

BRAVELANDS



CODE OF HONOR

BRAVELANDS

Book One: Broken Pride

Book Two: Code of Honor

ALSO BY ERIN HUNTER

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BRAVELANDS



CODE OF HONOR

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER

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First Edition

BRAVELANDS



CODE OF HONOR



PROLOGUE

A thin golden glow edged the horizon to the east, bringing the first daylight to the savannah and revealing the flat-topped acacias that dotted the grassland. Another beautiful day, thought Babble the oxpecker: another delicious breakfast. He stretched, preened under a wing, then pecked a fat tick from the hide of the rhino he rode.

This rhinoceros was a talker. He had been arguing with the other members of his crash since before dawn broke. Babble couldn't understand a word of their strange, ground-plodder language, but the conversation sounded urgent, agitated, and more than a little aggressive.

Babble raised his head and blinked. "Chatter?"

"Wait," came a muffled voice. All that was visible of Chatter was his tail; the rest of him was deep in the rhino's flickering ear. His tail wagged, and he popped out, gulping

down whatever parasite he'd been digging for. "What is it?"

"I just wondered where you were," Babble replied. "Is there anything else tasty in that ear? What do you think these rhinos are talking about?"

"No idea. I don't speak Grasstongue any more than you do." Chatter fluttered down the rhino's broad neck. "I think I got the last tick, but you're bound to find something in his other ear."

Babble hopped past him, up to the rhino's head. "I wish they'd stop all the horn-tossing and head-shaking," he complained. "It's not very calming. Or easy."

"It's a nuisance, but you know what old Prattle says," Chatter told him, poking under a flap of leathery skin. "*Don't worry about today, because tomorrow there'll still be insects.*"

"Well, I wish Prattle would have a word with these rhinos," sighed Babble. "They seem very wound up about something. They could learn a thing or two from us oxpeckers."

"They certainly—oh!" Chatter peered up as the call of a gray crowned crane echoed above them.

The bird soared on vast white-and-black wings, shrieking in penetrating Skytongue: "Great Flock! Great Flock!" He angled his head, staring down at the two friends. "Great Flock!"

As the oxpeckers gazed up in awe, the crane circled and flapped away in the direction of the sunrise. Distantly, they heard him calling the same words over and over, to other birds on the ground and in the trees.

"Great Flock!" chirped Babble in delight.

Chatter blinked his round yellow eyes. "I've never been

summoned to a Great Flock before. This is exciting!”

“Me neither,” said Babble. “I’ve been hearing stories about Great Flocks since I came out of the egg, but I’ve never been to one.”

“Let’s go, then!” Chatter darted his red beak at a last insect and took off.

Babble fluttered after him. The sun was rising above the horizon now, a half circle of dazzling gold, and the sky was a cool, clear blue that was filling with birds. Crows took off cawing from their rot-flesh feasts, egrets rose in a white-winged mass, and a flock of blue starlings erupted from a thorn tree. A pair of bright green-and-yellow bee-eaters zipped past Babble, almost touching his wing.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” he chirruped, but he was too excited to be cross. The sky was growing dark with birds; many more were silhouetted against the glow of the rising sun.

“I wonder why a Great Flock’s been called?” exclaimed Chatter.

A shadow raced over them from high above. A great white-backed vulture circled there; the gathered birds rose to swoop and flap around her, their cries hushed to an expectant twittering. A whole flock of vultures flew in the huge bird’s wake, soaring on vast black wings.

“Isn’t that Windrider?” whispered Babble. “The old vulture who speaks with Great Mother?”

“I think so.” Chatter fluttered, watching her in awe.

The strange quietness was pierced by Windrider’s harsh, eerie cry.

“I bring terrible news, birds of Bravelands. Great Mother is dead.”

Screeches and chirrup of horror rose throughout the sky. Crows gave rasping caws of shock, and the mournful hooting of cranes mingled with a burst of disbelieving chittering from the starlings.

“No!” Chatter cried at Babble’s side. “This is terrible news!”

Babble was stunned. “No wonder the rhinos were upset. They must have known already!”

“*Follow me.*” Windrider’s command silenced the hubbub once more.

No bird argued; the flocks swooped and fluttered into a rough formation behind the vulture, and together the vast horde soared over the savannah, the sun gleaming and glinting on thousands of wings. The riot of colors dazzled Babble.

I wish the Great Flock could have been called for a happier reason, he thought.

Already he could see where Windrider was leading them; ahead and below, a large watering hole sparkled and glinted in the dawn. It was not the peaceful, happy place it should have been. Herds of grass-eaters milled and jostled on its banks, braying and bellowing in distress. As the birds flew lower, Babble saw a great stain on the water; something huge lay half submerged in the lake.

Great Mother.

Babble had never seen the wise old elephant before; now he wished he could never have seen her at all, if it had to be like this. She lay lifeless, torn by wounds that were dark with

blood. Other elephants surrounded her, pushing desperately at her body; their enormous feet churned the bloodstained water as they struggled to get her to shore.

One of the elephants stood aside, though, staring at Great Mother. She looked young, thought Babble—smaller than the others, her legs trembling with shock. As he swooped lower he could see her huge dark eyes: filled with grief, but oddly wise for such a youngster.

The young elephant stood as if rooted to the mud, while around her grass-eaters trumpeted and bellowed, rearing up and stampeding. Zebras and wildebeests trotted to the shore, gaping at Great Mother's corpse, then surged away in a thundering, panicked mass. The squeals of smaller animals rose, then were cut off abruptly as they were trampled underfoot.

Yet the young elephant stood unmoving. She seemed transfixed by the horror of the body.

Every bird was landing now, finding perches on trees and rocks and grassy slopes. The banks of the lake became a flurry of wings as they settled, but there was no clamor of calls; only an eerie, mournful silence. Windrider and her vultures gathered on the body of Great Mother itself, wings raised as if to protect her.

"This," Windrider cried harshly into the stillness, "this is only the beginning of the turmoil that will come to Bravelands!"

She opened her beak to speak more, but a deafening crack of thunder split the sky. It crashed across the watering hole, rolling and resounding. Every creature froze in shock; Babble

hunched his head into his wings, terrified.

The sky was no longer clear and dawn-blue; it had been blotted out by a dark bank of cloud. Rain exploded, hammering down on the gathered creatures of Bravelands. Babble's feathers were instantly drenched and sodden.

He stared at Chatter as rain streamed from their beaks and tails and wings. His friend looked as scared as he was.

"The Great Spirit is angry," moaned Chatter, "because Great Mother is dead!"

Babble tried to shake rain from his wings, then gave up and squatted miserably, enduring the onslaught of the torrent.

"Perhaps Prattle was wrong," he whispered. "Perhaps tomorrow won't come after all. . . ."



CHAPTER 1

This rain was the hardest he'd ever known. Thorn staggered away from the watering hole, his paws clumsy in the thick mud, his fur sodden and dripping. He could barely see for the water that streamed down his forehead into his eyes; frantically he wiped it away, over and over again. Even his nostrils were full of it.

What happened? What happened?

Great Mother died. That was what had happened. But it didn't matter how often he told himself; it still seemed unreal. *How? Why?*

It didn't matter; the Great Parent of Bravelands was dead, and she couldn't help Thorn now.

He'd gone to the watering hole to ask for her advice, her assistance, her wisdom—and because there was no other creature who could help him. Great Mother would have known

how to deal with Stinger Crownleaf, he was sure. The enormity of Stinger's crimes was more than any ordinary creature could comprehend. The devious baboon had murdered Bark Crownleaf, smashing her skull with a rock. He had poisoned Bark's successor, Grub, with scorpion venom—clearing the way for Stinger himself to lead Brightforest Troop.

But when Thorn had confronted him, filled with righteous rage, Stinger had only laughed. His smirk still haunted Thorn, along with his certainty that he wouldn't be brought to justice.

Do you see how far I will go to protect Brightforest Troop?

Do you see how far I will go . . . ?

Thorn had known exactly what Stinger meant: he'd have no hesitation in killing Thorn, should he try to expose him to the troop. Thorn had had one chance to stop Stinger—one single place to look for help.

Now Great Mother was dead. And Thorn was utterly alone.

Dusk was a miserable, gray fading of the daylight; there was no sunset, no golden rays to stream through the branches of Tall Trees. Thorn crouched on the sodden earth of the Council Glade, mud soaking into his fur as if it were forming a second skin. All of Brightforest Troop was gathered before the Crown Stone; facing them were the Council members and their retainers, who flanked the broad, pale stone itself. Every baboon, from infant to aged councilor, looked drenched and dejected—except for Stinger Crownleaf. He couldn't stop the

rain, and he no doubt wasn't pleased about his wet fur, but at least he had the Crown Stone to perch on.

"What do you think will happen, Thorn?" whispered Mud Lowleaf.

Thorn squeezed his shoulder. His best friend had always been small, but with his fur soaked through to his hide, he looked scrawnier than ever. "I don't know, Mud," he murmured. "Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"I welcome you all." Stinger's commanding voice drew everyone's attention. As the anxious chatter died away, he gazed around his troop with stern solemnity. "As you know, I would usually meet here only with my councilors, but the events Bravelands has witnessed today are unprecedented. Never—in all the history of these lands—has a Great Parent been murdered." Stinger raised his eyes to the sky and closed them, as if seeking aid from the Great Spirit itself. "Together we must discuss what it means for us—for *all* of Brightforest Troop."

Every baboon craned forward, eager for Stinger's advice and wisdom. There was anxiety in their eyes, but also respect, and trust. Thorn's spine felt cold. *Just a day ago, I'd have looked at him like that.*

"Mango!" called Stinger, gesturing with a long-fingered paw. "You have been scouting for news. Tell us what you have discovered."

Mango Highleaf splashed forward through the mud and cleared her throat. "My Crownleaf, no one knows for sure what happened. But many animals say that the crocodiles

killed Great Mother. The brutes' tooth marks are on her body."

"That's appalling!" cried Moss Middleleaf.

"Those savages!" exclaimed Petal Goodleaf, her voice breaking with emotion.

Stinger spread his paws. "What do we expect of creatures who do not even follow the Great Parent?"

"They don't even follow the *Code!*" shouted Splinter Middleleaf angrily. "*Only kill to survive*; why, we learn it as infants on our mothers' bellies!"

Beetle Highleaf shuffled forward from the ranks of councilors. He was old and gnarled, and he had a whiff of fermented fruit about him, but all the baboons fell respectfully quiet as he spoke. "I have heard," he said in his querulous voice, "that many died in the stampede at the watering hole. Such panic was perhaps to be expected—but it will almost certainly spread, rather than lessen."

