The dazzling plains seemed to stretch forever. Even Windrider, a vulture soaring high above the savannah, struggled to see where Bravelands reached its end.

Narrowing her ancient eyes, she let her gaze trail over the great yellow-grass sea, and pinpointed at last where it met the endless blue sky in a shimmering line of light. A wingtip twitched, and she banked, riding the warm air downward in a broad, graceful spiral.

Her flock followed her lead, calling out to one another in harsh, guttural voices, but Windrider was silent, scanning the savannah. Far below, herds of animals as small as ants moved across the land, following the paths beaten by countless generations. A gash in the land marked the muddy, trickling river; a horde of wildebeests was teeming into the gully and galloping up and over the sheer bank. Zebras and gazelles, grazing
together on the far side, glanced up incuriously at the wildebeests’ approach. Then they dipped their heads to graze again, ambling and milling peacefully.

A dark spot on the landscape caught Windrider’s keen eye—a creature separate from the others, and not moving. She flew lower, adjusting her path with great beats of her broad wings.

“There, my flock. There.”

The others followed her down, in swooping circles. “May Windrider’s eyes be forever sharp,” cried Blackwing, as the others took up the chorus of gratitude. “She has found us flesh once again.”

It was just as Windrider had hoped: the corpse of a gazelle. Its old and tired spirit had gone; its eyes were blank and dead. Perhaps a cheetah had brought it down. It lay half hidden between ocher rocks, barely visible to wingless rot-eaters; and though its killer had fed, much of its torn flesh remained on its bones. The gazelle had enjoyed its time and its life; now it would nourish the vultures—just as they, in their turn, would one day become food for others. All was as it should be . . . or at least, so Windrider hoped.

“We must test the flesh, brothers and sisters,” she called. “Then we can feed in peace.”

Windrider tilted her head, banking sharply in to land, the other vultures flapping and clamoring behind her. Her claws touched the gritty ground, and she hopped a couple of paces toward the gazelle. With a glance to the birds on her right and left, Windrider nodded once.
"A bad death will linger with the fallen."
"May the Great Spirit always grant good death," chorused the rest of the flock.

Each vulture tore a thin strip of meat from the carcass’s flank, gulping it down. They all paused, looking to Windrider for the final judgment. She closed her eyes briefly.

"The kill is clean," she reassured them at last. "Feed, my flock."

When the carcass was picked bare, its bones stripped of the last tattered remnants of flesh, Windrider stepped back. Beating her wings, she launched herself skyward once more. Every vulture, sated, followed her in a chaos of feathers and rasping cries. It felt good to return to the air, to soar higher and higher into the fierce blue, knowing that the flock had eaten well and survived for another day.

When she was high enough to catch a broad current of warm air, Windrider let it take her, twitching her wings, gazing down once more. From the shimmering horizon to the dark sprawling forests, to the low range of mountains far beyond the plains, she surveyed the land. Ahead lay a cluster of slender, flat-topped acacia trees; at their edge, just within their shade, shifting golden-yellow shapes were visible against the dry earth.

*Lions,* she thought, *lounging in the heat of the day.*

"They will not hunt, for now," remarked Blackwing, following her gaze.

"No, not until dusk," Windrider agreed.
Then they will feast. And we will follow.

Windrider had mixed feelings about the great prides of Bravelands. Lions meant food, unsullied and copious; like all the creatures of the land, they followed the Code, killing only to survive. But she loathed their arrogance. They were among the few creatures who would not follow the Great Mother, leader of all the animals, and give respect to her wisdom.

Two cubs were romping and play-fighting, full of energy and mischief even in the heat of the high white sun. As her shadow passed over the smaller of the two, he started and looked up. His golden eyes met hers, and he opened his small jaws.

She was still high above him, but the sound of a roar buffeted the air around her. With astonishment, Windrider felt her wings tremble, and she was momentarily rocked off her course.

“Windrider?” came Blackwing’s concerned voice.

Glancing back, Windrider realized none of her flock had felt the impact of that roar.

No. It was not the little lion’s voice. That is not possible!

“It is nothing,” she told Blackwing curtly.

Half angry, half fascinated, she forced her wings to readjust, balancing her flight once more. No grown lion’s roar could reach the heights of the sky, let alone a tiny cub’s. There is more here to know.

Windrider tilted in the air, seeking out the little lion once again. He still stood there, stiff-legged and defiant, his golden gaze fixed upward. At last, his tail whisking with triumph, he
turned away. The other cub followed him as he bounded back to his pride.

Lost in thought, Windrider veered east. What she had just seen—it was an omen, she was sure of it; though she could not imagine what its message might be. A tiny cub, with a roar to make the sky shudder. This is a vision, a portent!

She led her flock higher and farther into the clear blue sky, until the small pride of lions and even the huge herds of the savannah were lost in the beautiful vastness of Bravelands.
Swiftcub pounced after the vulture’s shadow, but it flitted away too quickly to follow. Breathing hard, he pranced back to his pride. I saw that bird off our territory, he thought, delighted. No rot-eater’s going to come near Gallantpride while I’m around!

The pride needed him to defend it, Swiftcub thought, picking up his paws and strutting around his family. Why, right now they were all half asleep, dozing and basking in the shade of the acacia trees. The most energetic thing the other lions were doing was lifting their heads to groom their nearest neighbors, or their own paws. They had no idea of the threat Swiftcub had just banished.

I might be only a few moons old, but my father is the strongest, bravest lion in Bravelands. And I’m going to be just like him!

“Swiftcub!”

The gentle but commanding voice snapped him out of his
dreams of glory. He came to a halt, turning and flicking his ears at the regal lioness who stood over him.

“Mother,” he said, shifting on his paws.

“Why are you shouting at vultures?” Swift scolded him fondly, licking at his ears. “They’re nothing but scavengers. Come on, you and your sister can play later. Right now you’re supposed to be practicing hunting. And if you’re going to catch anything, you’ll need to keep your eyes on the prey, not on the sky!”

“Sorry, Mother.” Guiltily he padded after her as she led him through the dry grass, her tail swishing. The ground rose gently, and Swiftcub had to trot to keep up. The grasses tickled his nose, and he was so focused on trying not to sneeze, he almost bumped into his mother’s haunches as she crouched.

“Oops,” he growled.

Valor shot him a glare. His older sister was hunched a little to the left of their mother, fully focused on their hunting practice. Valor’s sleek body was low to the ground, her muscles tense; as she moved one paw forward with the utmost caution, Swiftcub tried to copy her, though it was hard to keep up on his much shorter legs. One creeping pace, then two. Then another.

*I’m being very quiet, just like Valor. I’m going to be a great hunter.* He slunk up alongside his mother, who remained quite still.

“There, Swiftcub,” she murmured. “Do you see the burrows?”

