and I would’ve let you all fall if Tom wasn’t oh-so-special.”

“What do you mean? You’re on Muezza’s side, you backclawer!” Puzzle snarled, “What do you care if we die?”

But Dewdrop didn’t answer. She cracked into a wicked grin, and pounced at them.

“Run!” Roofio yelled. In an instant they darted away, all fear of the bridge gone. Tom heard Dewdrop slam hard onto the metal

surface, and he had half a mind to turn around and see if she'd fallen off, but he didn't dare slow up. They darted after Roofio onto the flat, wide rooftop beyond, and headed for the cluster of huts in the centre. He didn't hear the backclawer Dewdrop pursuing them: maybe they were safe at last. But Roofio didn't slow. He stopped next to an open door, leading into inky blackness.

"In here," he heaved, "Quickly, now. Odd-Eye is waiting."

They bolted in. Tom's eyes rapidly adjusted to the darkness, but his mind was slower on the uptake. This wasn't what he'd been expecting.

Odd-Eye and the others were nowhere to be seen, yet he smelled Cobby Clan present amidst the stares of the City crowd: they were here. But the only Cobby cats he could see were the ones he least expected to see – Saxon, flanked as usual by Holly and Juniper, standing guard at a locked door. Something cold and hard pitted in his stomach. He knew who lay trapped behind it.

He turned back to the City Clan cats, ready to demand answers, but the stares he'd glanced briefly at before now hit him full-force with their hunger and hardness. They stalked towards them, as though they were prey ripe for the shredding.

"It's a trap," Puzzle mumbled in his ear, "On my word, we turn and get out here. Ready? GO!"

Puzzle, Tom and Berrybunch wheeled around – and slammed into two muscular, furry figures. Dewdrop and Roofio stood at the entrance, blocking the only way out.

"You're going nowhere," Dewdrop grinned, brandishing rows of razor teeth, "Someone has been waiting a long time to see you, Tom. It would be rude to leave now."

Berrybunch shuddered beside him. Puzzle drew herself up.

"*Backclawers!*" she roared, "All of you! Don't tell me you've all sided with Muezza? Have you all got hay in your head?"

A few of the City Clan cats recoiled, but one strode forward.

“Sorry for the rudeness, Puzzle,” he said, “But I must protect the Clan.”

“Pads?” Puzzle peered at him as though she couldn’t see him too well, “What do you mean, *you* must protect the Clan? Where’s Noodle?”

A palpable wave of grief rippled through the room, and sorrow glazed Pads’ eyes. “My point exactly,” he croaked, “Now, *seize them!*”

Puzzle spun on the spot once more and tried to force her way past Roofio and Dewdrop. Tom and Berrybunch did likewise, pushing hard at the cats, but it was useless: they might as well have pushed at the wall for all the good it did. In a heartbeat, claws clamped around every part of Tom’s back, dragging him backward. Everything whisked past in confused flurries of fur and angry caterwauls. He was carried helplessly away on a wave of City Clan cats, and with a pang of terror realised he was alone: Puzzle and Berrybunch were gone, nowhere to be seen or heard. He writhed and wriggled for all his worth, kicking out with his tired legs, but reams of claws and teeth scored along his skin,

forming a lattice of fresh cuts that paralysed him into stillness.

“Throw him down the chute!” a cat roared, “It’s the quickest way!”

The words were met with yowls of agreement, and Tom winced as sunshine blasted in his eyes. The clowder hustled him to the roof’s edge. They were going to fling him over! Tom fought with every drop of strength in his small body, but the cats holding him were too strong and numerous. The world turned – and he was staring down, not at the busy street far below, but into the endless depths of a rubbish chute. The innards were a grimy yellow but the bottom couldn’t be seen, shrouded in shadow.

“I’d like to say we’re sorry, Tom,” the voice of Pads whispered in his ear, “That we’re doing this only for the good of the Clan, but that’s not the only reason. You’re Tom Verbrisser. When Muezza kills you and leaves us in peace, we’ll be rid of two enemies in one swipe. So long.”

An almighty push in the back sent him hurtling into the chute. Jeers and cheers drowned his ears, soon fading away under the

sound of his own body thudding and scraping against the sides of the chute. Down he plunged, tumbling through the foul air. He tried to grab onto the sides, but snagged and snapped a claw. Then the chute curved inwards, levelling out, and he slid along the chute on his back. He thumped along the rough joins, but relief shot through him all the more: he'd be okay! He wasn't going to end up splattered on the pavement after all!

But his relief was short lived. The chute abruptly ended, and he burst out into a heap on a dusty floor. Stiffly, he clambered to his paws, and gave himself a quick shake. He gazed blearily around. The room was small, dry and empty, save for the chute perched through the filthy window behind him, and the entire wall facing him, which wasn't a wall at all, but giant glass sheets overlooking the grey River Thames below. Tom limped over to look at it. The murky depths churned and whirled with silent energy.

The stench of sour milk wafted past. He bristled.

“I’m surprised you never snapped up this room before, Tom,” a voice behind him drawled, “Good solid walls, lovely view, centre of town...well, I guess we all make mistakes. Some more than others.”

Tom turned. Muezza towered over him, his knife in a gloved hand, a smile on his face. “I made a mistake the last time I let you escape. Not this time.”

Blood surged in Tom’s veins. He planted his four paws on the ground. “I was just thinking the same thing,” he spat.

“So what now, Tom Verbrisser? You’ll attack me?” He crouched onto bended knee, as though Tom were a stray he was trying to entice into his embrace.

“If I must,” Tom sounded calmer than he felt.

Muezza threw back his head and howled with laughter. He wiped a tear from his eye.

“*Purrlease*,” he put on a drawling purr so catlike that it made Tom’s skin ripple, “Even if you found some strength in that feeble body of yours to overpower me before I carve you to

pieces, you won't harm a hair on my human head because of what I have."

The words slammed Tom in the chest like a clawed blow. "The way to turn back to being human," he gasped.

Muezza grinned.

"T-Tell me now, you madman!" Tom blurted the words out before he could stop himself, "You want to be a man? Then face me fairly and squarely."

Muezza scratched his chin in mock thoughtfulness; "Interesting point you raise there, Verbrisser. Perhaps I will...HA! Come off it. Do I strike you as the kind interested in fair play? I do whatever I can to get what I want – you of all people should know that."

"You're a monster, that's what you are!" Tom raised his tinny voice as loud as he could muster, "You're insane! You *kill* to get what you want! You think you're a human! I don't know anyone who would stoop so low."

Muezza swept in like a vulture, scooping up Tom and slamming him against a wall. Muezza's leather glove clamped him to the cold

concrete, the sharp tip of the blade aimed right between the eyes.

“I kill? But Tom, I haven’t killed a human.” Muezza said, still sounding derisive with every word, “All my human victims turned to cats, remember?”

“You know what I mean,” Tom forced his voice to stay even; “You killed your old Deputy and Leader.”

“Oh, so we’re talking about killing *all* creatures great and small are we?” Muezza’s eyes rounded, “So tell me: how many of the Clan cats have you trampled in your quest for glory?”

The pain pricking his forehead drizzled through him like a downpour of needles. He’d heard the stories, he knew how much he was hated amongst the cats: just how many had he *killed*? And then there were the destruction of homes, splitting up of families, destroying lives...

“You have some gall to accuse *me* of being a monster, Verbrisser!” Muezza declared. “You think *I’m* the one consumed by my ambition?”

That I go too far for my wants? That I'm a selfish, soulless excuse of a human being who deserves to be less than the animal he is inside? Look at yourself, Nestbreaker. It is *you* who is the monster, not I."

Before Tom could reply, a thudding and struggling echoed down the chute. Muezza dropped Tom to the ground, and strode over to it just as Puzzle flew out.

"Tom! I –" Her answer fell short as Muezza grabbed her by the neck and pinned her down, knife pushed into her throat.

"Well, that worked out nicely," Muezza smiled, "Now, Tom, let's see how brave you really are when a loved one's life is in your hands."

Tom flushed. *Loved one?* How much did Muezza know? Muezza roared with laughter again.

"You really haven't figured it out yet, have you?" he cackled, "Haven't you been listening? Haven't you heard how I came to be human?"

"Yes, you steal it from other humans, like me," Tom growled, "So what, Muezza? Enough

of the empty taunts, already. You're not going to tell me – without a fight."

But Muezza ignored him, "Precisely. You're not the only victim of mine, Tom, not by a long way." His voice was soft, dangerous and silky, "I need a regular diet to keep myself topped up. But I don't just choose my victims off-the-cuff; I make sure that they're the kind of people who won't be missed if they go AWOL – it keeps the suspicion minimal. I made an exception for the great Tom Verbrisser, for reasons you know. But I made a mistake with one, didn't I? There has been one victim I took the humanity of who has been sorely missed."

"What do you..." Tom staggered to a halt at his own words. The fire in him turned chill. "No...*n-no*..."

"Yes," Muezza hissed, grabbing Puzzle's face and brandishing it at Tom, "Now, look her in the eyes, Tom, and see the eyes of your long lost loved one; June Williams."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Loyalty

Billow stretched out on the Leader's platform overlooking the barn. Her Smoky Clan cats milled around their new territory, spraying their scent around the headquarters and demolishing the leftovers of the scrapstock. But her eyes were bolting and furious as they stared down at Slick and his party of cats.

"Let me get this straight," Billow sneered, thumping her tail against the wall, "You heard human. You smelled human. Then bolted."

"Yes, Billow."

"And they chased you?"

"We heard them follow us back, yes."

Billow's ear twitched. "But you didn't see anyone?"

"Erm...well, err, no..." Slick tumbled over his words, searching desperately for something solid and positive to say, "But we were certain they —"

A yowling from outside the barn cut Slick's jabbering short. Billow flew down from the platform, barged through her chattering Clanmates and squeezed through a hole in the wall. Screech stood guard in the yard with his group flanked around him. Their muscles were tense and their fur spiked, their eyes clamped firmly on the horizon.

"What is it?" Billow growled, as more cats filed out behind her, including Slick and Tracktail.

"Intruders, Billow!" Screech pointed with his tail, "There, towards the sun."

Billow squinted against the blazing morning light. Silhouetted against the sloping field were a line of cats, at least twenty of them. The wind wafted their scent in the barn's direction. Billow's nostrils flared.

"Leafy Clan?" Billow rounded on Slick, who shrunk away against the wall, "Alive and well? You were supposed to finish them off and capture Verbrisser!"

"B-but...we thought the humans would finish them off for us," Slick looked like a mewling

kitten as his snarling leader bared down over him, “We left them tied up and –”

Billow clawed him across the face, sending him sprawling into a haystack.

“Dung-brain!” Billow rumbled, quivering with fury, “You were tricked. And would you like to guess who tricked you?”

Slick stumbled out of the hay, spitting straws. A fresh red scar scrawled across his face, twisted by his furious scowl. He ran his claws across a single fang on his necklace.

“Verbrisser...” he growled through gritted teeth.

The Leafy Clan cats were bolting down the hill now, teeth bared. Billow snorted.

“A fight? Very well...SMOKY CLAN! LINE UP!”

At her call, paws pounded around them, and the ranks around Billow swelled. The Leafy cats froze in their tracks, eyes wide at the vast numbers of that enemy.

“And there’s plenty more where that came from,” Billow murmured to herself, “Come on my Leafy friends, give me an excuse...”

The Leafy cats turned tail and ran. The jeers and laughs of the Smoky cats echoed around them.

“After them!” Billow commanded, “Capture Leafy Clan all over again if you must! I would dearly love to rub it in that smug Twig’s face.”

Rank after rank of cats tore up the slope after their quarry, heading into the bushes beyond.

“Please, Leader, let me go with them,” Slick pleaded in her ear. Billow saw the hunger in his eyes, burning for revenge. Billow smiled: that was the kind of attitude she liked to see.

“You’ll come with me,” she said, “But first, we must check on a certain someone. Tracktail, come with us.”

Tracktail and Slick flanked their leader as they slipped back into the cool darkness of the barn. Already the stench of those Cobbies was fading, swamped under their own. They headed for a small partition. The thuds and yelps met Billow’s ears long before they reached it...*the sweet sound of torture...*

They rounded a corner into the room, where Brick pounded a bloodied mess into the corner.

“Okay, Brick, that’ll do,” Billow ordered, “Go stand guard outside.”

Silent as the wind, the vast cat turned and left without a backward glance. The pulp in the corner didn’t move, it’s fur matted red. If Billow didn’t know better, she would’ve assumed it was an oversize piece of scrapstock. She grinned...*now there’s an idea...*

Then the beaten shape opened it’s eyes, and carefully uncurled itself into a rough cat shape. Billow sensed Tracktail reel behind her.

“Pipes?”

Pipes slumped back on the floor, and coughed up a thick clot of blood.

“Kill me...” she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Billow extended her claws into the hay. “With pleasure, you mangy traitor.” She leapt forward, and –

“NO!” Tracktail wheeled in front of her, standing over Pipes. Billow pulled back just in time, staggering into her deputy.

“Tracktail, you furless little – explain yourself!”

Tracktail switched quickly from panicked to her usual smooth self, “Billow, killing her is too easy! We should draw out her pain as long as possible. Think about it: it would send out a strong message to your Clan,”

“Yes...and our enemies,” Billow nodded, her eyes rounding, “I like your thinking, Tracktail.” She drew herself up, summoning Slick over with a flick of her tail. “Very well. You stand guard over Pipes while we head off to give the Leafies the same thrashing we gave those soft Cobbies. Let Pipes recover – ha, give her prey and water, if you like! – and then we’ll torment her all over again.” Billow’s voice dropped to a growl as low and dangerous as a crackling fire at her final words. With one last glance at the traitor, she turned, and chased after her Clanmates, Slick just behind her.

“Pipes...” Tracktail whispered, “Are you...”

Pipes licked a paw, and stood up, more forcefully this time. Her legs were shaky and not a single inch of her fur was clear of blood,

but here eyes sparkled with defiance. “I’ll survive.”

Tracktail sighed with relief. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Tracktail led Pipes to the scrapstock room. Snarls and hisses were thrown Pipes’ way, and Tracktail could do nothing to stop them, not if she didn’t want to look suspicious. Thankfully the scrapstock room was empty, and she and Pipes ate and drank in silence. Tracktail watched the former Smoky Bigtail thoughtfully as she washed herself clean, wincing at the taste of her own blood. She soon came to something approaching cleanliness, though her many scars still shone red.

“Feeling better?” Tracktail meowed, beckoning her into the farthest corner.

“Much,” Pipes mumbled. The swelling on her cheek made it hard for her to talk.

“Good, because we have things to do.”

Pipes stared at her. “We? You want us to co-operate? Isn’t that dishonourable, Tracktail? You of all cats should know that.”

“There’s no honour left in Smoky Clan, Pipes,” Tracktail said flatly, “Look at us: we forced out nursing queens and kits from their homes, killed cats needlessly, taking territory we don’t need, and...and torture the Clanmate with the most integrity to within an inch of her life. And now Billow has gone to Leafy Clan to do it all over again. I’m...I am ashamed to be part of it.”

Pipes held her gaze steady.

“If there is any honour left in our Clan, it needs saving. But I need your help.”

Pipes stumbled forward and brushed her muzzle against Tracktail’s. The pungent smell of blood rushed up Tracktail’s nostrils.

“As a true member of Smoky Clan, I’m with you every step of the way.” Pipes vowed.

Tracktail stroked her tail over Pipe’s shoulders. “Thank you. Now, follow me. I’ll explain on the way.”

Tracktail turned and headed out the hole in the wall, Pipes close behind her.

“H-Halt!” came a nervy command, “Ah! Oh, it’s you Tracktail...where are you taking Pi – I mean, the backclawer?”

Tracktail turned to face the lone guard. “Ratchet!” she snarled, trying to inject as much fury as she could muster, “I’m taking this traitor into the trees over there to hunt some prey for us – she might as well make herself useful while she still breathes.”

“But Billow said –”

“Are you questioning the actions of your Deputy, Ratchet?” Tracktail bared down over him, teeth exposed, “Shall I tell Billow how a Smalltail went against my commands?”

Ratchet’s eyes bulged. “N-No! P-Please don’t, Tracktail!”

“Then get out of our way.” Tracktail barged past him before he could answer, bowling him into an overturned bucket.

Pipes and Tracktail headed around the back of the farmhouse. The Smoky Deputy made sure they were seen to be heading towards the nearby copse, just in case some cat back at the barn was watching them go. When they delved

deep into the bushes, and Tracktail was convinced they were far from preying eyes and ears, she did a sudden left turn, along a muddy path heading straight into Cobby territory.

“Where are we going?” said Pipes breathlessly. Tracktail remembered her injuries, and she slowed her pace.

“The Cobby cats still trust you, right?” Tracktail turned towards her.

Pipes’ matted fur rose slightly. “Yes...” she meowed cautiously.

Tracktail ran her tail along her flank once more. “Don’t worry; I’m not going to ask you to abuse that trust: quite the opposite.”

“What do you mean?”

“Muezza has headed into City Clan to hunt down Tom, and if the raids on Cobby and Leafy haven’t flushed him out, then Muezza will have him by now. And I know what he plans to do with him.”

Tracktail fell silent for a while. Pipes nudged her in the cheek. “Go on,” she prompted.

“We’re too late to reach him. He have to hope he survives somehow. And if he

does...I'm not entirely sure, but he will need our help to stay alive. We will need to gather some Cobby cats, good swimmers, especially, and head for the bank of the Great River. It may be our only chance.”

* * *

Saxon stood guard at the locked door, feeling utterly miserable, yet knowing he shouldn't be. Holly and Juniper stood at his sides, having freshly earned their Tails at last, courtesy of Muezza. They had been the sole cats to accompany Muezza to City Clan, and now he had the task of standing vigil at the door. Odd-Eye, Sir Paws, Tips and Malt were locked behind. This was a position any Smoky cat would envy, even Billow!

So...why didn't he feel happy?

“Saxon...” a small, muffled voice whispered through, “Saxon, please...”

“Quiet!” Saxon snapped, thumping a claw on the door.

“We’re your Clanmates Saxon! Help us, like we helped you...”

“My Clanmates are Smoky; always have been, always will be.” But did he believe himself? He remembered the way they drove him out, their fangs and claws aching to tear him open...and Odd-Eye...so welcoming she’d been...he could feel her all-seeing eyes boring through him, even through this door.

“Saxon...”

“SILENCE!” Saxon slammed his whole weight against the door, startling Holly and Juniper.

“Well said, Smoky,” came an approaching mew. Saxon looked up to see Dewdrop padding through the City Clan cats towards him, all standing around like they were caught in the glaring eyes of a Rumbler. She perched herself on the other side of the door, wrapping her tail smartly over her front paws, and groomed her chest-fur. She spoke between licks; “It’s high time someone put those arrogant Cobby cats in their place: prancing around everyone’s territories like the boundaries mean nothing.”

“We weren’t trespassing, and you know it!”
Sir Paws growled from behind the door.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Dewdrop shrugged, “As soon as Muezza has finished with Tom, nothing will stand in his way. The Clans as we know them will be destroyed, and those who have sided with him will have more territory than they could ever dream of.”

Saxon paused, mulling over her words.
“And?”

Dewdrop turned to him, eyes narrowed.
“And what?”

Saxon chose his words carefully, “Well...it’s not as if we *need* it, is it? No Clan struggles for prey, not even in winter. And what about all the territories, all the Codes and laws we’ve laid down? Will it just *go*?”

“Every last bit of it. Think of the freedom, Saxon! Think of the space! We won’t need to gather into tight groups to survive anymore; we can be independent, free, just like Muezza! What more could you want?”

Saxon did think about it. He imagined waking up in a lonely nest, padding around all

day on a full stomach, alone, just waiting for the day to end. Then he thought about the life he had in a Clan: close, tight, and teeming with friends, gossip and chores, always changing, always new; to rely upon others and to be relied upon; hunting on an empty stomach, but knowing your catch had to go to a starving kit; to do the bidding of your superiors, facing punishment for breaking the Code but earning the praise of your Clan when you did something worthy of it.

Sometimes Clan life was hard. Saxon would be the first to admit it was frustrating, tiring, and constricting. And yet...

“I want...” Saxon stammered, “I want...”

Dewdrop peered at him. “What do you want?”

Saxon closed his eyes, and sighed. He shook his head. In one swift movement, he sliced through the lock. It fell to the floor with a clunk, Dewdrop watching it tumble across the floor with wide eyes.

And the doors burst open.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Solving Puzzle

Tom's mind imploded. The world shrunk around him and squeezed his lungs, dissolving at the edges of his eyes, inked with the blood pounding through his head, making his hearing roar.

"NO!" he shrieked, "NO, IT CAN'T BE!"

The hunched shadow of Muezza clutching Puzzle swam in a haze. He lost his balance, staggering sideways and crashing to the dusty ground. Only Muezza's toothy grin flashed clear. Everything was falling apart...June...Puzzle...it didn't...couldn't...

"Focus, Verbrisser, before I slit your dear love's throat," Muezza spat.

His words sliced through the whirl of chaos in Tom's mind. He took a long, shuddering breath, drawing stale air into his lungs. His sight steadied to a mere sway, and slowly, carefully, he made his way back onto his paws.

His knees trembled, but he planted his paws wide apart, steadying himself. Puzzle's golden eyes were still on him, peeled wide open in shock.

"Puzzle...J-June..." Tom's eyes prickled with a heat, "Did...did you know?"

"Of course she didn't!" Muezza spat, tightening her grasp around Puzzle's neck. She clenched her eyes shut in pain, "Everyone I steal the humanity from loses their memory shortly after. Oh, I remember her well...what a pretty Toyger cat she turned out to be. I turned her in to the pet store for a pretty price. And her memory loss stays that way: any mention of my name, and it slides off of her like blood dripping from a sharpened blade."

Puzzle squirmed in Muezza's gloved hands, her eyes rolling. This was all news to her, too: what was going through her mind right now?

"I...I..." Puzzle gasped, "But...how..."

"How does Tom remember who he is?" Muezza finished, "Good question, Williams, and precisely why I couldn't let your precious Tom get killed – not yet, anyway. You see, by

dragging him back to his home after his transformation, he clung to his memories. And I gather you exposed the one flaw in the Cream of the Crop? That by recalling it's scent, it cancels out it's effects altogether?"

After all the wires had been pulled out of Tom's head, there were steadily rearranging themselves and plugging back in. The pieces of the puzzle were clicking into place before his eyes, and the terrible truth slowly revealed itself...

"But other victims of mine have exposed the flaw before," Muezza went on, "you're not the first to hang on to your previous life – remember Ratchet? – but they've always fallen quiet over the following days, the full grip of my power draining them clear of their human traits and recall. But *you*, Tom...you have something else, something driving you on, keeping your mind clear, fighting my gift."

"Like the fact I will *destroy* you when I return to being a human?" Tom found his voice, and it was a vicious snarl, "If I have my way

you'll get nowhere near that presentation room tomorrow!"

But Muezza shook his head, his never-ending grin still plastered on his crinkly face, "No, not that. At first, maybe, but something else pushes you onward now, and makes you strong...but what?"

His eyes rounded, and he looked at Puzzle, then back to Tom. Muezza's bolting eyes were like a punch, and Tom staggered back.

"Love?" Muezza scoffed, "You...*love* her, don't you?"

The prickling in Tom's eyes turned to hot tears that watered his eyesight. His throat stuck shut. He nodded, and he turned away, not daring to meet either Muezza's or Puzzle's eyes.

"Say it."

Tom remained silent, the fat tears dripping down and drying in the dust at his paws.

"SAY IT!"

A scraping of a knife.

"Tom! I—"

"JUNE, I LOVE YOU!" Tom screamed for all his worth. The words felt white-hot as they

pushed out of his mouth, their energy surging around the room. Yes! At last he'd said it, and it felt so good, good enough to say a thousand times over. A pleasant warmth rippled through him. But as his gaze locked onto Muezza's, it drained away.

“Hmmm...you love *June*?”

“Yes!” Tom declared, and he turned his attention to the dumbstruck cat, “You...you are June, aren't you?”

Puzzle didn't move. “I...I don't...”

“I've been looking for you for so long, June,” his voice quivered, “And you've been closer than I could have ever imagined. Everything I've done has been for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I...I've never stopped thinking about when we last spoke, June,” Tom felt his stomach clench: all these old feelings were being dug up again, tearing open old scars that has never quite healed, “I always kept that photo of us with me. I looked – I used everything at my disposal – but you'd just fallen off the face of the Earth.”

He stepped tentatively forward. Muezza didn't react, so he padded all the way up to her.

"Now I've found you," a choking laugh escaped his lips, "Of all the pet shops I could have gone to, and of all the pets I could have picked...it was you! That can't just be a coincidence, can it?"

"I've missed you, June. So, *so* much. I'm...I love you."

But Puzzle's face was blank.

"I'm sorry Tom," she didn't meet his eyes, "But I don't know who June is."

Tom frowned. His throat felt sticky, and words tumbled out in croaky lumps, "What do you...you are! You –"

"I...don't remember being a human," Puzzle shook her head, "I'm sorry, Tom...this is all new to me."

"Don't say that!" Tom's words were high-pitched and quick, "We'll find a way to turn back to humans, and –"

"But I don't want to!" Puzzle snapped, "How can I have a yearning for a life I don't remember? I am a cat, Tom, and you are a

human. Your life is on a different path to mine. We have different wants, different needs. You want to take on the world. I...that is not me.”

“No! June, *please*, I need you! You’re everyth—”

A heavy swipe across the flank knocked Tom sideways, scraping across the harsh ground. Angry grazes flared up on his side, and as he scrambled upright again and blinked the dust from his eyes, Muezza had stood up. He held Puzzle by her collar in one hand, and brandished his knife at Tom with the other, slowly advancing on him.

“Enough soppiness,” he growled, “We have business to take care of. You see, Tom, while you cling to your humanity, then I haven’t completed my feeding properly. If my last victim wasn’t a clean wipeout, my gift won’t work on another until it is. So, here I am, and here you are.”

Tom took a step back – then stopped. His whole world had come crashing down – what did it matter anymore? He’d run out of places

to run, out of friends to help him. And he had nobody to blame but himself.

“Fine,” he meowed, “But...then you’ll let us go? Puzzle and I won’t be any threat to you then.”

“Perhaps not,” Muezza raised an eyebrow, as though considering the idea, but then the leathery folds of his face set hard once more, “But no, Tom. Leaving two former victims of mine in each other’s company? Too risky. Somehow it mends memories. Your dear Puzzle has already shown signs of recalling who I am, correct? I can’t have that. And what do you think I am? Merciful?” he roared with laughter, then brought the knife back under Puzzle’s neck. Her chest rose and fell rapidly in panic, “No. I’m going to kill your dear loved one before you, then wipe you clean. You’ll be left with nothing but a searing memory of loss you won’t understand.”

Tom leapt at him. Muezza batted him away like a fly, sending him sprawling into a corner. “You’re sick!” Tom spat.

Muezza winked, “I learned from the best.”

He drew the knife across Puzzle's neck –
“NO!”

Tom lunged forward again, and this time Muezza fell backwards, though not because of him: a barrage of cats flooded out of the chute and bowled him over. Pelts flashed and caterwauls crackled the room, and in an instant Tom recognised his friends from Cobby Clan.

“Odd-Eye!” he gasped, “Sir Paws...Tips! Malt! What are you –”

“We need to get you out of here – both of you.” Odd-Eye turned, and dashed towards Muezza, who was squirming and howling with rage as he tried to tear off the cats clinging to his jacket by their claws and teeth. Tom recognised Holly, Juniper and – could it be? – Saxon!

“Why should we help *him*?” Tips snapped at Odd-Eye, flashing a dirty look at Tom, “He's just as bad as Muezza.”

Just then, more cats came barrelling out of the chute – City Clan cats! Barely pausing for breath, they leapt at the Cobby cats, locking into frenzied battle.

Odd-Eye pinned Tips and Malt down with her piercing glare. “You think this is a good time to stop and explain? Get him out of here *now* – that’s an order!”

But before Tips or any cat could act, City cats charged into them, knocking them all in separate directions. Tom was crushed under the body of a heavy cat, her stinking breath hissing hot in his ear.

“This is the end, for you and your friends,” she snarled, pushing Tom’s face deeper into the grit. In Tom’s free ear, he heard the bellow of Muezza, the distressed yowl of Puzzle, and the *shing* of the knife –

“NO!” through sheer desperation, Tom wriggled away. The claws pinned in his fur snagged at his skin, sending rods of pain shooting through him, but now wasn’t the time to care. He wheeled around, ducking and diving through the fighting cats towards the shifting tower of darkness ahead: Muezza. A cat grasped his tail; Tom whirled around with his claws out, but already Sir Paws was there, sinking his teeth into the scrawny City cat’s

scruff and shaking him into a daze. He let go of Tom's tail, and Tom turned, ready to leap at Muezza –

He'd turned to look down at Tom. His knife and glove were drenched in blood. In the other hand, held tightly by her neck, was Puzzle, limp and lifeless, an open wound gushing dark red blood, matting her fur and tail.

Dead.

Tom's world stopped, until all he could see were Puzzle's empty eyes gazing at him. The noise of battle around him faded away, replaced by a roaring in his ears: *No! You can't be dead! PUZZLE!*

Did he say those words? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Puzzle was dead. Then something warm and sticky clamped around him, lifting him upwards. It may have been squeezing his lungs clear of breath for all he cared: nothing came close to the pain burning a great hole in his mind...*Puzzle...you can't be...*

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Muezza. "And will hurt forever more, Tom. But wouldn't you rather

forget what it is that pains you? Come, embrace the life of a cat.”

The air turned frigid, and Tom could sense a gaping chasm of nothingness opening before him. His mind reeled, yet was pulled irresistibly forward: he could feel his thoughts peeling away one by one, lost forever in the abyss...yes...*all the pain is going away...*

A screech slammed him back into noisy, hot reality. The oozing glove of Muezza gripped him round his chest. A cat wound its way around Muezza’s arm like a snake. Tom forced his sluggish brain to focus...he knew this cat...Saxon! He stopped short at Muezza’s wrist, and drove his teeth deep into the exposed skin.

With another anguished howl, Muezza’s grip loosened on Tom, and he dropped him.

“You’ve turned backclawer for the last time, Saxon!” Muezza hissed. Another swish of the blade, and Saxon’s body crashed down next to him. Puzzle’s blood caked his fur into spikes, dying the white fur a rosy red. *No...*

Then claws descended upon him, pulling and tearing at him in every direction.

“Get off him!” came Malt’s roar. Skin and fur tore from Tom’s hind legs and he slammed backward into a thick coat. He looked up, and met Odd-Eye’s sight.

Her gaze lasted but a second, yet gave him a moment of solace and clarity amidst the storm. She said nothing, but her eyes said so much...*Listen to the leaves...you must fall...*

A boot struck him hard in the ribs, and he sailed through the air. Glass exploded around him, slicing at his cheeks and flailing paws, the shards glinting in the daylight. He turned in mid air, watching pale sky above and churning river below melt into one. He slammed into the cold, oily waters, crushing the air out of him, sending him whirling into its depths, falling, falling into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The End of

Tom Verbrisser

“Pens down, please.”

The examination hall gave a collective sigh as pens clattered to tables for the final time. Tom kept his eyes on the giant clock at the front of the hall, watching the seconds tick gently by. His classmates shuffled restlessly around him, throwing chance smiles at one another whilst the vigilator collected their papers.

The last one was collected, and stacked neatly in a box on the vigilator’s desk. The room held its breath. Then, with a silent nod, chairs groaned and squeaked, and everyone marched out in barely stifled silence. They burst into cheers when they stepped into the warm sunshine.

Tom didn’t join in. There was nobody to join in with. Everyone gave him a considerably

wide berth as they spilled out onto the grass. He didn't care. He'd long since given up on the idea of having friends.