Stinger nodded thoughtfully. "The creatures of Bravelands have no guidance," he murmured.

"And no one knows who the new Great Parent is," pointed out Mango. "Great Mother did not have time to pass the Great Spirit to her successor, and that's never happened before. What shall we do?"

Moss piped up in a small, scared voice. "Maybe the Great Spirit died with her."

There was uproar. Baboons hooted in horror, others pounded the muddy ground, and babies began to wail.

"Quiet, quiet!" Stinger slapped the Crown Stone and rose

to his paws. “My troop! Other animals may panic like disturbed ants, but we are *baboons*! We will stay calm, and keep our dignity!”

The hubbub faded. Mothers hushed their babies, and Moss, looking shamefaced, muttered, “Sorry, Stinger.”

Stinger turned to the baboon closest to him: Mud’s mother. “What does our Starleaf say? What do the Moonstones tell her?”

Starleaf’s white-streaked face was gentle and serene. Even Thorn felt calmer as she methodically laid the Moonstones before her. Each was a pebble of a different color: some were bright blue or green or orange; some were translucent, and sparkled even in the dim light; others were smooth and opaque. One was a broken shard of stone, its hollow insides revealing glittering crystals. One by one Starleaf held the stones up to examine them, her face creased in concentration.

At last she looked up, unsmiling—but then she never did smile when she was reading the Moonstones. Thorn shot an anxious glance at Mud, who nodded confidently.

“Stinger is right to call for calm,” declared Starleaf. “The Great Spirit will find the new Great Parent—of that, the stones are certain.”

“Well, that’s good news,” grunted Mango.

“But what if it’s an animal that’s unfavorable to us?” asked Bud Middleleaf nervously. “What if it’s, say, a cheetah?”

“Or a hyena,” squeaked Moss.

Starleaf gave her a kind but stern look. “The Great Spirit always chooses wisely.”

“That’s all very well,” said Beetle, “but I must say, every animal has its prejudices, and . . .”

As the discussion turned to the merits of various potential Great Parents, Thorn stopped listening. Berry Highleaf was sitting close to her father, Stinger, and she had said nothing so far. She listened to the speakers with an expression of vague concern, but mostly she seemed sad and hurt. *And I know why*, thought Thorn, with a wrench of guilty misery.

He felt dreadful for wounding her feelings so badly the previous night. If only she knew why he had really done it. When Thorn had told her they should stop seeing each other, it wasn’t because he wanted it that way. *I did it to protect you, Berry.*

But to do that, to keep her safe, Thorn had had to pretend the reason was their different ranks. He’d told her they couldn’t disobey the troop’s rules anymore; they must respect the laws and traditions that said Highleaves could never pair with Middleleaves.

Berry must have despised him for saying it, but he’d had no choice. Thorn was all too aware of what Stinger could do. If he found out that his daughter was involved with the one baboon who knew his secrets, or if Thorn accidentally let slip part of the truth, then Berry would be in terrible danger. Stinger might love his daughter, but he loved himself even more.

“Thorn,” whispered Mud, “what’s happened between you two? Berry hasn’t spoken to you since you got back.”

“It’s nothing.” Thorn shook himself, annoyed that he’d been staring so obviously at Berry.

"It's my fault, isn't it?" Mud rubbed his head and groaned. "You've fallen out because of me. You'd be a Highleaf right now if I hadn't beaten you in the Three Feats duel."

"No," Thorn said firmly. "Really, Mud, it's not that."

"Because I feel bad, and—"

"Hah. No need to feel bad!" A voice interrupted Mud, rather to Thorn's relief. He turned to see Grass Highleaf. The tall baboon was chewing on his usual grass stalk, eyeing Mud with amused disdain. His skinny friend Fly wore a cruel, chip-toothed grin. Along with Thorn, both had been part of Stinger's retinue when he was merely Stinger Highleaf, Council member.

"Yeah, don't feel bad, Mud," sneered Fly. "You didn't beat Thorn—he threw the fight to let you win."

"It was so obvious." Grass grinned.

"Don't talk hyena droppings," snapped Thorn, with a quick glance at Mud's shocked face. "Mud, don't listen to them. You won fair and square."

Fly giggled. "Thorn-y subject?"

Grass hooted and slapped his leg. Thorn glared at the pair of them. The fact was, they were telling the truth. He *had* thrown the fight. If Mud had lost his final Feat, he'd have been condemned to stay a Deeproot all his life—and that meant a miserable life of cleaning the camp and taking orders from the rest of the troop.

But there was no way Mud could ever know this.

"Get lost, you dung-stirrers!" he snarled at the grinning pair.

“Who’s going to make us—yo— Ow!” Grass clutched his head and staggered back. An unripe mango had struck him right on the forehead.

Thorn gaped for a moment. Then another piece of fruit zinged through the air; suddenly the grove was full of flying missiles, striking baboons and trees indiscriminately.

Thorn leaped to his feet with the others. Their mysterious attackers were nowhere in sight, but branches swayed and creaked and rattled. Thorn drew back his muzzle and snarled.

“I smell monkeys!” shrieked Mud.

The baboons erupted in howls of anger. “Monkeys!” echoed Mango.

“There!” yelled Thorn. “In the bushes!”

Fang snarled with fury. “Those little— There’s a whole gang of them!”

The monkeys bolted, hollering and screeching. Greenish-brown pelts, black faces fringed with white fur—Thorn recognized them at once.

“It’s the same troop of vervets who attacked us before!” he shouted.

Stinger bounded down from the Crown Stone, enraged.

“Don’t let them get away,” he screeched. “Highleaves—no, everyone—*after them!*”



CHAPTER 2

Thorn sprinted after the monkeys, Mud hard at his heels. Branches sprang and showers of rainwater scattered as the whole troop pursued the intruders; every baboon had obeyed Stinger's command, except for the very elderly and the mothers with babies at their bellies. From the glade, old Beetle Highleaf screeched his encouragement: "Teach them a lesson, Bright-forest Troop!"

Stinger led the way, bounding nimbly through the foliage. As he ran he hooted orders: "Grass—circle to the left! Fang, you go right with the Middleleaves. We'll cut those monkeys off!"

Baboons obeyed him, two groups peeling away to follow Grass and Fang. Thorn didn't veer off; he kept determinedly after Stinger with the main body of the assault. Berry was at her father's side, and he didn't want to lose sight of her.

She vaulted over a half-fallen trunk and leaped for the ground. Just as she touched down she glanced over her shoulder, right at Thorn. His breath caught in his throat.

Berry didn't look hostile or resentful. All he could see in her dark gaze was relief that Thorn was still behind her, still unhurt. His heart turned over.

But there was no time to stop. The noise of the monkeys seemed more distant now; through the gray mist of rain he could see an occasional tail, or a lithe shadow leaping, but the baboons weren't gaining any ground.

Thorn raked the forest with his gaze as he ran. It might be his imagination, but there seemed to be fewer monkeys now. They were splitting up, he realized, darting off at angles, hurtling into trees and scrambling toward the canopy. High above and far ahead, he could make out branches swaying wildly, leaves thrashing. *They're scattering*, he thought. *We're losing them.*

The chase carried the baboons out of the trees and onto the broad stretch of grassland beyond. Without the shelter of the forest, the rain lashed down harder than ever; the baboons' pounding paws threw up showers of mud. The monkeys were nowhere in sight, and at last Stinger skidded to a halt in a fan of water.

"Stop!" he barked.

The rest of the troop trotted to a halt, with Grass's and Fang's groups racing to join them. Stinger reared onto his hind legs and sniffed the air, his nostrils flaring wide, snout peeling back from his fangs.

He spat in anger. "The scent's lost."

At once baboons began to sniff the ground, running back and forth. But it was no use; whatever scent the monkeys had left, it had been washed away already in the torrential downpour. All they were getting for their trouble was rain in their noses. Thorn sneezed it out.

“All right, forget it.” Stinger called them back, his snout twisted with disgust. “We’ll catch those monkeys another time, and show them who owns Tall Trees. Back to the glade.”

The trek back was a much more morose affair. Every baboon’s fur was sodden and filthy with mud, and their tired paws slipped and skidded on the treacherous ground. Thunder crashed overhead, and lightning crackled to earth; rivulets of water streamed through the grass.

“The Great Spirit’s angry, I think,” murmured Mud, shaking red sludge from his paws. “About what happened to Great Mother.”

Thorn shivered. As he glanced at the sky, a paw touched his shoulder. He turned, surprised.

“Berry,” he said hoarsely.

“Thorn.” Her large brown eyes were steady and concerned. “Are you managing in this mire?”

“Excuse me, I—” babbled Mud. “I’ll just—go and check with Grass that . . . um . . . something.” He loped away as fast as he could in the sticky terrain.

Thorn watched him with a sinking heart. *I kind of wish he’d stayed.*

He didn’t know what to say to Berry. Did he have to go through it again, his awful decision from last night? Yet hope

surged inside him, too: he couldn't help wanting to hear her say, *I still want to be with you, Thorn.*

"What's wrong, Thorn?" Berry's voice was gentle as ever. "You've looked so worried all day. I noticed at the meeting you were on edge."

"I . . ." Thorn licked his jaws. "I'm just . . . shocked about Great Mother. It's a lot to take in."

"Not that." Berry shook her head. "There's something else, isn't there?"

For a horrible moment, Thorn was afraid that she could read his mind. *No. She mustn't find out about Stinger!* "Berry, Bravelands is in uproar, and nothing's certain anymore. Of course everyone's stunned. I'm just upset is all."

"I know you better than that, Thorn." Berry sighed. She stood so close, he could have reached out and embraced her. "Listen, Thorn, you *mustn't* worry. We'll be all right, don't you see? My father's in charge now. You know how wise and clever he is. He'll take care of us. He'll get Brightforest Troop through this awful time."

Thorn gaped at her. "You really think so?" he retorted. The words spilled out before he could check himself. "You don't know what—"

Berry's eyes had widened. Thorn drew a breath.

"You don't know anything about me anymore," he finished. He was shocked by how cold he sounded.

She blinked and half crouched, her gaze veering away. When she finally spoke, her voice was cool and abrupt: "Fine."

She loped away through the rain to join the others. Thorn

stared after her, his heart wrenching painfully in his chest.

I had to say it. I couldn't tell her!