He did, now. Ahead of the three lions, the ground rose up even higher, into a bare, sandy mound dotted with small
shadowy holes. As Swiftcub watched, a small nose and whiskers poked out, testing the air. The meerkat emerged completely, stood up on its hind legs, and stared around. Satisfied, it stuck out a pink tongue and began to groom its chest, as more meerkats appeared beyond it. Growing in confidence, they scurried farther away from their burrows.

“Careful now,” rumbled Swift. “They’re very quick. Go!”

Swiftcub sprang forward, his little paws bounding over the ground. Still, he wasn’t fast enough to outpace Valor, who was far ahead of him already. A stab of disappointment spoiled his excitement, and suddenly it was even harder to run fast, but he ran grimly after his sister.

The startled meerkats were already doubling back into their holes. Stubby tails flicked and vanished; the bigger leader, his round dark eyes glaring at the oncoming lions, was last to twist and dash underground. Valor’s jaws snapped at his tail, just missing.

“Sky and stone!” the bigger cub swore, coming to a halt in a cloud of dust. She shook her head furiously and licked her jaws. “I nearly had it!”

A rumble of laughter made Swiftcub turn. His father, Gallant, stood watching them. Swiftcub couldn’t help but feel the usual twinge of awe mixed in with his delight. Black-maned and huge, his sleek fur glowing golden in the sun, Gallant would have been intimidating if Swiftcub hadn’t known and loved him so well. Swift rose to her paws and greeted the great lion affectionately, rubbing his maned neck with her head.

“It was a good attempt, Valor,” Gallant reassured his
daughter. “What Swift said is true: meerkats are very hard to catch. You were so close—one day you’ll be as fine a hunter as your mother.” He nuzzled Swift and licked her neck.

“I wasn’t anywhere near it,” grumbled Swiftcub. “I’ll never be as fast as Valor.”

“Oh, you will,” said Gallant. “Don’t forget, Valor’s a whole year older than you, my son. You’re getting bigger and faster every day. Be patient!” He stepped closer, leaning in so his great tawny muzzle brushed Swiftcub’s own. “That’s the secret to stalking, too. Learn patience, and one day you will be a very fine hunter.”

“I hope so,” said Swiftcub meekly.

Gallant nuzzled him. “Don’t doubt yourself, my cub. You’re going to be a great lion and the best kind of leader: one who keeps his own pride safe and content, but puts fear into the heart of his strongest enemy!”

*That does sound good!* Feeling much better, Swiftcub nodded. Gallant nipped affectionately at the tufty fur on top of his head and padded toward Valor.

Swiftcub watched him proudly. *He’s right, of course. Father knows everything! And I will be a great hunter, I will. And a brave, strong leader—*

A tiny movement caught his eye, a scuttling shadow in his father’s path.

*A scorpion!*

Barely pausing to think, Swiftcub sprang, bowling between his father’s paws and almost tripping him. He skidded to a halt right in front of Gallant, snarling at the small sand-yellow
scorpion. It paused, curling up its barbed tail and raising its pincers in threat.

“No, Swiftcub!” cried his father.

Swiftcub swiped his paw sideways at the creature, catching its plated shell and sending it flying into the long grass.

All four lions watched the grass, holding their breath, waiting for a furious scorpion to reemerge. But there was no stir of movement. It must have fled. Swiftcub sat back, his heart suddenly banging against his ribs.

“Skies above!” Gallant laughed. Valor gaped, and Swift dragged her cub into her paws and began to lick him roughly.

“Mother . . .” he protested.

“Honestly, Swiftcub!” she scolded him as her tongue swept across his face. “Your father might have gotten a nasty sting from that creature—but you could have been killed!”

“You’re such an idiot, little brother,” sighed Valor, but there was admiration in her eyes.

Gallant and Swift exchanged proud looks. “Swift,” growled Gallant, “I do believe the time has come to give our cub his true name.”

Swift nodded, her eyes shining. “Now that we know what kind of lion he is, I think you’re right.”

Gallant turned toward the acacia trees, his tail lashing, and gave a resounding roar.

It always amazed Swiftcub that the pride could be lying half asleep one moment and alert the very next. Almost before Gallant had finished roaring his summons, there was a rustle of grass, a crunch of paws on dry earth, and the rest
of Gallantpride appeared, ears pricked and eyes bright with curiosity. Gallant huffed in greeting, and the twenty lionesses and young lions of his pride spread out in a circle around him, watching and listening intently.

Gallant looked down again at Swiftcub, who blinked and glanced away, suddenly rather shy. “Crouch down,” murmured the great lion.

When he obeyed, Swiftcub felt his father’s huge paw rest on his head.

“Henceforth,” declared Gallant, “this cub of mine will no longer be known as Swiftcub. He faced a dangerous foe without hesitation and protected his pride. His name, now and forever, is Fearless Gallantpride.”

It was done so quickly, Swiftcub felt dizzy with astonishment. I have my name! I’m Fearless. Fearless Gallantpride!

All around him, his whole family echoed his name, roaring their approval. Their deep cries resonated across the grasslands.

“Fearless Gallantpride!”

“Welcome, Fearless, son of Gallant!”

His heart swelled inside him. Suddenly, he knew what it was to be a full member of the pride. He had to half close his eyes and flatten his ears, he felt so buffeted by their roars of approval.

“I’ll—I promise I’ll live up to my name!” he managed to growl. It came out a little squeakier than he’d intended, but no lion laughed at him. They bellowed their delight even more.

“Of course you will,” murmured Swift. Both she and his
father nuzzled and butted his head. “You already have, after all!”

“You certainly—” Gallant fell suddenly silent. Fearless glanced up at his father, expecting him to finish, but the great lion was standing still, his head turned toward the west. A light breeze rippled his dark mane. His nostrils flared.

The pride continued to roar, but with a new strange undertone. Fearless wrinkled his muzzle and tried to work out what was different. He began to hear it: there were new voices. In the distance, other lions were roaring.

One by one, the Gallantpride lions fell silent, looking toward the sound. Gallant paced through them, sniffing at the wind, and his pride turned to accompany him. Swift walked closest to his flank.

Overcome with curiosity, Fearless sprang toward the meerkat hill, running to its top and staring out across the plain. His view was blurred by the haze of afternoon heat, but he could see three lions approaching.

_They're not from our pride_, thought Fearless with a thrill of nerves. He could not take his eyes off the strangers, but he was aware that other lions had joined him at the top of the slope: Gallant, Swift, and Valor. The rest of the pride was behind them, all quite still and alert. Swift’s hackles rose. Gallant’s whole body looked taut, his muscles coiled.

“Who are they?” asked Fearless, gaping at the three strange lions.

“That is Titan,” replied his mother. “The biggest one, there, in the center. Do you see him? He’s the cub of a lion
your father once drove away, and he's always hated Gallant for that. Titan's grown a fine mane, I see.” Her voice became a low, savage growl. “But he was always a brute.”