He looked across the smiling faces once more, knowing he'll never find the one face he hoped to see but looking anyway. He hadn't seen June since they'd argued – no one had. He turned to see one of the peeling 'Missing' posters for June Williams plastered on the wall, complete with her smiling face. He clutched his own photo in his pocket, recalling the day the police had knocked on his door to question him.

So that was that. Exams over. Only true friend missing, and living alone. Pulling his car keys out of his other pocket, he turned on his heel, and made his way to work.

* * *

Ice-cold water blasted his face, clutching at his shallow breath. With a wet gasp he lurched up, feeling pebbles shift under his paws. Blinking away the water, he saw the glittering surface of a river stretching before him. His

vision swirled, his stomach squeezed, and he retched what felt like a lake's worth of water.

“He’s alive!”

“Ssh, he needs to rest.”

“Fat chance he will. We need to talk.”

Voices bubbled around him, making him even more dizzy. What was going on? Where was he? More to the point, who was he? He felt as if his brain were moving through concrete, trying to remember...he was Tom Verbrisser, yes! And he'd landed in the river somehow. But how had he got there? Had he been pushed in? No, kicked – he could still feel the force of the boot sending aching spasms pulsing down his side. Muezza had kicked him...the image of Puzzle's, June's, lifeless body and dead eyes slammed into his thoughts and all else crumbled away.

“Tom! You MURDERER!”

Tom turned – and claws slashed him so hard he spun back onto the pebbles. Turning his head to face his attacker, he saw a horde of cats facing him with one standing at the front. Tom knew her...was it Apples? Yes, he recognised

the dusty coat. But it was her eyes that seized his attention; cold and furious.

“Apples, take it easy,” a cat nearby laid her tail on Apples’ shoulder – who was she? Her lean face and smooth words seemed familiar. “We’ve just dragged him out of the river. No sense in knocking him senseless after bringing back to life.”

“You...how did you...?” In spite of everything else, Tom couldn’t understand how he could be alive. Seeing all the familiar faces slowly brought his sodden brain creaking back to life. Perhaps Muezza hadn’t blanked his memories after all.

“Well,” said the lean-faced cat, “I knew of Muezza’s plans, and I knew he’d dump you in the river afterward. We couldn’t get to City territory on time, so our only hope was to find you downstream. Good thing Pipes is a good swimmer.” She nodded at the cat flanking the other side of Apples; a slender Sokoke cat with vast ears – yes, he remembered Pipes, and the way she’d saved him and Puzzle from the dairy – another pang rang through him...*Puzzle...*

The lean-faced cat padded up to Tom, and sniffed him carefully. Tom took a step back, feeling awkward and nervous.

“I can still smell Muezza on him,” she mewed, her eyes with his, “Do you remember who you are?”

“I – yes, I’m Tom Verbrisser,” he said, then with a sudden rush of recall added, “And you’re Tracktail, Deputy of Smoky Clan.”

Tracktail nodded, eyes closed in silent relief.

“So it’s true!” Apples snapped, “You really are the Nestbreaker, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He was in no mood to argue.

“And why did you lie?” her voice cracked, “What was your plan this time, Verbrisser? Hoping to get inside the Clans and tear us apart from the inside?”

“No. No plan. I just wanted to get back to being a human. I only did as Puzzle said.”

They don’t know she’s dead yet. Should I tell them? No. They hate me enough already.

“Well, you’ll be pleased to hear that Cobby Clan has fallen apart,” Apples snarled at him, looking ready to pounce, “The barn has been

overrun by Smoky Clan: Fuzzy, Swifty, Lightfoot and Simba are all dead, and the rest of the Clan have scattered in fear. Word has it Leafy Clan have done the same...who knows who's died there? And all in your name, Nestbreaker. I hope you're happy!"

Tom's legs felt weak...*No...all this death and fighting because of me. I never meant for this to happen! No wonder why June rejected me; why should she want anything to do with this?*

Apples did lunge forward at him again, and Tom didn't fight back as she knocked him into the shale, swiping him across the belly and face with claws sharpened by fury and sorrow.

"You've ruined everything!" tears dripped from Apple's eyes and onto his cheeks, "You've destroyed everything that meant something to me. First my littermates, and now this? What do you want, Tom? I'll tell you what you want; you want nothing! You're just...just an empty *thing* that swallows everything, and you're never satisfied. Why don't you just leave us alone? Why don't you just *die?*"

Apples threw him one last half-hearted swipe across the shoulder as she descended into shuddering sobs. Tracktail and Pipes led her away. Tom watched the Cobby cat stagger away, looking as broken as he felt inside.

The rest of the cats stared at him. None of them spoke. Their eyes bore many expressions, but most were set in grim agreement of Apples' words.

"Listen, Tom," Tracktail forced her way back to the front of the crowd with Pipes: Apples was nowhere to be seen, "It's a good thing your memories are still intact."

Tom stared silently at his paws.

"Tom, it means Muezza still hasn't completed the ritual yet!" Tracktail declared, "While you still cling to your human side, he can't feed again, and he'll turn back into a cat."

"So?"

"So...he can still be beaten," Tracktail frowned, "Tom? Isn't this what you wanted?"

"I'm tired of wanting," Tom stared at his paws, "Tired of trying so hard when it only seems to make things worse."

“Tom, I don’t underst-”

“Puzzle’s dead,” he said flatly. Gasps and wails washed through the crowd like the tide of the river rattling through the stony shore, “And who knows who else? Odd-Eye, Sir Paws, Tips, Malt...and it’s all because of me. She died trying to save me. Well, no more. I want nothing to do with this.”

He turned, and padded for the nearby flight of slimy granite steps leading up to the road.

“But – Tom! We *need* you!” Tracktail’s pleas echoed up to his ears, “Only you can defeat Muezza!”

“Why? Why me?” Tom suddenly found a flick of anger inside him, “Because I’m his last victim? Because I used to be a human too? Because I’m *Tom Verbrisser*?” He spat his name, “Well, I’m not Tom Verbrisser anymore. He’s killed and hurt too many. Apples is right. I must go.”

“Where?” Pipes’ eyes brimmed despair.

“Home, one last time. To say my goodbyes. Then I will forget everything. No Tom Verbrisser, no Nestbreaker, no pain.

Everyone's happy. At least that's one thing I can do right."

He turned, and headed through the tangle of streets heading for his house. He could already feel Muezza's ritual take hold one more. The chasm in his mind opened up, and his memories peeled away and vanished into it forever. Tom Verbrisser was soon to be no more, and he welcomed it.

He pushed through the cat flap and stepped into the foyer of his home. It seemed more alien than ever; so big, so quiet...so empty. Why was there muesli strewn across the kitchen floor? And there was a half-destroyed cheese sandwich on the floor, gone stale. When had he made that? He caught sight of the cat bowls nearby: the one thing he wanted to forget most of all still seared in his mind the most.

Blinking back tears, he headed up stairs, forcing his tired limbs to clamber up each vast step at a time, and headed into his bedroom. A low hum told him that there was a fish tank in here. *Fish!* His heart gave a small leap at the

thought: *I kept fish in my room!* When he looked at the tank, however, he saw that it was securely fitted with a roof. Not even the most dextrous of claws could prise that open. *Why did I keep fish in my room if I didn't eat them?*

He nearly lost his footing as he slipped on a loose piece of paper. He looked at the floor, covered in a spread of files, covered in strange, black symbols. What were these? Why were there so many of them? Some echoing voice in the depths of his mind told him that he once understood this strange language, but it was quickly snuffed out.

Looking around, he watched as all around him things reeled through his mind in reverse, slipping from the familiar and comfortable to unknown and mysterious: the bed became a mass of white fluff towering over him; the thick carpet became a flat expanse of fluffy pelt; the windows became these strange, invisible see-through shields—nothing made sense, save for a single, battered picture framed on the nearby panel of flat, raised wood. Scrambling his way

up to it, he stared at the two figures smiling back at him:

Tom Verbrisser. June Williams. And behind them, the old oak tree.

As everything else around him peeled away into nothingness, he stared at the photo, furiously holding onto the memories it held. But it was like cupping water in his paws, and soon the faces contorted, no longer the safe, familiar faces he knew, but of strange humans. He flattened the frame against the desk, hearing the glass chink as it cracked.

Now, only one memory remained, and it pained him more than anything else.

“Puzzle,” he whispered. He bounded quickly down the zig-zag slope and back into the room with the smooth floor and shiny surfaces. In the corner, there was her basket, lined with a soft pink pelt and chewed, fake pieces of spongy prey scattered around it. As he approached it, her scent wreathed around her, and memories of her choked his mind: standing protectively over him, grabbing him by the scruff and carrying him when he was hurt, helping him catch black-

feathered pieces of prey...but no more. She was fading fast. For a moment, he wanted desperately to hold onto a single memory, just one, to remind him of her. But already her scent was changing, and he knew time was short. He climbed into her basket and curled himself up, letting sorrow overwhelm him as he felt the last of memories of her slide away, fading over a horizon he couldn't follow.

“Puzzle...” he pressed his tears onto the blanket. Then she was gone, lost to him forever.

Crying over something he knew hurt like the deepest teeth and claws, but not knowing what it was, the small black-and-white cat wept itself into an empty sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tick

The cat awoke with a long, luxurious stretch, and licked his dry lips. Was he ever thirsty! He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a drink.

Stepping down out of his basket, he eyed the bowls in the corner. One was half-full with dry food pellets, and he managed a few mouthfuls of those, but it only made him more thirsty. The other bowl next to that held what he assumed to be milk, but when he lapped at it a foul, sour stench shot up his nostrils. A strange sensation crackled in the back of his head: frenzied déjà vu dripped down his spine, but it was gone as quickly as it had started. Great. Now what was he going to do for a drink? He'd have to ask for it.

A long, deliberately pitiful meow escaped his mouth, echoing through the house. That should get his pet's attention. Seconds passed, but

nobody came; not even a yell to tell him to pipe down. Well, where was his pet? He had one, didn't he? Now he thought about it, he couldn't remember what his pet looked like. Yet this was undoubtedly a human nest: the sharp angles, bright colours and unnaturally flat ground told him that.

A great sadness swept over him like a wave, threatening to engulf him and drag him down forever. He gasped, the feeling released him, and he looked feverishly around: *what was that about?* In that second, he'd never felt so lost, so unhappy...why?

Tick...tick...tick... looking up, he saw a circular object with symbols around the edges, thin black markers pointing at a couple of them, and an even thinner red one quickly circling around it, making a small *tick* with each movement...

Tick...tick...tick...

It was hypnotic, each *tick* resonating like a raindrop on a smooth puddle in his head. And yet the sound disturbed him, and with each *tick*

he felt his insides squirm, as though a dormant monster inside stirred.

He shook his head furiously. He was going mad with thirst. Maybe he'd find something outside.

Stepping outside, the warm light of sunset washed over him, and he breathed in, expecting to take in a lungful of fresh air. Instead, he choked on the scents of many nearby cats. He bristled, ready to bolt back inside if he needed to. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he clamped eyes on something more like a nightmare than his worst fears.

Cats, at least a hundred of them, were crammed onto the flat, bricked surface in front of the nest, every one of them watching him expectantly. His first instinct was to turn and run, but something held him firm to the ground, something more than paralysing fear.

One cat stepped forward, one with pristine white fur and eyes of differing colours: one green, one blue. Both had a pained, desperate look to them.

“Tom, we need to talk,” she said calmly, “Muezza is running rampant in Jacobsen Park; he’s going to tear down Scatterleaf. We need your help.”

The little black-and-white cat had to repeat the words in his own head to double-check, but no, nothing this cat had said to him made sense.

“I-I’m sorry, you have me mistaken for some other cat,” he stammered, “I don’t know who Tom is.”

The cats eyed him with an array of emotions etched on their furred faces: suspicion, anger, sympathy, curiosity, fear, weariness...whoever this Tom was, he didn’t envy him!

The odd-eyed cat peered at him, as though she could see into his thoughts. Then her eyes rounded.

“You...you don’t remember anything, do you?” she said slowly, “Muezza’s stripped you of your memory for good.”

“Moo-ezza?” he frowned, “Who’s that?”

Another cat padded up, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the odd-eyed cat.

“Don’t you remember me, Tom?” his fur was black, with white tips on his paws, tail and nose, “Or anyone else here...or Puzzle?”

“A puzzle what?” Tom frowned, “Okay, you’re all scaring me now. What do you want? I don’t know who this Tom is!”

The cats exchanged looks of sorrow.

“He’s gone,” the odd-eyed cat declared to the crowd, “Muezza’s ritual was too powerful.”

“We should never have left him!” a spotted Bengal cat kicked the ground, “He seemed to remember until he walked away from us!”

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper,” a dusty-pelted cat barged through the crowd, growling through something in her jaws. She dropped it and padded up to him, “I’m...I’m sorry. I was angry, but...I know you’re good inside, Tom. You saved my life. You were trying to make things better... make yourself better. Who knows, after all this was over, you could’ve helped me find my littermates,” her tail rose hopefully, then flopped down in despair as she added, “But it’s too late. Here,” she turned, and pushed the thing she’d been carrying in her teeth

across to him. “Odd-Eye found it after the fight. She said you should have it.”

It was a collar. His paw moved instinctively to his neck, and he realised with a pang that he didn’t have one. Was this his collar? Then he spotted the name engraved on the golden label: Puzzle. With an even greater pang, it hit him: *what was his name? Was he Puzzle?*

The dusty cat moved in close, and rested her chin on his head. The scent of her chest-fur smelled of that electric tang in the air before lightning struck, and it set his mind whirling.

“Goodbye...Tick, Smalltail of Cobby Clan,” she meowed quietly, “You were a good friend.”

Tick...tick...tick...

She backed away, and he nearly staggered, his own legs barely supporting him. The cats were slowly, reluctantly, turning away, resigned to the fate that this Muezza had in store for them.

But his brain felt stretched, like something in it was ready to snap, ready to break open.

Tick...tick...tick...

“I...I am your friend...” he whispered, “I...I promised I’d change...make everything right...”

The other cats didn’t hear him, still draining away from the front garden, tails trailing behind them. He looked down at the collar, at that name. *Puzzle*.

Puzzle. He ran one paw across the other, fluffing up his fur.

“She always liked having her fur stroked the other way,” he said aloud.

The cats paused in their tracks. A couple turned to stare at him, wide-eyed.

“What did you say?” said the dusty cat, as the odd-eyed cat bounded forward.

“Puzzle, I mean,” he said, “She liked having her fur stroked up, then flattened down – wait, what?”

He winced as his head seemed to split down the middle. He clutched at his ears, willing the roaring and screeching to stop. Colourful images burned in his eyes, swirling with a whirlwind of scents and noises. Claws pricked from his nose to his tail tip, filling him with fire

– then quenched by a feeling of being plunged into a vat of ice.

His eyes flashed open, and in an instant, everything was back. *Tom Verbrisser. Muezza. The Clans. The cats. The friends. The enemies.* Everything came flooding back, with all the pain, the joy, the grief, and the memories they were attached to. He felt so full with them he felt fit to burst. As though a mask had been lifted from the world, suddenly everything seemed familiar.

“Odd-Eye! Apples!” Tom gasped, “Is that you, Tips? Tracktail! And Twig, what are you doing here? Oh, you were attacked weren’t you? How’s the Clan? Is Lilypad okay? Oh, she’s there! And Berrybunch, too...it’s...it’s good to see you all!”

The crowd of cats flooded back onto the driveway, chattering excitedly, and this time, Tom recognised all of them. From only vaguely familiar faces he’d briefly seen at Dapple Glade, to close friends of his like the Siamese Malt, seeing each of them filled him with a warmth he

couldn't describe. *Why did I turn my back on this?*

"Tom!" Odd-Eye's eyes bulged, her jaw wide open, "You remember now?"

"Everything," Tom said, unsure whether to feel excited or grim at the prospect. He ran his mind through his thoughts as though leafing through an old book he'd read a thousand times. He could stop at any point and recognise it.

"This is good news," Odd-Eye's voice shook with relief, "It means that Muezza's ritual has still failed, and he won't be able to claim another victim."

"Not until he's finished me off," Tom recalled with a shudder, "One way or the other."

*Another victim...*the words swept him away to a place of darkness, to the one page of memories he wanted to avoid. A pair of lifeless golden eyes stared back at him, and blood clogged in his paws. *Now I remember why I wanted to forget. Why I turned away.*

"Tom?" Odd-Eye's call slashed through his thoughts like her piercing eyes, bringing him

back to the balmy evening, “Tom, are you okay?”

“Why bother?” he mumbled, not looking up, “What’s the point?”

“What do you mean?”

“Puzzle’s dead...June’s dead,” he could feel his eyes grow hot and prickly with tears; “Everything’s gone. Everything I worked for...everything I *lived* for...gone.”

A silence chilled his fur like an arctic wind. Paws padded up to him, and he looked up into the infinite depths of green and blue eyes.

“Everything you lived for as Tom has gone,” she said softly. Her breath was warm, scented with herbs, washing away the chill in his skin. “But this is your new beginning. This is what you’ve truly been after.”

“Is it?” Tom tried to sound cynical, but the words came out curious.

“I’ve seen your eyes light up whenever a Clanmate branded you as a friend,” Odd-Eye swept her tail across the assembled cats behind her, “I can tell you’ve felt moments where

you've felt more at home, more happy, in the last three days than you have for years."

Tom cast his mind back, remembering his first journey through the night-lit city to the Cobby Clan headquarters; his hunting with Malt and Puzzle; sleeping in the packed, cozy Smalltail den; cleaning and marking territory with Puzzle's guidance; eating with Leafy Clan. In spite of all the pain, all the misery, so much good had come of it.

"It's time to let June Williams go," Odd-Eye whispered, her eyes full of compassion, "I know it is hard. She will be missed. But if she is what you lived for, then she will want you to pick yourself up and start again."

Tom blinked, and felt tears drip onto his paws.

"You think so?"

"I know it to be so, Tom," she smiled, and she leaned in and breathed softly in his ear, "And, rest assured, if the right thing is done tonight, Scatterleaf will take care of her."

Tom wasn't sure what she meant by that, but he felt warmed and encouraged by her words.

He took in a deep, cleansing breath, and swept his gaze across the crowd of cats, and for the first time noticed that some of the familiar faces were also from City and even Smoky Clan, not just Pipes and Tracktail. They all looked as nervous as the rest of them.

“Even some of his followers have seen the path Muezza is taking us down,” Odd-Eye put in, noticing Tom’s gaze, “He *is* the monster of the prophecy, Tom. We *will* destroy the Clans. And only you can stop him.”

“Why me? What do you expect me to do?”

“I don’t know,” Odd-Eye admitted, bowing her head slightly, “But you are tied to Muezza in many ways. You are his most recent victim, and an incomplete one at that. And he holds the key to your returning to a human.”

Her last few words sounded strange to her. Then it hit him. He looked to the sky, blazing orange with the sinking sun. He took a long, cooling breath.

“That doesn’t matter anymore, Odd-Eye,” he mewed. Then he raised his small voice for all to hear, “This is where I belong now: in the Clans,

with all of you. I walked away before to forget *myself*, not Puzzle, or June. Well, I can't forget it, or change the past. But I will move on. I will try to right my wrongs."

He looked from Odd-Eye, to Sir Paws, and then to Apples, Tips and Malt.

"So long as I am a cat, I am Tom Verbrisser no longer. I am Tick, Smalltail of Cobby Clan. I will be loyal to the Code, my Leader and my Clan. And, as I swore in my Tailing, I will defend them all with my life."

A great thrill rushed through him as the cats cheered their approval. He remembered when he'd revealed himself to be Tom Verbrisser, and not Tick, to Twig, and how unnatural it felt. But declaring the opposite was now true, that he *was* Tick, felt so *right*, that it couldn't be anything but true. It was as if he had earned his Tail all over again, but this time, it was for real. He felt a great weight lift from him, replaced by a glowing, calm sense of being.

Tick turned to Odd-Eye, new purpose tingling in his tail.

"What are my duties, Leader?"

Odd-Eye gave him a quick rasp of her tongue across the ears. “*Our* duty,” she said, “Is to rid our Clans of Muezza once and for all.”

More yowls of agreement from the cats across all Clans. Tips stepped forward, running his tail over Tick’s shoulder. Tick smiled to himself.

“So, what’s the plan?” Tips stretched his claws out, that old mischievous grin playing across his face.

“Muezza is on his way to Scatterleaf,” Sir Paws growled, “Laughing and talking to himself, and he has this machine with big metal teeth on a huge handle.”

“A chainsaw!” Tick gasped, “He’s going to tear down the Scatterleaf trees!”

Fearful ripples ran through the crowd, but Odd-Eye held up a paw.

“Don’t panic,” she said calmly, “He hasn’t reached the Scatterleaf place just yet. In fact, he seems rather pre-occupied with this old oak tree just outside Dapple Glade.

Tick felt a deadweight drop in his belly. What interest could Muezza possibly have that tree? It couldn't be coincidence.

“Muezza is surrounded by his legions on all sides,” said Odd-Eye, beckoning the assembled cats to gather round as she carved a plan into the mud with a claw, “And there will be many Smoky and some City patrols dispersed around all territories. But we are strong, and many, and we're not the only fighting force out there, are we, Sir Paws?”

“No, Odd-Eye,” he said crisply, “There is another big clowder of City and Leafy cats stationed in a City Clan nest, and another team of Cobbies waiting in the Oldnest camp.”

“But how will we all attack at once?” came a call from the back.

“We have sent stealth runners with messages to each group,” Sir Paws explained, clearly enjoying all the tactical talk, “Clawdius and Alley-Oop are waiting for twilight, when the last tip of the sun vanishes.”

At this, many cats looked over their shoulders to see the sun dipping down between

the houses opposite, the golden disc just beginning to touch the horizon.

“We still have some time, but not much,” Malt hopped on her hind paws, “What should we do?”

With a flash of inspiration, Tick invited them all into the house, where they could eat and drink. He openly invited them all to raid the fridge for meats and demolish the stack of cat food. Soon, his house was like a Clan camp: his living room had turned into a fighting-practice area; the stairs and banisters were used for climbing practice; the box room was filled with cats trying to catch a catnap and refresh themselves before the battle, and the kitchen became the scrapstock room, where cats trotted in from the back garden with fresh prey to add to the food. Next to the pile, Odd-Eye, Sir Paws, Malt, Tips and Apples were drawing lines in the scattered muesli and talking in low, hurried tones as they put together an attack plan.

As one, they looked up at Tick, and he hesitated for a second. Then, as one, they beckoned him over with their tails. In spite of

everything, in spite of all that had gone wrong and could still go wrong, Tick couldn't hold down the purr that rumbled in his chest as he stood by his Clanmates, and listened to them in silence.

“And how about Pads? Whose side is he on?”

“Still Muezza, it seems. Looks like his first decision as Leader will be his worst.”

“A Leader he may be, but Pads is still just one cat. It all depends how many are following him.”

“City Clan have just lost Noodle. They're scared. Most will stick with him, if only out of fear.”

“Most, but not all. I mean, we've already recruited some breakaways, haven't we? I wonder how many does Alley-Oop have in her group?”

When the orange light streaming through the door windows faded to blue, Odd-Eye yowled a rallying call through the house. The cats streamed back out the catflap to congregate in the front garden. Tick was last to leave,

surveying the mess and damage they had made in the few minutes they'd been here. Had he been Tom Verbrisser, he would have flipped his lid at the thought of all those mangy wild cats running amok in his home. But, as Tick, he didn't care. In fact, he welcomed it.

He pushed through the cat flap, just as Odd-Eye commenced her explanation of the plans. They were simple: keep pushing forward, fight away patrols to keep them occupied, and get Tick to Muezza.

Tick quailed at the prospect of facing him again. What was he going to do? He was no stronger than last time, and no sudden ideas struck him. If anything, it would be harder than last time, now he didn't have Puzzle to protect him. A dark cloud of grief choked him for a moment, but he shook it off, just as Odd-Eye finished talking. The last strands of sunlight flared across the sky, and disappeared for another night. Would he see another day?

With a silent flick of her tail, Odd-Eye led the cats pounding through the streets. Yellow streetlights flickered on overhead, and a cold

chill crept through his fur as the sky rapidly enveloped itself into a starless, moonless night. As he picked up speed to run alongside his friends, Tick told himself, with fresh resolve: *just do what you can do. Nobody can ask for more. Do it for your friends. Do it for their homes. And do it for June...and Puzzle.*

Yes. I'm doing this for you, Puzzle. This, I do in your name. I hope this is what you want.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

True Colours

It wasn't long before they spotted their first Smoky patrol, crossing a road further up ahead. They didn't seem to notice them. Rustle and Mossylog from Leafy Clan bristled, backs arched, but Twig nipped in front of them before they could charge into a skirmish.

"Don't start a fight we can steer clear of," he murmured, "Avoid until it's unavoidable."

Rustle and Mossylog reluctantly flattened their fur, and nodded.

"Okay, the Oldnest group are on their way to the barn," said Odd-Eye, sniffing the air, as they delved through the quiet suburbs, "Half will occupy the Smokies camped up there, and half will sweep in from the north. The group from City Clan will move in from the east. If all works out, we should be able to surround our enemies."

They took a shortcut through a crooked alley. Weeds and broken glass clogged in the cracks between the concrete slabs, and the stench of human waste clung to Tick's nostrils. They emerged at the other end, and –

“Halt!” the shrill command echoed down the street. Tick wheeled around. A gang of six cats bound toward them, ears slicked back, teeth glinting as they passed underneath the streetlamps.

At the call, the rest of the group spilled out around Tick, swelling their ranks. The Smoky cats halted, eyes wide as they took in the sheer number of them. Tails between their legs, they turned and ran.

“Aha!” Rustle yelled after them, “Who’s running now? Not so tough when *you’re* outnumbered, are you?”

“Go after them, Rustle,” Twig instructed, “Take Mossylog and a few others with you and give chase. They might spread the word, and we need stealth at this point.”

The two Leafy cats peeled away from the main group, followed by five more Clanmates.

They bolted after their quarry, swallowed up into the night. Tick's breath snagged in his throat, knowing he may never see them again...

"Let's go," Odd-Eye whispered. With another flick of her tail they bounded across the road, and over a green.

"Wait!" Sir Paws hissed, "Do you hear that?"

The group skidded to a halt in the middle of the small field, all ears perked to the air. Faint on the breeze, Tick caught the slightest sound of cats fighting and caterwauling.

"Battle has been joined at the barn," Lilypad rasped, "The other half of the Oldnest group will be moving in on the park soon. Word will quickly spread to the Smokies and Muezza."

"Shouldn't we send some of our number to help them?" Twig looked to Odd-Eye, face tense.

"Don't worry for them, Twig," Odd-Eye assured them as they scuttled onward, "They aren't all-out fighting to reclaim the barn, only making it seem so. Besides, our headquarters will be less occupied by Smokies now than it

was: most will be protecting their Leader and Muezza.”

Tick felt Tracktail tense beside him, and Pipes gave her a comforting lick on the shoulder. He didn't doubt whose side they were on for a second, but if it came to it, would they fight to the death against their own Clanmates?

The houses and streetlights fell away behind them. The breeze turned cool and sparse, briefly turning fragrant before being swamped in the smells of rust, rot and Smoky Clan.

“Jacobsen Park,” Tips snarled, “This is it. They must all be huddled somewhere around their beloved Muezza; we ran into barely any trouble—”

“NOW!”

Bedlam exploded in the darkness. Cats tumbled to the ground, rolling and roaring as more cats bowled into them, digging long claws into their underbellies.

“Ambush!” came a yell, silenced by the sickening *shing* of claws through skin. Tick turned – and a head bashed into his chest,

driving the air out of him and hurling backwards.

He gazed up at a great mountain of a cat bearing down over him: Brick. Tick rolled, just in time to hear Brick's great girth slam into the ground where he'd just been. Blinking dirt and dust away, Tick sprang to his paws and turned to face Brick, who was struggling ungainly back onto all fours. Seeing his chance, Tick barrelled forward, knocking Brick onto his back. Tick scored his paws through his belly, and Brick yowled with pain. With an almighty heave Brick swung himself up, swiping Tick away like an annoying fly. They faced each other once more, but before either could make another move, Apples and Malt leapt out of the fray and pulled Brick down.

Tick barely had time to catch a breath before two more Smoky cats were pushing through the haze of battle to get at him. They lunged forward, and Tick dashed forward, the fur on his belly scraping the ground as he stayed low. He turned, and watched with satisfaction as the Smoky cats landed atop one of their own.

But now he was pulled into the main bulk of the fighting. Claws flashed past, bloodied yowls set his ears ringing, and eyes blazed by in whirls of fury. Scents mingled as rapidly as the cats did, and Tick didn't know where it was safe to land a blow, though he took many himself.

“Reinforcements!” an unfamiliar roar spilt through the battle.

Tick opened his mouth to taste the air, and his heart plummeted as Smoky scents swamped over the fight. Odd-Eye ran past, skidding to a halt at the sight of him.

“We're outnumbered,” she wiped a paw at the blood welling at her lips, “No...wait!”

Another tang filled the air, and for once, Tick welcomed the smell of old takeaways invading his nostrils.

“City Clan,” Sir Paws yelled, striking a cat aside, “And Leafy Clan too.”

“This is our chance,” Odd-Eye nodded, first to her deputy, then to Tick, “Let's keep moving.”

“You mean...leave everyone else fighting?” he frowned.

“This is everyone’s fight, Tick,” meowed Odd-Eye, already ushering him forcefully through the gaps in the battle, “You know the plan. Or are you going to defy your Leader, Smalltail?”

Tick felt an irresistible smile tug at the corners of his lips, and he bounded forward, following the grizzled tail of Sir Paws through the heaving pelts. As they burst into into a clearing, they darted for the nearest shelter, behind a stack of construction signs. Relief shivered through him as he spotted the familiar shapes of Malt, Tips, and Apples waiting for them.

“Where’s Odd-Eye?” Sir Paws wheeled around, looking over Tick’s head to where the battle raged. Tick did likewise, and watched in horror and awe as two vast waves of cats, from the right and left, crashed down on the battle, swelling the ranks of both sides and escalating the clamour of the clashing, yowling cats fivefold. From it darted a small party of cats, escaping unnoticed as they barrelled towards them. Odd-Eye led the way, followed by a

limping Twig, a jumpy Berrybunch and a bloodied Lilypad. Pipes and Tracktail staggered after them. Tick felt a cold fear drench his neck as he feared for the elderly Leafy Deputy, but when they drew closer, he saw the fierce glow in her eyes, could feel the hardy defiance rippling from her. None of the blood clinging to her pelt was her own. This wise old cat could take care of herself.

Odd-Eye looked back at the vast sea of cats. It frothed with slashing claws and flashing eyes.

“All four Clans fighting,” she sighed, “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“It may be the last time we see the four Clans at all, if you don’t hurry,” Sir Paws’ voice was level, but he couldn’t swallow down the panic that trembled his words.

“You?” Tick blurted out, “What do you mean? Aren’t you coming with us?”

“No can do, Smalltail,” Sir Paws drew himself up, his eyes glittering at the sight of the raging battle. “My place is here. On the front line, protecting that which matters most.”

“You must fight the Clans to protect them,” Odd-Eye nodded, “I understand.”

Sir Paws touched noses with his Leader. Tick could feel the energy coursing between them, almost glittering on their intertwined whiskers.

“Good luck,” Odd-Eye pulled away, eyes shining.

“I don’t need luck,” Sir Paws grinned, “I have the Code.”

Without another word, he bounded back into the fray, tail high, his voice bellowing above any other. Would Tick see his Deputy again?

Paws were padding silently away behind him, and he turned to see the group slinking away into the darkness, further into the scrapyard. Tick chased after them, squeezing between Tips and Apples. The reeking hills of twisted metal loomed over them, creaking and whistling with a fetid breeze. Pipes sneezed, and every cat’s fur bristled as it echoed for what seemed like an eternity, but they kept moving.