Miserably he trailed at the rear, his paws heavier than ever in the mud. Ahead, Tall Trees was a dark, drooping lump, as if the whole forest was sagging under the weight of the downpour. It looked exactly how Thorn felt. Far ahead, in the undergrowth, he could hear the leaders crying out, letting the ones who had stayed behind know that the fighters had returned.

Sunk in misery, it took him long moments to realize that they were not hoots of greeting, but of surprise and anger. Some sort of commotion was breaking out ahead.

What now? Thorn sprang into a run.

When he burst into the central clearing, the rest of the fighting party was standing immobile, gaping in shock. Thorn came to a halt beside them, his eyes widening.

The clearing was wrecked, devastated. Fruits had been ripped from the trees and flung to the ground, smashed and trampled. Broken and torn branches hung half loose; twigs and leaves were strewn everywhere. Dung had been smeared on tree trunks, all across the grass, and, worst of all, on the Crown Stone.

At the far side of the glade huddled the baboons who had remained behind. They trembled with terror; mothers clutched wailing infants, and others curled on the ground, whimpering. Many were wounded, with vicious claw marks and bites still leaking blood. Beetle squatted in front of them all, cradling the limp body of another old baboon.

He raised his old eyes, bright with grief. "They killed Fig."

Stinger stalked forward, his fur bristling with rage. He rose onto his hind legs, staring around the glade. "*What. Happened. Here?*"

"It was—it was all a trick." Beetle's voice was fainter and hoarser than ever. "Crownleaf, they lured the fighters away, and they . . . the monkeys came back."

A low, steady snarl was rumbling in Stinger's throat, but he stayed very still. The fighters bounded forward, exclaiming in horror and outrage, crouching over the wounded, cursing with fury at the treachery of the monkeys.

Thorn turned to Mud, who had crept to his side. "Mud, this is terrible," he whispered. "No monkey would have dared do this while Great Mother was alive."

"No," agreed Mud, trembling. "Bravelands misses the Great Spirit already."

Stinger had dropped to all fours and was stalking toward the Crown Stone. He halted right in front of it and flicked a contemptuous paw at the streaks of dung that disfigured it. Then he turned to face the troop.

"Brightforest Troop. This place is defiled." He curled his snout, baring his fangs. "We will find a new home, a better home."

There were murmurs of anxiety and a few uncertain whimpers.

"Courage!" Stinger raised his voice, and the baboons fell silent. "Brightforest Troop will never be crushed! We will rise

from this stronger than ever, my friends. And *when we do*—when we do—those sniveling, treacherous monkeys will feel our wrath. They sought to destroy us, did they? My troop, we will visit destruction on *them*.”

The baboons erupted, all their fear seemingly forgotten. Grinning, whooping, they sprang up and down, beating the ground with their paws. Stinger simply nodded, accepting their hollers of adulation.

Thorn could only watch, unease rippling under his pelt. *How good he is at manipulating them*, he thought. Stinger controlled the troop like a lioness steering her tiny cubs.

“My troop!” Stinger held out his forepaws and gestured for quiet. “We need to take steps to protect ourselves during this time of change, and that must begin right now. And so I propose to set up a brand-new rank for trusted, loyal baboons. That new rank will be called *Strongbranches*.”

The gathered baboons murmured in awed curiosity. “How wise he is,” whispered Fang, near to Thorn.

“Any baboon may apply to become a Strongbranch,” Stinger went on. “From Deeprout to Highleaf, all baboons will now have a new, exciting chance to rise in the hierarchy of our troop. All that will be required is that you pass a Strongfeat: one single test that I myself will set for you. There is new opportunity for all in Brightforest Troop!”

The murmurs of excitement rose to squeals and hoots and cheers. Thorn shot a glance around the troop: yes, the baboons who were most visibly inspired were the Deeprouts.

All their lives, since failing to pass the strict Three Feats challenge, they had resigned themselves to service and drudgery. *And now Stinger has given them hope of power and success. They'll do anything for him.*

Thorn chewed his lip. He had to admit it: Stinger was indeed a very clever baboon. But he, too, felt hope thrill through him.

If I become a Strongbranch, I can get close to Stinger. And then he could find evidence of his crimes and expose him to the troop. . . . “Mud,” Thorn said out loud.

“What?” Mud was still gazing, enchanted, at Stinger. His dark eyes sparkled with admiration.

“Mud, listen. I’m going to apply to be a Strongbranch.”

“You are?” Mud turned, startled. “Thorn, I think that’s a really good idea. You’re fast and strong enough—and it may help you and Berry to be together!”

Thorn did not comment on that, though his heartbeat quickened. He simply nodded, then padded alongside Mud as the troop began to make its way out of Tall Trees. Darkness had fallen completely, and crickets and tree frogs chirped around them, the sound loud enough to drown out even the splashing steps of baboons on the move. Right at the front walked Stinger, his head and tail high and proud.

Thorn broke into a lope to catch up. Stinger was talking to no one; he was a picture of courageous nobility as he led his troop to a new life.

Thorn felt as if he might be sick. He slowed a little, staying

a respectful couple of paces behind his Crownleaf.

Stinger glanced back and raised his brows. “Ah, Thorn Middleleaf.” His mouth twitched. “You want to join the Strongbranches, don’t you?”

Taken aback, Thorn nodded; then again, more eagerly. “Yes, Stinger.”

“I’m not surprised.” Stinger strode on, and Thorn had to hurry to keep up.

“How—what do you mean?” asked Thorn, edgily.

“Ah, Thorn. You remind me so much of myself,” Stinger murmured. The gap between them and the rest of the troop had widened, and oddly, he seemed happy to chat. “So keen, so strong and ambitious to do well. You want to be at the center of the action, just like I always did.”

“I . . . I’m flattered,” mumbled Thorn, uneasy at Stinger’s geniality. *I threatened to expose him! Why is he being so friendly?*

“You *should* be flattered.” Stinger grinned. “I’m glad you’re keen to be a Strongbranch, Thorn. I can use a clever baboon like you.”

“That’s . . . good,” rasped Thorn. He was growing more nervous every moment. It occurred to him that Stinger might want to keep him close, just as much as he wanted to keep an eye on Stinger. . . .

“Anyway, when the right opportunity arises, I’ll set you a Strongfeat.” Turning, Stinger gazed into Thorn’s eyes; his own glinted with a dark intelligence. “You’ll prove yourself, Thorn. Don’t worry about *that*.”

Thorn halted, letting Stinger walk on ahead into the night. He swallowed hard and gave his fur a shake to stop it crawling.

Why, he wondered, did that sound less like a promise and more like a threat?



CHAPTER 3

Would the Great Spirit ever put an end to this weather? Sky Strider was beginning to think not. Perhaps this is how it will be forever, now. Perhaps the Great Spirit thinks we deserve it.

She could no longer tell if the water that streamed constantly down her face was the Great Spirit's rain from above, or her own tears. Cold, hard drops pattered constantly on Great Mother's body, darkening her wrinkled hide to black. Sky had stayed by her for two days now. She knew that, because she had watched the sun beyond the storm clouds rise and sink, but it seemed so much longer. Surely by now it had been moons, seasons, *years*. Because how could Sky's world have changed so terribly in only two days?

She squeezed her eyes shut. When she did that, she could recall the gentle brush of Great Mother's trunk across her back. She could bring to mind that wise, gentle gaze. Without

the sight of that lifeless body, she could almost feel Great Mother there beside her, full of life and strength and love.

The old matriarch of the Strider family had been Great Mother to all of Bravelands—leader, judge, and wise adviser—but she had been so much more than that to Sky. As her grandmother, she had cared for her ever since Sky’s mother had been killed by lions. Great Mother had always been there, listening and consoling, taking Sky’s opinions seriously, looking after her and loving her. *Just as my mother would have, if she’d lived.*

Sky’s throat constricted with fear and grief. *What am I going to do without her?*

She blinked her eyes open, longing suddenly for the company of her family. The grown ones were not far away; they huddled at the edge of the watering hole, their rumps turned against the lashing rain. Now and again they would reach out to comfort one another in their shared grief.

Occasionally, though, they would turn to stare at her. Rain, the new matriarch, swung her mottled trunk and murmured to Comet. It unnerved Sky.

A small trunk touched her shoulder, and she managed to smile. “Hello, Moon,” she rumbled fondly.

Her little cousin pressed his flank against hers. “Sky, what’re you doing?”

She sighed. “Staying with Great Mother. I don’t want to leave her alone.”

Moon twined his trunk with hers. With a surge of affection, Sky realized he was trying to comfort her, the way she

comforted him when he was hurt or sad.

“I wish the rain would stop,” he mumbled.

Gazing up at the dark, roiling clouds, Sky let the rain lash her face and sting her eyes. “I don’t think we can hope for that any time soon,” she said softly.

“If the sun comes out . . .” Moon hesitated. “Will Great Mother wake up?”

“Oh, Moon.” Sky stroked his trunk with hers. “I’m sorry, but she won’t ever wake up. She’s gone back to the stars.”

Moon gave a small whimper. “Has the Great Spirit gone with her?”

A cold shudder that was nothing to do with the rain rippled through Sky. For a moment she couldn’t answer. Swallowing, she said hoarsely: “I wish I knew.”

Through the gray mist of rain, Sky could make out the next bay of the watering hole, where a herd of zebras paced, still restless from their panic after Great Mother’s death. Their leader, a tall male with swirling stripes, stiffened abruptly and pricked his ears, snorting. At his warning, his herd raised their heads, grunting and whinnying. They were staring at something behind the elephants.

Taking a breath, Sky turned. With a heavy, thundering tread, a pod of some twenty huge, gray-skinned animals were trotting toward the watering hole. Their leader gaped his jaws wide, displaying terrifyingly huge blunt teeth.

Hippos! They were dangerous and hot-tempered; Great Mother had always warned Sky to keep her distance from them.

“Come on, Moon,” she said, and shepherded him gently back to their family.

The grown ones had spotted the hippos too, and as Sky and Moon trotted into their midst, panting with fear, they formed a protective wall with their bodies.

“Stay back, young ones,” said Rain.

The hippos were almost upon them, but as Sky shied in alarm, they pounded on past the elephants. Slowing, they approached Great Mother’s body with grunts of sadness and formed a respectful circle. The obvious leader, a hippo with unusually large ears and a gray-pink face, lowered his broad muzzle to Great Mother’s forehead. His pod watched in silence.