The three lions drew closer; they paced on, relaxed but steady, toward Gallantpride. Fearless could make out the leader clearly now: he was a huge, powerful lion, his black mane magnificent. As he came nearer, Fearless found himself shuddering. His mother was right—there was a cold light of cruelty in Titan’s dark eyes. His companions looked mighty and aggressive, too; the first had shoulders as broad as a wildebeest’s, while the other had a ragged ear, half of it torn away.

“Why are they in our territory?” asked Fearless in a trembling voice. He didn’t yet know whether to be furious or very afraid.

Gallant spoke at last. “There’s only one reason Titan would show his face here,” he rumbled. “He wants to challenge me for leadership of this pride.”

“What?” Fearless stared at his father.

“Come.” Gallant turned and began to pad back down the meerkat hill.

Fearless followed with the rest, staying close to his sister’s flank. “Valor, what does Father mean?” he growled. “Titan can’t do that, can he? He can’t just take over Gallantpride. It’s not possible!”

For a moment Valor said nothing; Fearless did not like the tension in her face. “I’ve heard of such things,” she said at last, grimly. “It happened to Fiercepride, from beyond the forest. Fierce had been leader for ages, Mother told me, but he was
challenged and defeated by a lion called Strong who’d recently grown his mane. And his family became Strongpride, and his pride had to live under Strong’s rule. Fierce was forced to leave and live alone, and hunt by himself.”

“That’s horrible,” breathed Fearless.

“Worse than that, Strong was a terrible leader. He was cruel and unfair and stupid; the pride fell apart in the end. He killed the cubs. Other lions died too.”

Fearless gaped at his sister. “But that won’t happen to Gallantpride,” he insisted. “No lion can beat Father. He’s the bravest fighter and the strongest lion in Bravelands!”

Valor didn’t reply. Fearless looked around at the other lions of their pride, and a wave of cold rippled along his spine. None of them looked as confident as he’d hoped; they seemed nervous and edgy, as if an army of ants were marching across their paws.

Gallant was walking out onto the grassland now, toward Titan. When they were almost close enough to touch muzzles, both lions halted and stared into each other’s eyes.

Titan was even more frightening up close, thought Fearless. His shoulders were broad and thickly muscled, and his paws were huge. There were deep, roughly healed scars drawn into his face and flanks, and when he opened his jaws to speak, his fangs were long, yellow, and deadly.

“Gallant of Gallantpride,” he snarled in greeting.

“Titan, Prideless Lion,” growled Gallant. “What is your business here?”
Titan drew himself up, his black mane rippling over his powerful neck and shoulders. He slapped the ground with a massive paw.

“By the laws of our ancestors,” he roared, “I, Titan, come to claim this pride of Gallant.”

Gallant’s muzzle curled back from his own long, deadly fangs.

“By the laws of our ancestors,” he snarled, “I, Gallant, fight to keep this pride.”

For a long moment they stared at each other, the air seeming to quiver with anticipation. Both huge males half crouched, their muscles coiled.

Then, as one, they launched their attacks, colliding with a terrible grunting roar and an impact that shook the ground. Rearing up, Gallant sank his claws into Titan’s shoulders; twisting, Titan shook his huge mane, gripped Gallant’s flank with his claws, and raked his flesh in return. They broke apart, only to slam together once more, jaws wide and claws tearing.

Fearless could hardly bear to watch, but neither could he look away. His heart was in his throat. Now that they were gripped in close combat, and he could see them together, the two lions looked equally matched.

The pride stood watching, their tails lashing with anxiety—all except Swift, who was pacing back and forth on the edge of the fight. She was the only one who was silent; the others roared their encouragement to Gallant, and snarled in contempt whenever Titan landed a good blow. But Swift said
nothing, only paced and looked afraid.

“Mother,” pleaded Fearless, unable to watch her fretting anymore, “why don’t we help Father? Together we can beat Titan, can’t we? There’s more of us!”

“We can’t,” said Swift, her voice choked with anxiety. “I’m sorry, my son. Those are the rules. The pride leader must win this fight alone.”

There was a roar from the pride. Gallant had doubled abruptly and sprung for Titan, landing a mighty blow on the side of his skull. Titan reeled back, stumbled, then fell hard on his flank; Gallant pounced, slamming both his forepaws onto his fallen enemy.

“He’s won!” shouted Fearless in excitement, as the pride roared its approval.

“Yes,” cried Swift. “It looks like—” Then she gasped.

Titan’s sidekicks, the two lions who had arrived with him, sprang suddenly forward, attacking Gallant from both flanks. They hung on him, claws digging in, dragging him down and away from Titan.

“Stop! No!” roared Swift, and the pride joined in her protest. “Cheats! Traitors—”

She leaped forward, but Titan was already back on his feet. He lunged, as fast as a snake, and sank his jaws into Gallant’s exposed throat. Fearless saw his father stagger back, off balance, the two lions still fastened with their claws to his sides.

Swift and two other lionesses flew at Titan, but his companions released Gallant and turned on them, snarling and biting, holding them off. Swift gave panicked, roaring cries as
she tried desperately to fight her way to Gallant, but the two big males were too strong.

As the rest of Gallant’s pride joined the attack, the interlopers finally backed off, teeth bared and eyes defiant. With a crash and a grunting exhalation, Gallant collapsed to the earth, and every lion froze and stared. Titan stood over his fallen foe, his jaws still locked on Gallant’s throat.

Fearless felt as if a cold night wind had swept through his body. Titan was not merely holding his father down. His fangs were buried in Gallant’s flesh, and bright red blood was pooling under his great black mane. Gallant’s paws, sprawled helplessly on the ground, twitched in a horrible spasm.

Swift gave a screaming roar. “No!”

“What— Mother, what—” Fearless’s words dried in his throat, and he gulped hard. He had never seen a lion die, but he had encountered plenty of dead antelopes and zebras. That was how his father looked now: limp, blank-eyed, his lifeblood spilling into the dusty earth.

_Father can’t be dead! He is Gallant of Gallantpride!_

The lions stood motionless, glaring at one another over Gallant’s body. An awful silence hung over them. Fearless closed his eyes, desperately hoping it would all go away. But when he opened them again, his father was still lying on the ground.

A hawk screeched. Swift glanced up at it, then her face twisted in rage and grief and she stalked forward, snarling at Titan.

“You broke the rules, Titan Prideless! Worse, you broke the
Code! You may kill only to survive!”

Titan sneered. “What do I care for the Code? This pride is now mine—Swift Titanpride!”

With a roar, Swift leaped forward. Titan, shocked for a moment, staggered back, and the rest of Gallant’s pride joined the attack. Fearless gaped, horrified, as great tawny bodies clashed, jaws snapped, and claws tore.

But Titan was fighting back hard, and so were his two side-kicks.