“Get down!” Tips hissed in his ear. Before Tick could let the words sink in, he’d been

shunned sideways under a stack of chipboards. His friends huddled around them, their warm breath quickly turning the small space hot and uncomfortable.

“Patrol,” Tracktail whispered, “Big one. I think Slick’s leading it.”

Slick! Tom ran his tongue over his empty gum. How could he ever forget that? The wound had healed, but the memory dashed through his mind like a fiery claw, and he reeled from the pain all over again.

“Keep still, will you?” Apples wrapped her tail around Tick’s twitching haunches. Through a tiny gap in the chipboards, he watched as a distant group of cats marched between the scrap piles, at least twenty of them. He may have imagined it, but he swore he could hear the soft chinking of the teeth around Slick’s neck, somewhere...

Minutes dragged by. Even Apples started to get fidgety, her ear flicking at an itch she longed to run her paws over.

“Clear,” Odd-Eye announced at last, and they burst out of their hiding place, gulping at the air.

Even the tainted, greasy air tasted fresh after being cooped up in such a tight spot.

“Sneaking and hiding, Odd-Eye?” an unfamiliar voice snapped from above, “How unlike you.”

They looked up at the stack of crushed cars behind them. A wide-shouldered cat stood silhouetted atop the pile, with a cluster of cats crowded around him.

“Pads,” Odd-Eye replied coolly, “Well, I guess we’ve all be acting strange lately, haven’t we?”

“Change is a good thing!” Pads hopped expertly down, whilst his followers picked their way to the ground more carefully, “Muezza will bring that change. He will make things better, you’ll see. No more fighting, no more Nestbreakers, no more...killings.”

“You know you don’t believe that,” that was Pipes, and her voice was surprisingly calm and soothing, “You don’t have to be scared of Muezza, you know. You can fight him. We are. Join us, Pads. You *know* it’s the right thing to do.”

Tick watched doubt flicker across the City Leader's eyes, and he pawed the ground. For a moment, he thought Pads really would change his mind, or at least let them pass. But then his eyes fell on him, and Pads stiffened, his grey eyes turning cold and harsh.

"He lives?" his voice was high and disbelieving, "Tom Verbrisser *lives*? And you're protecting him? No, you're doing more than that...you're *helping* him!"

"Helping each other," Twig corrected coolly, "A real Clan Leader would know cooperation when he sees it."

Pads' eyes narrowed. He and his team bunched their haunches and launched themselves at Tick and the others. Pads dived atop Twig, while two smaller but nimble cats, one from City Clan and the other a Smoky, surrounded Tick. Tick wheeled feverishly around, looking for a way to escape, but the two cats circled him, their noses touching the other's tail. He tried to make a run for it, but a tail whipped him across the face, and loose fur got stuck in his eyes. As he staggered back,

blinking tears and hair away, a blow struck him on the hind legs, and he crumpled to the ground. Dark shapes moved overhead, moving closer. In desperation, he swung a front paw out, claws stretched to their fullest. It worked: he felt a claw snag at soft skin – a nose – and with an anguished wail, paws pounded away, the smell of blood in the air and on his paws.

Tick hesitated: he didn't want to hurt any more cats, even if he was fighting for the greater good. Wasn't that why he chose Tick? Tom Verbrisser was the Nestbreaker, not him.

Clearly the other cat didn't share his flash of insight because she lunged for him, ready to use her greater body weight to tackle him to the ground and break some of his ribs. But then a white pelt swept from the shadows like a ghost, and bashed into the side of the leaping cat.

“Lilypad!” Tick scrambled up, wincing at the pain that lanced up his hind legs, “Thanks. Are you alright?”

The Leafy Clan Deputy was breathing heavily, but her eyes glowed with raw energy.

“I haven’t felt this alive for moons, young one,” she rasped, then raised her nose to the air, “And – yes, here they come.”

Before Tick could question further, a war-cry caterwaul seared overhead, and many paws pounded toward the fight like a drumroll. The clean, herbal scent licked around him as a patrol of Leafy Clan crashed into the Smoky and City Cats, locking teeth into scruffs and slamming heads together.

“Tick!” Apples bounded over two cats as they scabbled past, “Odd-Eye’s moving out, we need to keep pushing on.”

“But –”

“Twig and Lilypad are going to lead their own Leafy cats through the fight,” said Apples, “That was the deal, remember? To keep the enemy occupied and get you to Muezza.”

Tick hesitated, but forced a nod, and followed Apples through the fight, and into the silence beyond. They dodged and ducked to avoid being detected by patrols as they marched past at speed, on their way to join claws with the fights breaking out around the territories. Tufts

of grass became more frequent, and he could hear the gentle hiss of swaying trees drawing closer. But when Tick opened his jaws to drink in the delicious, earthy scents, he instead gagged on the acrid, metallic stench of blood. The others seemed to notice too: the pace slowed, and fur spiked along spines.

At last the line of trees came into view, like black clouds billowing on the horizon. The reek of blood intensified. But before anyone could speak, a single dark shape darted out from the trees, firing straight for them. It crashed into Tracktail. Cats gathered around the shape, pulling it away to a safe distance. Tracktail staggered up, unharmed, and bounded over to her attacker.

“Ratchet!” she gasped, “What...what are you doing?”

“Escaping,” the crowd around Ratchet backed away as he climbed ungainly to his paws, “I can’t take being in there anymore. I came to look for you two.” He looked from Tracktail to Pipes, “I heard the three other Clans were gathering and fighting back.”

Ratchet...Tick mulled over the name. Where had he heard that before?

“Can I join you?” Ratchet’s eyes were wide with hope.

“Don’t trust him.”

Everyone turned to Malt, whose sleek Siamese fur had fluffed out so she looked twice her size, “He’s a backclawing, two-faced liar.”

“It’s Malt,” isn’t it?” Ratchet peered through the darkness at her, “Look, I’m sorry I turned you over, but I didn’t have a choice! Billow would’ve had my tail if I let you go. And Muezza...” he trailed off, eyes clenched shut as he shuddered visibly. Then it hit Tick: this was Ratchet, who Muezza had mentioned during their confrontation at the waterfront. He was a former victim of his, who’d long forgotten about his past as a human. *Should I tell him?* He took a step forward, his tongue poised to let loose the words, but pulled back just before he spoke. He remembered what Puzzle had said:

I am a cat, simple as that: I have no yearning for a world I don’t remember.

No. Ratchet would be no different. What good would it do to tell him? Perhaps it was best if he remained unaware. Yet Tick couldn't stifle a pang of sympathy for the small, nervy Smoky cat: who had he been before he'd turned into a cat? What life had he left behind? Did anyone miss him? Tick thought of all the lives Muezza had stolen, and it made him feel as though thorns were wrapping around his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs.

Malt gave a hollow, sarcastic laugh, and turned away from Ratchet. Tick felt even more unnerved: he wasn't sure what had happened between these two, but if it could drive sweet, docile Malt to this much hate, it must have been something bad.

"What do all think?" Tracktail turned to the Cobby cats, "Shall we give him a chance?"

"It's your call, Tracktail," Odd-Eye nodded, "He's your Clanmate, after all."

Pipes muttered something in Tracktail's ear, and they both nodded.

"I think we should," Tracktail declared, "Ratchet is spineless sometimes, but he's

sincere. And he might have some information for us, so we know what we're up against."

Ratchet seemed to deflate as he breathed out, weak with relief. Malt said nothing; she just looked on, stony-faced, as her Clanmates introduced themselves to the newcomer. Tick was halfway to padding over to her and attempting to cheer her up, but already the group were moving on, nearing the trees. Tick and Malt chased after them, the tension pouring off the Cobby Midtail in waves.

They paused at the edge, where Ratchet was peering through the bushes.

"That's weird," he said, "Where's the patrol? Screech usually has a group around —"

A yowl echoed through the trees beyond, and the thump of paws pattered like rain, snapping twigs and crushing leaves. Tick joined everyone else as they poked their heads through the brambles to see the commotion.

Chaos reigned. Cats flitted back and forth through the undergrowth, breaking out into scuffles. The scents of the forest mingled with

the clashing fighters, the smells of plastic and alleyways battling for supremacy in Tick's nose.

"Alley-Oop!" a cat yelled, "You dare defy your Leader?"

"Rather defy the leader than defy the Code, Dewdrop," came the breathless response, "Scatterleaf will never forgive you for the crimes and backclawing you have committed."

"Oh, spare me. Muezza is far more powerful than those bunch of trees ever were."

The answer came with a flurry of claws and yowls, and the stench of blood ran fresh through the air, sticking to the roof of Tick's throat.

"Looks like Alley-Oop's group has joined the fight," Odd-Eye murmured, "But we can't cross quietly through the woods now."

"Can't we go around the trees?" Tips suggested, "That tree Muezza is at is outside of it, after all."

"We could, but we'd be very exposed," Odd-Eye looked over her shoulder at the desolation, "And I'm guessing patrols are everywhere around here. Is that right, Ratchet?"

He nodded. Berrybunch clawed the ground in frustration.

“We can’t keep hiding forever!” she growled, “Sooner or later, we’ll have to fight.”

Tick stared at her in surprise. The happy-go-lucky Leafy Smalltail was usually so bright and cheerful, even in the given circumstances. Perhaps seeing her home ravaged by invaders had hardened her. Lilypad, too, and Malt. Every cat seemed to be changing in the midst of battle. Tick cast his mind way back to something Muezza had once said to him:

It is when we are pushed, with no time, and forced to make big decisions on the spot that our true colour shows.

What would he do? He’d been backed into a corner many times recently, but this felt different, like it was an end. One he couldn’t see beyond.

Leaves scuttled around his paws.

You must fall... perhaps his time was coming to an end. But he didn’t fear it. A calm sensation of acceptance overcame him. *Wherever you are, Puzzle, I’ll be with you soon.*

“I have an idea!” Ratchet’s excited squeal brought Tick back to reality, “How about Pipes, Tracktail and I pretend we’re all still on Billow’s and Muezza’s side, and we can take the rest of you prisoner to Billow without anyone else bothering us!”

There was silence as the plan sunk in.

“It won’t work,” said Pipes flatly, “Billow knows I’m a traitor.”

“No, hold on, Pipes, Ratchet might just be onto something,” Tracktail’s eyes flicked back and forth, as though she could see the plan playing out before her, “We can make out it was all an elaborate ruse to gain the Cobby’s trust.”

“Hang on,” Tips stepped forward, “Even if we do that, why take us to Billow? Why not just take us straight through the woods to Muezza?”

“Some tough patrols are surrounding Muezza,” said Ratchet, “They might not believe us. But, Billow might – she’s not been sound of mind since Muezza took over. And as she relies on Muezza so much these days, she will take

you prisoners straight to him, and the patrols won't dare question their Leader!"

Odd-Eye nodded. "It's an idea. We will have to fight when we break the pretend-prisoner ploy, but Berrybunch is right: fight was destined to happen tonight."

The cats nodded silently, though Tick spotted Malt's face turn stony as she did. The Cobbies and Berrybunch pulled together in a close group, while Tracktail, Pipes and Ratchet flanked them.

"Try and look defeated," Ratchet suggested, "And scared."

That wouldn't be hard. Tick could feel his legs weaken with raw fear. But what if the plan didn't work? They'd be surrounded by too many enemies to count...

Tracktail spearheaded the group. With a flick of her tail, she led the prisoners into the trees, screeching orders like; "Pick that pace up, Cobbies! Billow is waiting for you!" and "If I see you break ranks like that again, Midtail, I'll have your pelt for my nest!" She was so terrifying that even Tick was convinced for a

moment that they'd been tricked themselves, and captured for real. It was only when Tracktail threw him a knowing wink that he felt at ease.

"Halt!" came a familiar growl, "Who goes – well, well, what have we here?"

"Screech," Tracktail nodded, her voice not hiding a cold edge, "We have come to take these prisoners to Billow."

Tick peered from behind Apples' tail. The thin Abyssinian Smoky looked bigger and more skeletal than ever. Tick could still remember how he'd attacked him with such power. He was flanked by Holly and Juniper, in the same way they had done with Saxon.

Screech snorted. "You? Tracktail, you're a traitor to our Clan. You ran off with *that*," he tossed a dirty look at Pipes, "And now it looks like you've pulled poor little Ratchet into your treachery now."

"It was all a trick," Tracktail explained evenly, "And it's worked. Look at all the prisoners we've –"

“Silence, traitor!” Screech snapped, “*I’m* deputy now. I decide what to do.”

“Then decide.”

Then Screech’s mad eyes fell on Tick. Tick shrunk back as Screech bared his fangs, coiling his haunches, ready to pounce. But he pulled back from the brink, blinked back the rage, and sheathed his claws.

“Very well,” he said, “We’ll let Billow decide your fate. All of you.” He stared from one Smoky to the other. “Pray she has mercy upon you all, and ends your miserable lives swiftly.”

They padded through the forest, with Screech leading them and Holly and Juniper joining the circle around the prisoners.

“He seems more keen to see his Clanmates punished than us,” Tips whispered to Apples, who nodded.

“Do you think he believes us?” she looked around, making sure their captors were out of earshot.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it matters. It’s Billow we need to convince. If she falls for it, they all will.”

“Quiet, back there!” Screech bellowed, brandishing his tail like a whip. Tips and Apples swivelled their ears back, eyes bulging, but Screech said no more: he hadn’t heard them.

The sound of babbling water caught Tick’s attention, and in an instant recognised the familiar territory, where Berrybunch had led him and Puzzle only last night. Had it only been yesterday? It seemed a lifetime ago.

They arrived at the screen of bracken and pushed through into Dapple Glade. The wall of stench hit Tick like a blow between the eyes. That plastic, artificial smell he now linked with Smoky Clan, mingled with car fumes and burning rubber, made his eyes water. Even the plants seemed to be recoiling from it: the grass looked shrivelled, the leaves of bracken curling away as though trying to escape. And milling around Dapple Glade, in place of the quiet, soft-pawed Leafy cats, were the hulking, loud Smokies, bounding back and forth, snarling

orders and instructions to each other, running to Sickkits to get wounds treated before dashing back into battle. What few Leafy cats were present were in a tight heap, wrapped in so many strands of thorns that it looked like a giant ball of spiky, quivering yarn. Tick could see eyes glowing from the mass, terrified and pleading. He longed to run over and tear them free.

The group moved to the centre of the camp, huddling tighter together as the Smokies slunk around them, eyeing them with open hostility and furious spits.

“I don’t like this,” Malt muttered from behind him, “I really, *really* don’t like this.”

Tick nodded in agreement – and his eyes locked with Slick. Cold fear and hot fury mingled in his stomach as the Smoky Bigtail eyed him hungrily, running his claws up and down Tick’s lost fang. He muttered something to Screech, who smirked, and licked his lips.

By now an entire horde of Smoky cats had surrounded the prisoners, bringing them to a halt near the tree stump.

“What’s going on out here?” came a cracking yowl from the rockpile, “Why are you all so quiet? You should be out there fighting, not lazing about!”

Billow emerged from Twig’s den, and her eyes bulged as she drank in the scene. She looked thin, her fur unkempt and knotted with burrs, but her shoulders still rippled with that power he had sensed the first time he’d seen her. Her eyes flushed with darkness as they looked from Tracktail to Pipes.

“What is the meaning of this?” she growled, “Who brought these Cobbies and *backclawers* into our camp? I gave specific orders to kill – Muezza doesn’t need them alive anymore, not even Tom.”

“I did, Billow,” Tracktail bowed her head.

“You?” Billow bared her glittering teeth, “Explain.”

“I apologise if Pipes or I have appeared traitorous in the past few days, but it has been necessary to gain the trust of the Cobbies. We lured them here, then captured them with the help of Ratchet.”

Billow's shoulders shuddered, as if she was fighting down the urge to burst out laughing. "Well, you had me fooled."

"I'm sorry, Billow. We both are." Pipes joined Tracktail in bowing heads, "But we're on your side, we promise. Now, what shall we do with these Cobbies?"

Tick and his Clanmates held their collective breath, watching the Smoky Clan leader make up her mind. She had said that Muezza wanted them all dead, but Tick didn't forget what Ratchet had said – that she had become so reliant on Muezza that he made all the decisions now. Would she have them taken to him to have their fates decided? Or would she have them killed on the spot? There were too many Smoky cats to fight off. The fate of the Cobbies, and the future of all Clans, rested on Billow's decision.

But to his surprise, she said neither. Instead the laughter she had been holding back bubbled over, and she threw her head back in gleeful yowls.

“Billow?” Tracktail gave a tentative step forward.

Billow suddenly stopped, her voice low, quiet and deadly, “You think you can pull the pelt over my eyes,” she declared to the group, “But I am no fool. It is you who have fallen for the trap this time! Ratchet!”

A slice of claws behind him. A gasp. Tick spun around.

Malt lay sprawled at Ratchet’s paws, her paws clenched around her neck as blood stained the grass around her. Her eyes glazed over: empty.

Tick felt the world close in around him, pressing on his shoulders, willing him to collapse. *No...not again...*

Ratchet no longer looked the confused, awkward cat Tick had seen before. As he licked the blood from his claws, his eyes were piercing, full of cunning. They locked onto Tick, and his pupils narrowed, saying one thing: *you’re next.*

Tick and the Cobbies could do nothing, their paws stunned to the spot as though they had

taken root. Ratchet took a step over Malt's body, licking the blood on his nose, ready to kill again.

Malt blinked.

Her eyes slid back into focus, locked on the soft underbelly arched over her. Her claws slid out, and she tore deep into Ratchet's stomach.

Ratchet barely understood what was happening before he was pushed aside by Malt's powerful haunches. Blood oozed out of his fur, and he splayed across the grass at his Clanmates' paws, his limbs twitching.

Malt climbed steadily to her paws, every pair of eyes in Dapple Glade locked on her in disbelief. Tick noticed that she was bleeding, but not as heavily as he thought. She shook out her fur, and her rhinestone-collar fell to the ground, split clean open. She eyed the body of Ratchet with disgust.

"You fooled me once," she heaved, "You won't fool me again."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Fifth Tree

The Smoky Cats descended upon Tick and his friends like a stinking wave of filth. Claws grabbed tufts of his fur, pulling him in all directions, threatening to tear him open. He heard a distressed mew over the yells and shrieks.

“Odd-Eye!” he shrieked. Then the wind was struck from him with a weighty blow between the shoulders. Whatever it had been freed him from the claws. He whirled around, willing his aching limbs to keep moving, to be as hard to catch as possible. Teeth raked his flank, but his small size helped to dodge under a long-legged Smoky cat and away, slithering through the heaving mass of cats. Where was everyone? There were too many enemies to fight...they would lose this one for sure...

He spotted Tracktail, mouth open, baring her sharp teeth. He hesitated. Whose side was she

on? Had she and Pipes been siding with Ratchet all along? His answer quickly came when a Smoky cat slunk up to her, and she clawed him forcefully across the face, sending him whirling into a mass of his Clanmates.

“Tick? Tick!” Tick flicked his ears at the call, and he looked wildly around. Tips was fighting his way towards him, batting and swiping his way through the countless pelts between them. Tick did the same. They were nearly upon each other, when a great black mass stepped between them. Sharp heat jarred down Tick’s spine as a vast paw swatted him aside. Tick recognised those claws, could still feel the dull wounds throbbing in his chest: Screech. Heavy paws slammed him to the ground, driving his face into the dirt.

“It’s time I finished this!” Screech boomed. Tick felt a line of spit slide down his neck: Screech was going to bite down, hard.

“No!” Desperation gave Tick energy, and as he felt Screech’s putrid breath on his fur, he launched up, feeling the back of his skull smash into the Smoky cat’s nose.

“Aaaagh!” Screech gave a muffled yell, his paws folded over his face. Tick whirled around just in time to see Tips leap onto Screech’s back, tearing out great clawfuls of fur. Screech yelped, wriggled free, and dashed away, tail between his legs.

“Tick, head for the bracken ahead,” Tips gasped, pointing with his tail, “Odd-Eye is waiting. *Go!*”

Tips pushed him bodily forward with his nose, propelling him out of the battle. Tick looked back, seeing Tip’s eyes disappear, enveloped by the enemies surrounding him. A great emptiness swelled up in Tick’s chest as he charged into the bracken wall, nearly tripping over a mass of fur as he went.

“Watch it!” Malt groaned.

Tick rapidly took stock of his surroundings. Malt lay on the soft loam, front paws stretched out. Blood oozed from under the leaf-bandages wrapped around them. Next to her lay Berrybunch, who looked much worse: sprawled on her side, deep wounds scored down her

flank, which rose and fell in quick, shallow breaths.

“Oh no,” Tick pawed the ground, “Oh no, oh no, oh –”

“Pull yourself together, Smalltail!” Odd-Eye pushed through the nearby bush, a bunch of purple berries clenched in her teeth. She lay them down before Berrybunch, who took a careful sniff, and chewed slowly. Odd-Eye ran a paw through the thick fur on her neck, pulling free a pair of furry leaves. She nosed them over to Malt.

“Chew these,” she instructed, “then lick the juices into the wounds.”

Malt obeyed, and Tick could only look on as the two injured cats helped themselves to recuperate. The bleeding on Malt’s paws slowed, and Berrybunch’s breathing grew deeper. But all the while Tick couldn’t swallow down a gnawing darkness, that this was ultimately pointless: the battle was lost, and they would all fall to Muezza’s vision of a clan-less world where cats fought over petty scraps in decaying mazes of concrete.

Odd-Eye's ears flicked, as though he had spoken aloud.

"We're not beat yet, young Smalltail," she turned half a head toward him, her green eye shining, "Look."

She pointed her tail over the heads of the Smoky cats as they struggled to pin down Tips, Tracktail, Apples and Pipes, to where the mass of knotted Leafy cats shuffled back and forth, gnawing feverishly at the thorns with their jaws.

"Let's go give them a –" her words were cut short as a grey mass shot from the bushes and threw itself at her, spitting and yowling furiously, it's eyes rolling in madness.

"Billow!" Tick snarled. He leapt at her, but she batted him away with ease, sending him barrelling into a patch of brambles. Tick watched on helplessly as the two leaders whirled past, exchanging blows and dodging at a speed that made Tick feel nauseous.

"Leave, Tick!" Odd-Eye gasped, flinging out a claw at Billow's ears, "GO!"

Tick couldn't even mew a protest as Odd-Eye's heavy tail swatted him back out into the

clearing. He felt a fire flush through him, weary of being pushed around by everyone. But now wasn't the time to feel proud.

As he tried to figure the best way around the glade without being seen, Tips, Tracktail, Apples and Pipes charged out of the fray, pulling great waves of the Smoky cats with them. To Tick's dismay, more Smoky cats were filtering into the clearing, clearly summoned by the alarm call – but then his heart leapt as he spotted great groups of City Clan cats snapping at their heels.

The dodging and evading in Dapple Glade exploded into all-out mêlée. Tick dodged back and forth as grass and roots flecked with mud and blood soared overhead. He had to scramble and fight back a few enemies, but he wasn't much of a fighter, and had to rely on his short legs to run as fast as he could.

Finally he was upon the imprisoned Leafy cats. The thorn bindings had been worn down and snapped apart in many places, flecked with the saliva of many chomping jaws. But still the trappings held. Circling around, Tick spotted a

thick, wooded knot at one end, which seemed to hold the whole thing together. If he could break that...

“Tick, look out!”

The warning came too late. He’d barely turned a whisker before a scorching mass landed on top of him, driving his eyes at the thorns.

“Aaaagh!” Needles sliced into his face, white-hot pain lancing through his head. Paws forced him further down, and the thorns dragged through his skin, tearing deep scars down his cheek. Over the agony screaming in his ears, he heard a snarl, somehow distant yet right in his ear: “Time to finish what I started.”

The thorns fell free at last, and Tick slumped on the ground, clutching his face as thick blood welled upon his cheek. Gentle chinking rattled overhead, bringing him partway to his senses...*that sounded like...*

Tick twisted onto his back and thrust his paws into the air, just in time to hold back a spitting, snapping Slick. His breath blasted in his face like rotten eggs, making him gag. Slick pulled a paw free and raked it over Tick’s belly.

With a frenzied yelp Tick let go, and they both scrambled free of one another. Tick forced himself onto his sore paws, and looked at Slick with swaying vision. He seemed to be twice the size he remembered him, his tooth necklace crammed with the trophies of more victims.

“You look every inch the monster, now, Verbrisser,” he sneered, circling around Tick like a vulture.

Tick could only wonder how he looked. His cheeks felt torn to shreds, and blood streaked down them, dripping from his chin like tears. But he held himself as tall as he could, his aching chest trembling.

“I’m not Verbrisser anymore,” he snapped, as he circled to other way, his back turning to the tied up Leafies, “I am Tick, Smalltail of Cobby Clan.”

Slick doubled over in fits of laughter. “And I’m supposed to be *more* scared by that? Face it; you’re a mess. No, you’re less than a mess: you’re nothing.”

“And it makes you feel big, does it?” Tick countered, “Attacking a nothing?”

Slick's eye twitched.

"Come, then, Slick," Tick lowered into a crouch, "Come see what 'nothing' is made of."

A smile flickered across Slick's mad face, then it was gone, and he howled a high, feral war-cry. He flew at Tick, who looked ready to leap. Slick jumped – and Tick slid underneath him, knocking his paws off balance with quick swipes of his tail. Slick couldn't stop his slash in time: it tore through the knotted thorns. The binds fell away, and with meows of victory pounding in their ears, the freed Leafies descended on the Smoky cat on all sides. Tick grimaced as he listened to the cries of pain fall silent. There came a *snap*, and loose teeth scattered across the grass. Tick's own lost fang slid to a halt at his own paws.

"TICK!" a yell shuddered behind him. He turned. Odd-Eye limped across the battle-strewn glade, her once pristine fur blotted with red, "Tick, what are you doing here?"

Tick frowned. "I'm doing what you wanted," he said, "I freed the Leafies."

Odd-Eye was upon him now. “I told you to leave!” her eyes were half angry, half sympathetic, “You must confront Muezza!”

“What?” Tick’s wounds gave a throb as his heart pounded, “But – the battle...and you guys...I can’t leave you alone!”

Odd-Eye pulled her face right up to his, their noses were touching. All Tick could see were calm shades of blue and green. The smell of their blood mingled, the scent of Cobby Clan rife on them both.

“We fought to get you this far,” Odd-Eye whispered, “Every one of us entered this fight knowing the price we would pay, including you. Would you deny those who made sacrifices tonight to see their deeds go unfulfilled?”

Tick swallowed, his tongue furry and dry. He shook his head. The sound of battle around him dissolved away, until only the sounds of his and Odd-Eye’s raggedy breaths could be heard.

“Odd-Eye, I’m...I’m scared...” he confessed in a small voice, “I...I don’t what I’m supposed to do.”

Odd-Eye gave him a comforting lick on the forehead. Her purr rumbled against his ears.

“When the moment comes, you’ll know.” They locked eyes once again, just as they had done in the dusty room at the waterfront, and just as before, the words of the leaves whispered through him:

You must fall...

“Odd-Eye,” he whispered, “I’m...sorry. Really, really sorry. For everything. For being the Nestbreaker. For wrecking so many Clanmate’s lives. I don’t know you all found it in yourselves to...not just forgive me, not just give me a second chance, but to help, put their own lives, on the line, to —”

“Ssssh,” Odd-Eye hissed softly, placing her tail on his mouth to silence him, “Nobody understands the mistakes they make until they have made it. What matters is taking the chance to put right what we’ve put wrong. This is your chance. Will you take it?”

He blinked. The image of Puzzle blazed against his eyes as he did. “I will.”

“Then go. Don’t look back.”

All his instincts screamed at him to stay, to help Apples and Tips as they collapsed under swathes of Smoky pelts, and Malt and Berrybunch as they crouched hidden in the shadows, vulnerable and open to attack – but something stronger pulled him away, through the bracken, away from the battle. Alone in the dark, he crashed through the trees, trunks swaying before him, as though moving aside to let him pass. His paws felt light and heavy all at once: he seemed to fly through the park, springing across the lichen-covered boulders and over streams; yet at the same time each bound felt pained and laboured, as though every step closer to his fate drained him of something vital, something precious that left him with an aching emptiness inside.

The trees thinned away, and the desolate dumping grounds began in earnest, their masses arching over him, shards of debris peeling from them and sailing on the wind. Beyond them, he could make out a hazy hill, taller than anything else around for miles, with four huge trees crammed on it's peak: Scatterleaf. Never had it

looked so close. He'd once been told that hills and mountains looked closer than usual before a storm broke.

He rounded a corner of plastic boxes, and the old oak tree came into view, as black as an ink blot. Muezza was nowhere to be seen, but instantly Tick could tell something strange was going on. For one thing, the tree was in full bloom, great fists of leaves sagging on its branches. Only yesterday, this dead tree had one, weak little leaf clinging to life on its canopy. Frowning, he edged warily into the clearing, ears perked in case of an ambush, and approached the tree.

As he drew closer, he noticed something else strange: an odd sort of bulge around the otherwise smooth burnt out trunk. When he saw what it was, all else was driven from his mind: the tree, Muezza, the fate of the clans, everything.

Tied to the tree by thick rope was Puzzle.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Nothing More

“Tom Verbrisser, Tom Verbrisser, Tom Verbrisser.”

Tick’s ear flicked at the slow, taunting drawl behind him, each like a slap across the face. He turned slowly, and looked up into the shadowy sneer of Muezza. The teeth of the chainsaw wrapped around one hand glinted like his own, baring down over him like the towering menace he’d become.

Tic’s mind reeled. Did Muezza the ritual had, once again, failed? That Tick still clutched onto his memories? *He did call me Tom Verbrisser...*but then again, it may simply be a test. His heart punched his ribs, making his chest fur flutter. He kept his face blank as he looked up at Muezza, as though he had no idea what ‘Tom Verbrisser’ meant.

Muezza studied him closely with his cold dark eyes. “Interesting that it is you of all cats that come to find me,” he said at last.

“I’ve heard all about you, Muezza Ailuros,” Tick said slowly, “My Leader has told me everything.”

“And she sent *you* after me?”

Tick had to choose his words carefully: like the bridge to City Clan headquarters, one false step could end everything. “She thinks I can stop you. It would be my pleasure.”

Muezza considered him for a moment, as if weighing Tick’s words of their worth.

“I’d like to see you try. You’re nothing but a kit!”

Tick’s heart gave a jolt: *he really doesn’t know! But how can I use that against him?* Behind his stoic face, Tick’s mind skimmed across ideas, each as useless as the last.

“Recognise her?” Muezza nodded at the tree.

Tick turned away to face Puzzle. He let his mask slip whilst Muezza couldn’t see it. As he stared up at his dead friend, her fur black with dried blood, he swallowed the urge to cry.

“I’ve heard about her,” it took every drop of his resolve to sound distant, “A Bigtail of Cobby Clan. Faithful. Popular. Murdered by you.” Now he allowed himself to show some anger, some spit spraying from his mouth.

Muezza wasn’t fazed in the slightest: instead, he took a step towards him. Tick forced his paws to remain planted, willed his eyes not to glance at the chainsaw in his hands.

“Sacrifices have to be made on the way to greatness,” Muezza winked at him, “I knew someone who could’ve told you all about that. If you think I’m bad, you would’ve *hated* him...for more reasons than you’d believe possible, little one.”

Tick longed to burst forth with frenzied claws, but knew the moment hadn’t come, not yet.

“So this was your sacrifice, was it?” Tick sneered, “Killing...innocent cats! And what greater good, Muezza?”

“Mine,” his hiss issued like ice, “There is none greater than that.”

“So you never wanted to help Smoky Clan!”

Muezza's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter, "Any benefit they gain is a leftover. If they are happy to live in the cracks and corners of my empire, then that's just fine by me. I'll have moved on by then. Onwards and upwards."