“So it’s true,” he said at last, raising his head. His small eyes glittered with fury. “The grass-eaters were right.” Tipping his head back, he gave a resounding groan; his pod joined in his mourning, their bellowing voices full of rage and sorrow.

“Murdered!” The leader’s roar rose above the others. “The crocodiles *dared* to murder Great Mother!”

Moon clutched Sky’s tail with his trunk. “What are they going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Sky’s heart pounded. Something awful was about to happen, she knew.

The large-eared hippo splashed into the shallows. On the muddy bank of a distant bay sprawled a bask of ten or more crocodiles. One yawned, displaying ferocious teeth, then snapped its jaws shut.

“We’ll show them what happens to Codebreakers,” the

hippo grunted. "I don't care if they don't follow it—they're going to pay for what they've done!"

The hippos surged into the lake, flank muscles rippling, sending up showers of water. Nostrils flaring with angry snorts, they paddled swiftly toward the crocs.

"Sky!" cried Moon. "What're they doing?"

Rain broke from the line of elephants and cantered toward the shore. "Stop!" she trumpeted after the hippos.

Her cry was lost in the rattle of rain on the lake surface, and the hippos took no notice anyway. They were almost at the far bay now, lunging out of the water in a thunder of feet toward the crocodiles. Grinning, some of the crocs darted into the water and slid beneath the surface, but one was slower than the others.

Lifting her long head, twisting to eye the threat, she was too late. The hippo leader was already on her, smashing his huge head into her shoulder. Taken by surprise, she flipped onto her scaly back, exposing her creamy underbelly. She hissed a curse in Sandtongue and writhed to escape, but the hippo lunged and snapped his vast jaws into her belly.

The crocodile flailed her thick tail, making a hideous screaming sound, but the hippo hung grimly on. He heaved backward, staggering almost onto his rump, and dragged her with him beneath the surface.

The lake erupted in a churning froth of foam. The croc's tail surfaced, slashing wildly; then, for a moment, her snapping head was visible too. But when she was hauled under once more, the foaming water turned red. As Sky watched in

horror, the crocodile's twitching corpse floated to the surface, her belly shredded and bloody. Surfacing, the hippo opened his savage jaws and bellowed in victory. His pod took up the cry, their roars resounding across the lake.

At a distance the rest of the doomed croc's bask drifted, staring at the carnage with cold, stunned eyes.

Horrified, Sky shouldered through the grown ones. "It's not right!" she cried. "They're breaking the Code!" Tugging free from Moon's trunk, she bolted for the shore.

"Sky, no!" Comet shouted, but she kept running.

Fired up by their leader's successful kill, the hippos were harrying the rest of the bask. Some of the crocs met the challenge head-on, fearsome jaws gaping in defiance before they dived under; others hauled themselves from the water, racing across the sand on their stumpy legs. From the churning lake came an unearthly shriek, and another limp crocodile corpse drifted to the surface.

"Stop!" Splashing into the water, Sky raised her trunk and blared in horror, "*Stop!*"

The mud beneath her feet was soft and sucking. She wobbled desperately, lurched forward, and suddenly the lake bed was gone. Sky plunged beneath the surface, her gasp of horror stifled by a trunkful of murky lake water. Half-blind and choking, she kicked frantically.

Her feet touched the bottom. Shoving against the yielding mud, she broke into the air once more, gasping and spluttering. The hippos stared at her.

"Great Mother wouldn't want this," she cried to them,

coughing. “She—she always defended the Code.” Her mouth filled with water again and she spat it out, her legs still flailing. “The Code mattered to her more than anything! Please, you must stop!”

“And let these scum get away with killing her?” grunted one of the hippos, jerking its head at the crocs. “Maybe you elephants think that’s okay, but we don’t.”

“Please!” begged Sky, but the hippos twisted in the water, turning their backs on her. The remaining crocodiles were lurching up the muddy bank, scrambling over one another in their dash for safety; the hippos charged in pursuit, thundering up the bank and into the dense foliage beyond. With the battle moving to the land, the lake calmed and stilled quickly, its surface pitted only by the lashing rain. But where hippos and crocodiles had fought, Sky saw a dark stain rise and spread.

Feeling sick, Sky splashed back to the herd. *Is this what life will be like without Great Mother?* Her chest ached with sadness as her family trotted to meet her. She stopped. Their faces held a strange, startled curiosity.

“Was I wrong?” she asked miserably. “I know it was reckless, but I had to try to stop them!”

“No, of course it wasn’t wrong.” Rain exchanged a glance with the others. “That was very brave—Great Mother would have been so proud of you. But, Sky . . .” She took a deep breath. “We need to talk.”

Sky felt a shiver of unease. “What about?”

“Oh, young one.” Rain folded her mottled trunk around

Sky and pulled her close. “I know that your heart is still heavy with grief. All of us miss Great Mother desperately. But we must look to the future.”

Moon wriggled between Sky and his mother Star. “Rain, are you our new Great Mother?”

Rain shook her head. “The Great Spirit hasn’t chosen me, little one. But Bravelands does need a new Great Parent—and desperately.”

Once again, all the grown ones were studying Sky, their faces thoughtful. She didn’t like it.

“Your vision about the watering hole came true,” Comet told her softly. “You knew something terrible was going to happen, and it did.”

“You can read the bones of all creatures, not just elephants,” added Star, in her singsong voice. “Only Great Mother could do that.”

A jolt of shock went through Sky. “You think I’m the new Great Mother?” Aghast, she shrank backward. “I can’t be. I’m *not!*”

Rain patted her gently. “It’s true that we don’t know for sure. And you are young, Sky; so very young. But all the signs are telling us one thing: that the Great Spirit has settled in you.”

The other elephants murmured in agreement.

“It’s a huge burden for you to bear,” said Rain, “we know that. But we will all help you.”

Sky could feel her heart thumping in her chest, and her pulse in her throat and ears. Nothing in her had changed.

Surely she would recognize anything new inside her, other than just *Sky*?

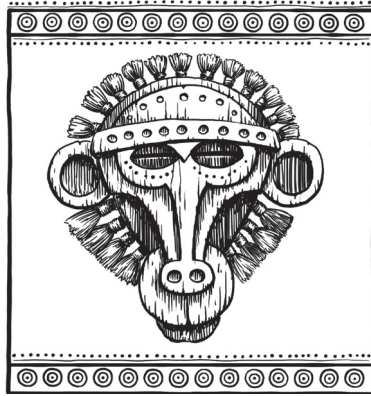
“But the Great Spirit hasn’t passed to me,” she whispered. “I know it hasn’t. Because—Aunt Rain, Aunt Comet—” She hesitated, then blurted, “I can’t *feel* it!”

Gently Rain pressed her head to Sky’s. “I know it’s hard. Great Mother should have had many more years, and you should have been able to grow up before your time came to succeed her. But Bravelands needs a Great Parent now. Please, Sky. We need you.”

Sky stared around at her family, her throat dry. Every elephant’s face was bright with hope—a hope Sky knew she couldn’t fulfill.

Moon rubbed his bristly cheek against her flank, as if he was comforting her again. Her little cousin, at least, seemed to understand how she felt.

But how could she show the others how wrong they were?



CHAPTER 4

*The trees gave little shelter from the downpour; drenched, they showered water onto the baboons at even a glancing touch. At the head of the troop with the other Strongbranches, Thorn splashed a hesitant paw into another muddy puddle; no, it was too deep. He retreated, testing the edges for an easier way around. They were all going to be soaked; it was just a question of *how* soaked. Some of these pools were more treacherous than they looked, and if no babies or old ones drowned on this dismal trek, thought Thorn, they'd be lucky.*

Of the six Strongbranches, only four were negotiating the muddy forest; Grass and Fly Middleleaf had veered off to look for any prey that hadn't fled for shelter. Brightforest Troop would need to be well nourished for the next few days: the search for a new camp was going to be hard and long.

“Ow,” complained Worm Strongbranch, who was limping slightly.

“Poor you,” sympathized Frog Strongbranch. She was taller of them all and looked down at Worm with concern. “Does that tarantula bite still hurt?”

“It really does,” grunted Worm. “I wish it had bitten my sister. She deserves it.”

“Well, at least you completed your Feat,” grumbled Fang Strongbranch. “When are you doing *yours*, Thorn Middleleaf?”

Once Stinger thinks up something terrible, Thorn thought. He gritted his teeth. “Stinger said I had to pass a trial period first, didn’t he?”

“Because he thinks you’ll fail,” scoffed Fang.

“Maybe,” said Thorn. “But Stinger knows best. Until he decides differently, I’m a Strongbranch, just like you. Worm, you’d better see if there’s a way through that prickly scrub.”

“Go and look yourself, *Middleleaf*,” sneered Worm. “Maybe we’ll listen to you when you’ve actually done your Feat.”

“Mine was the hardest,” boasted Fang as he tore at some obstructing creepers. “I had to lift a boulder that was bigger than the Crown Stone.”

“Liar,” muttered Worm under her breath.

Frog shot her an anxious glance and spoke up loudly to drown her out. “Are you sure that’s right, Fang?”

“Absolutely!” Fang glared at Frog. “And what’s more, a baboon was sitting on top of it to make it even heavier.”

Frog bit her lip, but silently began to help Fang with the creepers; her gentle face looked nervous. Until joining the Strongbranches she had been a Deeproot, and Thorn wondered if she was feeling as out of place as he was. He glanced over his shoulder to where Mud was helping Beetle across a treacherously slippery log. *I wish I could have Mud for company instead of this lot.*

“We need to stop for a rest,” came Beetle’s cracked voice, sounding out of breath. “Many of us are tired.”

The baboons slumped down gratefully, shaking off rain, and mothers began to nurse and soothe their babies. Impatient and frustrated though he was, Thorn had to halt too. He was just beginning to scout for berries when Grass and Fly bounded from the undergrowth.

Despite their sodden fur, they were grinning. “Look what we’ve got!” announced Fly, and both of them held out paws full of fermented fruit. “Sweetpulp!”

“Ooh!” Worm brightened as she grabbed some from Grass. “Where did you find that?”

They exchanged a sly look. “Well, we didn’t *find* it as such,” admitted Fly with a smirk.

“Old Beetle had a stash of it in a hollow log near Tall Trees,” said Grass, popping a lump into his mouth and chewing on it. “We raided his supply.”

“That’s not really fair . . .” began Frog.

“What, when it was just going to rot away altogether?” pointed out Grass. “He didn’t have any more use for it.”

“We’ve rescued it, that’s all,” said Fly. “Here, have some.