“Kill them!” bellowed Titan above the chaos. “Kill the ones who resist! Titanpride will not allow rebels!”

Fearless hopped and bounced frantically, trying to see a way into the fighting. But the lions looked so big, and so terrifying. He might be crushed by one of his own pride before he could even reach Titan. At least Valor was at his side.

Titan flung off a young lioness and shook his huge mane. His head turned, and his dark eyes locked with Fearless’s.

“The cubs!” he grunted, his face full of vengeful malevolence. “Kill the cubs, Cunning! Gallant’s heirs must not live!”

The lion with the torn ear wrenched himself out of the battle. He paused for a moment, seeking out the cubs. Then his cruel eyes lit on Fearless.

He sprang.

For an instant Fearless thought he was already dead. His heart froze in his rib cage and he could only watch the huge lion flying at him. But a golden body slammed into Cunning, knocking him off his feet. It was Swift.

“Fearless! Valor!” their mother gasped. “Run!”
Fearless was still rigid with shock. What did she mean? Run where?

Valor nipped his rump hard. “Go, go!”

He scrabbled around, half stumbled, then forced his paws to move. He ran, lengthening his stride, but the savannah was so broad, so open and flat; there was nowhere to hide, and the dust stung his throat and blurred his vision. He could hear Valor right behind him, panting with terror.

Fearless’s breath burned in his chest. He hadn’t known he could run this hard. *Even Valor isn’t catching up.* Terror drove him on, faster and faster across the dry red earth. *Even Valor—*

With a gasp he twisted and looked over his shoulder. And he realized why Valor wasn’t with him: Titan’s other companion had intercepted her, driving her back, roaring and swiping with his claws.

“Valor! Hold on!” Fearless squealed. He skidded to a halt and turned, ready to rush and save her.

“No!” she roared. She ducked another lash of her attacker’s claws. “No, Fearless, run! I can take care of—” She dodged, stumbling, “I can take care of myself! We all have to!”

The one called Cunning appeared a few paces away, his mouth red with blood. Fearless’s knees almost gave out beneath him. *Whose blood? Mother’s?*

“Run, Fearless!” cried Valor.

Fearless spun around and fled. He did not know if the sound of great pounding paws behind him was a pursuer, or the echo of his own panicked running, or just his imagination; he could only keep racing on, until his paws were stinging with
pain and his chest ached. A lizard darted out of his way and a flock of bright blue starlings scattered with shrill cries, but he didn’t even pause. He sprinted on, desperate with terror, his eyes streaming from the dust so he could barely see where he was going.

And then, abruptly, his paws slid from under him. The ground sloped and rocks tumbled away, and he skidded helplessly. Tumbling head over tail, he crashed down, clutching frantically for a pawhold. The last thing he saw was the bright blue sky, somehow in the wrong place and at the wrong angle.

Then he was spinning in the air. A hard sudden impact, and one dazzling flash of light, and Fearless’s world turned black.
Fearless blinked. The light was too bright, and his head hurt. There was something odd about the sunlight; it flickered and dipped and sparkled. For a moment he dared to hope it had all been a dream—that he was lying under the flat branches of the acacia trees with his mother and Valor and . . .

No. He gasped and opened his eyes fully, wincing with pain. He was lying not on grass, but on a rough tangle of twigs and sticks and green leaves. And of course, there was no Swift and no Valor. No Gallantpride.

I’m alone.

A great wrench of grief twisted his stomach. And Father is dead.

Strange smells drifted into his nostrils. Sniffing at them helped take his mind off his misery. Fearless frowned and looked around; there was one scent he recognized. Feathers.
He remembered it from the time Valor caught a stork, pretty much by accident.

The instant of happy memory was drowned at once. Valor’s gone, he remembered again. Father’s dead, and she and Mother probably are, too. His chest heaved with grief. He tried to sit up, though every part of him ached. The twigs beneath him held steady: they appeared to be tangled together with deliberate care. It’s not just a pile of forest litter, he thought. Something had made the twigs into a broad, secure circle.

Panic rose in his throat. I’m in a nest, he realized. A really, really big nest . . .

And the nest was in a colossal jackalberry tree. Through the leathery green leaves he could see gray branches spreading out, and, peering over the edge, the solid earth below looked hazy with distance. Heart thundering, he shuffled back from the edge of the nest and whimpered in terror. How did I get up here?

Not by myself. I can’t do anything by myself. His grief was suddenly overwhelmed by terrible shame. I’d just been given my name: Fearless. I swore to Father I’d live up to it. And what did I do? I ran away at the first sign of trouble.

He had to do better, try harder. Hesitantly, Fearless got to his paws, being careful not to disturb the nest. It looked sturdy, but he didn’t want to dislodge anything; the whole thing might collapse and send him plummeting down. As he stretched his aching muscles, his flanks stung, and he peered at them, shocked. There were deep puncture marks, crusted with dried blood. Fearless gave a small mewl of distress.
He gritted his jaws. *Mother isn’t here. I have to help myself, like Valor said.*

Licking at the wounds, he made himself think. It was obvious, now, what had happened: a bird had brought him up here. It must have seen him lying where he fell. Swift had told him all about birds, and how some of them ate flesh or rot-meat: vultures, eagles, hawks. Whatever it was, it must have been huge. Maybe it was that vulture he’d seen and roared at. Fearless shuddered. *And it might come back any moment.* . . .

*I have to get down from here!*

Fearless swallowed hard and crept back to the edge of the nest. Oh, it was a very tall tree. He could see the green crowns of surrounding trees, so he was high above even them. The mountains far in the distance had never been much more than a thin blue haze, but now he could clearly make out farther peaks beyond; there were grooves and gullies in the savannah that he hadn’t noticed before, and he could see whole herds of grass-eaters, tiny and distant.

There was no way he could jump. He’d have to climb down backward, clinging on to the branches and the trunk with his claws. *I might fall to my death.*

It seemed a terrifying prospect, but what choice did he have? *Something built this nest. Something big, with sharp claws.*

*If I don’t try to climb down, I’m going to get eaten instead.* Another whimper of terror escaped from Fearless’s dry throat.

The nest had been built over a couple of thick branches; Fearless clambered over the edge and onto one of them. Just one paw at a time, he decided. *And don’t panic.*
Crouching low, he pulled himself along the branch. The nest was not far from the enormous, thick trunk. He narrowed his eyes. *Come on, Fearless. Live up to your name!*

He reached out a paw, dug in his claws, and dragged himself a little farther. His heart thudding, he stretched out his other paw and did it again.

*Not far now.* He looked down.

*Ohhhh . . . that was a mistake.* The ground seemed farther away than ever, now that he was outside the relative safety of the nest, and his head swam. *The trunk, the trunk, I just have to get to the—*

He lurched forward, too fast, snatching with his claws at the branch. He missed and flailed even more wildly, trying to keep his balance. But his body shifted sideways, and Fearless felt himself slipping around the branch.