"What do you want, Muezza? Why do you keep demanding more? Don't you have enough? I know you were a cat before. You've got your power now. You've got your money. That's what you wanted from the start. Can't you just leave it at that?"

Muezza didn't hold back his roar of laughter this time, "You have no idea how rich that sounds coming from you! Ah, little one, there is always *more* to be had. Why shy away from it? When all is said and done, everything is fair game. Some will stand in my way – and they will suffer." He nodded once more at Puzzle, "She was one of them."

Something in Tick snapped. Red descended over his eyes, and he lunged at Muezza's face. He heard the chainsaw clatter to the ground as his claws scored deep through thick skin and

tore clumps of lank hair out. Before Muezza's hands could make a grab for him, he scrambled over his shoulder and tore through his jacket. He slid down his back, slicing at the skin beneath.

A hammerblow struck him across the head, and the world flickered out, flashing in full blazing colour as he slammed into twisted shards of metal. Fire and ice swirled in his head, and he staggered away. Muezza drew himself up and strode towards the tree, pulling the chainsaw into life. His eyes flickered with embers, and he glowered at Tick, daring him to try that again.

The chainsaw roared, and Muezza gave a victorious howl to the air.

"It's a shame," he called to Tick as he stood next to the tree, stroking the dead Puzzle with his free hand, "I set this up just for Tom Verbrisser. He was like me. Always wanting more. Too bad he'll never feel that again." He patted the tree. "I'm thinking of putting a giant roulette here in memory of him."

He pressed the whirring teeth of the chainsaw to the scorched bark. The noise shuddered the leaves at Tick's paws as the saw slowly chewed through the trunk. With a jolt, Tick understood: that tree would fall, and crush Puzzle's body! *No!* He staggered forward, slipping over the dead leaves and metal splinters on the ground. He lost his footing and tripped on that hidden old rabbit set again, but he stayed up, scrambling toward the tree. He skidded to a halt as close as he would dare. What could he do now? Attack Muezza again? That wouldn't do any good: he'd just tear him to pieces and carry on. Save Puzzle's body? Again, Muezza would kill him before he got close.

The chainsaw sliced through the tree, spraying wood chips over the ground. Tick pawed the ground restlessly – what could he do? – and charged at Muezza. But Muezza unleashed the chainsaw from the tree and jabbed it at him.

AAAAGH!

Blood gushed from where his left ear had split open, spidering through his fur and sticking

around his eyes. He blinked away red just in time to see the metal teeth lunge for him again, and he leapt backward.

“It’s hopeless, little one, give up!” Muezza jeered, returning to the tree. Blackened shards of wood rained down over Tick, sticking in his wounds and sending fresh prickles of pain through him. He staggered, feeling light-headed. He’d lost too much blood. Muezza’s laugh sounded distant and ghostly.

“I wish you remembered Puzzle, Tom, just to make this moment sweeter,” he yelled over the noise of the hungry saw, “But say goodbye to your pet cat!”

“She...IS NOT MY PET CAT! SHE IS MORE THAN THAT!” Tick screamed. But Muezza didn’t seem to hear over the noise.

He forced himself to focus one last time at the body of the beautiful Toyger cat tied to their tree. Words welled up inside him, long known but never voiced before, and out they flowed.

“You are everything to me, Puzzle,” he said, blinking back red tears, “You were the last thing

I forgot, and the first thing I remembered. And...I understand now.”

A wind picked up around him, rustling the dirty leaves at his paws.

“All that time I was trying to impress you, to impress June, when I never really thought about what you wanted. I was selfish. I got greedy; I lost sight of why I was doing it. But you never wanted any of that!”

The tree creaked, swaying violently. Muezza roared with laughter.

“I remember what you said to me,” Tick whispered, “you said you didn’t care I used to be human: it’s what I am right now that counts. Well...here I am, Puzzle. I am Tick, Smalltail of Cobby Clan. Nothing more than you wanted me to be. I...love you, Puzzle.”

One by one, the leaves of the canopy snapped from their branches and swirled around the tree. As more and more joined the whirl, Muezza stopped his sawing to bat them away like gnats in the air, but the whirlwind of leaves seemed to push him back. He threw the chainsaw aside

and backed away, watching the leaves with mingled fear and fury.

“Scatterleaf,” he muttered, his eye twitching.

Tick squinted at the hill in the distance. From the trees at the pinnacle, a thin stream of leaves flowed towards the broken tree, joining the thickening swirl, adding their colours and aroma to the mix. Tick’s fur prickled, and the dead leaves around him murmured in anticipation.

The wind dropped away in an instant, and the leaves fluttered playfully to the ground in a shower of greens, reds and yellows. Tick peered through the thick, falling sheets of leaves. His heart slammed against his throat as the leaves parted like curtains.

Puzzle’s body gave a spasm, a short sharp gasp. Her chest rose and fell with living breaths, and her golden eyes sparked with new life, peering down at him with curiosity.

“Tick?”

“PUZZLE!” Tick’s voice cracked with soaring joy, “You’re alive! Oh, Puzzle, I—”

“I know,” Puzzle smiled warmly, her eyes holding him with that familiar warm sparkle, “I heard. That’s all I wanted. Tick.”

A murderous shriek brought Tick crashing back to the moment. Muezza drew himself up, eyes flashing with madness as he brandished the chainsaw over his head.

“No!” he bellowed, “Scatterleaf will not deny me!”

He swung the chainsaw at Puzzle. Tick bunched his legs, ready to leap – but held back as the chainsaw fell loose from Muezza’s hands. The chainsaw smashed sidelong into the foot of the tree, snapping the chain and sending it whipping through the darkness like a wild snake. The motor spluttered, and stopped.

In the silence, Tick stared at Muezza, who glared at his hands, eyes wide and spit quivering on his lip. He could see why: they were rapidly growing long strands of black-blue fur. His fingers were shortening, his nails lengthening. His face screwed up, writhing in agony he twisted away. His ravaged white suit slackened around his shrinking body, contorting into a

scrambling mass. Long claws tore through the jacket, and out burst the true form of Muezza: the biggest cat Tick had ever seen. Pale blue eyes bolting, he scowled at his paws in disgust, then in a snarling frenzy tore at the remnants of the suit until tiny white fragments hung in the air like snow.

“What’s happened to me?” Muezza the cat demanded in a rumble deep as thunder, “I fed on a new victim tonight! Scatterleaf cannot interfere with my gift! Unless...”

His ice-cold eyes locked onto Tick. They rounded in understanding first, then narrowed.

“You!” Muezza’s voice rumbled like an earthquake, shivering up Tick’s paws, “You *are* Tom Verbrisser! You have broken my ritual! I’ll kill you!”

Tick hadn’t seen movement, yet in a blink Muezza was upon him, and teeth sunk into his scruff. Muezza shook him ravenously, and the world shuddered. In his good ear, he could hear Puzzle shouting something, but couldn’t make it out. But hearing her voice gave him the tiniest droplets of courage to lap at: she was *alive!*

Now he wanted to live too, to talk to Puzzle again, to be with her. He swung out his claws, and sure enough, he found purchase on a velvety ear, and clung on for all his worth. Muezza roared, and bucked Tick free. Tick landed on all fours, and twisted to face his enemy. *This is it, he told himself, this is why it was me. I broke the ritual. Only I can break Muezza.*

They circled one another. Muezza peeled back his lips, displaying the ivory fangs so sharp they could surely slice through metal. But as he kneaded at the leaves underpaw, Tick could feel fresh energy pouring into him. He matched Muezza's sneering face, letting out a caterwaul. Muezza drew in closer, strafing towards him. Tick pulled back his good ear, heart thumping, knowing what was coming, fighting against every instinct that begged him to run. He reared up and swiped at Muezza's muzzle.

Muezza ducked and slammed his vast head into Tick's belly. He rolled away, but clambered up too slowly. Muezza charged into him, locking his claws into Tick's legs and

throwing him up in the air. He had a fleeting glimpse of Puzzle's terrified face and the now stark canopy: empty, save for a single piece of fruit sagging from a branch. Then he was plummeting back to earth, back to the waiting jaws of Muezza.

Tick fluffed out his tail and lashed it across Muezza's eyes before he landed. Muezza groaned and spun away, blinking out the hair stuck in his eyes. Tick landed, hunkered down, and sprung onto Muezza's back. Now it was his turn to bite down hard on neck-scruff. His teeth were too short and Muezza was too big to make it a lethal bite, but he held on. Muezza roared and yelped, swinging around, his huge shoulders shifting, slamming heavy blows at him. Tick held firm, battering his back with his hind legs, but he was tired now: his small body had taken too many blows, lost too much blood, and the punches were coming harder and faster from the massive cat.

Finally, Muezza rolled onto his back, crushing Tick underneath. His grip came loose, and Muezza reared up, towering over him. Tick

couldn't see properly: only the glistening teeth stood out on the dark shape as they rushed toward him. They clamped around his face, fitting easily in Muezza's jaws. He was dully aware of being shaken like a ragdoll, his ribs snapping as Muezza smashed his broken body against the ground.

“YOU – CAN’T – BEAT – ME!” Muezza roared with each blow. Then Tick felt nothing at all, air whispering all around him. Then hard wood crashed against his back, and he slid to the ground. The tree creaked. Above him, Puzzle mewed desperately, scratching at the tree and ropes, but her binds were too tight. He looked blindly around; cuts and bruises had forced his eyes shut.

“It's over, Verbrisser,” Muezza declared. He didn't even sound breathless, “You have revealed your true colours, and they pale in comparison to me. The Clans are over, and so are you and all your little friends. Jacobsen Park is mine. You just don't want power more than I do.”

“You’re...right. I don’t,” Tick murmured through pained breaths, “I don’t want anything anymore. Just what I...I need...”

“Then receive it,” Tick heard Muezza lick his chops, “Goodbye, Tom Verbrisser.”

Muezza pounded forward – a struggle of paws, a grunt, and a body thumping hard on the ground.

“What—”

Tick forced his eyes open, and looked blearily at Muezza. He was slumped on the ground, a hind leg twisted deep in the hidden rabbit hole he had twice tripped in. Snarling and spitting, Muezza tried to wriggle free, but he was stuck tight, the leg twisted at an odd angle.

The tree creaked and snapped. Tick backed away from its roots as it inched steadily forwards, bearing down over Muezza. His pale eyes widened, and he struggled hard, but the old set collapsed around him, sinking him deeper into its clutches, and he yowled in agony, watching the falling tree in terror.

“Tick!” Puzzle screamed from above. He arched his neck up and saw Puzzle writhing furiously against the ropes. “Tick, help!”

Tick looked at Muezza, about to be crushed, then back up at Puzzle, tied to the falling tree.

Summoning his final scraps of strength, he leapt at the tree, and climbed upward. It grew harder to cling to the peeling bark as the tree tilted backward, but he gained purchase on the thick ropes holding Puzzle. He gnawed with his aching teeth, slashed with split claws, pushed at Puzzle to squeeze her free, but nothing worked. Her eyes swelled with terror as the tree descended to the ground in earnest: they had seconds left.

“NOOO!” Muezza roared, scrambling to escape but falling deeper into the hole.

The wind stroked Tick’s fur...*you must fall...only one thing could be done now, one way to save Puzzle...you must fall...*

He lined himself up sidelong against Puzzle, and pushed with all his might at her flank. Sure enough, she slid sideways through the rope,

onto the side of the tree: still bound, but out of harm's way.

In the heartbeat before impact, Tick's eye's locked with Puzzle's. There was no time to leap away to safety himself. His last vision was of Puzzle opening her mouth to scream, then –

Chapter Thirty

Satisfaction

The world exploded in Puzzle's ears as the tree slammed to the ground. She jolted and jostled on impact, her back rubbing against the tough, dead wood. The rope snapped apart, and she tumbled free.

She stared at the tree, huge and hulking. Nothing would survive being crushed by that, but she had to hope, had to pray that something miraculous could happen, as it had happened to her...*but how many miracles can we ask of one night? Is this too much?*

She pushed and headbutted the tree, but it wouldn't budge. The sound of pattering paws rushing towards her from the trees met her ears. Not caring who it was, she threw back her head and yowled to the sky.

Cats skidded into the clearing. She looked wildly around, into the bulging eyes of her Clanmates: Odd-Eye, Sir Paws, Apples, Tips,

Malt...they were all there, bloodied and exhausted, but alive. They stared at her, the Bigtail back from the dead, but she was in no mood to explain. Odd-Eye nodded, then stepped forward.

“Where is Tick? Muezza?”

Puzzle’s eyes prickled with hot tears. She looked at the fallen tree. As one, the Cobbies gathered at the edge of the trunk and pushed. It swayed slightly, but as they stopped to catch a breath it rolled back. Puzzle clawed desperately at the charred bark, tearing at the edge of the heart-shaped carving that peeked from underneath.

There came another distant call, and more cats descended upon them: Twig, leading a band of battle-worn Leafies: Lilypad, Berrybunch, Rustle, Mossylog...Then City Clan, led now by Alley-Oop. Even some Smoky Clan cats turned up, led by Tracktail and Pipes. Puzzle caught word that Billow had been killed, the Tracktail was the new leader, with Pipes as deputy. They would pull the broken Smoky Clan back into order for sure. Pads had survived, but had

admitted his mistakes, and returned home to make amends.

All of Puzzle's friends, everyone she'd met on her journeys through the territories with Tick, all here, all alive. And Muezza was gone at last. The Clans would live on. But it didn't feel like a victory. Without Tick, Puzzle had never felt so defeated.

With their combined might, the Clan cats heaved and shoved at the tree, and at last it rolled away.

One cat lay beneath. One cat, and one human.

Every cat immediately turned their faces away from the sight of Muezza's flattened cat body: it was too grotesque to bear. Grimly, cats immediately set to work burying him where he lay.

But Tick was gone. Tom Verbrisser had returned.

Yet even as a human he was barely recognisable. His ripped ear and tooth had returned, but his scars remained: his face mangled under layers of cuts and scars, blood

still shining on the surface. Purple swellings ringed his eyes.

Puzzle scrambled through the assembled cats. She had to know. Had to hope. She placed her paws on his chest.

Nothing. As lifeless as the tree that had crushed him.

*No...no, you can't...*the world seemed to close in around her, as though she too was being crushed. The sky was starting to lighten with a new dawn, but the world seemed to grow darker, so much darker. She lay across his chest, ear pressed to his heart, listening to the silence as his warmth drained away from him.

A snap of a branch pricked her other ear, and dully she looked up. Twig padded past, the singular piece of fruit the tree had bared hanging from his teeth. It was mashed and bruised: Puzzle couldn't even tell what it was. *But what did it matter? Did anything matter?*

Twig pressed the fruit into the turned soil near the beech tree's roots.

“From the rot, new life can spring,” he mumbled, carefully covering the fruit, “And start again.”

Thump.

Puzzle’s heart jolted in unison with Tom’s. But it didn’t again. She stood up. Had she imagined it? She licked a paw, and held it close to his nose. *Please...just one more miracle...*

The tiniest, weakest breeze fluttered in and out of his nostrils, tickling her fur. But it was steady, and unmistakable in what it meant.

“He’s...breathing...” she muttered. Paws shifted behind her. She said aloud; “He’s ALIVE!”

The cats stood stunned for a moment. Then, one by one, they joined in a joyous chorus of caterwauls, rattling the air with their calls, to be heard for miles around, reaching the furthest corners of their territories and beyond. Puzzle felt a great joy swell inside her as she yelled to the breaking dawn. After a minute of their singing, footsteps pounded the ground,

accompanied by the angry, scratchy shouts of a human.

The cats scattered into hiding, save for Puzzle, who stayed by Tom. A human bounded around the corner, making all the noise in the world, a bright light flashing in his hand like the single eye of a rumbler. He took one look at Tom, and dashed forward. He paid no attention to Puzzle as he checked Tom's pulse and breath, just as she had done. He pulled a shard of metal from his pocket, tapped on it, and held it up to his ear, talking quickly. He stayed by Tom's side, moving his body into a strange position. Then he saw Puzzle. He said something to her she couldn't understand, but his tone was gentle.

Soon, blue lights flashed through the creeping dawn, and a vast white rumbler crunched its way across the debris towards them. Humans in bright green pelts appeared, and there was a flurry of activity. Puzzle backed away, but never took her eyes off of Tom. They lifted him onto a thin, elastic sheet, and carried him towards the rumbler. Puzzle

dashed forwards, hoping against hope this wouldn't be the last time she saw him.

The humans in green pelts said something, and tried to push her away, but then the first human who found Tom whispered to them, and they let her get close to Tom.

Already he was covered in strange human devices: wires, cobweb-like bandages, a strange squared helmet over his head. He looked worse than ever.

Tom gave the slightest turn of his head in her direction. His eyes were swollen shut, but the tiniest slits still shined through, looking straight at her.

Start again.... Twig's words, echoed through her mind as she backed away, and let the humans drive Tom away in the white rumbler, around the corner, out of sight.

* * *

Tom sat in the waiting room, crutch leaning against his chair. He looked over his battered hands. His fingers felt long – unnecessarily

long. The crutch may have been for the twisted ankle, but he didn't trust himself on two legs.

"The boardroom is ready for you now, Mr. Verbrisser," said the receptionist, "Do you need help with your things?"

"Thanks, Lucy," he said, pulling himself up by the crutch, "that would be appreciated."

Lucy picked up his suitcase and pushed open the glass doors. The frosted lettering of *Verbrisser International* flashed as he walked inside. He thanked Lucy again as she pulled out a chair for him, and he carefully lowered himself into it. Three board members faced him from across the vast mahogany table, each with varying degrees of bemusement on their faces.

"Angie, Clyde," he nodded to them, shifting in his seat, "Walter, how's the hip?"

"By the stars, what happened to you, Tom?" said Angie, her eyes darting over his many cuts and bruises. "We heard it was in Jacobsen Park, but —"

"I was doing some last minute research," Tom cut in quickly, lifting his suitcase to the

table, “Then some rotten old tree collapsed on me.”

“In the dead of night?” Clyde raised an eyebrow.

“Like I said, last minute,” he said flatly. They still looked unconvinced, but Tom didn’t mind. *Let them guess away.*

Angie turned to her papers. “Well...let’s begin, shall we? As you can see, Mr. Ailuros has failed to turn up,” she gestured at an empty seat, “We’ve been trying to contact him all day, but there’s no word.”

“Can’t imagine why. How rude.”

“Quite.” Walter huffed.

“So by that token, control of Verbrisser International transfers to you, Tom,” Angie shuffled up her papers. “Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Verbrisser. Truth be told, we were all looking forward to seeing you and Mr. Ailuros lock horns, so to speak.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Well, congratulations are in order. We’ll hold off all the formal greetings to the staff while you recover, and —”

“Actually, there’s one thing I’d like to put in action right now, if you wouldn’t mind.” Tom struggled to his feet, opened his suitcase, and slid a thick brown envelope across the table. With a curious look at Tom, Angie opened it, and the three of them scanned through the papers. Their eyes grew wider with every passing page. Finally, they looked up at him.

“Are you serious, Mr. Verbrisser?” said Angie.

Tom smiled, and splayed his long fingers on the desk. “I have a new proposal.”

Tom stood atop the steep hill, overlooking Jacobsen Park. The tiny blot of green trees was like an island in a sea of dusty, murky trash. But that was all about to change.

A tree branch near him rustled and swayed, and something soft nuzzled him in the neck.

“It is done,” he said quietly, “And I am ready.”

He turned to face the four vast, imposing trees. The leaves whispered in their high canopies in greeting.

Scatterleaf. And in the centre of the opening lay a vast pile of leaves. A message, but for who? This pile stood in the exact centre of Scatterleaf. Who was it for? Either it was for every Clan, or...

Tom smiled. "I see."

A meow at his feet, and Tom looked down. Puzzle looked up at the high canopies. A gust of wind rattled them, and once again, Tom heard them: *You must fall.*

Dropping his crutch, he leapt at the nearest tree, and climbed. Hand over hand, foot over foot, upwards he went, until he was within the leaves. They shivered excitedly at his arrival. The pile of leaves awaited him far below. Puzzle stood back, and even from this distance a clear smile played in her eyes. She nodded. He grinned, nodded back, and let go. The air took him, cushioning and slowing his fall, gently lowering him into the leaves, holding him in their embrace.

Epilogue

Jackson cursed as the wind tugged the plans out of hands yet again. *Damn this weather. We could've waited until summer, but no, Tom wanted it done straight away...*

He dashed across Jacobsen Park, a much easier thing to do since it had been cleared of trash, and picked up the plans that had mercifully snagged on an orchard sapling. Despite his grumpy mood, Jackson couldn't help but swell with pride at the lines of young trees. *In years to come, it'll be ripe for the picking. In the middle of London, too! Who'd have thought it?*

He already knew the answer to question. As he weaved his way through the trundling machinery and groups of gardeners, he looked over the plans once again. All drawn up by Tom's own hands, and aside from an Education Centre and some public toilets there wasn't a building to be seen on the blueprints. It was all replanting and restoring, with the remaining

green heart of the Park to be left alone. The Tom that Jackson knew would've looked at a tree and wondered at the cost of cutting it down, not the reverse. Just what had come over him?

Some passing workers greeted him with an unusual amount of respect, and Jackson tipped his hard hat to them. He was head of Verbrisser UK, now – as part of the split-up empire of Verbrisser international. Jackson recalled hearing the news with dumbstruck amazement: every part of the business was, effectively immediately, to focus on environmental restoration. And Jackson was given the reins of their London property. Jackson had to hand it to Tom; this kind of project was right up his alley. All the more curious, seeing as they had never seen eye-to-eye.

Jackson arrived at the great curiosity of Jacobsen Park, already a mysterious thing: the fallen tree, now called the Rot Tree according to Tom's wishes. *Why on earth would he give it such a terrible name?* The shattered trunk and splintered stump still sat there, a new tree growing in its remains, again just as Tom asked.

*All this bizarreness...*and Jackson couldn't ask Tom why. One minute this tree had nearly killed him. Then the second he finally laid hands on his father's company, a desire he never hid, he disappeared, leaving strict instructions on what he wanted to happen – the breaking of Verbrisser International and the restoration of Jacobsen Park being just the tip of the iceberg. It was all very confusing and annoying.

“Sir! Mister Jackson!”

Jackson looked up to see a portly builder charging towards him, carrying something fluffy. Jackson rolled his eyes. “What is it now, Adam?”

Adam brandished the fluffy thing under Jackson's nose. It was a cat, looking surprisingly calm and content as it licked bits of ham from it's chops. “This thing is a menace!” Adam spluttered, “It's stolen my lunch! Again!”

Jackson sighed. “Let it go. You know full well that there's nothing we can do. It's Tom's orders. Not a single cat is to be touched, moved or harmed.”

“But –”

“Let it go, before I let you go.” Jackson said firmly.

Mumbling, Adam dropped the cat, and it darted back into the thick trees.

“Can’t we why we can’t just move them,” Adam muttered as he shuffled off, “It’s not like anyone’s watching.”

Jackson watched him go, then looked at the plans. His eyes fell on the note scribbled in the corner:

I’m counting on you Jackson. Follow these plans to the letter. I’ll be watching.

Jackson rolled up the plans. *I wouldn’t put it past you.*

Something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. It was another cat, sitting on the trunk of the Rot Tree. It was small and black with a chest and paws of white. It stared straight at Jackson with bright green eyes.

Jackson considered the cat for a second. Then he smirked. “What are you staring at?” he murmured softly.

He walked off. He didn't notice the bigger, tiger-like cat join the other one, followed by three tiny kittens.

Want to know what happened
between the final chapter and the
epilogue?

Read on for more adventures in the
world of 'Tick!'

P.J. Leonard
Tick

The Trials of a
Midtail

Prologue

The cat burst through the open window. The string of sausages dangling from his jaws wrapped round his marmalade paws, and he crashed into the pavement. The world whirled as he tumbled over and over, gravel and shattered glass slicing through his patchy fur and skin, and then – *slam*. It smacked against the wall. Even with the fat sausages softening the blow, the cat yowled in pain, and lay for a second in a heap of meat and limbs at odd angles.

Footsteps. An angry roaring. A metal door swung open, and the hulking figure of a human stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the harsh light from within. It boomed something the cat couldn't understand, but there was no mistaking the fury in that yowl. Something glinted in the human's hand. The cat felt his heart push at his ribs, as though forcing him to his feet. The cat bunched his hind legs and leapt aside as something sharp and shiny zipped past him. It scraped past the fur at the tip of his tail, slicing the string of sausages in half. The cat bolted, the remaining sausages still trailing from his teeth, not daring to look back. The yowls

followed the cat down the street as he dodged between the legs of more humans, and then darted across the wide grey expanse where Rumlbers sped by. They screamed at the cat as they rolled past, some screeching to a halt, others swerving around to avoid him. The cat felt another tug at his teeth as more sausages were pulled free from his grasp, but still he kept running.

He bounded down a quiet road, through a metal fence and into a small thicket. The mud was a little wet here, the shade from the thick bushes and trees blocking the endless sunshine of the past week from drying it out, but it was cool, hidden and quiet here. *Perfect.*

The cat opened his jaws, dropping two mangled, lumpy sausages onto the grass. The cat's stomach grumbled longingly, while his nostrils let out a long, weary sigh. *Better than nothing.* Again. That was all the cat could think to himself recently, when his few meals had been dry dog food, puddle water, and worst of all, human leftovers. *To think I, Chess, have to resort to mooching from humans...ugh.* This seemed like a feast by comparison. The cat known as Chess drew himself up. *Well, at least this had an element of hunt to it. I've earned this.*

But as he leaned down to take a bite, the wind changed, rattling through the leaves, bringing with it a smell. A smell Chess had not smelled for a long, long time, but had never forgotten. *It...it can't be!*

He spun around and jumped out of the thicket, startling a human on the mud path as it walked its dog. Chess ignored the barking dog as he sped up the hill and rounded the slope. The wind streamed through his orange fur as he looked down over the winding streets and chimney stacks of London. The vast nests of glass and concrete lay far in the distance, but Chess' eyes were fixed on a green patch of land some dozen yowls away: a patchwork of rolling fields, a farmhouse, and two barns: one old and on the brink of collapse, the other new and clean. *There was only one when I left.*

The wind blasted in his face again, and his whiskers twitched irresistibly as the smell once again shot up his nostrils: the electric smell in the air before a lightning storm. The smell of his old clan.

The sausages lay forgotten in the thicket as Chess launched down the hill. Soon...very soon, he would be home at last...

Chapter One On The Fence

The black-and-white cat sat on the fence, looking in at the house. It peered at the window to the lounge, head swaying back and forth, as though trying to discern the insides, although the room beyond the glass was as black as night. Not once had he seen the new owners switch on his TV. Maybe they had moved it to another room? Or maybe they had got rid of it altogether? The cat shook his head. Surely not! That was a 50-inch wall-mounted plasma, with a surround sound theatre to boot! Who wouldn't want that?

The door opened, and a pudgy boy with a bowl haircut and glass of cola in his hands stepped out into the sunny morning. The boy looked straight at him, and the cat tensed. He'd seen the boy now and then, though the boy had never seen him before because he was always engrossed in some handheld game or another. But now they locked eyes for the first time. The boy stared at him for a while. Then he turned, and shouted back into the house: "Mom! Dad! That cat is here again!"

The cat leapt down from the fence, muscles tense, but still too curious to run: the door to his old house lay wide open now, and he could see all the way into his old kitchen. The boy disappeared back into the house for a moment, and he could see – yes! They still had his old oven. Had they refloored the hallway, though? Sheesh, what was wrong with the pine tiling he had before? And what had they replaced it with? Mahogany? Uck. No accounting for taste.

The boy stepped back out of the house again, a bowl of cold chicken in his hands. His beady eyes fixed hungrily on the cat as he laid the bowl down on the doormat, then he stepped backwards into the house. He threw a creepy grin at the cat, and slowly closed the door.

The cat rolled his eyes. Did the boy think he was stupid? He would bet his old house all over again that the boy was squeezed against the other side of the front door right now, peering through the peephole, poised to strike.

But that chicken...the smell wafted through the tyres of the parked convertible. Not even the acrid stench of hot rubber could stop his mouth from watering up. He hadn't eaten properly in days, even with the bumper catch of

mice that the Cobby Clan had pulled in: his mind was too full of other things.

He looked around: nobody. Only the sound of a distant lawnmower, and of birds tweeting as they soared across the endless blue sky. He stood up and stalked around the sides of the car, strafing around the garden until he came to the wall. His black and white fur scraped against the brick as he tip-toed up to the bowl of chicken. He knew it was a trap, but the smell was just too irresistible. His stomach pulled him closer. He dipped his muzzle into the slices of chicken, and wolfed down a few succulent, delicious slices...

The bowl scraped across the doormat and spilled its contents on the fuzzy brown carpet. He cringed as the bowl struck the wall. He'd been too greedy! The door swung open, and the boy's huge face loomed out. The cat froze.

"Oh no!" the boy said, "Silly kitty, spilling the food everywhere!"

A fat hand bore down over him. He was about to turn tail and run for it, but the hand swept past him and picked up the pieces of chicken, placing them back in the bowl.

"There you go, fella," said the boy softly, pushing the bowl towards him. He stood rooted

to the spot, stunned. “Don’t rush, okay? Nobody’s gonna take that from you.”

The boy stood up and went back inside the house, closing the door behind him. The cat looked at the chicken. Then he turned, and walked away.

Chapter Two Cat Culture Shock

The cat walked through the streets with his head down, the pads of his paws stinging on the hot tarmac, the sun beating down on his shoulders.

“Tick? Tick!”

Tick...that's my name, isn't it? He wheeled around, and saw Puzzle walking towards him from a nearby garden. Tick felt himself get lighter at the sight of her: he walked up to greet her with an affectionate nuzzle on the head and a lick between the ears.

“What are you doing all the way out here, Puzzle?” he asked, looking around for the other cats, “Weren't you put in charge of Oldnest Camp this afternoon?”

“Good to know you pay attention to the morning meetings, Tick,” said Puzzle curtly, “But Oldnest decided to take out the young ones on a trip to Jacobsen Park while the weather was good. So I decided to go out on the hunt.”

“For what?” Tick meowed, wondering what Puzzle was hoping to catch in the middle of the suburbs.

“You,” said Puzzle, her bright amber eyes looking right through him. Tick felt his ears instinctively flatten to his head, and once again he was reminded of how much bigger Puzzle was than him. “I could smell that chicken on you from the next street along; it’s tainted with human hands.”

“‘Tainted’?” said Tick, feeling a surge of indignation his chest, “That’s a bit strong, isn’t it?”

“Even so, the point still stands,” Puzzle went on, wrapping her striped tail neatly across her front paws, “You are shunning duties with your clan and feeding yourself first, from human food no less. This isn’t the first time, is it?”

“It is, actually!” Tick stood up, “I haven’t been eating properly for –”

“I mean it’s not the first time you’ve visited your old nest,” Puzzle finished, nodding in the direction Tick had come from.

Tick blinked, words catching in his throat. He looked down at his paws. There was no point denying it. “For a couple of weeks, yes. I just...I wanted...”

Tick looked up at Puzzle again. Her eyes had softened, and she leaned in closer.

“You’re still not sure, are you?” she said softly, “If you made the right choice.”

Tick sighed. "I...it's just difficult," he said, the words being pulled out hard at first, but then flowing faster, as though he were pulling a plug from deep inside himself, "It's nothing personal, Puzzle, really! I love you, the Clan, and the life I have now. But sometimes I sit on that fence, and I see the life I left behind. Sure, when I was Tom I was a bit of a...err..."

"A selfish Nestbreaker?" Puzzle suggested.

"Right," Tick added sheepishly, wincing at the sound of the old nickname the cats had used for his human self, "But...it wasn't all bad! I miss cooking a hot meal, going out on a Friday night, going to the movies, listening to music, driving my car around the countryside on a Sunday...I can't do any of that now."