That'll calm your conscience."

"No, thank you," said Frog, turning primly away. "I don't think the Great Spirit would approve."

"Hmph." Fly shrugged. "The Great Spirit hasn't struck me with lightning yet."

"Why would it?" Worm giggled. "You're so boring, Frog."

"I think she's scared of the sweetpulp," snorted Grass. "Maybe she can't handle it."

"If she doesn't want any, it's her business," butted in Thorn angrily, and Frog shot him a grateful look. "Leave her alone."

"Fine." Grass shrugged. "If she wants to miss out, that's fine by me. Anyone else?"

Worm and Fang didn't have any of Frog's scruples; they grabbed the offerings eagerly and gulped them down. Thorn bit his lip, tempted despite himself. "What's it like?"

"You've never had it before?" Fly lifted his brow disdainfully. "Go on, you might like it."

Thorn had no wish to be in debt to them, but he couldn't repress his curiosity. He took the pawful of mushy fruit that Fly offered him and sniffed at it. It smelled strong and tangy enough to make him blink. Doubtfully he crammed it into his mouth.

It wasn't bad. Slowly he chewed, blinking. The juice that ran down his throat was sharp and made his head feel light. A rather dozy feeling of well-being crept across his brain; they were right, it did taste good. He suddenly felt a lot more relaxed about the trek ahead of them.

No! he thought in alarm. That was no way to think about

the quest for a new home; it was going to be tough and dangerous, and they'd all have to have their wits about them. Grass, Fang, Worm, and Fly were squatting against tree trunks, grinning and telling jokes that were little more than gibberish; they weren't paying him any attention. Thorn turned quickly and, under the guise of a cough, spat the sweetpulp into a bush.

Wiping his mouth, he cleared his throat. Frog was the only one who was looking, and she gave him a shy, approving smile.

"You didn't like it?" she murmured.

"I need to keep a clear head," he whispered firmly.

Frog nodded, still gazing at him with shining eyes. "I think you're wise, Thorn."

"Thanks," he grunted. "Let's get these fools going again, and the troop will have to follow. We can't waste time."

Frog nodded eagerly, and with quite a bit of scolding on her part, the other four Strongbranches were chivvied into moving on through the forest. With grunts of reluctance, the rest of Brightforest Troop followed.

"I know this place," Frog told Thorn as they tore and smashed at a barrier of scrub. "I'm sure you do too. There's a stream up ahead, remember?"

"I think so." Thorn was beginning to realize just how powerful the big baboon was—no wonder Stinger had picked her to be a Strongbranch. He watched with admiration as Frog ripped down a last tangle of small branches.

"But it shouldn't cause problems," she went on. "Everyone's wet anyway and—oh!" Her eyes widened with shock. Thorn

followed her gaze through the gap.

Of course. They should have realized, he thought dismally. The rain had swollen the stream massively, bursting its banks; water had risen to cover the lower sections of the tree trunks. The once-lazy trickle was a churning torrent of foamy brown, with twigs and leaves and small dead creatures swirling in its current.

“We can’t cross that!” exclaimed Moss, following Frog and Thorn out of the undergrowth.

“I’m not taking my baby in there!” declared a mother, clutching her infant against her with a protective paw.

The baboons were all pushing through the scrub now, gathering around Frog and Thorn. As each baboon came through, the exclamations of horror rose.

“Stop, stop!” Stinger clambered through the foliage and scowled at them all. “I’ll have none of this panic and defeatism. We have an efficient team to help us now! They will get us safely across this river.” He stared expectantly at the six Strongbranches.

Thorn and the others looked apprehensively at one another. After a small silence Thorn said, “We should split into pairs and look for a way across. Come on. Frog, you come with me.”

The other four Strongbranches set off downstream, halfheartedly poking at broken twigs and flotsam, while Thorn and Frog made their way upstream. “I honestly don’t see how we’re going to do this,” Frog told him with a sigh.

He nodded. “It would take forever to find a way around this water, if there is one at all. Look out!” He darted out of

the way as a rotten branch was flung ashore at their paws. As it receded a little, bobbing in a side current, he frowned. "I'd suggest using a branch like that one to get across, but did you see what happened?"

Frog nodded. "The river tossed it as if it was a twig. We'd need something a lot bigger. But what is there?"

"Something bigger." Thorn frowned. Then he brightened and pointed. "Like that!"

A sturdy mgunga tree stood right on a bend of the river, its roots now sunk deep in water. One of its branches had snapped, but not entirely; it hung drooping out over the river, reaching more than halfway to the far side.

The two baboons looked at each other, excited. "That's it!" exclaimed Frog. "It doesn't go all the way, but—"

"But there are strangler figs on the other side," said Thorn. "Look, their branches almost touch that broken one. I think even the oldest baboons could make that jump."

"And the littlest can be carried by their mothers," finished Frog. "We've done it, Thorn!"

She gave him a quick hug of celebration; Thorn was too surprised to react, and she'd released him before he could. She went bounding off back down the bank, and he loped after her.

When they reached the troop, Stinger was turning from the other Strongbranches, his face sour with disappointment. At the news from Frog and Thorn, he perked up instantly.

"Well done, my Strongbranches!" he declared, clapping his paws to draw the troop's attention. "I chose you well!"

Brightforest Troop—follow Frog and Thorn. We shall once again meet a new challenge as a troop, and overcome it!”

The plan worked just as Thorn had hoped. Grass and Worm were first to cross—at Stinger’s insistence—and they looked more than a little nervous as they picked their way along the flaky yellow bark, wincing when their paws touched the prickles. But they made the jump to the fig trees with ease and sat up on its branches, hooting in triumph and relief.

Satisfied, Stinger nodded. “Fly and Fang, you cross too. Thorn and Frog, stay here to guide everyone up. And then, my troop: the rest of you.”

There was a new optimism among the baboons, despite the lashing rain. As Frog guided them up the mgunga tree, Thorn set to helping them cross the branch one by one. It wasn’t long before most of the troop was sitting in the twisted boughs of the fig tree on the opposite bank, hooting encouragement to friends who were still to cross.

Thorn turned to find Mud at his shoulder. Mud smiled at him, nervously.

“How is it?” Mud whispered. “Being a Strongbranch, I mean?”

When he’d glanced round to make sure no one was looking, Thorn made a face. “Except for Frog, they’re driving me crazy,” he confided softly.

Mud grinned. “I’m quite relieved,” he murmured. “I don’t really like any of them. Frog’s all right, but she’s a bit—well, odd.”

“She’s very devoted to the Great Spirit,” Thorn told him,

mock sternly. “Now your turn, Mud.”

He watched apprehensively as his friend crept along the branch, but Mud made it to the far bank without a problem. Thorn turned to the next baboon.

“I have to carry my baby.” It was a young mother, Lily, and she wore a beseeching gaze. “Thorn, will you make sure Snail gets across? She’s still quite small. . . .”

Thorn glanced at Lily’s older infant, who puffed out her chest and rose onto her hind legs. “I’ll be fine, Mother,” said Snail. “I’m actually big.”

“I’ll watch her,” Thorn assured Lily, stifling a grin, and he helped her mother up onto the branch. With a last anxious look at Snail, Lily ventured out across the raging river, one paw shielding the baby who clung to her chest.

“Your mother and sister are fine,” Thorn told Snail with a smile, as Lily made the leap to the fig tree. “Your turn now.”

Snail didn’t look quite as confident as she’d sounded, but she stepped bravely onto the branch, wincing as her paw touched a prickle. Remembering his promise, Thorn kept his eyes on her as she wobbled out across the churning water.

“Ow.” Snail stifled a yelp as she stood on another tiny spine. She danced her paw sideways.

The bark where she set it down was flaky; it peeled under the little baboon’s weight. With a yelp of surprise, Snail staggered sideways. Losing her footing, she slid helplessly and plummeted into the river below.

Lily’s shriek of terror resounded over the crashing water,

and the whole troop erupted in hoots and screams. Below Thorn, Stinger charged to the bank.

“Strongbranches!” he shouted. “Get her out!”

With one glance, Thorn saw that Grass, Fly, Worm, and Fang were dithering on the far shore, their eyes dazed. *The sweetpulp.*

“They’re no use,” he snarled. “Frog, come on!”

He sprang down from the tree and with Frog at his heels raced downriver. A clumsy crashing of foliage told him the other Strongbranches were following, but they were far behind. He clenched his teeth in anger and picked up speed. *It’s up to me and Frog.*

Out in the water, rising and falling in the surging waves, he could just make out the drenched little head of Snail. She was tossed this way and that; at one moment sucked under, the next cast up to gulp for air. He and Frog were running abreast of her now, and he looked frantically around the river in search of some scrap of hope.

“There!” he shouted. A blade of rock jutted from the water not far ahead. “If she’s washed toward that, we could grab her!” Loping to the edge of the foamy water, he crouched to spring.

“No!” Frog grabbed his shoulder and pushed ahead of him. “I’m bigger, I’ll do it!”

Before he could even argue, she had leaped for the rock. Frog’s hind paws splashed into the river, but she hauled herself out and balanced on the rock, staring fixedly at the small bobbing head as it swirled toward her. Frog half rose, stretching

out her arms; her face was taut.

Snail was facedown in the water now. As she eddied close to the rock, Frog made a grab for her, plunging her arms into the river. One paw snatched the little baboon's scruff, and Frog yanked her out, limp and dripping.

Thorn's heart raced as Frog tucked the bedraggled creature under one arm and leaped back to shore. They were bending over her when the other Strongbranches finally caught up, panting.

Snail's head lolled backward as Thorn grabbed her by the shoulders. Desperately, he shook her. Frog groaned, punching the ground in frustration. The rest of the Brightforest baboons—the ones who hadn't already crossed the river—were gathering now, and Thorn saw that Lily was there. She had recrossed the water without her baby, and she was shoving through the crowd, hooting in distress.

Oh no. Thorn shook the little baboon again, hard, and suddenly her head jerked forward. Coughing up water, she began to whimper feebly. As Lily reached her side she croaked, "Mother . . ."

Thorn staggered back in relief as Lily grabbed her daughter into her arms and rocked her. "Thank you, Thorn Strongbranch! Thank you, Frog!"

Thorn grinned and slapped Frog's back. "You did it! You got her out!"

Frog turned and gave him a hug, her eyes shining. "We did it, Thorn!"

Beyond Lily, who was cradling Snail and crooning softly, and beyond the other shamefaced Strongbranches, Thorn caught sight of Berry. She was staring at him and Frog, her eyes unreadable.