There was another, thinner bough, just below him and to the left. Panicking, he let himself slip and grabbed for it. His claws sank into the bark. He was dangling by his forepaws, his hind legs swinging in the air, but his grip was good, and he gave a shuddering cry of relief.

At that moment, the thinner branch creaked and gave a little.

*No, no, no . . . .*

It snapped.

Fearless tumbled down through the branches. He snatched hopelessly with his claws, but couldn’t catch another hold. His rump thudded against a branch and he squealed, but it didn’t matter, because he was still falling, faster now, and in a
moment he would hit the ground hard and—

Something seized his scruff, yanking him up short and halting his fall so abruptly the breath was knocked out of him.

For long moments, he could only dangle there helplessly, panting in high-pitched, whistling breaths. Wide-eyed, he stared through the branches and leaves at the yellow earth, still far below. The thing that had caught him must have long toes with claws—he could feel them snagged in his fur—but he was unable to twist his head to see more. Only when he was lifted and dumped on a branch did he get a glimpse of the creature.

It dusted its slender brown paws together, tilted its head, and studied him.

Fearless stared back. He had never seen anything like it. It sat perfectly comfortably on the bough in front of him, peering at him with dark amber eyes fringed with brown fuzzy fur. Its snout was long and black, a thin white scar slashed above the nostrils, and when it grinned at him, Fearless could see long yellow fangs.

He didn’t know what it was, but those teeth made it look very much like a flesh-eater. He backed onto his rump and lashed out at the thing with his claws.

He wobbled on the branch again and had to grab it with his forepaws. The creature tilted its head the other way.

“I wouldn’t move too much if I were you,” it said.

Fearless, panting and trembling, sat very still again.

“That’s better,” said his rescuer. “Shall we introduce ourselves? My name is Stinger.” Whatever this creature was, it
didn’t seem about to eat him. If anything, there was a sparkle of humor in its eyes.

_Though I can’t see anything to smile about._

“Can you speak?” said the stranger. “This will be tricky if you can’t.”

“I’m Fearless,” Fearless growled, with as much ferocity as he could manage.

“Fearless, eh?” The creature yelped with amusement. “I should say you are. Do you know who made that nest? I don’t know many animals who would go visiting one of the biggest eagles in Bravelands.”

“I wasn’t visiting it, I—” Fearless stopped short when he saw the humor in the animal’s expression. _Oh. He’s joking._ He licked his jaws nervously. “What are _you_?”

“I’m a baboon, _obviously._” Stinger shook his head and tutted. “Why, what are _you_?” he mimicked.

“I’m a . . . a lion. I’m Fearless Gallantpride!”

He’d heard of baboons before. Flesh-eaters, sometimes. This one wasn’t all that scary, though.

“Oh, you’re a _lion._” Stinger grinned, and Fearless realized he was mocking him again. “Well, I’ve never seen a lion being carried away by an eagle before, so I came to investigate. And aren’t you lucky I did!”

Fearless swallowed. He glanced down and back up at Stinger. The baboon seemed friendly enough, even though his teeth did look nasty. “I guess so,” he muttered. “Thanks.”

“That’s better.” Stinger sat up and held out his elegant paw. “Now, let’s get you down from here.”
“I’m not sure I—ow!”

Stinger was quicker than he looked. In an instant, he had Fearless tucked under his long foreleg and was swinging elegantly down through the branches, springing with ease to the most secure footholds. Fearless barely had time to be scared. In fact, he barely had time to draw a breath. When the branches ended and Stinger began to climb down the last long section of trunk, Fearless could see that he hadn’t come alone: a big crowd of baboons was gathered at the base of the tree, and they were all staring up with curiosity.

The light beneath the trees was all green shadows, and the foliage grew dense and verdant, but everywhere Fearless looked he could see more baboons—they were perched on mossy branches, crouched on damp rocks, peering out from fern clumps, or simply staring at him from out in the open. The sheer numbers, combined with the strange, rich scents of the forest, made his head reel. Stinger’s pride—or whatever baboons called their groups—was much bigger than Gallant’s.

There must have been fifty baboons there, some even bigger than Stinger, some much smaller. All of them had the same long, clever paws, powerful forelegs, and vicious-looking fangs. When Stinger reached the bottom and set down Fearless in the middle of them, he decided the best thing he could do was stand very still, try to look tall, and let them stare.

*Just hope I haven’t escaped being eagle-food only to become baboon-food.*

“Wow,” said one of the baboons, stalking curiously forward. “It really is a lion cub.”
“Indeed it is,” said Stinger proudly. “And not just any lion cub, he’ll have you know. This one calls itself Fearless Gallantpride.”

“Gallantpride, eh?” A small female baboon, clasping a baby to her chest, walked a circle around Fearless, examining him from nose to tail-tip. “So where is this pride of yours, youngster?”

Fearless flinched. “Titan stole my pride,” he growled. “And I’m going to take it back!”

A terrible, earsplitting howl erupted from the baboons. Fearless took a startled pace back, but he realized after a moment that they weren’t threatening him. It was worse than that: they were laughing.

The female slapped the ground, hooting with hilarity as the others whooped. “Titan must have been a terribly big lion to be able to steal your pride.”

“Now, Mango, don’t tease,” said Stinger, but he was grinning.

Fearless hunched his shoulders, glowering and blinking. “It was my father’s pride. My father, Gallant. Titan killed him and stole his pride.”

The baboons’ laughter faded into gasps and hiccupping coughs. Mango scratched her tail, looking a little remorseful. “Oh. You poor cub.”

“I will get my father’s pride back,” Fearless growled. “I will beat Titan.”

Stinger tapped his back with a paw. “I’m sure you will, Fearless Gallantpride, but not yet. All in good time, eh? For
now, you’ll have to stay with us. We’re the Brightforest Troop, and we’re very hospitable.” He grinned, an unnerving sight given the size of his teeth, and gestured to the sky. “The Great Spirit sent you, that’s what I think.” He raised his head to include his fellow baboons: “This youngster fell from the sky! He’s Fearless, Cub of the Stars, and he’ll bring good fortune to the Brightforest Troop.”

They all looked at one another. One baboon wrinkled his snout. “I don’t know. What does the Starleaf say?”

Fearless snuffed in a breath, uneasy. He didn’t know what a Starleaf was, but the baboon’s voice had been filled with respect and anticipation. *This must be important, I guess.*

The crowd was parting, and through the gap walked a stately-looking baboon with a serious face, the fur on her forehead streaked with white. She stopped right in front of Fearless, but instead of looking him up and down as the others had, she gazed directly into his eyes. Her amber stare was so intense he felt dizzy, and his tail twitched with anxiety. The chatter of the other baboons died away, and Fearless could sense their anticipation as they waited for the Starleaf to speak.