He looked up at the clear sky. "Can I spend the rest of my life like this? Yes, I could. But...do I want to? I...I'm not so sure, yet, Puzzle."

He looked at Puzzle's paws as he shuffled awkwardly on the spot, not daring to meet her eyes.

"Look at me," she said gently.

Tick looked up. To his surprise, she was nodding gently. "It must be difficult," she said, "You've only been a cat for, what, three months?"

“Four,” Tick quickly corrected her. Puzzle looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“It’s still early days,” she added, “But you’re not helping yourself by skulking around here everyday.”

“I don’t skulk!” Tick mewled.

Puzzle’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “Of course you don’t,” she said, “But what you need is some kind of project, a goal to work towards. Something that was kind of like what Tom would do.”

Tick had a sudden image of him as a tiny cat driving his Porsche down the motorway while wearing sunglasses, then sitting in the cinema with popcorn and a cola on either side.

“Look, don’t worry about it,” he said quickly, “It’s just a bit of a culture shock, that’s all, I’ll get over –”

“I’ve got it!” Puzzle jumped to her feet, and Tick leapt back, tumbling off the kerb. “You remember Milkshake, right?”

“Yeah,” Tick pulled himself back up to the pavement, shaking the gravel out of his fur, “Why?”

“Well, her owners had to move away, and they took her with them.”

“A pity, for sure,” Tick meowed, “But, what does she have to do with –?”

“She was a Midtail!” Puzzle’s eyes sparkled, “That means there is an opening, Tick! You should talk to Odd-Eye about it – the extra responsibility might be just what you need.”

Tick stared at Puzzle for a spell, then gave his teeth a nervous swipe with his tongue.

“Oh. Well...I dunno about that Puzzle,” Tick murmured, “I’m not sure if Odd-Eye would accept-”

“What’re you talking about? Of course she will!” Puzzle gave him a friendly bat over the head, “Do you think she’s forgotten about Muezza already?”

“That’s what scares me.”

Puzzle pierced him with her eyes once more. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said with a twitch of her whiskers, “But it can’t hurt to at least ask, can it? Come on, let’s head back to base before Odd-Eye heads out on patrol.”

Before Tick could answer, Puzzle turned, and with a playful flick of her tail across his nose she bounded away. Tick dragged his paws after her, lost in thought. Maybe...maybe Puzzle was right. Maybe this was what he needed to find some of his old flair. Tom had always been the kind of person who loved rising up the ranks, after all, and though there were many things

about his old life he wanted to bury, what was wrong with a little drive, a bit of ambition? Yes, maybe becoming a Midtail was exactly what he needed.

With a push of his hind legs he leapt forward, speeding down the pavement to catch up with Puzzle.

Chapter Three

Square One

Puzzle marched into the Cobby Farm Barn with Tick in tow. Soft hay pressed against Tick's pads, easing the sting. Sunlight streamed in from the holes in the roof, highlighting the dust floating lazily through the air. Cats walked here and there between the sectioned compartments, some carrying mice and birds between their teeth, others carrying flowers and herbs, and more still with little kittens. Puzzle's usually clear and sharp gaze softened at the sight of the little fuzzy bundles.

"Good to see some new life in the Clan, isn't it?"

"Puzzle, you feeling okay?" Tick said. Puzzle was the last cat he'd expect to say such a thing: just yesterday she'd been complaining loudly to anyone who heard that all the extra kits were a strain on their stockpile of food.

Puzzle looked over his shoulder, a grin on her face. "What? Of course I'm fine! Why wouldn't I be? Ah! Odd-Eye!"

Tick looked past Puzzle to see their clan leader curled up, her immaculate white fur in

stark contrast to the grizzled tabby next to her: the Deputy, Sir Paws.

The leader unfurled herself as smoothly as silk, her green and blue eyes shining at the sight of them.

"Tick, Puzzle," she meowed, arching her back in a long stretch, and yawning widely, "Both of you back so soon? Ah, yes, that's right – the trip to Jacobsen Park. Tips told me about it."

Tick still felt that same grip of awe and fear every time he met the unmatched eyes of the Cobby Clan leader. Even though he had known her long enough now, and she had put on a healthy bit of weight since Muezza had been destroyed, she still radiated that same mysterious, intense aura. Sir Paws looked as brackish as ever, the mass of his matted brown-grey fur rising and falling as he snored. Odd-Eye peered curiously at Tick.

"Is there something I can do for you two?" she asked calmly.

Tick felt a paw push him in the back, and he slid across the straw towards Odd-Eye, stopping a tail-length away from her. Tick looked back at Puzzle, who nodded encouragingly at him. He turned back to Odd-Eye, standing a head higher than him, watching him patiently.

“So, err...” Tick said, clawing nervously at the hay, “How’s the prey?”

Tick winced. Odd-Eye laughed.

“Ha! This is just like our first meeting, Tick, do you remember?” said Odd-Eye, hopping up onto the bale of hay behind her, “I made you a Smalltail that night, too. Not the most popular decision I’d made with the clan, but it turned out well in the end, did it not?”

“Well, that’s kinda what I wanted to talk to you about, Odd-Eye,” he said, forcing himself to look up at his leader, “How...have you found a replacement for Milkshake yet?”

Odd-Eye held him tight with her eyes. Tick couldn’t even blink as he looked from green to blue and back again.

“Do you want to be a Midtail, Tick?” Odd-Eye asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you think you would make a good Midtail?”

“Y-yes.”

“You hesitated.”

Tick blinked. “Well, I don’t exactly know what a Midtail’s responsibilities are yet, but I’m willing to learn. And I have the best mentor any cat could ask for.”

Tick's ear twitched as Puzzle shifted behind him.

"Very honest of you, Smalltail," Odd-Eye nodded, "One of the most important qualities that a Midtail must possess. But there are many more besides. One must become a mentor themselves for apprentices, organize parties and patrols and further the training of the Smalltails, and pass on information to their Bigtails when asked, as well as shouldering some of the weight of a Bigtail's duty now and then so they may more effectively work. Yes, one could say a Midtail is the most vital position in the Clan, the centre of the wheel upon which all Clan life turns."

Tick blinked again. He hadn't thought that much about being a Midtail - in fact, he hadn't thought about it at all - but as Odd-Eye reeled off the list of responsibilities, Tick felt...not nerves, but that old thrill deep inside him shuddering, shaking off the dust. Puzzle was right: being a Midtail was exactly what he needed.

"I understand, Odd-Eye," he said firmly, "I would still like to apply for the position."

Apply for the position? He laughed inwardly: now he really did sound like Tom.

Odd-Eye lay down, her paws wrapped neatly over the edge of the bale of hay. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, young one, but I must take into account all that you have done for this clan so far as well."

"Well, Tick is perfect material, then!" Puzzle said brightly, "All the stuff with Muezza - "

Tick swung around, and gave her a small shake of the head.

"Yes," Odd-Eye replied coolly, "He has indeed been busy."

Tick shuddered: he and Odd-Eye had come to an unspoken agreement on this. It was true that he had stopped Muezza, saved Jacobsen Park and Fourtrees and steered the four Clans away from destruction. His friends were always quick remind him of that:

"I'm amazed that they haven't promoted you already!" Tips would say.

"Yeah, Clawdius became a Midtail by bossing around all the other Smalltails all the time," Apples would add, "You'd think that saving us from the most evil cat in all Clandom would be worth more than that!"

They weren't the only ones in the Clan who felt that way. But there were also an equal number who remembered all too well what Tick had once been, and the damage he had inflicted

on the clans as a human. True, the clans had forgiven him for his deeds after Muezza, but not yet forgotten: no wound that deep would every truly heal.

So as far as Odd-Eye was concerned, he was effectively on square one, his rights cancelling out his wrongs. Tick couldn't help but admire the leader for her sense of democracy, but a square one Smalltail hardly seemed like the best candidate for a Midtail. Why oh why had he wasted so much time these past few weeks moping around his old house?

Odd-Eye held his gaze steady once again.

"I must admit my own trepidation at this, Tick," she said, "You are already a Smalltail, at an age when most cats are just becoming so. Becoming a Midtail may be another leap too early."

Tick opened his mouth, but Odd-Eye held up a paw.

"But, I cannot ignore your contributions so far, Tick," Odd-Eye added, "your difficult past shows just how far you have come, and your desire to atone for your wrongs is an inspiration. The elders of the Clan may always find it hard to fully forgive Tom, but to the youngsters, you could provide many valuable life lessons."

Tick felt as though a balloon were inflating in his chest. *Could it be...?*

Odd-Eye leapt down from the hay, and Sir Paws stirred, blinking blearily. The leader circled around him.

"Still, you must prove your worth," said Odd-Eye, "The Clan will doubt you otherwise."

"I will prove them wrong!" Tick said, stronger than he'd meant to. He flinched, but Odd-Eye didn't stop circling.

"But how, Smalltail? Catching prey? Organizing patrols? That would be enough for most cats, but you will have to prove yourself twice as much, Tick."

"That doesn't put me off," Tick replied, feeling as though a long-slumbering animal within him was awakening, "In fact, I welcome the challenge!"

"Then you will need an exceptional challenge," Odd-Eye declared, sitting herself next to Puzzle, "Something that will show you to be capable and committed. Something -"

"HE'S HERE!"

"HE'S BACK!"

"He's...ALIVE?"

Odd-Eye and Puzzle leapt aside as a small Manx cat blundered into the opening, crashing at Odd-Eye's paws.

“Mimsy!” Odd-Eye’s eyes were wide, “What’s going on?”

As Mimsy staggered to her paws and stammered for the words, Tick heard more shouts from other cats:

“It’s impossible...”

“Weren’t you dead?”

“What? WHAT?”

Tick’s heart raced as the cats in the barn arched their heads out from every nook and cranny. Somebody back from the dead? Sending the clan into a frenzy? *No...it couldn’t be...*

But then a handsome ginger tabby stepped between Odd-Eye and Puzzle, turning on the spot. With his back to Tick he bowed to the Cobby Clan leader.

“Odd-Eye,” he said smoothly, “I have returned.”

Tick heard a scramble of paws behind him, and a gruff voice: “It’s not possible...”

Tick and the mystery cat wheeled around as one, as Sir Paws padded up to the orange cat. They touched noses. Sir Paws sniffed.

“It is!” sir Paws said, sounding unusually enthusiastic. He threw his head back to announce to the barn; “Chess has returned!”

Chapter Four

Chess

Half of the cats assembled burst into meows of celebration and joy, including Puzzle, while the other half looked around at the others in confusion, including Tick.

“Err...Chess?” He whispered to Puzzle as the din died down, “Are...are we playing board games now?”

Puzzle snorted, “No, Tick! *This* is Chess.” she waved a paw at the orange cat, “It’s his name.”

The cat called Chess turned on the spot again to face Tick.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, err...” Chess tailed off.

“Tick,” he drew himself up to his full height, barely up to Chess’ neck. Why did his cat form have to be so small?

Chess nodded politely. Tick returned the nod, but as he did so Chess’ bright pink nose twitched, and his eyes gave the tiniest twitch.

“We all thought you were dead,” Odd-Eye stepped forward, her eyes bright and wide.

You must have gone to the Summit, what, two years ago, Chess. My, you have changed:

have you been keeping well? How did you find your way back?"

Tick felt the fur along his spine bristle: just when it looked like his talk with Odd-Eye was going somewhere, in walked this stranger and suddenly he was the centre of attention.

"Okay, so his name is Chess," he said, fighting to keep his voice calm, "But who IS he?"

A murmur of agreement rippled through the old barn: Tick wasn't alone in his confusion.

Odd-Eye nodded to Chess, who turned and leapt atop Odd-Eye's bale of hay, hopping up the jutting-out bricks until he reached the high platform. Tick had been up there once: how could he ever forget? From there you could see the whole barn. Chess, with dirt and scratches marking his dazzling coat, looked every part the battle-scarred hero.

"My dear Cobbies!" He announced, "Even after being away from my clan for so long, I am flattered to see so many familiar faces, so many cats who remember me. But of course, there are many more of you who don't know who I am. Please allow me to explain."

"Every other Sun, a Clan High Summit is held in the heart of London, where members from the countless cats from all corners of the

land meet on the full harvest moon. Truly, it is the most incredible event for the Clans, and after badgering Odd-Eye about it, I was allowed to go."

A good natured chuckle ran through the barn. Tick looked at the leader, a tiny smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. *Quite the charmer, this Chess...*

"I was a Smalltail then, so I was overwhelmed by the Summit. Cats from well beyond this human nest they call London, so many strange accents and scents...and I heard Chief Hightail and Master Greattail speak."

A gasp went through the barn, followed by more murmuring.

"The Hightail and the Greattail? What an honor!"

"I wonder if it's the same Greattail? Greattail Xenon has been around forever."

"Oh I would love to go to the Summit! Maybe I can go next time?"

Tick only felt his confusion thicken. All this talk of Summits, Greattails and Hightails was making his head spin.

"The Summit went smoothly," Chess went on, "But as Odd-Eye gathered Cobby Clan together to leave, we could sense something was

wrong. We thought it was just the weather, a storm rolling in. If it had been just that.

"We left the meeting place, gathering in a small side alley. Just as we were about to depart, a Catcher leapt out from a dark corner, wielding his net."

Terrified gasps this time, and a few meows of anger. Tick heard a growl rising in Sir Paws' throat.

"The Catcher charged at us, and we scattered. I was only a Smalltail, the smallest and slowest, so he chased me. I leapt through gaps in fences, climbed up walls and through pipes, but the Catcher would not give up. Then I finally found my way out: a dirty, fast-flowing river."

A few hisses of disgust ran through the Clan. Chess nodded.

"Agreed, Cobbies: I hate water as much as any cat. But I had no choice: before the Catcher's net could grab me, I leapt into the river. It was cold, and so, so wet."

Tick snorted. Puzzle clipped him over the ear. "Don't be so rude," she hissed in his ear.

"I lost consciousness a couple of times as the current pulled me under, but I came to on a muddy river bank, on the very outskirts of London. I took refuge in an abandoned badger set as rain closed in, wondering what I would do

now: I had no idea where I was or which way to go. Should I give up? Become a lone wanderer? Seek refuge with humans?"

Tick heard the bite in Chess' voice as he said that last sentence.

"But I couldn't let my clan go like that. I had to at least try. So when the skies cleared, I began to follow the river upstream, back into London."

The whole barn was silent in admiration. But something didn't add up here.

"It's a long way, sure," Tick said aloud, "But still, two years? Why did it take you that long?"

Tick could sense Puzzle reaching to smack him again, but Chess nodded.

"A good question," said Chess, "After a few days I came to a split in the river, two flowing into one. I had to choose one to follow. I chose wrongly, as I didn't realize until I saw mountains on the horizon. Then I got hunted by foxes, stalked by some wild cats, and...well, it's a long story."

"And we shall hear that full story!" Sir Paws declared, "Puzzle, double the prey hunting duty. Malt and Apples should be back from patrolling the border soon; set them on it too. Tonight, we feast, celebrate, and hear about this epic journey!"

The barn wailed its approval and burst into flurries of activity. Chess climbed down from the platform, head held high, as a group of cats swarmed around the bale of hay, waiting eagerly to greet their old friend. Tick stood alone as Puzzle strode past him to join them. As Chess disappeared into the fray of fur and tails, Tick couldn't help suppress a ripple of rage: Odd-Eye, too, had disappeared. What about their discussion? Just as he was really warming up to the idea of Midtail, it had been snatched away.

"Chess..." Tick murmured to himself.

Chapter Five

The Trials

"I was surrounded!" Chess declared, a dramatic pause lingering as the apprentices leaned in, "Evil streetcats on all sides, and a sheer drop off the edge of a human's nest behind me, right onto a Rumblepath. So, how did I escape?"

Tick rolled onto his side, peering sidelong around the side of the stockpile to see Chess looking at the surrounding cats, waiting for an answer.

"You took them all on!" Came a squeak, "Four against one!"

"Don't be silly!" said another, "He must've jumped over them and made a run for it."

The older cats were seated around the sides of the stockpile room, chuckling, but their ears pricked towards Chess just as intently as the young ones. Chess smiled.

"Not quite," he said, "Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a Rumbler on the path below, a big one, it's top open, filled with hay. Just like the hay under your paws right now. I waited for the right moment...and then, just as the biggest

and meanest cat of them all leapt at me, I threw myself off of the nest!"

Half of the apprentices leapt to their paws, clawing anxiously at the hay. "What happened?" One of them said, wide-eyed with fear, "Were you okay?"

"He must've been, here's here now!" Tips called from the back. More laughter. Chess joined in.

"Indeed, Tips!" He added, "I fell right into the hay, and the rumbler sped me away to safety. I'd escaped, but once again I'd gone further off track, the rumbler taking me even further away from home."

"And after all this, you still managed to find your way home," said Odd-Eye softly, "Your loyalty to Cobby Clan is touching."

"We should expect nothing less from such a fine specimen of Smalltail!" Sir Paws agreed, rising to his paws and stretching, "Say, Odd-Eye: have you found a replacement for Milkshake yet? Chess would be perfect for the job."

Tick leapt up as fast as though he'd been electrocuted. Odd-Eye had her eyes closed, deep in thought.

"He would..." she said slowly.

"Now hang on a minute!" Tick blurted out, "We've already talked about this: I'm going to be a Midtail!"

All the faces in the room swung around to face him. Tick stood his ground. Then Odd-Eye opened her eyes, pinning him with a look as sharp as claws.

"I have made no such promise, Tick," she said, "We have merely discussed options. Please do not jump to conclusions." she spoke calmly, but Tick felt as though she had raked him across the stomach with her claws.

"Tick? A Midtail?" Sir Paws twitched what remained of his whiskers, "With all due respect, he was made a Smalltail very early."

"I think it's a great idea," Tips said brightly, "He's already done loads of stuff!"

"Yeah, and not all of it good," said another cat darkly, "It's a controversial choice, Odd-Eye."

"And is it without merit?" She asked, looking around the room, "Can you truthfully tell me that Tick does not display many of the qualities we ask of our Midtails?"

Some of the cats looked around awkwardly, while Tips, Apples and Malt beamed at Tick.

"But I agree," Odd-Eye, "Chess is also a good candidate, showing many similar qualities:

tenacity, loyalty, resourcefulness, and fighting on when all the odds are against him. Yes, we have two excellent cats here, and only one position."

Silence. Tick and Chess locked eyes. He hadn't said a word since Odd-Eye had started speaking.

Sir Paws took a few steps towards the pensive Odd-Eye.

"What are you thinking?" He mumbled to her, "Some kind of one-on-one fight?"

Tick swayed on the spot. Chess looked wiry and muscle-bound: he'd have no chance. But then Odd-Eye raised her head.

"A Trial!" she announced for the whole barn to hear, "Chess and Tick will compete in a series of varied tasks. The Bigtails, Sir Paws and myself will track their performance, and at the end of the trials, we will judge who we deem most worthy of being a Midtail."

A murmur of agreement ran through the room. Sir Paws sniffed.

"Seems fair," he said gruffly, "A good old-fashioned fight would've been quicker, though. But a trial works just as well. What say you, Tick? Chess?"

Chess bowed his head. "I am honored to be considered for the position."

Tick quickly followed suit. "I accept the challenge."

"Then it's settled," Odd-Eye said crisply, walking towards the stockpile, "Tick, Chess, meet me at the entrance of the barn at sunrise for your first trial. Chess, thank you for your story. It's wonderful to have you back. Good night, everyone."

She picked out a mouse from the pile, and every cat bowed their head as she left.

Tick stood in the darkness, the thin slice of the moon barely shining on the swaying grass. A fresh breeze tugged at his fur. He opened his jaws, sucking in the cold air. It carried a scent of fresh prey, taking chance scurries through the trees in the warm night. But Tick had no appetite. He clawed at the dirt as his mind whirled.

"What's with you?"

Tick didn't need to turn around: Puzzle came up to his side, and with a gentle nuzzle in the neck sat down next to him. They sat in silence for a while, watching the swaying trees silhouetted against the night sky.

"Well?" Puzzle said at last.

"That Chess..." Tick said slowly, "Does anything about him seem a little...off to you?"

"No, why?"

"I don't like him."

Puzzle burst out laughing, falling onto her side as she playfully swiped him with her paws. "You're jealous of him!"

Tick batted her paws aside. "I'm not jealous!" He said hotly, "I was just moments away from becoming a Midtail, and then he strolls in and ruins everything!"

"You weren't moments away, don't exaggerate," Puzzle said, the laughter still playing on her voice, "Odd-Eye said she would set a challenge for you, right? Well, this is it. Beat Chess in the trial, and the Midtail post is yours."

Tick sighed. She was right, of course, and he knew it, but that didn't stop him from feeling hard done by.

"It's just...it's not fair," said Tick, "Why does he get to walk in and get promoted so quickly?"

Puzzle sat up straight. "What did you just say?"

Tick bit back a fiery retort: now not even Puzzle was listening properly. "I said: why should he get to be promoted so...quick...ah...."

Puzzle looked meaningfully at him, her eyes catching the light from a farm house window, "Sound familiar? You have no idea how many

times I heard apprentices say that to me the night you first walked into that barn and was made Smalltail ahead of all of them."

"I didn't ask for that," Tick pointed out.

"Neither did Chess," Puzzle replied immediately, "And nobody has been made a Midtail yet."

Tick shrugged. Puzzle looked him sidelong, her eyes glowing mischievously.

"The Tick I know never backs down from a challenge," she said teasingly, "Is Chess gonna scare you off?"

Tick gave her a friendly headbutt in the flank. "If I can handle you, I can handle any cat!"

"Is that so?" She said, head butting Tick in the side and bowling him over, "you got a long way to go before you can really handle me, Tick."

She ran her tail over his muzzle as she walked away, making him sneeze. He watched her go, as though hypnotized, as she walked back into the barn, the light from the farmhouse throwing a long shadow behind her. A chill wind blew around Tick. He scrambled to his paws and followed her inside.

Chapter Six

The First Trial

Tick awoke with the sun striking his eyes and surrounded by the backs of cats, the mounds of fur rising and falling with each snore. He rolled out of his little hollow of hay, wincing at the cold of the concrete on his paws. If only he could put on a pair of slippers, or get a coffee...*something*...

He stepped out of the Smalltail sleeping quarters, eyeing the compartment on the opposite side, where the Midtails slept. They had way more room, the hay looked fresher, and the walls looked less rundown. He had to focus on that: yes, a better place to sleep, more space, less snoring...

He shook himself. What was he thinking? Less *snoring*? He'd had it all not so long ago. Not all of it good, true, but not all bad either. And now here he was, about take on another cat for the right to sleep in a place with less cracks in the walls! Oh, how the mighty had fallen...

He shook himself again. *Come on, Tick: you gave all that up, remember? You made your choice, and it was the right one. Wasn't it?*

“You look a million yowls away,” a familiar voice said.

Tick blinked. Without realising it, he’d padded outside, standing in the muddy patch around the entrance of the barn. Chess was already there, grooming his paw. He still looked thin, the bumps of his rubs pushing through, but what little muscles he had seemed wiry and tough.

“Just...thinking,” Tick said, then added, “Wondering what the trial will be, y’know?”

Chess said nothing, rasping his tongue over his shoulder rapidly. Tick paced back and forth to work off his nerves. Then Chess looked straight at him, as though noticing him for the first time.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Tick.”

Tick tilted his head. “You have? You couldn’t have heard that much: you’ve only been back one night.”

“I didn’t hear about you from the Cobbies,” Chess shook his head, “Or the Smokies, Leafies or Cities. Cats all over London know your name – or should I say, names.”

Tick twitched his nose. *Well, I was kinda infamous as Tom. But as Tick as well? Did news of my battle with Muezza travel that fast?*

Chess shrugged. "I guess it's best I don't tell you what I'd always planned to do if I were to ever meet the Nestbreaker alone," said Chess, sending a cold chill down Tick's spine, "But I trust Odd-Eye's judgement, and you did rid us of the most dangerous cat to ever walk among the clans. So I will let it slide."

"Err...thanks," Tick said. *I'm honoured by your mercy, oh great one!*

"But I'm curious," said Chess, looking down the hill towards the border with Smoky territory, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you give up your old life for this?" he asked, "You were turned into a cat by Muezza at first, but then you chose to stay as a cat as well. Do you prefer it to being a human?"

Tick took a step back, then winced as he felt his hind leg sink into the sticky mud. *Of all the things to ask...* Was Chess trying to put him off? To make him lose what little focus he had? Or as he trying to gather evidence that Tick wasn't as committed to being a Cobby as the rest of the Clan thinks?

"Well...it's early days I guess," he said guardedly, "I'm still adjusting to the lifestyle."

"You still made that choice for a reason, though," Chess insisted, "What for? Was it to be a cat, or to escape being a human?"

"What is this, an interview?" Tick snapped.

"A what?"

"Never mind," Tick turned away, "At any rate it is none of your business."

The trees hissed in the wind.

Chess narrowed his eyes. "Very well," Chess said, "Just bear in mind that when I'm made Midtail it will absolutely be my business, Smalltail."

Tick glared at Chess, who glared back. Odd-Eye stepped out of the barn, flanked by Sir Paws, Puzzle and a team of other Bigtails.

"Ah, look at that, Odd-Eye!" Sir Paws said with relish, "Our two combatants are already shooting claws at one another! Ah, it does this cat's heart good to see it!"

Tick and Chess turned away from each other in unison to face their leader.

"This will be the first of three trials," she announced, "the first Smalltail to two victories will be announced as our new Midtail."

Three trials...let's get this over with. This less time I have to be in Chess' company the better.

Odd-Eye looked over her shoulder and nodded. The Bigtails ran past them, up the ploughed field and over the hill, Puzzle among them.

"The first trial is a race to Oldnest Camp," Odd-Eye announced, "you both know of it: the empty human nest on the curving path. Does your memory serve you well, Chess?"

Chess' eyes glittered, "I earned my tail there, Odd-Eye. It serves me very well."

"Good," said Odd-Eye, "This trial is to test your speed and dexterity, so you may choose to go whichever path you deem quickest to the Camp. But do not obstruct each other, and do not ask any other cat for help. To do so will mean an instant win for the other cat. My Bigtails are positioned all around the human nests to keep watch on you. The first cat to strike the door of the camp wins. Understood?"

Chess and Tick nodded.

"Very well. Then you may begin."

Chess turned tail and ran. Tick hesitated, looking at Odd-Eye, who looked back at him expectantly. "Well? I said begin! First rule as a Midtail, Tick: take your superior's orders immediately!"

Tick barely suppressed a growl as he spun around in the mud and charged after Chess. The

marmalade cat's body was hunkered down low to the path as he sped away, his legs pounding on the ground like pistons. Tick was already out of breath as he rounded the top of hill, his lungs heaving as he watched Chess slip through the farm gate and up the bush-lined road.

*This is hopeless...*his legs were way too short to compete against Chess. He racked his brains as he ducked under the fence. He knew some shortcuts, but maybe Chess knew them as well. How could he get there quicker than a lightning quick cat?

Chess was already out of sight as he came to the roundabout. Tick had a lucky break in the traffic, and ran to the island, over to the other side and pelted cross the hot road as a van rattled by. He was about to bolt up the slope, when he froze, and turned to stare at the cars rolling around the roundabout. *Yes...that's it! Cars! Can I do that? Why not? Odd-Eye hadn't mentioned any rule against it...*

He headed back to the edge of the roundabout, a blast of dirty air from a passing car throwing pellets of gravel into his face. His heart pounded. But he had to try.

He stood at the corner of the roundabout where the cars slowed to filter in. He looked frantically at the cars trundling by, as high as

houses. Where could he jump on? Not the front; that might make the driver freak out and crash. But the back of the cars were too smooth and steep to cling to...

Then he saw his chance. A car pulled up where the boot was half open, an oversize wardrobe sticking out the back, tied down with rope. There was a space between the wardrobe and the edge of the boot, just big enough for a cat!

He bunched his hind legs and launched himself at the car. It pulled away as he was in mid air: he wasn't going to make it! He'd land in the middle of the road and that huge truck behind would flatten him! He threw out his front paws, and as they struck the boot he sunk his claws in, hind legs flailing. The truck behind honked its horn, the noise vibrating to the tips of his teeth. The car swerved around the roundabout, picking up speed. Tick set his teeth and gave a mighty heave. He pulled himself up into the boot of the car. He'd done it! The Tarmac of the bypass raced below, straight towards Oldnest faster than he and Chess combined. He'd be there in no time!

The car slowed in the run-up to the next roundabout. The Oldnest was a left-turn from here. *Please turn left...turn left...*

It did! But the wardrobe slid across the boot, squishing him against the side. He was trapped, and the exit for Oldnest was coming up fast! Digging his claws in again he tried to pry himself free, but the wardrobe pinned him firmly in place. He watched in horror as the turning towards Oldnest swept by. Giving a squeal he struggled for all his worth but it was no good; the wardrobe was too heavy to budge.

Then, with a rumble as loud as thunder only a yowl away, the car jumped. A speed bump! Tick came dislodged from the boot and fell spinning into the road. The tarmac scraped and bit at his fur, the world whirling in a blur of black and blue. He stopped, panting, aching all over. Then a familiar blast hit his ears: another car horn. He flattened himself to the hot road as a car roared overhead and fumes consumed him. As quick as a flash the car was gone, leaving him in a plume of exhaust smoke. He forced himself to his paws, every muscle screaming in protest, and blundered to the pavement. There it was: the way to Oldnest! His sores seemed to fall away from him as he bound down the street and into the winding suburbs. Left, left, right, straight at the crossroads...the roads around him seemed to meld into one. He slowed. Was this the quickest way? In fact, was this the right

way at all? Panic gripped him as he ran into a cul de sac, and he looked wildly round. His eyes locked onto a striped cat sitting by an alley.

"Puzzle!" He gasped, "Oh, I'm glad you're here! Listen, I'm lost, I don't remember the way to the -"

But Puzzle held up a paw. "Sorry Tick, I can't help you. This is your task and yours alone."

Tick was about to protest, when he noticed her tail, flicking subtly down a nearby alley.

"Oh. Right," said Tick, he said, fighting back a grin, "Well, guess I'll see you later then."

He darted down the alley, dodging through the shards of broken glass, and emerged at the other end.

It was the edge of Carnworth Road. The Oldnest was here! Tick peered up the road, and sure enough there was the grim and abandoned house, its weed-strewn garden and empty windows in stark contrast to the rest of the prim and trim street. Tick bolted forward, nearly flying, silently praying: *Please don't be there yet...please, please don't be there yet...*

But then the door of Oldnest came into view, and his heart plummeted into his paws. A ginger cat stood in front of the door, waiting patiently. Tick slowed to a crawl. He'd failed!

He'd been beaten around by least two different cars and a wardrobe for nothing. He was never going to beat Chess at anything!

A rustle of a bush behind him made him whirl around. He stared at the shuffling bush, and out burst -

"Chess!" the orange cat raced towards him like a firework. Tick turned and pelted towards the gate of Oldnest. But Chess had already overtaken him, his long legs bounding ahead. But Tick was small, and as Chess struggled over the rusty gate Tick slipped smoothly through the railings. There was the door! The cat standing guard – that wasn't Chess, but Clawdus, the grizzled Bigtail in charge of the Oldnest. He stepped aside. Tick threw himself at it, not daring to look back or even sidelong. He leapt forward, and swiped a claw across the door, scratching a long groove in the warped wood. A heartbeat after, Chess slammed a shoulder into the door.

"We have a winner!" Clawdus rasped, "Tick wins the first trial!"

Chapter Seven

Sore Loser

"That was blatant cheating!" Chess said hotly once again, "Tick stunk of that human Rumblepath the moment I raced past him! I know exactly what he did!"

