

After Sunset: The Right Choice?

Leafpool emerged from the trees and padded up the slope to the place where she could look out over the whole lake. She had left Brightheart watching Firestar while he slept; the ThunderClan leader hadn't lost a life in the fox trap, but his neck was bruised and he wouldn't be able to eat or speak for a while. Leafpool shuddered, remembering the sight of him lying so still with the trap clutched around his neck and a trail of blood leading away from his body - all the way down to the lake, where Hawkfrost lay half in, half out of the water with scarlet waves lapping at his fur.

Before there is peace, blood will spill blood...

The prophecy had come true: Brambleclaw had killed his half brother, Hawkfrost, to save Firestar. Leafpool shook her head. StarClan may have sent her a dream of brambles with claws protectively circling the hollow, but she had felt nothing but fear when she heard Firestar name Brambleclaw as his deputy. And her first thought when she saw Firestar's body slumped beside the trap was: Brambleclaw did this.

She reached the top of the hill and stopped dead in surprise. A cat was sitting with his back to her, his head lowered and his shoulders hunched as if the lake was painful to look at.

"Brambleclaw?"

Brambleclaw's head shot up and he looked around. "Leafpool. I didn't expect to see you here." His voice was flat and his amber eyes were clouded.

"I... I often come up here to admire the lake," Leafpool meowed. Her heart was thudding in her chest and she told herself to stop being such a mouse-brain: Brambleclaw had killed his own kin to save Firestar. There was no reason to be scared of him.

Brambleclaw stood up. "I won't disturb you. Squirrelflight is probably wondering where I am anyway."

"No, stay," Leafpool told him. "There's plenty of room." She swept her tail to indicate the open stretch of grass that turned into WindClan territory where the ground began to slope down before rising up again to a longer, flatter ridge.

Brambleclaw nodded and sat down. Almost at once his shoulders hunched and he closed his eyes.

"Is everything all right?" Leafpool questioned. She couldn't ignore how dejected he looked. "Is it Hawkfrost?" It made sense that Brambleclaw would grieve for his kin, no matter how he had died.

"No," Brambleclaw meowed without looking up. "It's me."

Leafpool sat down, easing her growing belly to one side until she was comfortable. Oh, my precious kits, what will happen when you arrive? She pushed the thought away; there was time enough to worry about that.

"You can talk to me, you know," she told Brambleclaw. "I'm your medicine cat. It goes with the job."

"But if you weren't medicine cat, you wouldn't have anything to do with me, would you?" Brambleclaw flashed back at her. "Admit it, Leafpool, you don't trust me any more than the rest of ThunderClan, and you wish Firestar had never made me deputy."

Leafpool bristled. "If you recall, it was my dream from StarClan that reassured Firestar you were the right choice!"

Glowing amber eyes burned into hers. "I bet you wish you'd never closed your eyes."

Leafpool took a deep breath. "I don't have to trust you, Brambleclaw. StarClan approves of you, and my sister loves you. I just hope you don't do anything to let either of them down."

Brambleclaw looked at the ground. "Then what about today? That was all my fault."

"What?" Leafpool was shocked. "How can you say that? You saved Firestar!"

"I had to kill my own brother. My first day as Clan deputy, and I had to take another cat's life. What kind of beginning is that?"

"An unlucky one," Leafpool conceded. "But you're a hero in the eyes of the Clan now."

Brambleclaw raised his gaze to her. "Really? Or do they think I'm bad luck because I haven't had an apprentice?"

Leafpool flinched. Brambleclaw was right: Many cats were anxious that Firestar had gone against the warrior code by appointing a deputy who hadn't been a mentor. And she shared their fears. Was today's violence and bloodshed a warning that the code should not have been broken? But if StarClan didn't approve, why send her the sign that sealed Brambleclaw as Firestar's choice? She shook her head, trying to clear it.

"I can try as hard as I like, but I'll never do anything right," Brambleclaw growled, and Leafpool was startled by the bitterness in his voice. "I will bring nothing but trouble to ThunderClan because I was made deputy when I shouldn't have been. My Clanmates didn't trust me before: Now they will blame me for everything that goes wrong, every drop of blood that is lost. Whatever I do, I will destroy my own Clan from within."

The blood roared in Leafpool's ears, and her eyes were dazzled by the red glow of the setting sun as it turned the lake crimson. Brambleclaw's words didn't sound like a threat: They sounded like a prophecy.