At last she dropped her gaze from Fearless. She raised her forepaw, uncurling the long toes to reveal a small pale stone. She lifted it skyward, and as the stone caught the mottled light slanting through the trees, it burst into glowing white brightness. Fearless couldn’t help gasping—it looked as if she were holding one of the stars.

Finally, with a twitch of her snout, the Starleaf lowered
the stone and spoke to the troop. “Stinger speaks wisely,” she announced. “A cub, found where he should not be, and brought there by the greatest of the eagles? The Moonstone tells me that this is a good omen. The sky is home to the Great Spirit, and the sky gave us this cub.”

There were mutters and murmuring from the troop. Some of them scratched at their fur; others picked their teeth.

“I don’t know, Starleaf,” growled a smaller male. “A lion in a tree? How can that suggest good luck and not great chaos? It’s unnatural.”

“There’s another thing,” put in a grizzled older baboon. “He’s small now, your Cub of the Stars, but he won’t stay that way. Do we want a fully grown lion hanging around our troop?”

“Far too dangerous,” muttered another.

“I’m not lion-food,” cried a baboon from the back. “I say we kill him now, before he’s big and strong enough to do it to us.”

“I agree, Grub,” called a mother baboon, clutching two little ones. “He shouldn’t be around our babies.”

“He’ll grow huge,” complained another young male. “Much too risky. I know he’s little, but kill him quickly and it won’t be unkind.”

“And think of the future enormous lion while you kill him,” pointed out a sulky-looking senior. “Then you won’t feel quite so bad. It’s not as if we’d be breaking the Code—we’d be protecting the troop! Come on, Stinger, let’s get this over with.”

“I’ll tell you another thing,” said Grub, pushing past
Stinger. “There’s good eating on a lion.” He licked his jaws as other baboons gathered behind him. Fearless tried to return his yellow-eyed stare, but when Grub opened his jaws and displayed his enormous fangs, Fearless couldn’t help but tremble.

They were crowding around him now, teeth bared and jaws gaping. He couldn’t see Stinger anymore—and all the faces were hostile.

But I’m Fearless Gallantpride! I won’t bring shame on my name again. I’ll make my father proud!

He swallowed hard, closing his eyes briefly. He could feel the hot, rank breath of the baboons on his face, but he wouldn’t flinch, not again.

I wanted to be with my family, didn’t I? And they’re gone forever. Soon I will be too. He gulped hard and fixed his jaws in a defiant snarl.

This time I’m not going to run. This time I’ll face death bravely. . . .
“Stay quiet, Mud. And still!” Thorn placed a paw on his friend’s foreleg.

“Don’t worry, Thorn,” whispered Mud. “I won’t make a sound. We’re going to do this!”

The two young baboons were crouched near the top of a fever tree, keeping as still as they could, well concealed by drooping leaves and yellow flowers. From this vantage point they had a clear view of the next tree, and the buzzard’s nest near its crown. If we can avoid being spotted as we run along the branch, thought Thorn, we’ll be able to jump across quite easily.

Then it would just be a matter of dodging the beak of an angry buzzard. . . .

The bird hadn’t moved in ages. It was tawny-colored and small compared to some of the huge eagles Thorn had seen.
He was pretty sure it wasn’t strong enough to carry one of them away—not even a baboon as small as Mud—but its hooked beak and curled talons meant he didn’t want to take any chances.

He was determined to get himself one of its eggs, though. *And Mud has to have one too.*

Mud tugged at Thorn’s fur with his small paws. “Look!” he whispered. “It’s Pebble!”

Following his pointed finger, Thorn scowled. Another young baboon was climbing the trunk of the buzzard’s tree, climbing up quickly, paw over paw. “So we’ve got competition,” he murmured to Mud. “But those eggs are ours.”

Every young baboon in the troop was hoping to filch one of the buzzard’s clutch, of course. Steal the Egg of a Flesh-Eating Bird was the first task of the Three Feats—the challenges every young baboon faced in their sixth year, and their one and only opportunity to move up the troop hierarchy. Thorn wasn’t going to waste his chance—or let some other baboon steal it from under his snout. He bared his teeth silently at the interloper.

“Pebble’s got no chance,” he muttered. “He’s too impatient.”

“I hope you’re right.” Mud clenched his paws, looking determined.

When Thorn’s parents died several seasons ago they had still been Deeproots, happy to remain in the lowest rank and proud of the menial work they did for the Brightforest Troop. Thorn had loved them dearly, and he was glad they had been content with their lot—but it didn’t mean he had to be. *If I can*
steal one of these eggs I’ll be a Lowleaf. And after that, a Middleleaf. And finally . . . Thorn Highleaf!

It sounded so good in his head. Highleaves were the senior baboons, the ones who ran the troop and fought to protect it, and Thorn could not imagine anything more challenging and exciting. *I’m not going to spend my life collecting bedding and cleaning up after the troop. No way!*

Besides, if he and Berry Highleaf were ever going to be together officially, he had to be of the same rank as her. And he did, more than anything else in the world, want to be with Berry Highleaf. . . .

*Never mind Highleaf,* Mud had joked, just this morning. *You want to be Thorn Crownleaf, don’t you?*

Thorn had laughed at that. But on a day like today, even eventually becoming leader of the troop seemed possible. The sky above the fever tree was a startling blue, but massive clouds piled on the horizon; the rains had already begun to make the savannah green and fertile, and the rivers were running fuller. A bright future as a Highleaf, a life at Berry’s side, seemed to open out before him.

His daydreams were interrupted by a growling rumble in his stomach. Thorn scowled, feeling his good mood rapidly fade. He and Mud had been watching the buzzard’s nest for two days now, crawling a little closer every time the buzzard flew off, and they were both starving. And the rain might make the savannah look pretty, and the fruit grow plump and plentiful, but there was a dampness in his fur that he couldn’t
get rid of. He could have sworn he smelled of mold. Thorn fidgeted and scowled.

Beside him, Mud grunted. “That buzzard has to go feed again soon, surely.”

“How long since it last hunted?”

Mud glanced knowingly at the sky. “Long enough. It’s definitely due to go again, any moment. We’re lucky—if its mate was still around, this would have been a lot harder.”

“But it never leaves the nest for long. What if it doesn’t fly far?”

“This one prefers hares or hyrax. There aren’t any burrows nearby, so it’ll have to fly a little way at least. We can do it if we’re quick.”

But we can’t wait much longer, Thorn thought, glancing at the sun. It seemed to be dropping through the sky much faster than usual, like a gazelle with a hyena on its tail. The rules of the First Feat gave them only until the moon was full to find an egg—and that would be tonight. Over the last few days several baboons had returned to the troop’s camp at Tall Trees, clutching eggs and triumphant at becoming Lowleaves. If he and Mud didn’t do the same before sundown, they would have blown the First Feat forever.