"So did my Bigtails, Chess," said Odd-Eye calmly, "They saw it all and they assure me nothing was done that broke the rules."

Tick, Chess, Puzzle, the other Bigtails, Sir Paws and Odd-Eye had gathered at Oldnest. Clawdius fussed over them all, sending out his best hunters to fetch the plumpest prey they could find. Odd-Eye sat in the coolest corner out of reach of the scorching sun, with Tick, Chess, Puzzle and Sir Paws ringed around her. A small stack of shrews and mice were piled between them.

Chess batted the mouse between his paws back and forth. Tick sat there, drinking it all in: he'd won the first trial, and all of Chess' complaints only made his shrew taste sweeter.

"Odd Eye, you said that this trial was supposed to test speed and dexterity. I am clearly faster and more agile than he is. How

can we accept that Tick wins this trial if that is so obviously not true?"

Odd-Eye opened her mouth to reply, but Puzzle beat her to it.

"Because Tick IS faster and more dexterous than you!" She snapped, "Did Odd-Eye say anything about it being just physical, Chess? How about your mind, hmmm?"

Chess' jaw hung open, stunned. Everyone else stared at Puzzle too as she lashed Chess with her tongue.

"Being a Midtail is not just about being the strongest or fastest, it's about how quick can you think, as well. Can you think under pressure, when time is against you?"

"Well, I –"

"Tick knew he couldn't beat you for sheer speed, and he didn't try to: he used his head and thought his way around the problem. That is exactly what we look for in a good Midtail, Chess. Dexterity of the mind!"

"But –"

"And another quality is knowing when you are beat and accepting defeat gracefully. Learn your place, Smalltail."

The whole room rang with silence. Chess looked at Puzzle as though she had raked him

with her claws. Then he drew himself up, and bowed his head.

"You're right, Puzzle," he said, then turning to Odd-Eye, he added, "I am sorry, Leader. I spoke out of place."

Odd-Eye nodded. "Puzzle speaks the truth. The first victory goes to Tick."

"Understood," said Chess, eyes glazing over, "When and where is the next task?"

"This sundown, in front of the Oldnest gate," said Odd-Eye. "You should both get some rest." She stood up, her bones clicking as she stretched. She flicked her tail at Puzzle. "May I have a word?"

Puzzle shook her head, as though coming out of a trance. "W-what? Oh! Yes, sure..."

She stood up and followed Odd-Eye away, weaving through the chattering cats and into the old kitchen. Tick nodded awkwardly to the stony Chess and followed them. He hugged the wall as he pricked his ears, trying to pick out Odd-Eye's and Puzzle's meows amidst all the talking. Amidst the din, he only caught snippets:

"That was uncalled..."

"Lot on my mind...him."

"What!"

".....sure..."

"Will you....?"

"...needs to focus. Hold on..."

Tick leaned in closer, ear pressed against the wall. Then Puzzle's head swung around the door, and hissed at him so loud that it threw him backwards.

"This is a personal matter!" She spat, "No eavesdropping!"

She disappeared again, and this time Tick heard Odd-Eye clearly:

"Someone bothering you, Puzzle?"

"Just some nosy apprentices," said Puzzle, "You know how word gets around if they hear it."

Tick stood up, head swimming. What on earth was wrong with Puzzle? What could be such secret that she would tell the Cobby Clan Leader but not tell him?

Tick sat in a broken window frame in an upstairs bedroom, watching the sun descend behind the houses and the sky flushing orange. It was almost time for the second trial. If he won this one, he'd be a Midtail. *But Puzzle...* he couldn't take his mind off of her. When she'd left the kitchen, she had headed straight for the door of Oldnest and left without a backward glance. What was going on with her? She had

seemed absolutely fine last night. Now she was yelling and hissing! True, Puzzle had always been something of a firebrand, but this...this had shocked even Odd-Eye enough to ask for a private word.

Was it his fault? Was he being selfish? Wait, no of course he wasn't! This whole Midtail thing had been her idea, to give him responsibility, to make him feel like he belonged. Yet he felt more distant than ever from his own mate.

Something scraped on the door below, and Odd-Eye and Sir Paws stepped out into the overgrown garden. Tick stood up and shook himself down. *Time to focus.*

"You're both on time," said Odd-Eye, "Good. I trust you both had a good rest."

Tick barely held back a snort of laughter.

"What was that?" Sir Paws growled.

"N-nothing," Tick stammered, "Just hay fever."

"What?"

"Never mind," he said quickly, "So what's the trial?"

"Follow Sir Paws," said Odd-Eye, "He will explain on the way."

With a grunt Sir Paws leapt over the gate. Chess followed suit, and Tick slipped through the railings, the peeling paint scratching at his fur. Sir Paws led them up the street, back towards the cul de sac. Tick caught up with Chess.

"Sorry," said Tick.

Chess looked at him. "What for?"

"For Puzzle," said Tick, "She was...well, I think she was a bit too sharp with you today, to be honest."

Chess looked ahead. "Puzzle is her own cat; you have nothing to apologize for. Besides, what she said is true: I need to know my place. I spoke out of turn. I guess I need to get used to Clan dynamics again: I've grown accustomed to fending for myself for so long."

Chess' story sounded eerily familiar. *Ah, why can't any cat be easy to understand these days!*

They emerged into the cul-de-sac, and Sir Paws led them across the open lake of tarmac.

"Your second trial is to catch the single biggest piece of prey you can find and bring it to me," Sir Paws explained as they climbed over the fence of a big house, "You can catch as much as you like, but you will win only by the biggest single piece. You must stay in the vicinity of this wooded area I'm taking you to.

You have until the next BigMetalSnake passes by. Oh, yes, that reminds me: watch out for the BigMetalSnake."

Tick shuddered: he knew all too well that a BigMetalSnake was a train. When he'd first transformed into a cat, he'd nearly been run down by one.

They crossed the back garden, clambered up the side of a shed, and over the back fence. They hopped down into a thick tangle of trees and bushes. The ground here was steep, sloping down into darkness. Tick's nostrils tingled: he could smell the stench of the railyard down below.

"I'll be waiting here," said Sir Paws, "Good luck. Begin."

Chapter Eight Foxhunt

Chess bounded straight down the slope, leaves crunching under his paws. Tick headed sidelong through the trees, the ground breaking away underneath him. He slipped and fell onto his side half a dozen times before he'd made it to the first big tree. He leaned against the mangled trunk and looked around. He could still see Sir Paw's silhouette, huge against the off-white fence. This looked even more hopeless than last time: even if by any chance he managed to catch any prey here, how was he going to get it back up to the Cobby deputy?

A rustle in the leaves to his left made his ears swivel around. *Mouse*. He could just make out the shadowy smudge hopping lightly across the leaves, barely a leap away. He hunched down: *small prey is better than none. If I catch this and Chess brings back nothing, I win.*

He jumped, landing on top of the mouse. But before he could wrap his paws around its tiny body, the leaves underpaw gave way, and he tumbled over and over until he crashed into a prickly bush. He yowled in pain as thorns nipped at him. He thrashed around wildly until

he burst out the other end, sliding onto a flat piece of land. Panting, he opened his paws. Empty. He smacked the ground in anger. *Come on, Tick. Remember what Puzzle said? You won last time because you used your head, when the odds were stacked against you. Well, they're stacked against you now. Come on! Think!*

Large prey. This slope...there was no way anything of size could live on ground this steep. True, creatures could burrow sets and hideaways, but getting in and out would be far too much of a bother when flat ground was nearby. Flat ground near to humans no less, who would drop all sorts of waste for urban animals to mooch from. He eyed the bottom of the slope, a single rail shining in a yellow light. Maybe, just maybe...

Tick went into a controlled slide to the bottom of the slope. He made so much noise he was sure that everything for three yowls around could hear him. He skidded to a halt where the slope ended. The trees went on for a few pawsteps more, then came to an abrupt stop where the railway began. Tick moved stealthily through the trees, stepping as lightly as he could, eyes peeled for movement or telltale pawprints. After the impossible slope, this seemed like a breeze. Yes, the biggest prey

would be down here for sure! Chess would be so busy trying to prove to himself that he could catch prey on tough terrain that he wouldn't think to –

He stopped dead. As his lips had curled aside in a grin, a foul stench hit the roof of his throat. It was living, but what? He'd never smelled it before, but his instincts made his fur stand on end. He looked around, legs weakening, heart pounding. Dotted in the mud were pawprints, far bigger than his own. And then he saw it. He ducked down behind a tree trunk, then peeked over the top.

Fox.

Tick's heart gave an extra hard pound, so loud that he was sure the fox could hear it. He held his breath, though the blood pounding in his ears roared. Leaves surrounded him on all sides, dried to a crisp by the summer heat. One step, and the fox would know he was there in an instant.

Tick felt his fur shrivel in terror. Should he just run for it? Or yell for help? But there was no way he could run faster than a fox: he couldn't even run faster than Chess! What chance did he have against an animal twice as big?

A scuffle of leaves behind him. Tick leapt up, fire in his veins, and jumped atop the tree trunk. The fox was charging at him. He jumped again, soaring over the fox. His claws clattered on the rail, and he staggered, but he held his footing as he spun around, spraying leaves everywhere to face the fox. The fox snarled and barked at him, baring sharp yellow teeth. But Tick felt something new stewing within his fear: strength. Memories of his fight with Muezza flooded back to him, a cat who had also been far bigger than he. Then it hit him: the biggest prey would win. This fox would be his prey.

The fox ran at him again, and Tick ran at him too. He jumped, unsheathed his claws to swipe at the fox's muzzle, and -

Thump. The air was punched out of his lungs. He arched through the air like a rag doll, striking the ground and breaking through the dead leaves like a ship through water. He felt hot blood welling up on the side of his face. The fox bared down over him, its breath reeking of old trash. Tick summoned his wits and rolled aside before jaws clamped down over him. He staggered to his paws, but the fox was upon him again. Tick tried to jump aside but the fox was quick: it bit down on his tail. Tick gasped in pain and scored his claws across the front legs

of the fox. Growling, the fox let go of his tail and batted him aside to lick his legs.

Okay, so I underestimated this...

Tick staggered, feeling blood dripping from his cheek and clumping his fur. The fox, meanwhile, had already recovered, and faced Tick with hunger in its black eyes. Tick steadied himself, wincing as he put weight on his front left paw. This wasn't over yet, not by a long way...

The fox thundered over the leaves at Tick, a string of saliva swinging from its mouth. Tick stepped forward - and collapsed, his bad paw, refusing to take his weight. He fell in slow motion as the fox swelled over him, teeth flashing -

A yowl filled his ears, and a blur of orange bowled into the fox, knocking it aside. Something stood over Tick as it hissed at the stunned fox.

Chess!

"I...I've got this!" Tick heaved.

"Oh, you think so? What were you doing, then?" Chess hissed, not daring to take his eyes off of the fox, "Lulling it into a false sense of security by nearly getting yourself killed?"

"I've beaten Muez-"

"Now is not the time to be nursing bruised pride, Tick!" Chess snapped, "Help me beat this thing!"

The fox, meanwhile, had quickly gotten over its surprise and was sizing Chess up, tongue rolling from its mouth. Tick could tell all too clearly that it this fox must be thinking it was his lucky night: two cats for dinner!

"I will run at it," Chess murmured, "You circle around and attack it from behind."

Before Tick could reply, Chess' hind legs exploded, skimming over Tick's fur and throwing leaves and twigs over him. The fox leapt over the train rails and ran at Chess too. Chess looked to jump. The fox reared up, jaw open to catch the cat midair. But Chess feinted, ducking down and barrelling into the fox's legs. The fox barked in fury as it collapsed to the ground. Tick set his teeth and peeled himself away from the dirt. He winced as he put weight on his bad paw, but he stumbled around the clearing. He wouldn't let Chess show him up like this. As Chess and the fox scrambled around, Tick strafed around them, looking for the best opening to attack the fox. But the fur of Chess and the fox spun in a whirl of orange. His eyes darted back and forth at the writhing bodies, but no opening came. Finally, the

squirring stopped, and the fox growled in victory as it held Chess' head in his jaws like a clamp. Chess' face was contorted into an unnatural shape, eyes pulled open, blood oozing from the points of the fox's teeth.

Tick felt his claws lengthen and his legs carry him forward. Before the fox had spotted him, he scoured his claws across the fox's face as deep as he could. The fox yelped in anguish, releasing Chess from its mouth. It growled in pain as it staggered backwards. It struck the railtracks, and it slammed against the concrete rail sleepers with a horrible *crack* . Tick stepped forward, ears flattened and teeth bared. Chess, too, and risen to his paws and stood alongside him, spitting at the recoiling fox.

But as Tick laid a paw on the rail, he froze. The cold metal hummed under his soft pads, vibrating softly, though it was quickly growing stronger. Chess had noticed it too, and although the fox was gathering itself up for another attack, bristling with rage, the two cats looked around wildly. The vibrating grew into a rumble, louder and louder.

Then, with a flash of white light, a train rounded the corner, rocketing straight at them. Tick felt his legs weaken at the sight, as

flashbacks of that fateful night swam before him.

"Run!"

Tick turned and ran for the tree trunk, hiding behind it as the train roared onwards. But the fox hadn't run. It was still there, glaring madly at him and Chess, teeth flashing by the light of the train. The train blasted its horn, the noise rattled through Tick's bones, the fox's eyes blazed with a madness and hunger. It took a step onto the rail track. The train headlights washed over the fox. As though snapping out of a dream, the fox looked up at the train rushing at it, and -

Tick turned away as the train rushed past, the screech of metal grinding on metal rushing by and fading into the distance.

Chapter Nine

Handing Victory

Tick and Chess looked at each other in silence. Then they swiveled their heads around, hackles raised, as something new came blundering down the slope towards them. Something big and furry crashed through a bush, but before Tick could tackle it to the ground, he saw that it was Sir Paws, eyes wide and wild.

"I vowed to not interrupt the hunt no matter what," he growled, "But it sounded like the great battle of Jacobsen Park all over again down here! What happened? Speak quickly!"

Tick opened his mouth, but no words came out. Chess, too, was speechless: he pointed a tail towards the rail tracks. Tick saw a mound of fur laying next to it, motionless.

With a curious look at the two Smalltails, the deputy padded over to where the fox lay. The huge brown tabby leaned over the animal, and for a wild moment Tick wondered if this was some kind of trap. But the fox didn't move as Sir Paws sniffed the fur. Then the deputy looked up, his expression blank.

"Who did this?"

Chess and Tick looked sidelong at one another again. Then Chess nodded. Tick launched into the story of his encounter with the fox, Chess adding detail from when he joined in the fight. Sir Paws sat in silence, ears pricked up.

"...and then you arrived, Sir Paws." Chess finished.

With one more look at the fox, Sir Paws stood up and padded closer to them.

"You were both extremely foolish," Sir Paws growled, "Even a full legion of cats wouldn't dare to take on a fox. With the experiences you both have, you should have known better."

Tick shrunk back. Sir Paws hadn't even lifted a paw, but a tongue lashing from the grizzled deputy was nearly as bad as fighting the fox.

"On top of that, I did not receive a single shred of prey from either of you," Sir Paws added, "But I need to report back to Odd-Eye with a trial winner." He looked back at the fox. "I need to assess you on something."

As though his head was see-through, Tick watched Sir Paws' mind work. He could sense where this was going. He swallowed. "Chess saved me," he blurted out.

Chess and Sir Paws looked at him. What was he saying? He was handing victory to his rival! But, his mouth kept moving.

"I-if it weren't for Chess, I'd be fox-food right now," he went on, "I...Chess deserves the win."

"Give yourself some credit, Tick," Chess said gruffly, "You held that thing off for quite a while on your own."

"Not for much longer, though!" Tick pointed out, the words spilling out like an uncorked bottle.

"True, but –"

Sir Paws held up a paw to silence them.

"I admire your honesty and camaraderie," he said, "Both are fine aspects of a good Midtail. But this only makes my decision harder!"

Sir Paws rasped his tongue around his chops.

"You both showed guts and teamwork here, it seems," he declared, "And good old-fashioned bravery! Yes, many a Smalltail and apprentice could learn from you. But ultimately, I must hand this victory to Chess. Tick, you rather foolishly took on the fox in the hope of winning this trial, whereas Chess fought for purely selfless reasons: to save a Clanmate. The second trial goes to Chess!"

Tick knew that the better cat had won, but that still didn't stop him from being angry with himself. As he sat in the empty Smalltail sleeping quarters, he munched angrily on slices of cold beef that the farmer had left outside the barn for them.

Puzzle walked past the entrance, then backed up as she spotted him.

"Hey!" she said, "You know the rules, no eating in the sleeping quarters!"

Tick grumbled, and kept eating, though he ate with less anger. Puzzle entered the quarters.

"I heard what happened," she said, her tail raised, "How's your paw?"

Tick raised his paw. Muffins had slathered it in a foul smelling yellow gunk, but it eased the pain.

"I'll live," he said though a full mouth.

Puzzle collapsed lazily on the freshly laid hay, eyes facing the roof. "That was a good thing you did today," she said.

Tick swallowed, and slouched into the hay beside her. They lay there in silence for a while: the barn was quiet and almost empty: most of the clan had gone to Leafy Clan to help with some of the cleanup efforts and planting some seeds. Tick and Puzzle stared at the holes in the roof, the stars winking back at them.

"Was it?" Tick said suddenly, "Should I have fought my corner a bit more? I mean, if I'd won that trial, I'd be a Midtail already and these horrible trials would be over already."

Puzzle twisted around to look at him directly. "Then you'd have to live with the fact that you don't believe you deserve it," she said, "You want that, Tick?"

He sighed. "No. No, of course not."

"Well, then."

Tick twisted around to face Puzzle.

"Say, you seem a lot calmer this evening. What was all that about earlier today?"

"Eh? Oh...that," Puzzle looked back up at the stars, "Just...stress. Lots of stress. It's been a crazy week."

"Anything I can help with?"

Puzzle gave a hollow laugh. Then she looked at Tick again, her eyes shining as though she were on the verge of tears. "Just...do your best in the last Trial, okay?"

"What's going on with you recently?" Tick pressed, "You can tell me: we're meant to be mates, after all!"

"Finish the trials, Tick. Afterwards, we will talk. Just forget I said anything."

"That's easier said than done -"

"Just do it, alright!" She snapped, "Can't you wait just one more day? Sheesh!"

Puzzle rolled over, her back to Tick. Tick lay there in shock for a while. Then Puzzle sat up. "Sorry," she said wearily, "I lost my temper there. Again. As a Bigtail I should know better."

"Doesn't mean you can't be angry once in a while," Tick shrugged, "You're only huma- er, a cat, after all."

Puzzle's whiskers perked up a bit. "You're too kind, Tick," she said, stretching and arching her back, "I guess I'll be heading to my sleeping quarters, as well. You should get some rest. Another sunrise wake-up call, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Tick yawned widely, his eyes suddenly heavy, "Nearly out of the woods."

Puzzle's expression was unreadable as she left; a mixture of sadness, excitement, and fear all crashing around for attention. "Good night, Tick."

She stalked away, her tail dragging through the hay. Tick's mind raced. What was going on in her head? Everything at once apparently: lately being in her company meant feeling every emotion all at once. What was all this about? He couldn't begin to guess, but...deep down, the

answer called to him, though it seemed too distant and murky to make out right now.

He yawned again. With free reign of the sleeping quarters, he picked the place with the fluffiest hay, and curled up. Maybe the hay would be this good everyday when he's a Midtail, he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

He paced around the outside of the barn, sometimes bursting into a run to warm himself up. It looked like it was going to be another perfectly sunny day, but for now the early morning was cool and crisp.

Chess emerged from the barn. Tick suddenly stopped running, feeling self-conscious. He padded over to Chess.

"Good morning, Tick," Chess said pleasantly.

"Morning," Tick replied.

An awkward silence clung to the air around them. Then they both started speaking at once.

"Listen, I just wanted-"

"I wanted to say -"

They both stopped and looked around sheepishly. "You first," said Tick.

"Well...I just wanted to say thanks," said Chess, "I know that yesterday's win bent the rules slightly..."

"So did the first trial," Tick pointed out. He knew he wasn't doing himself any favours: after all of his complaining, why was he still defending Chess' win? But he couldn't help it: he was warming up to the marmalade cat more and more.

"Well, I know this much," said Chess, looking steadily at Tick, "Whoever wins today will make a great Midtail."

"I agree!" Tick nodded, and they both laughed.

Then a screaming meow. Tick and Chess spun around. A small cat came charging up the slope, its sandy coat covered in dirt.

"Tama!" Tick stepped forward as the little apprentice skidded to a halt before the two Smalltails, "What's happened?"

"It's...Odd-Eye!" Tama gasped for breath, leaning on Chess for support, "She's been taken by the Catcher!"

Chapter Ten

The Final Trial?

Even through Chess' coat was thick, Tick could see the colour drain away from the skin beneath.

"What?" Tick held Tama's gaze, "What happened? Keep it quick!"

"We were helping Leafy Clan last night," Tama spoke fast, eyes wide with terror, "Planting and cleaning the Park, you know? Most of us came back to the barn late last night, but Odd-Eye wanted to stay. So some of us stayed with her.

"Then, just as we were heading out of the Park this morning, the Catcher's rumbler pulls up. Odd-Eye orders all of us to scatter, so we all split up. I thought Odd-Eye had made a run for it too, you know? But the next thing I know, I hear a cry for help, and I turn around: Odd-Eye is in the Catcher's net! I tried to go after him but he was already in that big rumbler of his, and it was way too fast to chase...Oh Tick, what will happen to Odd-Eye..."

Tama trailed off, shivering. Tick laid a tail over her shoulders.

"You did the best you could," Tick said softly, "And you did the right thing coming back here. Don't worry: we'll get our leader back."

Tama's eyes still welled with sadness but she lifted her chin slightly. "What should I do?"

"Alert the rest of the Clan," said Chess, "Tell them all what happened. Get Sir Paws to gather up a search party and head to the park. Tick and I will run ahead." Chess met his gaze, and they nodded. This was no time for competition. This was the time to work as Clanmates.

"O-okay," Tama said, "Tips and Malt are waiting at the edge of the park where it touches Smoky territory. We'll meet you there."

They parted ways, Chess and Tick racing down the hill. They crashed through the bushes, treading through the path of a hundred pawsteps laid before. They bolted through the tunnel under the road like bullets from a gun and burst out into Smoky territory. Tick led them on a route around a loading yard to the back of the old dairy factory. Smoky Clan had been very quiet since the battle on Jacobsen Park, with no patrol reporting any clashes with the industry-dwelling cats since then - a record, according to Sir Paws. But even though the Smokies seemed subdued, Tick couldn't help but feel cautious

here: he gave their headquarters a wide berth, just in case.

As they poked their heads out around the corner of a shriveled old tree, Chess murmured to him: "Don't you think this all seems a little fishy?"

"Eh?"

"We just so happen to be getting ready for the third trial, and the leader of our Clan suddenly goes missing? Very suspicious, if you ask me."

Tick led them across the street. "You think Tama was lying?"

"Acting," Chess corrected him, "This whole thing looks a setup. Our third trial is a ready-made crisis to test us. Don't you think so?"

Tick stayed silent. He hadn't thought about that. It made it a lot sense: the timing of this couldn't have been worse...unless it had been planned. And yet Tama didn't seem to be faking it...

As they darted out between two shipping containers, the old park swam into view. The land immediately beyond the twisted gate was still grimy and devoid of life, but it had been cleaned of the mountains of garbage that had been dumped on it. And ahead of schedule too: Jackson was doing a fine job so far. At the foot

of the gate, Tips and Malt were pacing around, clawing the dirt anxiously. Were they acting as well? Tips snapped around as they approached.

"Tick! Chess!" He gasped, "Oh, thank the Hightail you're here!"

Malt bounded over to them, her usually immaculate fur matted and flecked with dirt. Her eyes looked tired but wide with wild terror. *How could this not be real?*

"You heard?" She said. "We sent Tama ahead as a runner."

"We heard," said Tick, "She's raising the alarm back at the barn. Backup should come soon." No matter how likely that this was all a setup, he couldn't afford to not take it seriously. What if Odd-Eye was in actual danger?

"G-good," Malt blurted out, "We've been hunting for clues here since the Catcher ran away in his rumbler."

"What have you found so far?" Said Chess urgently. *Was doing this just to win the trial? But this wasn't a trial! Was it?* Doubt buzzed around Tick's head like a horde of wasps.

"Come quick, look at this," Tips said, beckoning them into the park with his tail. Chess leapt over the gate and Tick slipped through the buckled railings. The mud was slightly soft here, despite the fact there had been

not a drop of rain for a week. Jackson had been keeping the earth soft and peaty, ready for replanting. The pawprints of terrified cats were scattered everywhere like the strings of a broken web, the centre a messy tangle of cat paws, heavy duty boots and the treads of a van's tyres. Tick had told Jackson that the cats here were to be left alone! Unless...yes, that was it: the Catcher had come here on his own accord, without Jackson's permission.

"Rumblers," Tips growled, "I swear, if humans didn't have them they'd be as useless as kittens on their mother's milk. Er, no offense, Tick."

Tick barely heard him: he looked over the muddy prints for clues, or just a hint that this was all just a test. There was the thick band of cat prints in tight formation heading out of the green heart of the park. Then the prints exploded, firing off in a dozen different directions as if the Catcher's van had hit them like a bowling ball to skittles. Then he found it: a single cat's long, thin prints weaving through a mass of boot prints.

"They struggled here," Tick called out to them, pointing a paw at the thin claw marks scored in the dirt.

"It sure looks like a cat was taken," Chess said to himself. Tips and Malt heard him, and they rounded on the marmalade cat.

"Of course a cat was taken!" They hissed in unison, "Our leader! Why would we lie about that?"

"I didn't mean it like that!" Chess said, lowering himself to the ground. As Malt and Tips turned away with their tails upturned, Chess passed a meaningful glance to Tick. Tick tried to ignore him, but he couldn't shake that nagging seed of doubt Chess had planted in his head. *Focus, Tick...come on...Odd-Eye might be in danger...*

A light clicked on in his head. *That's it!* He turned to Tips and Malt. "Did either of you get a look at that va-er, rumbler before it drove off?"

"Not...really," Malt narrowed her eyes, "it's paws were spinning madly and it kicked up a huge cloud of dust. When it cleared it was gone."

Tick felt as though a giant fist were closing around his chest. They must have seen something! "Did you see the color of it?"

Their expressions cleared. "Yes, I definitely saw that!" Tips said breathlessly.

"Me too!" Said Malt.

Tick felt the fist loosen. Yes! A lead! His friends nodded, and answered in unison:

"Blue."

"Yellow."

They looked at each other again. Tick felt the grip tighten again, harder and colder than before.

"It was definitely yellow!" Tips clawed the ground.

"That's just when the sun caught it!" Malt said, the whites of her eyes flashing, "it was blue for sure."

"It doesn't matter," said Tick heavily, "Neither of those colours help."

"The Catcher, though," Tips looked at the boot marks, deep in thought, "there was something strange about him."

"Like what?"

"He walked with a heavy limp."

Tick flicked his head up. "He did?" He said, "Well why didn't you say so!"

"Is it important?" Tips meowed.

"I know that guy!" Tick said triumphantly, "I'd hired him a couple of times to clear out...oh. Right. Sorry about that..."

"That's all in the past, Tick," Malt shook her head, "Forget it. Just tell us what you know."

"The Catcher told me he got that limp from a wild dog bite a few years back."

"Hmph," Chess snorted, "Nice to know there are some things dogs are good for."

Tips and Malt nodded in solemn agreement.

"Anyway, the Catcher's den is downtown, on the southern edge of City Clan territory. We can lead a rescue party there when the others show up."

They looked back towards the faceless factories of Smoky Clan, but all was silent: no sight or sound of a cat approaching.

"This is taking too long," Tips hopped on the spot, "You're sure that Tama raised the alarm?"

"Positive," said Chess.

Tick racked his brains. What reason could there possibly be for the rescue team coming late, especially if Sir Paws were in charge? Perhaps the Catcher had struck again? Tick's fur chilled at the thought. But if that were true, surely some cats could escape and tell them? He chanced one look at Chess, and sure enough, and smugness flashed in his eyes. As he turned to face Tick, Tick looked away.

"We can't waste any more time," he said, his throat dry, "A big rescue party will be more a hindrance than a help anyway. Chess, you and I will go to the Catcher's."

Chess blinked, and a frenzied excitement blazed in his eyes. His fur rippled. "Exact revenge on that web-wielding monster? Gladly!"

That wasn't the main reason they were going, Tick murmured, but it was better than his constant doubts.

"Tips, Malt, stay here and send the Cobbies after us," said Tick, carving a crude map into the dirt with a claw, "Chess and I will attempt to break Odd-Eye out, but in case things go wrong, a big backup party will be needed."

Tips and Malt nodded, eyes darting over the map.

"Let's go!" Tick bolted away, not waiting for Chess to answer. Trial or not, he had to move quick. But Chess was already bounding along beside him with such ease it looked as if we were walking. *Show off*...still, he had to follow him. Only he knew the way!

"Should I scout ahead?" Said Chess, "I saw where you marked the 'X' on that map."

Oops.

"Better to stick together," said Tick, thinking quickly, "If the Catcher sees us, we can split up and confuse him."

"Right," said Chess slowly, sounding less and less convinced by the moment, "Oh come

on, Tick, isn't this obvious? Sir Paws would raise all nests into a frenzy if a single brick went missing from the Cobby barn. And he's late when our own Leader goes missing?"

"Then what are suggesting, Chess?" Tick retorted hotly, "That our Leader somehow called up the Catcher and organized this all with him?"

Chess nearly tripped over a jagged stone. "Not at all: I'm just thinking that it may not be Odd-Eye that got captured. It may have been some other cat that looked like Odd-Eye: white fur isn't exactly rare, is it?"

"So, what," Tick mustered up the most outrageous answer he could think of, "You think that we've been sent into the Catcher's den for nothing?"

Chess met his eye. "Not nothing. For a trial."

Tick bit his tongue before he could answer back. This was ridiculous: this was going nowhere, and arguing while running had left him breathless. He settled for a dismissive sniff, and focused on the road ahead, the wide streets and glittering towers of downtown looming ever closer.

Chapter Eleven

The Catcher

Chess and Tick skidded to a halt between the giant fashion boutique and the exit to the multi-storey car park. Squeezed in between them was a crooked, grimy alley littered with greasy chip paper and stagnant puddles of something clearly not water. At the far end was a metal door of peeling white paint, with claw marks of all shapes and sizes scraped around the bottom.

"That's it," Tick pointed with an extended claw, "The Catcher's lair."

Chess' thin face clashed with two very clear, very different emotions: his nose twitched in anticipation, but he shrunk back in fear.

"I've always dreamed of what I'd do if I met the Catcher again," said Chess, "The human who stole two years of clan life from me."

"This might not be the same Catcher you know," said Tick, leading them off the busy pavement and into the stinking alley.

"They're all the same," said Chess, "This Catcher deserves whatever is coming to him."

They approached the door slowly, as though walking towards a fire. Closer to, the door had no handle, only some sort of security card

device, and despite looking old and battered, it definitely wouldn't open if a cat tried.

"Now what?" Chess mewled quietly, as if they were in the presence of a slumbering beast.

"When I came here as a human, I was told to knock and wait."

"Oh, well that's great," Chess rolled his eyes, "Then that's what we'll do as well, I suppose."

"Exactly."

Chess' eyes bulged at him. "I...I was being sarcastic, you know!"

But Tick leaned in, and whispered his plan to Chess. Chess nodded, but frowned. "Well...okay. But how?"

Tick nodded over Chess' shoulder. There was a small, murky window, just about low enough for a strong cat to jump through if it were opened.

Chess narrowed his eyes, then nodded.