As his gaze caught hers, she turned away.

“We baboons are the best organizers,” Stinger told the Strongbranches as he strutted across the open grasslands. “So it only makes sense that we try to bring order back to Bravelands. Since Great Mother died, things have been out of control.”

“I’m just glad that we’re with you, my Crownleaf,” Grass told him eagerly. Ever since the debacle with Snail and the sweetpulp, the big baboon had been trying to ingratiate himself again with his leader. “There’s so much disorder, anything could happen.”

“I’m glad to have you here, my Strongbranches.” Stinger shook his head sadly. “Even I need bodyguards.”

It didn’t seem that way to Thorn, but he kept his mouth shut. Every animal Stinger had spoken to had seemed wary rather than hostile. They had left the rest of Brightforest Troop sheltering in a clump of trees and now headed toward the sweeping stretch of savannah where the zebras grazed. The ground was sodden beneath their paws, and rivulets of water lay on the saturated surface, yet there was still no sign of the rain stopping. It teemed from a sky that was black with looming cloud.

Stinger had already met with a gazelle herd leader and

a coalition of cheetahs, but there were scores of other animals still to see. Thorn was weary and thirsty from the long march around Bravelands, and he kept licking water from his snout; Stinger would not hear of stopping to rest. As the rain intensified, Thorn tilted back his head and let it run into his jaws.

A cluster of bee-eater birds perched in a tree; their plumage, red and startling blue, looked dull and lifeless in the rain. A lone hyena hunched under the same tree, but she didn't even twitch as the baboons passed. Stinger, striding on with his tail held high, seemed like the only creature in Bravelands with any energy or purpose.

"Here we are," Stinger said cheerfully as they crested the top of a low hill. On the plain below a herd of zebras grazed, tails swatting, large teeth tearing at the sodden grass. Every zebra herd Thorn had seen numbered several hundred, yet here there were only about forty of them.

He frowned. "Where've the rest of them gone?"

"Why should we care?" Stinger loped down to the herd, and Thorn and the other Strongbranches scrambled after him. A stallion with curving stripes came to meet them, his ears flicking in agitation.

Stinger nodded coolly. "Greetings to you. I am Stinger Crownleaf of Brightforest Troop, and these are my faithful Strongbranch escorts."

"I see." The zebra eyed Thorn and the others. Worm had drawn herself up, her stare menacing. Grass chewed arrogantly

on a stalk of the grass he was named for. Fly's broken-toothed grin was not a pleasant one. The zebra swallowed hard, his long throat rippling.

"I am Sleekfriend," he said politely. "What brings you here, Stinger Crownleaf?"

"We live in difficult times," Stinger said, his face grave, "and I hope your herd stays strong, Sleekfriend. We came to find you first. The zebras are the heart of Bravelands."

Thorn knew these words by heart now. Stinger had already said the same thing to the gazelles and the cheetahs.

The zebra blew out a breath. His hoof pawed at the muddy ground as he dipped his head. "Hard times indeed," he agreed. "This is all that's left of my herd, in fact. Most of them stampeded after Great Mother's death, and we remain scattered." His gaze flicked to a small colt shivering at his mother's side. "If we don't regroup soon, I worry we'll be easy targets for flesh-eaters."

Stinger nodded sympathetically. "I'm hearing the same thing everywhere," he told Sleekfriend. "Discord, restlessness, herds and packs breaking apart. Nothing is as it should be." His sigh was deep and sad. "That's why it's so important to make things right in Bravelands, and quickly. We must ensure everyone's following the Code."

As if you follow it, Thorn thought darkly.

Stinger launched into the same speech he had given the other animals, stuffed with flattery and false concern. "To settle things for the good of Bravelands, I'm proposing a

Great Gathering at High Sun tomorrow. We need to find the new Great Parent—or decide how to live together until one appears.”

Sleekfriend’s ears were a blur of flickering anxiety. “At the watering hole?”

“Of course.” Stinger gave him a sober, direct stare. “I trust the zebras will be present? We need you, Sleekfriend.”

The zebra shook his thin coat, sending a shower of water flying. “Our herd . . . we feel uncomfortable at that place. Since Great Mother’s death.” He blinked, his long lashes glinting with raindrops. “You see, Stinger, the flesh-eaters have always left us alone at the watering hole, but without Great Mother we don’t trust them. We still drink there, when we need to, but we don’t linger. A Great Gathering could be . . . problematic.”

Stinger slanted his gaze deliberately at the Strongbranches. In response Worm puffed herself up even more, and Grass hummed softly as he chewed; it was almost a growl. Fang plucked a beetle from the mud at his paws and bit down so hard on it his teeth clashed. Fly’s chipped grin stretched wider. Frog and Thorn simply looked at the ground.

Sleekfriend shook his mane, and his hoof pawed even more anxiously at the mud. Thorn felt hot with shame, but he could say nothing.

Stinger looked thoughtful, as if he was entirely unaware of his bodyguards’ hostile air. “You may be wise there, Sleekfriend. Protecting your herd is the most important thing of all.” He scratched his chin. “But consider the alternative, my

good friend. If the zebras aren't represented at the Gathering, how can we be sure we'll decide what's best for you? Far better if you're there to speak for yourselves. Really, it's the only way to ensure your . . . safety."

For long moments, Sleekfriend was silent. The whites of his eyes were visible as he shifted his wary stare from baboon to baboon. Then he raised his head, breathing hard.

"May animals always praise the wisdom of baboons." There was a hint of a tremor in his words. "So be it, Stinger Crown-leaf. My herd and I will be there."

Stinger grinned, his fangs glinting despite the dull light. "Well said, Sleekfriend, and a wise choice, very *wise*. And now that we have the agreement of the zebras, we can invite the rest of Bravelands!"

Sleekfriend dipped his head quickly, then trotted back to his herd. Feeling more than a little sick, Thorn followed Stinger back up the slope.

"Elephants next," Stinger said cheerfully. "They won't be nearly so easy to handle."

He's too good at this, Thorn thought as he trudged behind Stinger, over the crest of the hill and slithering through a sodden stretch of brush. Even if Brightforest Troop would listen to Thorn, it would be impossible to convey just how menacingly Stinger was behaving. To rebuff him, Stinger would simply have to repeat what he'd told each herd leader. *Every word that comes out of that baboon's mouth is so polite, so reasonable—but so twisted.*

Stinger wasn't organizing this Gathering for the good of

Bravelands; that was obvious. The creatures he intimidated must know that; yet they had to comply. Stinger was leaving them no choice.

Ahead, great gray shapes loomed through the thick mist of rain: a family of elephants, shifting restively around a massive heap of torn and broken branches. As the baboons drew closer, Thorn realized with a jolt what must lie beneath them: *Great Mother's body*.

The elephants turned to confront Stinger and his escort as they approached. Thorn quailed as the huge beasts towered over them. Rain streaked down their great flanks in streams.

"What brings baboons to this place?" asked the largest elephant, flapping her ears in warning. Her swinging trunk was mottled with white patches.

"Greetings to you, Family Strider." Stinger bowed his head. "I am Stinger Crownleaf of Brightforest Troop, and these are my troop-mates." He gestured at the Strongbranches, his eyes sly as they struck their aggressive poses. "Brightforest Troop grieves for your loss, dear elephants. Great Mother was wise and generous, and we will treasure her memory."

"As will all of Bravelands," rumbled the large elephant, with a disdainful glance at the posturing Strongbranches. "I am Rain, matriarch of the Strider family."

Stinger bowed even lower. "We live in difficult times, Rain. It's our most fervent hope that your herd stays strong. I come with a proposal that, with your approval, I will carry to the other animals. The elephants, after all, are the heart of Bravelands."

Rain waved her trunk dismissively. “You seek to flatter us, Stinger Crownleaf,” she said. “Just tell us why you’re here.”

As Stinger launched into his well-rehearsed speech, Thorn took the chance to study the elephant family. The Striders were all adults, he realized—the young one called Sky, whom he and Fearless had met when they’d come to plead a favor of Great Mother, was nowhere to be seen. Thorn hoped she was all right. It had been obvious that she and Great Mother were unusually close, even for elephants; the matriarch’s death must have hit Sky hard.

Stinger concluded his speech with a flourish; to Thorn’s surprise, the elephants had brightened. Rain glanced at the rest of her family, and they all nodded.

“We will come to the Great Gathering, Stinger Crownleaf,” she declared.

“We’re so glad to hear it.” Stinger bowed his head again, but Thorn had already caught the glitter of surprise in his cunning eyes. “All the animals of Bravelands owe you a debt for your generations of wise guidance. Until tomorrow, Rain Strider, farewell!”

The elephant nodded and turned her rump.

As the baboons set out once more across the rain-drenched grassland, Thorn noticed that Stinger’s jaw was clenched. In fact, his entire body was rigid with controlled rage.

He should have felt happy that things didn’t seem to be going entirely Stinger’s way, but Thorn found himself more uneasy than ever. Frog, at his side, seemed to think the same.

“Why is he upset?” she whispered. “The elephants agreed to come. So what’s wrong?”

Thorn shrugged. “I don’t know.”

The two of them had fallen a little behind, and with an anxious glance at the others, Frog cleared her throat. “Thorn, I don’t like this. I thought we were here to protect Stinger, but it’s more like the other animals need protection from *us*.”

“I know.” Hope rose inside him. *Maybe Frog could be my ally! Maybe she’ll help me convince the troop. . . .* “Frog, listen—”

“You two! Hurry up!” Stinger had turned and was glaring at them through the rain.

“Come on, we’d better catch up.” Frog bounded on.

With a sigh of frustration, Thorn followed. *I can talk to her privately later.*

Stinger hadn’t calmed down since his conversation with the elephants; if anything he looked even more annoyed. “They think they’re in charge, don’t they?” he snapped.

Thorn, loping at his side now, gave him an uncertain glance. “Who do?”

“The elephants, of course. Did you see the way they looked at each other?” Stinger picked up a stone and flung it at a flock of ibises; they scattered, squawking. “The Family Strider are up to something, and I don’t like it.”

“I’m sure they aren’t,” said Thorn, then added quickly, “I mean, they wouldn’t dare! Elephants are always a bit . . . haughty. Aren’t they? It’s just . . . the way they come across. They’re so big. That’s all . . .” His words trailed off lamely to silence.

The Crownleaf's eyes were dark and glittering. "You know what the trouble is with elephants, my Strongbranches?"