He glanced at Mud. His friend’s eyes, huge in his small face, were fixed patiently on the nest. Thorn forced himself to stop worrying. Mud wasn’t just his best friend—he was one of the smartest baboons Thorn knew. His plan to watch and wait would work in the end.
It has to!

Thorn twisted his head to eye their rival, who had chosen to climb directly up the tree. Thorn clicked his teeth in exasperation as Pebble continued his greedy scramble up the trunk. He’s going to spook the buzzard. Sure enough, the buzzard spread its huge wings and shrieked in anger. It rose up in the air and swooped down on the rash thief, squealing threats in its strange bird language of Skytongue. I could have told him that would happen, thought Thorn.

Pebble whooped in alarm and scuttled back down the tree, dodging the buzzard’s raking talons. The bird didn’t continue its pursuit for long; huffing and grumbling, it flapped back to its nest, taking long moments to peer suspiciously around the trees below. Thorn and Mud kept still, and at last the buzzard seemed to relax, half closing its yellow eyes.

Was it going to settle again?

“We could be here a long time . . .” muttered Thorn.

He let his shoulders slump, but at the same moment, the buzzard stretched its wings and took off into the sky. The two young baboons watched, hearts thumping with excitement, as it flew away swiftly westward.

“Now’s our chance!” exclaimed Thorn in delight.

“Wait until it’s out of sight,” Mud reminded him. “Just in case it finds some rot-flesh nearby and—”

Before he could finish, another young baboon flung himself from the opposite treetop, landing on a branch close to the nest. Blinking in surprise, Thorn recognized his heavy
forehead and long limbs. He gave a groan of despair. “That’s Nut!”

“Oh no,” said Mud, staring miserably. “He’s going to beat us to it.”

Thorn spent half his life protecting his friend from Nut, the nasty-tempered young baboon who was now within reach of their eggs. He clenched his paws in frustration.

“No, wait!” Mud pointed at the sky. “The buzzard’s coming back!”

Thorn grinned. That served Nut right! The buzzard must have spotted him, and was flying back with swift beats of its enormous wings. Diving at Nut, it screeched and clawed at him; Nut barked in anger, but he was forced to scamper back from the nest and down the tree. This time the buzzard didn’t give up the chase; it swooped after Nut as he dodged and scurried through the scrub, buffeting him with its wings whenever he was exposed, and snatching at his back with its savage talons.

Thorn didn’t wait to enjoy the show any longer. “Now’s our chance!”

He raced along the branch and leaped for the nest. Glancing back, he saw Mud creeping carefully along, some way back, looking nervous. He sighed to himself. If only Mud wasn’t so scrawny, he thought. Everything frightens him, even that stupid bully Nut.

“Wait there, Mud!” he hooted softly. “I’ll get the eggs.”

Scrambling into the nest, he spotted them at once—three big eggs, cream-colored and speckled with brown. Seizing
one in each long-fingered paw, he raised his head and glanced around anxiously, half expecting the buzzard to dive at him, beak snapping and stabbing. But he could still hear it, distantly, harrying a squealing Nut through the scrub. Thorn allowed himself a grin.

But he wasn’t going to make the mistake of hanging around. Cradling the eggs against his chest with a single paw, he made the jump to the next tree, then hurried back to Mud.

He passed his friend an egg. “We’ve done it!”

Mud’s wide eyes shone with delight as he gazed at the treasure in his paws. “You did it! Thank you, Thorn!”

“We did it together,” Thorn insisted. “You did all the thinking, and I only did that very last bit on my own. Now we’re both Lowleaves!” Victory thrilled through his bones. I’m not a Deeproot anymore! I’m really, truly on my way—straight to the top!

Chattering happily, the two of them made their way carefully down the tree, handling their eggs with care. Mud couldn’t stop gazing at his; he looked, thought Thorn affectionately, as if he might burst with pride.

It took a while, since both baboons were nervous of stumbling and breaking their eggs, but they had finally bounded a good way from the buzzard’s nest, and slowed to a strutting walk. Mud grinned. “My mother is going to be so surprised.”

“She’s going to be thrilled—” began Thorn.

“Well,” said a new and vicious voice. “What have we here?” Thorn halted, bristling, and bared his teeth. “Hello, Nut.” Nut crashed aggressively out of the bushes ahead of them.
He looked ragged and out of breath after his escape from the buzzard, and there were bloody scratches on his back and neck, but Nut was still big and brutish, and Thorn wasn’t about to let down his guard.

“How did you get those eggs?” Nut snapped, glaring at them.

“With patience,” retorted Thorn. “And by waiting until the buzzard was gone.”

“Until it had attacked me, you mean.” Nut hissed through his teeth. “Those are my eggs.”

“No,” said Thorn. “They’re not. It’s not our fault you were too stupid to wait.”

“Those scratches look nasty,” put in Mud hastily.

Thorn sucked in a breath, wincing. His friend was trying to calm things down, Thorn realized, but offering sympathy was never a good strategy with Nut. Nut would think Mud was mocking him—or worse, he’d see it as a sign of weakness.

Sure enough, Nut turned on Mud, snarling. “Yes, they really hurt! Because I did all the work to get those eggs, and you stole them!”

“That’s not true—” began Mud.

“I don’t care. I’m the one who deserves to be a Lowleaf. Not you, Skinnylegs!”

Then, before Mud could catch his breath to reply, Nut lunged, snatched the egg from his paws, and fled.

Nut had vanished into the newly lush undergrowth before Thorn could stop him. Thorn gave a screech of fury, then
jumped and slapped the ground; but although it relieved his feelings a little, there was no point. Nut wasn’t coming back, and he certainly wasn’t returning the egg.

Thorn turned to Mud. His small friend was staring at his empty paws as if he couldn’t quite believe what had happened.

“Oh, Mud. I’m sorry, I should have grabbed Nut. Stopped him.”

“It’s not your fault,” whispered Mud. “I didn’t stand up to him.”

Thorn sighed and sat back on his haunches. He looked down at his own egg. *Mud’s got plenty of brains, but that doesn’t mean he’s cut out for the Three Feats. What if he fails all of them and stays a Deeproot forever?*

A horrible thought struck him. While he was exploring the forests of Bravelands, hunting and defending the troop from monkey attacks, Mud would be stuck at the camp. He’d spend his life being bossed around by all the other ranks, fetching food and bedding, cleaning up and scrubbing around for scraps. *It’s not right, thought Thorn fiercely. Mud’s far too smart for that. And anyway, what’s the point of going on adventures if my best friend can’t be there too?*

“Here,” Thorn blurted, holding out his egg. “You take this one. I can get another.”