"Three, two, one..." As one they head butted the door. Heads spinning, they drew back, the door booming like a vast bell. Chess stood his ground while Tick ran, hiding under an old newspaper. The damp sheets clung to his fur, but he wrinkled his nose and lay still.

Then, footsteps. They boomed from deep behind the wall. Tick's heart hammered harder with each step. *Please work...*

With the clunk of a lock, the door creaked open. Out stepped the Catcher. He was a big, beefy man with a thick-set face and scratchy stubble on his chin that couldn't quite hide the scars and scabs. He wore a pie cap and dark leather clothes, and he snarled down the alley.

"Who's there?" He growled, his voice as rough and hard as sandpaper, "Is it you ruddy kids again? I'll call the police next time, mark my words!"

Chess meowed. The Catcher looked down at the marmalade cat.

"Well, well..." Said the Catcher, "How's about that? Giving yourself in, are we? Good! A wild cat with half a brain cell!"

The Catcher leaned back through the door, reaching for something. Just as Tick spotted the net gripped in his hands, Chess bunched his haunches, and leapt at the Catcher's chest.

"Aargh!" The Catcher roared, "Why you filthy little- GEROFF!"

The Catcher grabbed Chess by the scruff of his neck and flung him bodily down the alley. Chess wheeled through the air and landed on an old chip wrapper, sliding down the alley like a surfboard.

"Now you've done it!" The Catcher seethed through gritted teeth, "Come here, you!"

The Catcher charged after Chess, net held high. As the door swung shut, Tick slipped out of his hiding place and bolted though the door just as it clicked shut.

His cat eyes quickly adjusted to the dark, and he looked wildly around. No time to lose. An empty doorframe to the left led into a room filled with shelves. He slunk inside - and nearly jumped straight back out. It was a storage room of some kind, with all the shelves filled with...what exactly, Tick couldn't tell: The dim light from the window barely illuminated the strange metallic tools glinting and hanging from the walls. A faint smell of stale blood clung to the musty air. Was this some kind of torture chamber? A pleasant animal shelter this was not, that was for sure.

He hopped up onto a tool cabinet, wincing as something fell from the workbench and clattered across the stone floor. He froze, ears strained. Nothing. Keeping his paws as light as he could, he skipped up the shelves, hopping over the boxes of spare nets and metal grates towards the window. But just as he laid a paw on the dusty window handle, a rattling came from back in the corridor. He peered over his shoulder, and harsh white light spilled through the doorframe.

The vast shadow of the Catcher swelled into view, cursing at the top of his voice.

"Bloomin' cats!" He growled, "You'd think I'd get a bit more respect with the work I do cleaning up the streets of that filth, but no..."

Tick shrunk away from the window, staying as still as he could, forcing his legs to stop shaking. The door slammed shut, plunging the room into darkness again. The window was so caked in dirt it barely let in any light.

The Catcher shuffled by, throwing the empty net onto a shelf. *No Chess. Good.* He turned into a room opposite the store room, grumbling to himself as he collapsed into a chair. It creaked under his weight, and the cool blue glow of a TV illuminated his pasty face. His beady eyes peered at the screen as he picked up his plastic-wrapped meal and scoffed away at it. The smell wafted into the storeroom, and Tick's stomach grumbled longingly. *Now isn't the best time to be hungry!* He turned towards the window once again. The Catcher had a direct view to here from where he sat. One look this way, and it would all be over. Tick squinted through the glass, and sure enough a smear of orange paced the alley down below. Heart pounding, he hooked a paw around the handle, and pushed with all his might. It wouldn't

budge. Had this window ever been opened? He looked to the Catcher again. His eyes were still on the TV, free hand reaching for a mug of coffee. Tick turned his back on the handle and shoved himself backwards on it. *Come on!*

The handle budged loose, giving a *creak*. Tick threw himself back into the dark as the Catcher swung around to look into the storeroom. Tick didn't move, save for his chest, heart pounding so hard it was nearly visible.

The Catcher held out his mug of coffee to place on the desk. He missed, and Tick heard cracking china and liquid splashing. "Ahh!" The Catcher gasped, leaping to his feet, "Not again!"

Tick saw his chance: he gave the handle one more push with the crown of his head, and the window creaked open, flecks of dirt showering down over Chess.

"Finally!" said Chess, wrinkling his nose as he shook the dirt off, "It took you long eno-"

"Ssh!" Tick hissed. He looked over his shoulder. The Catcher was bent double, running a dirty rag over his boots.

"Ruddy coffee stains, they never come out...stupid company insists I use white boots..."

Chess' ears twitched, and he clamped his mouth shut. Tick held out a paw. "Wait," he

mouthed. Chess bunched his hind legs together, eyes bright.

The Catcher was about to stand up when he smacked his head on the desk. He roared like a wounded bear as the TV nearly toppled over.

"Now!" Tick hissed. He hopped aside as Chess leapt, soaring up to the window. His head and front paws pushed through, but his back legs struck the side of the wall. Chess gasped as he threw out his claws and clung to the edge of the shelf, hind legs flailing outside. Tick scrambled forward, biting down as hard as he dared into the scruff of Chess' neck. Chess barely held back a squeal, instinctively trying to shrug Tick off. But Tick held steady, and dragged Chess through the window. Chess scrambled away, and Tick swung around. The Catcher had stood up, his back to them. Tick pulled the window shut – and the Catcher swung around.

Tick snapped back his paw as though it had been burned, but it was too late. Although Tick and Chess were in darkness, the Catcher looked straight at them...wait, no, not at them, but at the window, still half open. Tick's throat went dry as the Catcher switched off the TV. Rubbing the back of his neck, the Catcher approached, floorboards creaking under each

step. His face swam into view again as he stepped into the fresh air flowing in from the open window. Tick shrunk back so far he was nearly in Chess' lap.

"Who's there?" The Catcher called out the window, "I'm warning you, I'm not one to mess with!"

He reached up and slammed the window shut, twisting the handle so tight it nearly snapped off.

Tick held in his sigh of relief as the Catcher turned and walked away, grumbling to himself.

Tick's nose tickled. The plume of dust sent out by the closed window had billowed towards the two cats.

Tick held his head back, telling himself to not sneeze as dust dappled in his nostrils. Chess held his tail up to Tick's nose, but it only made things worse. Tick sneezed, the sound erupting through the silent room. *No!*

Tick looked up, expecting to see the furious face of the Catcher bearing down over them. But wait, he wasn't: the man was bent double, sniffing. "Ruddy allergies," he mumbled. *He'd sneezed at the same time?* Warmth relief trickled through Tick. No wonder why the sneeze had sounded so loud!

The Catcher staggered back into his TV room, blowing his nose into the same rag he'd used to wipe his boots. Light as a feather, Tick and Chess jumped down from their hiding place. From the floor, the Catcher seemed as big as a giant once again. He switched his TV back on, and immediately started chuckling along with the canned laughter.

"What now?" Chess hissed in his ear, "Did you find out where Odd-Eye is being kept?"

Tick blinked. If there was a tone of sarcasm in Chess' voice, he hadn't heard it. "Well, no...I had about one minute before the Catcher came back."

Chess' whiskers twitched irritably. They looked up at the Catcher. His hands were folded across his chest, his eyelids drooping.

"This looks like our best chance, said Chess, "Come on: let's go take a look around."

Chapter Twelve Card Capture

Keeping their bodies hugged to the shelves and walls, they slunk around the doorframe as silently as snakes, one eye on the dozing Catcher. When he was safely out of sight, Tick sped up, and despite the darkness he saw his surroundings clearly: a grim kitchen to the left, and a bedroom that looked about as inviting to sleep in as a nest of maggots. *And this guy calls wild animals 'filth'?*

Chess threw out a paw, holding him back. And just in time: Tick looked down, and a yawning chasm of a staircase plunged downwards.

"Do you smell that?" Chess whispered, nose raised. Tick did likewise, and nearly choked on the thick smell billowing from the bottom of the staircase.

"Cats!" Tick hissed, then cringed. He'd said that way too loud. Flattening their ears, they looked behind them. The Catcher let out a loud snore. Tick breathed again.

"Careful!" Chess batted a paw over Tick's ear, "Sheesh, this trial is way too dangerous for wannabe Midtails."

"This isn't a trial!" Tick snapped, "If you think Odd-Eye would send us into something like this, then you don't know her very well!"

Chess opened his mouth, looking as though he were about to retort. Instead he rasped his tongue over his chops. "Guess we're about to find out."

Without another word Chess descended the staircase. *Time to find out indeed.* Odd-Eye was here, he was certain of it. He followed in Chess' wake.

The temperature dropped with every step. Even his cat eyes struggled to see through darkness this deep. Then they came to a door: the only other door here apart from the front door. It too was solid metal, locked by another security card. This door, however, looked like it was the only clean thing in this hovel the Catcher called his workplace and home. This door either kept everyone out...or kept whatever was inside in.

Chess scored a claw around the edges of the door. "It's sealed shut," he said, looking over the door's surface, "How does the Catcher open something like this? There's nothing on it to open it with!"

"Yes there is," said Tick, leaping back up the stairs, "Follow me."

Tick peered slowly into the room where the Catcher sat. He was fully asleep now, head back and mouth wide open, snoring louder than a squealing pig. Still, he and Chess couldn't hold their fur flat as they looked upon the massive human being. Chess flexed his claws. "This guy is the same one that chased me, I'm sure of it," he whispered, a growl as low as thunder deep in his throat, "Oh, the scars I would give him..."

But Tick was looking elsewhere. His eyes darted around the room, taking in the trash can, the bright TV, the empty pizza box still open on the floor, the rack of keys hanging from the wall...

"There!" Tick hissed, pointing his tail at the bunch of keys, "You see the orange card? That's what we need to open the door."

Chess looked from Tick to the card, then back again. "Seriously?" He said, eyes wide, "That thing looks as flimsy as hay. How will that open a door that big?"

"Trust me, it will," said Tick. He'd used security cards like that all the time as a human: his own office had used something similar.

Chess looked as if he was going to deny it again, but Tick pointedly turned away and

stepped across the threshold and into the room. Tick stepped over the legs of the Catcher's computer chair and slipped behind the trash can. He peered up. The Catcher gave an extra loud snore. The blue light from the TV glinted on the keys. The card hung from a piece of string. If he could hook around it somehow...but it was so high up, and nothing around it near enough to stand on...except...

Oh, no. Tick caught Chess' eye, still standing at the entrance. Chess shook his head wildly.

“Don't do it!” Chess said, “I know what you're thinking, but don't do it!”

But what choice did Tick have? Odd-Eye needed them. Crouching to the cold floor, he strafed around the room and jumped onto the desk. The vast belly of the Catcher stretched out before him. Beyond that was his snoring head, and beyond that was the backrest of the chair. It wasn't too far; he made jumps like this all the time. But never had they been this dangerous. What if he misjudged it? What he jumped too far, or worse, not far enough? The Catcher smacked his lips and sniffed. Tick shuddered. He didn't dare look at Chess. His stomach seemed to dissolve as he bunched his back legs. His front legs turned to stone, as

though in protest. But Tick pushed away from the desk, and jumped.

He floated through the air, soaring over the Catcher, his eyes were fixed on the backrest. His mind whirled the same thoughts over and over again: *I'm not going to make it! No, I am going to make it! Wait, no I won't! Yes I - Auugh!*

His front paws slammed into the backrest, hooking around them. His back legs scrambled to get up, his claws tearing through the leather as he tried to grip to it. Digging in deep, he heaved himself up onto the top of the backrest. He'd done it! He straightened up, and was just turning around to throw a gloating look at Chess when he felt his tail brush over the Catcher's nose.

The Catcher grunted like a troll, sniffing. The chair swung to and fro, a ship in a storm. Tick clung on tight as the Catcher launched upright and gave another huge sneeze. Tick froze. *Don't turn around...*

"Bloomin' allergies," the Catcher grumbled groggily, and he slumped back into the chair. Tick's stomach had returned, now lurching in his belly as the chair rocked back and forth, but still he held on tight. By the time the rocking

had stopped, the Catcher was already back asleep.

"Are you insane?" Chess hissed, glaring up at him.

"Slightly," Tick breathed, and he turned to look at the rack of keys. It was much closer from here, but still not close enough to just reach out and take. He looked around for inspiration. Then he saw the Catcher's feet, suspended from the floor. He looked back to Chess.

"Push me," he said.

"You what?"

Push the chair closer to the wall so I can reach," said Tick impatiently. The Catcher's snores were quieter than before. Chess narrowed his eyes at him.

"You really think Odd-Eye is he-"

"Just do it!"

Tick and Chess stared at one another for a few seconds that seemed to stretch into minutes. Then Chess rolled his eyes.

"Yep, definitely insane," he muttered to himself as he disappeared under the chair. Tick felt the chair shake, and it rolled ever so slowly across the room. Tick held his breath as they slid towards the wall. If the Catcher were to awake now...but he stayed asleep as the chair

came to a stop right against the wall. The Catcher's leg nudged gently against the leg of the desk, but he didn't budge. Tick let out a long, shuddering breath. Keeping his back paws planted on the backrest, he pulled his front up the side of the wall.

The wall was a smooth and cold concrete, and offered nothing for his claws to grip onto. One of his claws scrapped across the grey surface, screeching like nails on a blackboard.

The snoring stopped. Tick didn't dare look back. For all he knew, the Catcher could be staring right at him now, waiting to strike. But nothing in the room moved. Forcing his quivering paws still, he threw out a single claw at the string. He missed, rattling the mass of keys instead. Twice, three times he tried, nearly falling from his perch.

"Come on..." He whispered to himself. He reached up, stretching every muscle in his legs and chest. He wrapped an entire paw around the string and pulled. The security card came free! But the rest of the keys came loose too, and his insides turned to ice as he watched them fall to the ground in slow motion. He spotted Chess out of the corner of his eye, rushing to grab them, but he tripped and fell over a leg of the chair. Tick held the card in his teeth and

switched his grip to his front paws. The keys smashed to the ground, the metallic explosion booming in his ears. The Catcher launched bolt upright. Tick threw himself over the back of the chair, clinging on by his front paws. The Catcher swung around, the chair and Tick with him. His claws screamed in protest but he held on tight.

"Wha-who?" The Catcher garbled wildly, "What's the ruckus?"

The swinging stopped. Tick spotted Chess, hugging the underneath of the chair, his eyes shining with open terror.

The chair creaked as the Catcher leaned over, the keys rattling as he picked them up. He grunted.

"Huh, knocked them off again," he chuckled to himself, "I should get a bigger hook for these things."

An arm reached out and looped the keys back onto the hook above, and the Catcher slumped back into the chair. The chair leaned back so far that Tick's hind legs dangled in the air. A sharp pain lanced down his front right leg as the quick of a claw ripped. He bit down hard on his tongue to stop himself from squealing out in pain.

A long silence passed. Tick felt every muscle in him burn, fighting to hold him up. Finally, Tick heard a sound he'd never thought he'd be happy to hear: a loud, rumbling snore.

He sheathed his claws and slumped to the floor, his legs crumpling underneath him. He licked away the blood welling up on his paw. Chess hopped out of his hiding place.

"And I thought some of my stories were crazy," he whispered as he nudged Tick under the chin and helped him back to his paws. "But that...well, that was up there."

Chapter Thirteen

The Risk of Freedom

Tick's legs quickly recovered their strength, and together they returned to the door at the bottom of the stairs. The card still clamped in his jaws, Tick looked up to where the swiping device was. It was nearly as high as the keys had been, but the wall next to it was a knotted, gnarled wood. Tick clambered up, wincing every time he hit his broken claw, and craning his neck around he wedged the card into the slot. Holding it firmly in his teeth, he swiped the card down.

The machine beeped, and with a hiss the door slid open. Tick dropped down, drinking in Chess' wide eyes and open mouth.

"We-well..." He stammered, "That was...unexpected."

"But worth it after all?" Tick asked teasingly.

Chess rolled his eyes. "Human technology is about as easy to understand as...well, humans."

"Let me know what confuses you, and I'll do what I can to fill you in," Tick's whiskers

twitched, "Consider it a gift from your new Midtail."

Tick slipped through the door before Chess could reply - and instantly his good mood drained away.

Cages. Dozens of them, lining the walls, stacked five high in towers that looked ready to topple. And nearly every single one of them had a cat or dog inside. Their eyes glinted from the darkness within. Tick nearly retched at the stench of fear that filled the room and stuck to the back of his throat. The stone floor was damp, and a single naked light bulb swung from the ceiling, flickering in and out.

"Let's do what we have to and get out of here," Chess muttered, descending the steps, "I don't like this one bit."

Tick followed him. As the two cats approached the middle of the room, all of the eyes flashed towards them like dim searchlights. Claws clattered against the grills, and a muted mewling rippled around the room.

"Who's there?"

"Those two: they aren't in a cage!"

"Please help us!"

"Set us free!"

The mewling grew louder, the room grinding slowly into life.

"Hush!" Chess hissed. "The Catcher is sleeping not far from here. If you keep that racket up, it'll just make things even worse!"

The room was silent again, though it wasn't a sad silence like before: it was as tense as a taut string. Either Tick was getting used to it, or the scent of fear was receding.

"Now, we are looking for a cat called Odd-Eye," said Chess, swinging his neck around, "Odd-Eye? Are you here?"

Silence. Tick felt the fingers of iron clench at his chest again.

"Odd-Eye?" Tick wandered around the cages. It was far too dark to see inside some of them, and some cats and dogs cowered as far back it looked empty save for a few flecks of hair from a protruding tail. "Odd-Eye, it's us! We've come to rescue you!"

Still no answer came.

"Did anyone see a cat with white fur?" Chess asked crisply, "She was only captured today; you couldn't have missed her."

More silence.

"Well?" Tick snapped, "Catcher got your tongues? Did you or did you not?"

"I...saw nothing," came a strained answer.

Nods and mewls of agreement. "The Catcher hasn't been down here for a couple of days now."

"We'd have noticed if he came," another shuddered, "We haven't been given fresh water or food in ages."

Tick saw the tubes of water and food pellets sticking out the sides of each cage, each one almost empty. *Odd-Eye wasn't here? It couldn't be...she had to be...*

Chess snorted, and turned, padding towards the door.

"Wait...Where are you going?" Tick's voice came out like a whimper.

Chess stopped at the door, but didn't turn around.

"Isn't it obvious?" said Chess, "It's as I've been telling you all along. Odd-Eye was not taken by the Catcher. This was all just part of the Trial."

"But..." Tick grasped around for something to reply with, "Just wait," he said, walking towards Chess, "Let me think: there must have been something I missed, something -"

"Yes, you did miss something!" Chess rounded on him, and Tick tumbled backwards, "The fact that this was a Trial all along! And a

stupidly dangerous one at that: I shudder to think what you need to do to become a Bigtail."

Tick looked sadly around the room of cages. He'd felt so sure...and he agreed with Chess on one thing too: why would Odd-Eye set up a trial so clearly beyond them? It just didn't add up.

"Then...how about the rest of them?" Tick sighed.

"The rest of who?"

"These other cats."

"What about them?"

Tick blinked. "Err...we're going to set them free, right?"

Tick heard snuffles and paws clattering on metal. The room stirred, leaning in to listen.

"How?" Chess' eyes flashed.

Tick felt his chest grow cold. "Well...by trying?"

Chess gave a hollow laugh. "Oh, right, and after we open fifty cages with our bare paws without making a sound, we'll all just march out of here."

Tick stepped backwards. "That's not what I said."

"Then what?" Chess yowled. His yell echoed around them. Chess cringed, his ears flattening on his head. All ears swiveled to the crack in the door. The echo faded into a ringing silence.

Chess' shoulders slumped, and he turned back to Tick, his eyes dull.

"Look, it's not that I don't want to help," he said, then looking around the room, he added, "Truly, I do. But can't you see? There is no way to save them all. Even if we manage to get everyone out of their cages, how will we guide them all safely past the Catcher? And how do we all get out? Through the locked door? Or the window that he jammed shut?" Chess shook his head.

"We have to try!" Tick stepped forward, "What harm can it do to at least try?"

The other cats murmured their approval, but Chess kept shaking his head.

"Every harm in the world, Tick," he said, his voice heavy, "You'll be lucky if a few of them escape. Everyone else who gets left behind will be punished, injured, or worse."

"So we just leave them here!" Tick kneaded the ground impatiently, "What's a shot at freedom if you have to risk something, huh?"

Chess looked up at the swinging lightbulb. "You're living in a fairytale, Smalltail," he said, "I admire your ideals. I wish I could share them. But I lived rough for two years. If that taught me anything, it's that life isn't fair. Better to accept that than to fight it."

Chess turned away. Tick felt as though the floor was crumbling away underneath him. Chess took one step towards the door, and a voice spoke. A very familiar voice.

"Interesting," it said smoothly, "Very interesting..."

Tick and Chess spun around. Amongst the pile of cages, Tick saw it. Two eyes glinted in the darkness, one green, the other blue.

Chapter Fourteen

Switch

"Odd-Eye!" Tick and Chess gasped as one.

The eyes glittered and blinked. Tick galloped over, feeling a balloon rising in his chest. She was here after all! He was right!

"Good to see you both," she said, stepping forward into the light. She looked exhausted, and her fur was dull and bedraggled, but her eyes shone as brightly as ever.

"Wait a second!" Tick looked around the room. "I asked you all if you had seen Odd-Eye, and you all said no! Yet here she is! Why did you all lie to us?"

"Simple," said a cat, "She asked us to."

"She asked-"

"I had to test you," said Odd Eye, "I needed to see how you would both react."

"So this *is* a Trial!" Chess declared, thumping his tail on the ground.

But Odd Eye shook her head. "You are right and wrong, Chess: this is no trial. My capture here is very real, and I am astounded that you would assume otherwise."

Chess looked as though he'd been splashed with ice cold water. He bowed his head in shame.

"But when I heard you both approach, I requested a moment of secrecy from these cats here. A moment to appraise you both. I think this ordeal will suffice as evidence enough for the chosen Midtail."

Tick felt the balloon inside him tighten. "Who -?"

"There's no time now," she said, her voice suddenly so tense that the balloon inside him turned to steel, "We must leave, now. All of us."

"All...you mean, everyone here?" Chess waved his tail around the room.

"Everyone." She repeated. She didn't sound angry, but a deep authority resonated in her voice: there would be no argument here. Still, Chess looked wildly around.

"But...how..."

"Look at the back of the cages," said Odd-Eye, "Tick, you go. It's something only you can see."

Chess bristled, and Tick slipped past the cage to hide his grin. It was even drearier and smellier back here; pellets of old rat poison stung his nostrils. What was so special about

this? He looked at the rears of the cages – and saw it. A cable ran from the back of each cage, all twining together into one fat cable as big as a snake. It skirted around the edge of the room, and at the edge of the door, it rose up the wall, connecting into a circuit board with fifty identical switches.

"They're electronic!" He said with relish, "All these cages are electronic!"

"Elo-what?"

Tick skidded to the centre of the room.

"Listen up everyone!" He whispered as loud as he dared, "When you are free, keep the noise down, do as we tell you, and don't wake -"

The room plunged into cold as a long shadow stretched over him. All eyes looked upward, icy with terror. Tick spun around. The Catcher towered over him, net held aloft.

Tick leapt aside before the net slammed down over him. He rolled across the room, and caught a glimpse of orange fur flying past and leaping into the air. Chess' caterwaul made Tick's fur stand on end. The Catcher grunted and roared, writhing around as Chess scrambled over his shoulders and head. Tick made a dash for the switches. Chess gave a strangled yell, and Tick glanced sideways. He had a split second of fur flying towards him before the

marmalade cat's back slammed into his side. They crashed against the wall. The Catcher bounded at them, swiping the net through the air. Tick wedged his hind legs on Chess' back and pushed away. They burst apart, and the net hit the wall. The room erupted with yowls and mewls and barks.

Growling with rage, the Catcher rounded on Tick again. Tick charged at the wall. His paws pounded up the concrete as high as he could, then jumped away. Claws raised, he had one glimpse of the Catcher's ugly face before he scored his claws as deep as he could across the rough, stubbly skin.

The room gasped in unison as Tick landed smoothly and whipped around to face his enemy. The Catcher was hunched over, clutching his face and roaring in pain.

"The switches, Chess!" Tick yelled, "Hit the switches!"

Chess was only two tail lengths from the switches, but he was still in a pile on the ground. At Tick's words, though, Chess scraped himself off the floor and looked up at the switchboard.

But the Catcher was faster. Tick saw the red lines slashed over his cheek, pulled tight by his grimace. He threw himself at Chess. Chess jumped aside, landing on the Catcher's back.

He sunk his claws deep through the thick leather jacket. The Catcher growled like a bear, and rolled onto his back.

All of the cats in the room gave a collective gasp as Chess was crushed under the Catcher. Tick's legs carried him forward. Blood pumped through his head, a red haze descend over his eyes. He reared over the Catcher's face, claws pushed out so far that his paws ached. The whites of the Catcher's beady eyes flashed, and he winced, wheeling away just as Tick's claws scraped at the concrete where skin had been a heartbeat before. Where was Chess? Tick had expected the marmalade cat to be pressed into the ground, but -

"Ack! Geroff me you mangy piece of-"

The Catcher staggered to his feet and trashed about. Chess still clung to the Catcher's back! He tried to shake Chess off, but Chess stuck to him as though his life depended on it, his eyes clasped shut. Tick saw his opening: he dashed at the switchboards one more time.

"ENOUGH!" The Catcher boomed. He lifted a boot and kicked at Tick as hard as a football. Tick saw flashes of white and red, and then darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

Declawed

Lying down. That was the first sensation he felt.

Yes, lying down feels good. I could stay here for a while.

Whatever he lay on was hard and cold, though.

No matter: if I just keep my eyes closed, nothing bad can happen to me. Nothing at all.

Then his eyes snapped open, and the memories poured back into him. Odd-Eye captured! The cages! Chess! The Catcher!

He stood up, and three things happened at once: the top of his head slammed against something hard, he realized that he was in a cage, and a thick knot of pain rolled in his belly. He groaned, and he slumped down again.

"He's awake," somecat drawled.

"Oh, thank goodness for that!" said another, "Does he look alright? That was quite the kick the Catcher planted on him.

"Gotta say I'm surprised they lasted that long," said another, "I've never seen any animal stand up to the Catcher like that, let alone two young cats."

Tick's eyes slid into clearer focus: through the cage, he looked down upon the room from up high. He must have been put in one of the highest cages. He could see Chess in another cage off to the side, his paws pressed against the cage grill. And there was Odd-Eye, her cage almost opposite his. Her eyes glinted up at him like precious stones in a cave.

"Well, that was the most excitement I've had for...for..." another cat trailed off, "Err...well, drat. How long we been down here, Pickles?"

"A long time, Waxy," the cat called Pickles said mournfully, "Settle in guys, it's gonna be a long time before we have anything like that to take our mind off of boredom and starvation."

"Not necessarily," the cat next to Odd-Eye rasped, pushing his weathered face up to the bars, "You two enraged the Catcher in a way I've never seen, and that's saying something. Don't be surprised if he has a special plan for you."

"Like what?" said Chess.

The door to the room burst open, and in strode the Catcher, the cuts on his face still bright but with a vicious grin on his face. A small tabby dangled from his outstretched fist, hissing and spitting madly.

"There!" The Catcher cackled as he threw the cat into an open cage and slammed it shut, "That will teach you to a lesson you will never forget, you nasty little beast!"

The cat reached through the door of the cage as though trying to grab the Catcher. He laughed again.

"Oh, what's the matter?" He teased, "You wanna scratch me? Go ahead: try."

The Catcher held out a hand to the cat. Curious, Tick leaned forward. Then the cat batted at the Catcher's hand with its soft paws, and the truth slammed into Tick like a bag of ice.

"Haha!" The Catcher pulled his hand back and laughed so loud that dust fell from the ceiling, "Not so tough without those claws, are you!"

Then the Catcher rounded on Tick so fast that he jumped backwards. The Catcher's fat face filled the cage door.

"You're next, runt!" He seethed, phlegm flying at Tick through the grill, "You and your orange friend. And I'm gonna use the extra rusty clippers on you!"

He walked out of the room, slamming the door shut. The light bulb swung back and forth, shadows dancing around the room.

"Tinsel!" the cat called Waxy gasped, "Are you okay?"

The clawless cat slumped so heavily in her cage it was as if she'd collapsed. "My life is over," said Tinsel, "What good am I now? I can't fight, can't climb, can't catch prey..."

"Aw, come on, it ain't that bad!" Said Pickles, "You can still...erm..."

"Oh, way to go, Pickles," said another, "Way to put the fighting spirit back in her."

"It doesn't matter either way," croaked the old cat next to Odd-Eye, "You will never need your claws in this place. Escape is impossible."

A cold silence descended over the room. Nobody argued back.

"That cat over there: what was his name?" the old cat went on, waving a gnarled paw at Chess, "Wasn't it Cress or something?"

"Chess," said Chess.

"That's it! Yes, Cross here was right: better we accept it than fight. It's less painful that way."

Accept it? Tick thought back to when he was Tom. He'd had a car, a house and a well paying job. And after all of his strife to make things better, this was the result? In an animal cage...as a cat? Maybe the old cat had a point.

"No," said a new voice. All the cats looked around for the owner of the voice of dissent, but Tick knew it straightaway: Odd-Eye stepped out of the darkness, "You are wrong, Hopkins. We should always fight. Fight to our last breath. Just as Tick said."

"Wait...did you just say Tick?" said Pickles, "*The* Tick? As in the cat who took down Muezza Tick?"

A ripple of excited chatter rippled through the room. Odd-Eye rose her voice above the din.

"You know the name, and you know him because he fought," she said, "He could have accepted his fate, could have let Muezza win and learned to live with it."

Odd-Eye fell silent, and to his own surprise Tick found himself picking up the speech.

"But I didn't," he said, "Because I...how can I put it...well, there's *way* more to it than this. But if I had given up, that wouldn't have been the end of it. He would have kept taking from me and everyone else until there was nothing left."

"I accepted this cage," said Tinsel, her eye's glinting like broken diamonds, "And now my claws are gone. How long before I accept that? What will the Catcher take next?"

"Anything he can, so long as he knows you won't fight it," said Odd-Eye, her voice growing harder, "You could all stay here and live your life, as Hopkins said. But it would not be your life. You'd be living a lie!"

Odd-Eye's mewl echoed around the room, resounding longest in Tick's ears. Was he living a lie? Why was he trying so hard to accept life as a cat? Had he exchanged his old life for something better or worse? His head pounded. He just didn't know anymore.

"Odd-Eye," said Chess, standing up and mustering a shadow of his former, formidable self, "You are right. Tick was right. Your capture was real. And even if it hadn't been, I should have taken it as seriously as Tick had done."

Tick's ears twitched. Odd-Eye watched the marmalade cat silently. Chess bowed his head. "I yield this trial. I do not deserve the rank."

Tick's front paws nearly gave way. Still Odd-Eye stared at Chess, her expression unreadable. Then, finally, she nodded.

"I understand, and reluctantly I accept your withdrawal from the trial," she said, suddenly formal, "Regardless, take heart, Chess: I understand what you mean, and why you said it.

You will always be a valuable member to Cobby Clan."

Chess looked up, his eyes shining. "Th...thank you, Odd-Eye."

Tick couldn't believe what he was hearing. He'd beaten Chess. He'd won. He was to be made a Midtail after all. And yet...his head still felt heavy. Where was the sense of elation? The thrill of victory? He looked at Tinsel again, gazing sadly at her paws.

Chapter Sixteen

The Call of the Lobby

The door flew open, and all the animals scuttled back into the darkness. In strode the Catcher, holding what looked like the oldest, rustiest pair of pliers Tick had ever seen. With a wicked grin, the Catcher snapped the pliers at the air. The metal groaned, creaked and scraped. Tick felt as though his stomach were being pulled through his mouth.

"Well, well," the Catcher sneered, looking over all the cowering cats, "we're not so brave now, are we? So! Which one of you wants to go first?"