"What, Stinger?" asked Grass eagerly.

"They think they have a Spirit-given right to be Great Parent," spat Stinger. "Well, they don't."

"No, they don't," chorused Grass and Fly.

Stinger ignored them; his eyes had narrowed. "I'd make a better Great Father than any of those colossal fools," he murmured. "Elephants can read bones. So what?" He turned his head and threw them a smirk.

"I am a baboon. And I can read *minds*."



CHAPTER 5

The young gazelle grazed intently, tugging at the wet grass with her blunt teeth. Crouched upwind, Fearless crept forward, a few paces at a time. Her scent was diffused by the heavy rain, but when he flared his nostrils and inhaled, he could almost taste her on his tongue. The gazelle was bigger than him, but he knew he had the strength to bring her down.

He just needed to get close enough—and the need was becoming more urgent all the time. With the herds scattered and storms raging across the savannah, hunting had been meager and difficult. Fearless’s belly growled with hunger, and he knew his muscles were already weakening. He and Valor could not afford to lose this gazelle. Tensing, Fearless slunk determinedly forward.

The gazelle’s head jerked up. Fearless froze. She looked

around, ears twitching, but then dipped her elegant neck back to the grasses.

Now!

Fearless launched into a sprint, his legs at full stretch, his tail balanced behind him. The gazelle's eyes snapped wide; she flinched, spun, and bounded through the grass.

Fearless willed his weary legs to work faster, harrying her as she tried to evade him. The gazelle stumbled, and he sprang, slamming into her flank. She buckled and fell, her spindly legs thrashing. Fearless twisted fast, pinned her down, and clamped his jaws around her neck.

In moments, it was over. The gazelle sagged, her dead eyes glazing.

He'd made his first proper kill. Exhilaration coursed through him. Despite his weakened muscles, he felt as if he could run the length of Bravelands.

"Nicely done," remarked Valor, his older sister, as she emerged from the long grass. Her pale gold fur glowed dully in the misty rain, and she moved lithely, her elegant head high. "One day you might even hunt as well as me."

Fearless swatted her playfully. "Oh, really? Didn't you see that beautiful kill? Maybe *you* could learn something from *me*."

Valor snorted, but Fearless could see the pride in his sister's eyes. Her hunting lessons were paying off. Their mother had been the best hunter in Gallantpride, with the keenest nose and fastest sprint, and Valor was becoming just like her.

Valor stiffened. "Something's coming," she murmured.

Fearless tensed. Through the mist, a rustle of damp grass reached his twitching ears. He flared his nostrils and felt an involuntary growl rise in his throat. Together with Valor, he crouched, tail lashing, prepared to defend their kill.

Then the mist carried a scent to his nostrils: it was earthy and sharp and familiar.

Loyal!

“It’s all right.” Fearless relaxed. “He’s my friend.”

A lion’s great head broke through the grass near them. A pale scar was slashed across his cheek, and his black mane was shot through with gold. “I’ve been looking for you, Fearless,” said Loyal gruffly.

Valor eyed the newcomer suspiciously. “Did this one live with baboons too?” she asked Fearless.

Loyal growled, his crooked tail flicking. “Certainly not.”

Fearless grinned at the thought. “I met him after I left the troop. You know when I rescued Ruthless from the cheetahs? Loyal helped me.”

“I did. And you must be Valor,” said Loyal. “I was a friend of Gallant’s, long ago.”

Valor’s eyes sparked with joy. “You knew Father!”

Father, thought Fearless; he could never repress a stab of angry grief when his name was mentioned. Gallant had been murdered by the tyrannical Titan just over a year ago. The memory of that fight still brought a cold shudder of horror and loathing to Fearless’s blood. It had been brutal, like any battle for a pride—but it had also been unjust. Unable to defeat Gallant alone, Titan had his friends intervene to attack

Gallant. Gallantpride had become Titanpride through deceit and a shattering breach of the Code—and the lives of Fearless and Valor had changed forever.

“So where do you live now, Loyal?” Valor asked, her tail lashing with excitement. “What pride do you belong to?”

Loyal tilted his head with a hint of defiance. “I hunt alone these days.”

Valor stared, the fur rising along her spine. “You’re prideless?”

Fearless knew what she was thinking: a prideless lion either couldn’t be trusted, or wasn’t strong enough to join a pride. It wasn’t true of Loyal—he knew that from experience—but Valor was bound to be suspicious.

Ignoring her tone, Loyal swung his huge shaggy head toward Fearless. “Where have you been, youngster? I haven’t seen you for days.”

“Hunting,” Fearless told him. “Valor’s been teaching me.”

“To hunt for Titanpride?” Loyal’s face soured. “I hope you’re keeping a check on that temper of yours. Titan won’t forgive any defiance. I’m still amazed he lets you anywhere near his pride.”

Fearless bristled. “I haven’t got a temper! And I’m not a newborn cub, Loyal. I don’t need looking after.”

Loyal cuffed him gently. “You’ve got a lot of growing up to do yet,” he growled. “Maybe the grass-eaters are frightened of you, but you’re no match for Titan. You’re not safe in Titanpride, and don’t you forget it.”

Fearless tossed his head. “Actually, I *am* safe. Titan made an

oath not to kill me if I rescued Ruthless, and we did. Not even Titan would break an oath.”

“Let’s hope not.” His eyes dark, Loyal gazed across the plain toward the watering hole.

Somewhere on its churned, muddy shore, Fearless knew, lay Great Mother’s lifeless body. Three days ago, Titanpride’s scouts had brought news of her murder; Fearless could still barely accept it was true. It was Great Mother who had negotiated Fearless’s meeting with the cheetahs; Great Mother who had used her tact and reputation and wisdom to help him get Ruthless back. It was horrifying to believe that the noble old elephant was dead.

Loyal was watching him again. “I heard what happened,” he said, as if he could read Fearless’s thoughts. His voice was surprisingly gentle. “I’m sorry.”

Fearless’s head drooped. “Nothing’s gone right in Bravelands since she died. Driving rain for days, and there’s no sign of it relenting. The grass-eaters are scattered, and hunting is next to impossible.” He jerked his head toward their kill. “It took Valor and me forever to find just one gazelle.”

“I know it. Even I’ve had trouble hunting.” Loyal shook his mane. “But Great Mother didn’t control the weather, Fearless. There have always been hard times in Bravelands. Even believers in the Great Spirit suffer.”

Valor flicked her ears in agreement. “This is what I’ve been trying to tell him,” she said. “It makes no difference if there’s a Great Parent or not. In the end the weather will go back to normal and hunting will be good again. You’ll see, Fearless.”

Fearless sighed. Their attitude wasn't surprising; it was shared by every lion. Almost every other animal in Bravelands believed in the Great Spirit and followed the Great Parent's advice, but lions had always ruled themselves. And yet . . .

He scratched at the muddy grass with his claws. "The baboons believe in the Great Spirit, and they're clever."

Loyal gave an amused growl. "Perhaps, but lions are clever too. And no one, Great Parent or not, tells us what to do."

Valor butted Fearless's shoulder. "Living with baboons has left you with some odd ideas, brother." She glanced at the looming clouds. "We should get this gazelle back to the pride."

"I'll be going then. Be careful, both of you." As Loyal padded away, he paused and glanced back. "Fearless, have you told your mother about me?"

"Not yet."

Loyal looked relieved. "Keep it that way."

"Why?" asked Valor. "She'll be pleased Father's friend is nearby, won't she?"

"Believe me, it'll be safer for her if she doesn't know." Loyal narrowed his gaze. "Will you promise?"

Fearless felt offended on his mother's behalf. "She can keep a secret," he said stiffly. "Just because she's blind now doesn't mean she's stupid."

"I know that," Loyal growled. "But promise me, Fearless. Please."

Fearless sighed. "All right. I promise."

He watched Loyal slink back into the tall grasses. Valor was already worrying at the gazelle's leg, starting to heave the

corpse back toward the pride, and Fearless hurried to help her.

“What was all that secrecy about?” Valor asked him through a mouthful of leg.

“I don’t know,” said Fearless. He dug his fangs into the gazelle’s rump.

“*And he’s prideless,*” Valor mumbled darkly. “What happened to him?”

Fearless raised his chin. “I haven’t asked,” he said. “Look, he must have his reasons. He’s a good lion. I know it.”

“Whatever you say, little brother.” Valor shrugged. “He seems strange, that’s all. And you remember what old Wisdom Gallantpride used to tell us?”

Fearless didn’t reply, but Valor growled it anyway.

“Never trust a prideless lion.”

The lions of Titanpride were huddled under a dripping acacia tree. Honor, Regal, and Agile, three of the former Gallantpride lionesses, had already returned from hunting; they were licking their fur clean of blood and mud. Artful, Titan’s favorite mate, sprawled smirking near them, tail wrapped neatly around her plump haunches. Ruthless, her young cub, batted at her curled tail in frustration.

When’s the last time Artful bothered to go hunting? Fearless wondered resentfully. He and Valor dragged their gazelle to where the other kills lay.

Titan was tearing into a zebra. His muzzle was smeared with gore, blood matting his magnificent black mane; nearby, his allies were devouring an antelope. Titan stared

contemptuously at Fearless and Valor as they dropped their gazelle, then ripped another mouthful of flesh.

Once, thought Fearless, a zebra would have fed all of Galantpride, and they would have hunted and shared it together. Now Titan demanded multiple kills, and he gorged on them with his cronies and Artful. *How does that fit with the Code?*

The junior males and the lionesses lay in a hungry circle, waiting their turn to eat. *This pride is too big*, thought Fearless; these lions would be desperate to gnaw at what remained after Titan's favorites had eaten. His chest tightened with frustrated fury. *This is not the way of true lions!*

Beyond even that circle of famished lions crouched a lone lioness: Swift. Fearless could clearly see his mother's rib bones through her thin, dull fur, and the terrible scar where one of her eyes had been. The other was cloudy and sightless.

Her nostrils flared as Fearless and Valor approached. "My cubs," she murmured. "You're back safely."

"Fearless killed a gazelle, Mother," said Valor, nuzzling Swift's cheek.

"My brave lion," Swift said. She leaned forward, searching for him, and Fearless touched her nose with his. "Your father would be so proud."

The best parts of the kills had already been reduced to bone and shreds of sinew. Fearless knew how this would go. Despite the quantities of prey, despite the fact that he and Valor hunted Swift's share as well as their own, their mother would be shoved aside until only the smallest, least desirable scraps were left. And she would be expected to be grateful.