Silence. Tick stepped forward into the light.

"Yes...you," the Catcher walked slowly towards him, "It was you that scarred my face, wasn't it?"

The Catcher reached for Tick's cage. Tick extended his claws. He would fight to the end. He scraped them across the cage bars.

"Don't even think about it!" The Catcher slammed a fist on the roof of the cage, and Tick

rattled inside. "If you even think of fighting, I'll be clipping off more than claws, y'hear?"

Tick looked past the Catcher's seething face to see the faces of Chess and Odd-Eye. The Catcher unlocked the cage, and a low caterwauling swelled in his throat. The cage opened, and Tick sprang forward. He sunk his claws into the Catcher's hand and bit down as hard as he could.

The scream of pain whirled around him as the Catcher swung his hand back and forth. Tick held tight with claws and teeth.

Slam! Cold concrete met his side, and the world fell away. He had a distant sensation of falling, caterwauling, and someone yelling. Boots stamped toward him like the pounding of a drum. Then something hard pressed down on his back legs, and a voice spoke, as distant as though it were from across a windswept valley.

"I warned you," it said, "Now I'm going to have to make an example of you."

Tick twisted around. The red-faced Catcher towered over him, pinning his back legs down by the heels of his boots, holding an empty cage over his head. Tick closed his eyes.

Caterwauling.

Far, far away.

He opened his eyes. He was still there, and the Catcher still stood there. Had he imagined that sound? No, the Catcher had heard it too: he threw the cage aside, and howling like a wolf he swung the door open and marched up the stairs. The caterwauling came louder and clearer.

"More cats!" The Catcher roared, "I swear, if I have to see one more cat today I'll AAAAGGHH!"

Light poured down the stairs and washed over Tick as the front door swung open. Tick squinted as he looked up the staircase. A rumble like an earthquake shook at Tick's belly and paws, and a powerful smell washed over him. The electric tang in the air before a rainstorm. Tick's ears pricked up. *Could it be...*

The silhouettes of dozens of cats lined the top of the stairs, their shadows stretching over Tick and the cages.

"Cobbies!" Sir Paws roared, "Forward!"

The Cobbies poured down the stairs like a waterfall. Tick curled up, bracing himself for impact, but the cats parted around him like rapids around an island. They climbed over the cages, swarming around like bees to a hive, pulling at the cages in teams of five.

"Tick!"

Something fuzzy bowled into his side, winding him. It was Tama, hopping around, her eyes wide.

"Oops! Sorry Tick!" She said, "And sorry we're late! A load of humans came to Jacobsen park in their big yellow Rumlbers, we had to take the long way around..."

"It's fine," said Tick, "Absolutely...fine!" He felt an irresistible joy bristle inside him. These cats...his clan...his family, all swirling around him. Then a cold darkness fell over him and the cats around him. He turned and looked up. The Catcher lay atop the staircase, looking like something the cat had literally dragged in. His hands shook with rage he pulled himself to the edge of the top stair, his red eyes taking in the sight of cats swirling around his lair of cages. Then his sights locked onto Tick. The Catcher looked ready to spit flames. He pushed himself to his feet, casting his shadow wider.

Tick looked wildly around. Only a couple of the cages had been snapped open. Tick fought his way through the crowd of cats, out of the shadow and towards the switchboard.

"No!" The Catcher yelled, fighting his way towards him, "Stay away from that you filthy furball!"

Tick reached the switchboard just as an orange paw rose to hit the switches too. Chess! They met each other's eyes. With a nod to one another, they threw every single switch down.

The light flickered as every single cage burst open.

For a heartbeat, the room was still. Every cat, dog and even the Catcher froze. Then the freed animals launched out, flowing through the Cobbies and charging straight for the Catcher.

The Catcher gulped. "Nice kitties..." He squeaked. They swamped over him. Tick saw Tinsel using her long tail to whip his face. The Catcher's yells drowned away waves of fur and claws.

"Good work," said a smooth voice. Tick turned, and looked up at Odd-Eye. Her eyes glowed. "A strong start for our new Midtail."

Tick bowed his head. Doubt still nagged at him. He held his tongue. *Not yet.* Looking up, something caught Tick's eye: something the size of a marble clung to the fur of Odd-Eye's flank, dark and shining. Before Tick could get a better look at it, though, Odd-Eye turned away, looking around the room of cats. Her chest swelled with pride. Sir Paws appeared out of the roving crowd, and nodded to his leader.

"They're all yours," he said.

Odd-Eye blinked gratefully at her deputy. She faced the room. "Cobbies! Fall out!" She announced. The Cobbies flicked their tails in a unified salute, and pounded back up the stairs, around the mound of cats still tearing at the writhing Catcher. Odd-Eye, Sir Paws, Tick and Chess brought up the rear. As they passed, the once caged cats broke apart. Tick caught one last glimpse of the Catcher's face, every inch covered in cuts and grazes.

"I need a new job..." He moaned.

Tick rode the wave of cats out of the front door and into the warm day. Tick felt wonderful sunshine press on his face and back. He'd been in that dingy prison for only a few hours but he felt elated to be back outside. The freed cats were almost wailing with joy.

The mass of animals burst out into the main street. Cars screeched to a halt and passers-by gawped as cats swarmed in every direction, yowling their delight as they disappeared into the maze of the city. The Cobbies were already halfway down the road, heading back towards the barn. Tick fell into stride beside his leader, deputy and trial rival. As the street opened up into the wide expanse of the park, a thought jumped into his head: where was Puzzle?

Chapter Seventeen

New Life

They didn't stop until they reached the barn. When they came to a halt at the doors, Sir Paws' ears twitched. "We have visitors," he said, pointing behind them with his tail.

They turned around, and hidden amidst the long stalks of maize were Tinsel and Pickles, looking very awkward.

Odd-Eye watched the two of them carefully. Once again Tick saw the dark marble stuck to her fur. He took a pawstep closer - maybe she didn't realise it was there? - But then she shook her fur, and it disappeared into the folds of her thick coat. Tick stepped back. Had he imagined it, or had Odd-Eye met his gaze for a split second?

"Visitors indeed!" Odd-Eye said loudly, "It must surely be important if you came straight here!"

Tinsel and Pickles looked at each other. They nodded in unison, and bounded towards them.

"Please!" Pickles pleaded, "Make us a part of your clan!"

Sir Paws rolled his eyes. "We're going to have to ask the humans for another barn at rate we're growing."

But Odd-Eye held her tail over his mouth. "Raise your heads, young ones," she said, "I would be delighted to accept you as new apprentices. We will need to assign you both a mentor to teach you our ways." Odd-Eye turned and met Tick's eye. Tick's throat went suddenly dry. Odd-Eye nodded to the door. "All of you, follow me."

They slipped into the cool of the barn. Excited chatter bubbled around them as returning cats shared their adventure with those who had stayed behind. Tick's memory sparked.

"Sir Paws, have you seen -"

"Did you find it?" Sir Paws whispered to Odd-Eye.

"It took me all night," said Odd-Eye, twisting her head around and digging her teeth into her coat. Tick leaned in closer.

"You didn't have to stay overnight with the Leafies, you know," said the deputy gruffly, "You had a sizeable patrol with you. If you'd travelled back at night none of this would have happened."

Odd-Eye gave a tug, and the marble came free...except it wasn't a marble at all. It was some kind of dark berry. It hung from Odd-Eye's teeth by a thin vine, making Odd-Eye look as if she were growling.

"And if I hadn't been caught, all of those cats would have never been freed," she said through gritted teeth, "Here. Take this to the Sickkit quarters. Muffin will know what to do with it."

Sir Paws carefully took the vine between his own teeth and padded away. Tick stepped forward.

"Where's Puz-"

"Cobbies! Meeting!" Odd Eye drowned out Tick's question. Tick pushed down a ripple of frustration. Something very strange was going on. Was Odd-Eye avoiding him on purpose? And wasn't the whole reason she and a bunch of Cobbies went to Jacobsen Park to help with cleaning and planting? Why was Odd-Eye picking fruit?

"Tick? You're up!" A cat's call snapped him out of his reverie. Odd-Eye stood atop her platform, looking down at him expectantly. Mind a million miles away, he leapt up the bales of hay and protruding beams of wood, up to the platform. The Cobby cats assembled down below, looking up at him and their leader. The

last time he'd been here, the looks shot at him had been a mix of confusion, anger and suspicion. Now he saw only familiar faces. There was Apples, Tips, Malt, even Chess skulking in a corner. But the most familiar face of all was missing...

"I, Odd-Eye, Leader of Cobby Clan, draw upon the force of my Clan to see Tick earn his Midtail," she yowled, "Do I hear your approval?"

The Clan meowed it's agreement. Tick stood up straight, though his eyes still darted around the barn. *She should be here for this! Did no other cat notice?*

"Tick, you have shown great aptitude and determination not just through the trials but through all of your time as a Cobby," said Odd-Eye, "You have battled your inner demons, faced incredible danger and made the right choices when it counted."

Tick saw Chess' whiskers droop. This wasn't even half as victorious as he'd imagined his Midtail ceremony to be.

"Tick, are you ready to be tailed?" Odd-Eye's eyes sparkled.

"Errr... shouldn't the deputy be here for this as well?" said Tick, recalling his first Tailing.

Odd-Eye blinked. "Ah, yes. He should. Rest assured he will be here momentarily. Now, do you accept?"

Tick looked down, and spotted Sir Paws padding out of the Sickkit quarters. The berry was gone. A very familiar striped tail swished back and forth from the corner.

"P...Puzzle?" He gasped, "PUZZLE!"

Tick leapt from the platform. The shroud of cats parted and Tick landed in the soft hay. He heard Odd-Eye meow something, but it was lost in his ears amidst the roaring, his mind rolling with terrible thoughts. What was Puzzle doing in the Sickkit quarters? What could be so bad she didn't even want to see his own tailing?

He pushed his way towards the entrance. Muffins blocked the way in, her eyes wide. "Tick, no! She-"

"Out of my way!" Tick ducked underneath her and slipped inside the quarters.

And there lay Puzzle. She lay on her side, surrounded by thick hay. Her belly protruded outwards. A strangely large belly. She looked up at him as she licked her chops clean of black berry juice.

"What...WHAT!" Tick's paws gave way, and he collapsed on the fragrant hay. Other cats gathered at the entrance to see, while others

clambered up onto the walls to look in. A ripple of excitement and shock ran through the barn. Odd Eye looked down at them, her face unreadable.

"I...I'd been meaning to tell you," Puzzle said, not meeting his eye, "But you were so busy with the trials, I didn't want to distract you."

"You..." Tick knew his mouth was opening and closing like a fish, but he didn't care.

"S-So..." His voice quivered like a taut string, "Err...who's the father?"

Half the cats on the wall fell off as they rolled about in laughter. Puzzle laughed too, her belly expanding and falling. Tick stood rooted to the spot, as though hypnotized. When the laughing died down, Puzzle fixed him with her golden eyes.

"It's you, Tick!" Puzzle said, her whiskers twitching, "And I sense it's more than one. Three, I feel."

Tick's stomach lurched as though he were tumbling through thin air. Him? A dad? To...to *kittens*? This couldn't be real, no way...could it?

"Come here," said Puzzle softly, "Quickly, I can feel one of them kicking."

The whole barn was a still as a rock as all eyes trained on him. He tiptoed towards Puzzle

as though approaching a landmine. Puzzle rolled her eyes.

"I'm not made of feathers!" she snapped, "Get over here before I fall asleep from boredom!"

Tick obediently trotted over, and heart pounding, pressed an ear to Puzzle's soft belly fur. Sure enough, something did seem to stir inside her, pushing gently against Tick's cheek. He felt lightheaded.

"Tick?" Odd-Eye called from the platform, "I am sorry this was kept from you. But it was Puzzle's wish to keep it secret until after the trials. While we were helping the Leafies, myself and a group stayed back to search for a berry to ease Puzzle's aches."

"Aches?" Tick looked back to Puzzle, "Are you alright?"

Puzzle nodded patiently, "But these are three big kittens. The berry has helped."

"That's why it took all night," Odd went on, "It is a very rare berry. We are fortunate to have found one, but it did take all night. Luckily I stashed it away in my fur before the Catcher caught me."

"I see," said Tick, "It explains the mood swings, anyway."

"What mood swings?" Puzzle flashed him a look so hard that Tick flinched. Then he saw her twitch her whiskers, and they both laughed.

"Now Tick," Odd-Eye declared as Sir Paws took his place next to her, "I cannot withhold this ceremony any longer. I hear a lot of grumbling bellies. Please return up here, and claim your right to be a Midtail."

Tick looked up at the platform. Sunlight passed through a hole in the roof and struck it, illuminating a strip of Odd-Eye's silky fur. His shock was quickly falling away, and he felt that balloon swelling in his chest once again. Still he felt lightheaded, but it felt good, as if some great weight that had been on his shoulders for so long that he'd forgotten about it had been lifted. A curious, excited sort of calm washed over him. It was all beginning to make sense.

"Tick." Odd-Eye repeated, "Are you ready to be a Midtail?"

Puzzle watched him too, her eyes shining with pride. Tick drew himself up, and bowed his head.

"Thank you for this opportunity, Odd-Eye," he said, "However, I would like to humbly decline the offer."

The gasp from the Cobbies was so great it seemed to make the walls of the barn lean in.

Odd-Eye and Sir Paws didn't move. He felt no nerves though, not any more.

"Chess is a good cat," he went on, "Actually, he's a great cat."

Chess bowed his head sheepishly.

"He's led a hard life these past two years, but that should count for him, not against. I recommend he become the new Midtail instead."

Odd-Eye leaned in to whisper something to Sir Paws. Tick looked at Chess, perched on the edge of the wall. He looked ready to collapse. They met each other's eyes for a split second before Tick looked up to the leader again.

"I must admit I am curious," she said, "Why the change of heart? You both went through a lot of strife to get here. You deserve this, Tick. Don't you want to be a Midtail anymore?"

Tick took a deep breath. His head was still whirling.

"When I first approached you about becoming a Midtail, Odd-Eye, I was lost," he said, "I was still struggling to understand my place here. My place as a Cobby, as a cat. Don't get me wrong, I've made a lot of friends and had some incredible experiences. I've learned a lot about myself. But that didn't mean I was ready to leave my old life behind. I needed

something, some responsibility, something...something meaningful. I learned a lot fighting alongside Chess. I've learned that I do indeed want to be more responsible, to have real reason to be here. But Chess is your Midtail, not me."

"Tick..." Puzzle murmured.

"I have all the reason I need now," said Tick, nuzzling his head against hers.

A muttering floated around the barn.

Tick could feel Odd-Eye's gaze pressing on his back, watching them both carefully.

"Well said, Tick," she said at last, "And I agree with you on another thing: Chess will make a great Midtail. Sir Paws, will you do the honours?"

Sir Paws nodded and with a whisk of his tail beckoned Chess to the platform. Now it was Chess' turn to have every cat stare at him. But he held himself steady on the wall he perched himself on. The old confidence he'd shown the first time Tick had met him glowed once again. He nodded, jumped down, and padded through the Sickkit quarters. He blinked a long, grateful blink at Tick as he passed, which Tick returned. Tick felt a wonderful, warm calm come over him as Chess climbed up to the platform.

"I am humbled," said Chess, "And...I know I don't deserve this position, but -"

"Says who?" Odd-Eye's ears pricked up as he looked at Chess. Chess looked at his paws.

"Well...I said some things in that Catcher's lair...things you didn't like..."

"We disagree on some things, then," said Odd-Eye, "That is all. Do you think Sir Paws and I see eye to eye on everything?"

Sir Paws roared with laughter, nearly falling off of the platform. "A day where we don't disagree is a day we aren't doing our job right!" He meowed.

"Disagreements are healthy," she said, "If I wanted to surround myself with cats who nodded at my every word, I'd go find a puddle and look at myself."

Chess' mouth was as wide open as his eyes.

"So!" Odd-Eye faced the crowded barn, "Once again, my Cobbies: are you ready to receive your new Midtail?"

Tick cheered as loud as anyone as Odd-Eye and Sir Paws wrapped their white and tabby tails around Chess' orange tail. Tick's memory of his own tailing as a Smalltail came flooding back to him, and as their tails unwrapped, Tick climbed up onto a wall to get a better view. Chess braced himself as Sir Paws and Odd-Eye

head butted him from his haunches and pushed him off the platform. Chess flew across the barn, and the cats on the hay parted like waves as he ploughed paws-first into the hay. Cats immediately swamped over him, meowing their congratulations to the new Midtail.

"Are you sure about this?" Puzzle mewed. Tick turned, and jumped down to her side. "I thought you wanted to be a Midtail."

"I thought so too," Tick admitted.

"Are you sure this is enough for you?" Puzzle's narrowed her eyes, "This won't be easy. You're going to miss your old life more than ever."

Tick closed his eyes. The cheering receded into the background, and he dreamed about waking up to a Sunday breakfast...driving through the country lanes on a lazy afternoon...seeing his own creations rise up and shape the London skyline...and nights alone, wondering where his best friend went. He opened his eyes, and there she was, right in front of him.

He smiled, and nestled himself against her belly again to hear their unborn kittens.

Read on for another short story by

P.J. Leonard

Paganini's

Strings

The neon lights of kanji rippled in the puddle. December rain pounded the rusty drain pipes and trash loaded wall-to-wall in the night-cloaked alley. It reeked of fried and refried takeaways, a stench that gave my stomach a guilty rumble.

I never eat before a gig. It wouldn't stay down otherwise. Instead, I sipped on a flask of coffee (crammed with sugar, of course), waiting. Despite the rain, I was in high spirits. This gig would pay handsomely, and by my standards, was fairly routine. Regardless, I'd had my guitar restrung; no crack-ups this time. Just killer riffs.

I shuffled the guitar and portable amp bagged on my back. Paganini, I called it. In this line of work you had to call your weapon of choice by a name.

There came a shaft of musty light, gleaming a door shape against the wall. I threw my flask onto the trash heap and ducked behind a skip. Flies bounded on and off my face and hands, but I had to concede it, had to remain still. I pulled

my trenchcoat tighter around me, and peered down the alley.

Voices bawling in speedy oriental met my ears through the rain. Then the sharp noise of crockery smashing. Shadows danced across the light like a puppet show. At last he staggered out, throwing his lithe hands out against the wall before he hit it. His hair blazed with the colour and manner of a fire, and his furious eyes did similar as he looked back. Cat-like he leapt for the door – the light closed away with a slam, leaving his fists pounding against the surface, the steel echoing through the alley. It shook the flies off me, at least.

“Yeah? Well to hell with you!” he roared, “I don’t need this job!”

He spat at the doorstep. Instantly I sized him up; tall, perhaps underweight, full of cocksure bravado. So, this was Ken. Judging by the get-up he was either an über-fashion victim or a hardcore cyberpunk. He even wore sweatbands weaved of microchips and wires. I watched him light up and suck luxuriously on a kretek. My lip curled; he was certainly underage. So, he

was a tearaway *and* a pretentious brat too? This was just getting better and better. I'd played to tougher people for less.

Finally, Ken moved down the alley, hunched and brooding, disappearing through a plume of greasy steam. I leapt up, and shook myself down vigorously. I'd not have my new trenchcoat ruined. Stepping lightly, I emerged through the steam onto the main street.

The towers of the Urbania gleamed against the night, each screaming for attention with dazzling arrays of fluorescent lights bedecking the sporadic angles of the walls. The thumping basslines of various generic trance tunes escaped from the nightclubs and melded into one equally generic mesh of noise. Late-night shoppers and revellers bustled from doorway to awning, ducking against the rain. Between the garish circus were alleyways loaded with shifting shadows and smoke; gateways into the underworld beneath the lights.

I quickly caught sight of Ken, owing to his hair. He strode tall against the rain, shouldering

passers-by. I followed, keeping a good distance behind. A row of shop assistants standing under umbrellas proudly declared their latest offers to me:

“Extremely rare Oscibird feathers! When they’re gone they’re gone!”

“Happy hour for the whole night! Get those drinks in!”

“Hey you! We’ve got girls all the way from the Ayrn Islands waiting just for you!”

I’d admit that one of them tickled my fancy. Which one it was...well, that’s for you to decide.

In my moment’s distraction, I lost sight of Ken. I looked up just in time to see him slip down a side street. Odd; either he really was naïve or he was asking for trouble. I shrugged, and slipped away from the crowds after him.

It wasn’t an alley, but it wasn’t a real street either. The cobbled path wound downwards, the stones shining under the weak glow of gas lamps. Tiny stores squeezed for room on either side, their windows so murky and crowded with

oddities that it was impossible to tell whether they were open or closed.

Just when I'd thought I'd lost my quarry, with an all manner of doors to slip through, I heard the scuffing of shoes on the cobble stones up ahead. I plunged own the path, briskly, silently.

Soon, Ken came back into view, walking as casually as I was careful. Didn't he have any idea what territory he was walking into? Not that I cared for him: soon I'd play for him and it would all be over. But I *did* care for myself. Immensely. I'd have to spring onto him soon, get it over with and get out while I could. Maybe that was why my employee was paying so much; idiots were dangerous creatures.

The street came to an end, and he stopped before a plain door. I slipped into the shadows once again, as his head cocked around. Had he seen me? Heard me?

He ran his hand through his hair, and lifted the lid on a battered dustbin. He unstuck a key taped to the underside of the lid and inserted it into the door. It unlocked with a loud *clunk* that defied it's size. With another look over his

shoulder, he replaced the key and slipped through the door, locking it shut from the inside with another *clunk*.

I waited for a while, aware that this left me in an awkward situation. On the one hand, I had him cornered. On the other hand, he had me cornered too, if he was at all aware of it; I could only enter through this door. He could easily ambush me and ruin the whole gig.

Still, I had no choice. It was too much money. I unpacked my equipment, in case I needed to make a quick play.

Paganini slung over my shoulder and amp in my hand, I stepped inside, tensed, ready to swing into action. It was inky black inside. The air had an electric tang, as though a storm were rolling in. It felt like a big room, perhaps huge. The old nerves started setting in again, and my empty stomach clenched. The tips of my fingers perspired.

Where was Ken? For all the darkness told, he could be a fair distance away, or standing right next to me. But if he'd seen me, he'd have

made his move by now, surely. Perhaps I'd entered undetected, after all.

I stepped forward, slowly, hands out, expecting to bump into something. Nothing. The room kept going. What was this place? Such expansive rooms didn't exist in the cramped heart of the Urbania. Something didn't feel right. My back bristled. I turned – and saw him, standing in a pool of light, looking right at me with cold eyes.

In one smooth, heavily rehearsed motion, I dropped the amp to the floor, swung Paganini into my hands, and jacked the guitar in. The sweet sound of feedback shivered up my arms. I sucked it in through my teeth, feeding on it. I pressed the tips of my fingers against the strings, feeling the coarse gut strings rub against my toughened skin. The familiar shape of Paganini pressed against my thigh and midriff. All fear had evaporated. I felt alive. Ken still slumped in casual nonchalance. He sneered at the sight of me.

“Herrick Stringlayer,” he said in a drawl, “My, what a surprise.”

I wasn't taken aback by the fact that he knew my name. My reputation preceded me. Perhaps he recognised the infamous red strings of Paganini, drawn from the gut of an Oscibird. I wasn't even taken aback by his lack of surprise upon seeing me, despite what he said. No. If he did know me, then why did he not run? Why did he stand before me, unafraid, bored even?

It didn't matter. I licked my dry lips, feeling the ridges in the cracked skin. It was time to play.

I formed one of my favourite chords with my hand: the G Major. Locked. Loaded. My breathing was shallow. Paganini was ready to draw blood. I raised my picking hand, poised to strike. I gave Ken one last passing glance: arms crossed, still bored.

I brought my hand down like a guillotine, stroking my nails hard against the strings. The music! It blasted from the amp, filling the infinite darkness with its rough beauty. Pins and needles seared up my arms; blood leapt into my head, making my knees weak. I staggered

to the floor in a stupor, letting the magisterial chord ring through my bones.

I completely forgot about Ken. I descended into a screaming solo, my fingers skipping joyfully over the strings, taking on a life of their own as they shaped the air with Paganini's screeching. It sent an ache prickling across my back, made old scars sting – the Immunity wasn't total – but it was a bittersweet ache, a hurt born from goodness.

I stopped abruptly. The ghosts of the music faded away, imperceptibly into the ringing in my ears. The amp crackled and buzzed, hungrily awaiting my next move.

But it was done. I'd played enough to tear a small army to shreds. The sweat on my brow turned chill.

I looked up – and gave a screech not unlike Paganini's final note. Ken stood there, unscathed! I looked down at Paganini, and back up again – how could this be? He should be sliced to the marrow, entrails steaming in the cool air. But no – his body had held firm

against Paganini's strings. How? There were two other people with Immunity in Urbania, and Ken wasn't one of them.

Ken raised his hands, and brought them together into a slow, sardonic applause.

Clap. Clap. Clap. Each felt like a slap in the face.

"Not bad," he remarked matter-of-factly, "A few bum notes halfway through, but you covered them up nicely. One of yours?"

I swallowed, wetting my throat, but I said nothing. Had I not played enough? I usually lost track of time as I played – but no; the opening chord alone should've been enough to carve him up. *Should've* been.

"Who...are you?" I managed at last. I barely heard myself.

Ken's lips curled. He glanced at his watch, then raised three fingers.

Two.

One.

A crash erupted nearby. He didn't turn, merely gave a nod.

"This is your end, Ken!" a husky boom.

Ken clicked his fingers. A second spotlight flickered on, just behind him. A vast drum kit, with twenty drums and as many cymbals. A vast man towered over it all. He raised his drumsticks, drowned in the size of his fists – then hesitated, his beady eyes locked onto mine. A knot twisted in my stomach.

“Herrick?” he said, pulling a frown that made him look like a gorilla.

“Dermon,” I said with a steely respect. The Skinslammer. The ghettos and inner city wastelands of Urbania were his domain, and ruled over them with the Oscibird skins of his drums and the cymbals made of a similar alloy. The heart of the city was mine. We didn’t like each other – after all, if one of us didn’t exist the other would have twice the work, be twice as rich and notorious – but we held each other in grim esteem, like business rivals. We stuck to our territories, knew the consequences if we didn’t.

“Ah, you know each other!” said Ken, giving a devilish smile to each of us, “Good. Yes, it will make everything much easier.”

What happened next seemed to catch Ken off guard. Footsteps. Running towards him from the left. He snapped his fingers again, and another spotlight blazed. For a second it was empty – then she ran into it. Mephista, the Bassassin . Her territories were the leafy suburbs miles out, towards the hills. What were she and Dermon doing here? This was my job! We were on neutral grounds, but barely.

Mephista snapped her slick bass and amp into place, and threw her thick dreadlocks out of her opal eyes, staring at Ken. She didn't appear to notice myself or Dermon.

“You're *mine*, boy!” she hissed, and she plunged headlong into a bass riff, throwing her dreadlocks back and forth as she clawed at the red strings.

Not wanting to miss his chance, Dermon bashed furiously against the drums, the crisp smash of cymbals spiking the hairs on my neck. My muscles ached again.

Well, I wasn't just going to stand there whilst the other two went for the kill. I let loose with a delicious solo. Over my own rhythm I heard the

bass and drums. We made a vast, messy wall of noise; terrifying, shapeless, in no way cohesive. We played enough to rip apart the entirety of Urbania thrice over, until we crumpled, exhausted.

I looked up. Ken was gone. Not dead, with his guts splayed across the floor as he should be; just gone. The spotlight where he stood was empty.

“Here,” he whispered.

As one, Dermon, Mephista and I wheeled around to face the far wall as it lit up, revealing a mountain of an organ reaching for the shadows and rafters. Ken stood at the keyboard. He flashed us a grin, laid his spidery hands across the keys and pressed down.

The first thing I did was to clutch my skull in both hands, for it felt ready to split open.

“Herrick!” Ken thundered over the hellish roar, “Dermon! Mephista! It’s time you three stepped down!”

Then it stopped, quite suddenly. The sound resounded in my head like a gunshot. My whole being was on fire.

Ken was still talking, though it sounded like he spoke from a floor above. He grabbed me by the lapels of my coat and pulled me up.

“You were all too proud, too complacent to realise,” he spat, “Immunity to the Oscibird’s qualities aren’t just blood-rights. If you’re willing to shed time, tears and blood, it can be earned.”

I gulped down the acrid taste of my own blood. No...it wasn’t possible...

“Now I am stronger than the three of you put together!” he laughed, dropping me to the floor. “But I didn’t stop there; I researched the Oscibird’s guts and skins, learned about how it vibrates at the frequency of human flesh, causing it to tear as an opera singer can smash glass. I enhanced those qualities, enough to rip right through your so-called Immunity.”

“I called you all here; I am your contracted employee. When I finish you off, the whole of Urbania will be at my mercy!”

He moved back to the organ. I had to act. One more note of that thing would be the end of me.

But what could I do? I had no further tricks up my sleeve.

I looked across, and saw Dermon and Mephista thinking the same thing, their bloodied and bruised eyes filled with dread as Ken stepped back up to the organ.

We met each others eyes, and knew what must be done. It was worth a try. We loathed to do it, but had no other options left beyond death...

Ken lowered himself onto the bench. He clicked his neck and cracked his knuckles, laid his hands on the keys – music met his ears. But he hadn't pressed a key yet. He swivelled around. To his amusement, he watched the three mercenaries, barely conscious, playing out another tune. Ken chuckled.

“It's hopeless!” he laughed, “You can't –”

A cut tore across his shoulder. He looked up again. They were playing simultaneously, but in tune with each other. It was the simplest of

jams; Mephista and Herrick played basic chords and solos whilst Dermon knocked out a drum beat an amateur would snort at. So where did that power come from? He wheeled back to the organ and slammed his fingers to the bone-white keys. The mercenaries crumpled to their knees, but kept on stubbornly playing away.

Snap. Ken's fingernails shattered.

He screamed, threw himself backwards as though electrocuted, and stumbled to the floor. Dermon rounded off a drum break. A blow struck Ken across the head like a hammer, hurling phlegm and blood from his lips.

“Stop!” Ken pleaded, lurching towards them like a zombie. The band intensified their playing, tripping over each other in their efforts to throw in signature moves, but they held it together. Ken screwed up his face in one final effort, and leapt at Herrick Stringlayer.

Hands slick with sweat, I aimed Paganini's machine head at Ken's chest. I threw a glance at Dermon and Mephista, and they understood: they brought their play to an abrupt end, let a

silence linger as Ken launched toward me. As his torn shirt touched the tip, I struck; a straight and true C Major rung out, throwing him backwards across the room, plunging into darkness. We heard him slap across the floor, heard him slide, and squeak to a halt in a lone spotlight, a blazing wreck. Smoke and steam hissed from the tips of his hair.

My arms slapped down to my sides, exhausted. I heard Dermon's drumsticks clatter to the ground, heard Mephista give a vast sigh.

We walked over to him, trying in vain to keep steady postures. I felt as though an entire hive of wasps had had their way with me. I couldn't even flex my fingers.

We stood over him, and I kicked him over, onto his back. Ken coughed, retched. We jumped back. Still alive! But barely.

"Idiots," he croaked, "Do you think I'm the only one? There will be others. You can't hold out forever."

I managed a pained smile: "Until then."

I looked up at Mephista and Dermon.

“We know what to do,” I said, handing them an Oscibird feather each. They nodded; “But no-one must know.”

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“For readers and writers everywhere.” **Grant Ekelund**

“LOL IDK THANKS” – **Peter Frazer**

“Cat. I'm a kitty cat. And I dance, dance, dance and I dance, dance, dance.” – **Ms. Annie Nohn**

“Check me out - my name is in this awesome book!”
– **Keith Hall**

“When I read about a man turned in to a cat I knew I had to back it.” – **Andreas Gustafsson**

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