But Fearless wasn't going to let his mother go hungry today. Keeping a wary eye on the rest of the pride, he padded back toward the gazelle. *I caught this*, he thought defiantly. *It's mine.*

He slapped a paw onto the gazelle's rump and bit down on a hind leg, then gave a violent wrench of his head. Tendons tore and joints snapped as the leg came away; grabbing it in his jaws, he trotted to a clump of acacias. Valor had watched him, eyes wide; now she butted Swift gently to her feet and guided her to the shelter of the trees. Fearless laid the leg under his mother's nose. She sniffed it and took a delicate bite.

"It's the gazelle I caught," he told her.

"Your first kill," murmured Swift, licking it. "No wonder it tastes so delicious."

Fearless swallowed hard. Once his mother had been the strongest hunter in Gallantpride. His chest ached to see her now, thin and blind and living on the charity of lions who had taken her sight and her mate. He glanced at his sister and saw the same sadness in her pale gold, elegant face.

"I'd better join the other lionesses," said Valor. She rubbed her mother's cheek and slipped away.

Swift ate a little more, then raised her head. "I've had enough, Fearless. You eat the rest."

"You've barely had anything!"

Swift licked the blood from her muzzle. "You need to eat well so you can become as strong as your father." She pushed the leg. "Go on—it's your first kill, you should enjoy it."

Fearless sighed, but as he took a bite of the rich meat he realized how hungry he was. He'd had a long day of hunting,

and yesterday Titan had let him have only scraps. Giving in, he tore at the gazelle.

Her ears twitching toward him, Swift sighed contentedly. "I'm so happy to have you back. I only wish I could see what you look like now."

"Pretty much the same, I expect. Only bigger."

Swift rubbed her cheek against the back of his head. "Well, I can feel you don't have a mane yet."

"I wish I did."

Swift chuckled. "It'll come," she said. "You've got a lot of growing left to do."

Fearless sighed. Loyal had pointed out the same thing.

The sooner I'm grown, the better, he thought.

With a mane, and my full strength, I'll finally strike down Titan.

Fearless and Swift had rejoined the pride by the time Titan stood up from his meal and stretched. His powerful muscles flexed beneath his thick, healthy fur, and he shook his full black mane.

"A good meal," he grunted. "While the grass-eaters panic, the lions feast."

His tail lashed as he gazed around his pride. When his eyes locked on Fearless, they gleamed with malice.

"Ah, those foolish animals who follow the Great Parent," Titan said loudly. "Living their feeble lives in terror, and all because they don't have anyone to plod after now. Their Great Spirit didn't protect the old elephant from a few crocodiles, did it?"

Fearless's chest tightened with suppressed rage: Titan knew he had been raised by baboons, had been taught to believe in the Great Spirit. Clenching his jaws, he stayed silent, determined not to show how much Titan was riling him.

"The Great Spirit didn't even give her the sense to stay out of the water," Titan went on mockingly. "So much for the wisdom of elephants. They're no brighter than the idiotic herds who hung on her every word."

Artful and Titan's allies roared with laughter. Fearless swallowed his grunt of rage, but he kept his stare riveted on Titan's.

You can laugh now, he thought fiercely, but you won't when I keep my oath and take back the pride. One day, Titan, I'll make you regret every vicious deed of yours.

The lions were still huffing with laughter when one of the scouts threaded through them and padded to her leader. It was Daring, a small lioness with a scarred ear.

"I bring news, Titan," she announced. "I overheard the monkeys' chatter. There's a Great Gathering at the watering hole at High Sun today."

"Really?" Titan growled with amusement. "How exciting for the poor animals. They can bleat about how much they miss their old elephant." Resolute, Titan's closest ally, snorted so hard he choked.

"They're going to decide what to do now," said Daring. "I think they're looking for a new Great Parent."

Titan flicked his tail dismissively. "Fools," he said. "They

can't wait to be told what to do." He stalked toward Fearless. "And *you*," he snarled, "you're just like them. A lion who wants to be bossed around by some grass-eater."

More laughter rumbled around the pride. Valor edged closer to Fearless, looking worried.

"Since you love the grass-eaters so much, you can spy on the meeting," said Titan. "It could be useful to know who they pick next."

Fearless bowed deferentially, hiding the hatred he knew was in his eyes. "Yes, Titan."

"Please, Titan, could I go too?" Valor asked. "They won't expect lions at the Gathering. When Fearless shows up, there might be trouble."

Titan curled his muzzle in a sneer. "You think I care what trouble this baboon-lover gets into?"

"If two of us go," Valor said quickly, "at least one of us will be able to report back to you. Even if something bad happens."

Titan shrugged. "Go if you must," he said coolly, turning away. "I can't imagine two lions I'd be happier to lose, and I daresay you'd be happy to leave. But just remember what happens if neither of you returns."

He glanced back, and his eyes burned with malevolence.

"If you're not here to hunt for your mother, she doesn't eat at all."

As Fearless and Valor trotted across the grasslands, heading for the watering hole, High Sun was almost upon them.

Fearless knew it only because the clouds were mottled with a feeble, pallid glow. The sun itself had not been visible since dawn, and still the rains fell.

“We have to be careful,” said Valor. “It’s like I told Titan. The animals will be suspicious if they see lions at the Gathering.”

“I know,” Fearless agreed. “I’ll stay out of sight. But I want to speak to the baboons if I can. They’ll be there for sure—Brightforest Troop is so important.”

His heart lightened at the thought of seeing Mud and Thorn again. A rain-soaked, rocky kopje jutted from the grass not far ahead; in his excitement, Fearless leaped up the stones to the top.

“Important baboons,” Valor huffed sarcastically, as she jumped up beside him.

“Well, they *are*. They’re one of the biggest troops in Bravelands. And they’ve definitely got the best territory—you’ve never seen so many fruit trees.”

Valor wrinkled her nose. “You like *fruit*?”

Fearless laughed. “Of course not!” he said as they sprang from the highest rock and set off down the far slope. “Hey, maybe the new Great Parent will appear at the Gathering! Wouldn’t that be amazing?”

“Not for us,” Valor growled firmly. “The Great Parents have nothing to do with lions, remember?”

“I know.” Fearless gave a wistful sigh. “But it would be nice, wouldn’t it? To have someone to turn to with our problems?”

Valor stopped short, lashing her tail. “Is that so?” she

snapped. “A Great Parent would solve our problems, eh? Could a Great Parent bring back Mother’s sight? Or protect us from Titan?”

“No, of course not,” said Fearless, offended and a little hurt. “They don’t do things *for* you, they teach you how—oh, never mind. You’d get it if you’d lived with baboons.”

“Like I’d ever dream of it.” Valor gave a scornful snort, then shouldered him aside and jumped down from one gravelly outcrop to another. “Idiot,” she grunted, but her tone was affectionate.

“Watch your paws,” called Fearless cheekily. “You’ll—”

—*Trip*, he had been about to mock her, but at just that moment, she did. One paw slid as it hit a puddle, and Valor stumbled. She had to take a few sideways paces to regain her balance; then she stopped and spun around, glaring indignantly at the waterlogged slope.

Her expression changed. “What . . .”

Fearless loped down to her side, and the two lions stared aghast at the devastation that lay before them. The slope was pockmarked with meerkat burrows that had not been enough to save their inhabitants.

“This wasn’t the work of a flesh-eater,” murmured Valor.

All across the gritty hill were strewn the lifeless, sodden corpses of meerkats: young or old, big or tiny, they had all been caught and drowned in the torrential downpour. The smell of death drifted like an invisible fog. Fearless pawed at a limp body; it was still saturated, its tiny eyes half closed and blank.

“The Great Spirit is certainly angry,” he said, his voice trembling with fear. “How many more will die if this weather doesn’t stop?”

Valor took a step back and shook her head sharply. “The rain fell,” she said. “Like it does. Come on, Fearless; we need to get moving.”

The dead meerkats had unnerved him; Fearless’s spine felt cold as he followed Valor toward a steeper rise. *Valor doesn’t believe, and she never will.* But he couldn’t help thinking the lethal rains were too much of a coincidence after what had happened to Great Mother.

Side by side the two lions trekked to the top of the higher slope, slowing as they neared the crest. Lowering themselves onto their bellies, they crawled forward to peer down at the watering hole.

The clouded sky was shot with silver; it looked as bright as it was likely to get today. *High Sun. We made it.*

The vast stretch of the lake gleamed dully; a light mist lay over it where the constant rain struck the surface. On its churned shore, hundreds of animals formed a semicircle. Wildebeests stamped and grunted; sentry zebras and antelopes stood rigid, ears swiveling and eyes alert. A hyena, pacing through the herds, gave a sharp, laughing bark. A coalition of three cheetahs sat together, grooming one another; a leopard sprawled on a tree branch, one paw dangling, tail twitching expectantly. Fearless’s gaze roamed over the huge crowd. Rhinos, monkeys, colobus, mongooses . . . all waited patiently

together. Shooting a glance at his sister, Fearless saw that Valor's eyes were wide with wonder.

"How do the flesh-eaters resist all that prey?" she muttered.

"It's tradition. Oh!" Fearless brightened as he recognized some familiar baboons in the center of the crowd. "Look!" He nodded. "Brightforest Troop!"

"Your troop?" Valor wriggled forward a little, peering down with fascination.

"Yes. That's my friend Thorn, closest to the water's edge. And that small baboon next to him is Mud. His mother's the Starleaf—she reads the signs sent by the Great Spirit. And the big one?" His voice took on a note of awe. "That's Stinger. Everybody looks up to him. He's the one who rescued me from the eagle when I was little."

"What's that mound of branches?" Valor narrowed her eyes. "Oh—is that their Great Mother underneath?"

Following her gaze, Fearless swallowed. "It must be."

Rain pattered on the half-dead branches that had been draped over Great Mother's body, and their leaves rattled and rustled eerily in the faint lake breeze. Little of the great old elephant was visible, but Fearless could make out patches of her wrinkled gray hide beneath the sagging foliage. It was terrible to imagine her lying under there, her flesh already wasting away. Fearless closed his eyes briefly in silent respect. Whoever replaced her would find it tough to live up to her example.

There was motion in the crowd, a shifting of bodies, a

perceptible rising tension in the atmosphere. The muttering of gossip faded to silence as Stinger Crownleaf emerged from the horde, tail high, and stalked into the space before the assembly.

Fearless craned forward, his heart thudding. The Great Gathering had begun.