Mud’s eyes widened in gratitude, but he shook his head. “No. No, Thorn, I didn’t get it out of the nest. I couldn’t use your egg to make myself a Lowleaf—I wouldn’t feel as if I’d earned it.”
“I don’t mind,” insisted Thorn. “And if I go now, I can be back at the nest—”

“No,” said Mud, catching his shoulder. “It took us long enough to get this egg. And anyway, look.” He pointed at the sun, which was dipping ever lower through the trees. “It’s too late, Thorn. I’ve failed this Feat.”

Thorn knew he was right. It was bitterly disappointing. If it weren’t for Nut, they would both be bounding back to Tall Trees as Lowleaves. But Mud’s triumph had been snatched away, and the rules forbade the baboons from ever trying a Feat again.

“I’m not leaving you behind,” said Thorn. “You’re my best friend.”

“That won’t happen!” Mud put his paw on Thorn’s shoulder and crooned reassuringly. “We’ve still got two more Feats to go, haven’t we? If I pass them, at least I’ll be a Middleleaf.” Poor Mud. The Second and Third Feats were even more demanding, and he didn’t sound any more convinced he’d manage than Thorn was. They both knew that stealing the bird’s egg had been Mud’s best chance of success. With a heavy sigh, Thorn hugged his friend. “Just wait, when I get hold of Nut—”

Mud shook his head again, more emphatically. “No, don’t get yourself in any trouble. It won’t help. And Nut won’t get any satisfaction from this anyway. He knows he didn’t really earn that egg.”

I don’t think that matters to Nut, thought Thorn, as the two friends made their way back toward Tall Trees. But if believing it
is any consolation to Mud, I’m not going to tell him differently.

The two baboons padded back to the small forest that had been the troop’s base for the last few seasons. It was a prized camp, cool and green and lush, the envy of the other baboons and monkeys of Bravelands; the high trees gave shelter and protection, and now that the rains had begun they were heavy with desert dates, figs, and jackfruit. The treasure of the Brightforest camp was the mango tree that had somehow seeded itself among the others; their leader, Bark Crownleaf, was strictly fair in sharing out its sweet-scented gold fruit.

The Brightforest Troop was busy relaxing as Thorn and Mud returned. Mothers nursed their new babies; youngsters chewed on figs; pairs of baboons groomed one another. Thorn felt some of his anger fade away as he watched his big family. It was hard to hold on to resentment when the troop looked so contented and at peace.

“I’d better say hello to Mother,” Mud told him. There was trepidation in the small baboon’s voice, and Thorn watched his friend anxiously as he bounded across to where she sat beneath the mango tree. As the Starleaf, Mud’s mother was high-ranking in the troop, with vital skills in reading the stars, the clouds, and the flight path of birds—any sign, in fact, that was sent by the Great Spirit in the sky. Thorn knew she had ambitions for Mud to follow in her footsteps. But he’d have to become a Highleaf first, he thought sadly, and now that’s not going to happen. Poor Mud. Well, maybe the signs told the Starleaf that he’d return without an egg. She might be expecting it.
Mud was speaking to the Starleaf quietly, but she wasn’t saying much in return, just sitting very still and shaking her white-streaked head.

*I wish she’d hide her disappointment better. All Mud needs is a bit of confidence.*

Sighing, Thorn turned away and went in search of Stinger. The big baboon wasn’t hard to spot; he was crouched in the center of a small clearing, surrounded by a fascinated cluster of little baboons. Best of all, Berry Highleaf was sitting nearby. The sunlight picked out golden strands among her fur, and her large brown eyes shone as she watched her father teach the youngsters.

“See how I’ve made a trap for it with these twigs?” Stinger was explaining. “That means it can’t get at me.”

*He’s showing them how to catch a scorpion,* realized Thorn, spotting the scuttling brown shape between the twigs. He remembered fondly when Stinger had taught the same trick to him. *Every small baboon thinks he’ll learn to do it even better than Stinger,* he thought with amusement. *And no baboon ever quite manages.*

Berry hadn’t spotted him yet. She was following her father’s every move, adoration on her kind, sweet-tempered face.

*I’m going to surprise her,* he decided. *Wait until she hears I’ve completed a Feat!* Holding his egg carefully behind his back, he padded over to her side.

“Thorn!” Her eyes lit up, sparkling in the filtered sunlight.

“Hello, Berry,” he said, wishing he had the nerve to groom her shoulder. “Scorpions again?”
She laughed. “My father’s quite determined that the troop’s going to live on them one day. Just because he loves them. I’d sooner have a mango anytime!”

“He’s a very good teacher, though,” said Thorn, settling down on his haunches to watch.

Stinger brought down a twig, lightning fast, trapping the furious scorpion beneath it. “Like this. See?” He seized it by the tail, avoiding the sting, and squashed it with his other paw. “There. It never got a chance to sting me.”

There were gasps of awe from the young baboons. “I want to try, Stinger!” squealed one.

“We’ll have to find another scorpion first.” Stinger laughed, the scar above his nose wrinkling.

“Are you scared?” asked a small female shyly.

“Course not. How do you think I got my name?” Stinger flicked the dead scorpion with a claw. “It’s because I love scorpions so much!”

“Do they really taste good?” The littlest male made a slightly skeptical face.

“Delicious!” declared Stinger. “The fresher the better!” He pulled off the scorpion’s tail and dropped it on the ground. “There, that’s where its venom is, so you need to throw the tail away. You can eat the rest of it, though. Here.” He pulled the scorpion into small pieces and handed them to the youngsters.

As they nibbled uncertainly, then gulped them down with exclamations of delight, Stinger turned to Thorn. “Hello, Thorn! How did it go?”
Now was his moment. Thorn returned Stinger’s grin, but he couldn’t help looking at Berry as he pulled the egg from behind him. She gasped in delight; then she touched his arm gently and smiled.

“Thorn!” she gasped, her wide brown eyes full of happiness. “Well done!”

“You’ve stolen yourself an egg!” exclaimed her father. Thorn nodded, pleased. “Yes, Stinger.”

“Congratulations, Thorn Lowleaf!”

“This is such good news,” agreed Berry, gazing at him with joy. “Congratulations, Thorn!”

Thorn felt tongue-tied. Besides—especially in front of Stinger—what could he say? Baboons were forbidden to take a mate from outside their own rank. Thorn restricted himself to a nod and a shy smile.

Stinger took the egg from him and turned it in his paws, studying it. “This is very fine, Thorn. These buzzards are watchful and sharp-eyed! It took skill and patience to get its egg.”

Thorn glowed with pride. Such praise from Stinger, the cleverest baboon in the troop, made his heart sing.

“Should I take it to show Beetle?” he asked. Beetle was a member of the Council of fourteen Highleaves who helped advise Bark Crownleaf on running the troop. He was responsible for overseeing the Three Feats.

Stinger waved an airy paw. “No need; I’m on the Council, so I can confirm to Beetle you’re now a Lowleaf.” He handed
Thorn back the egg. “Keep this up and you might even complete all Three Feats, as Berry did.” He flashed an adoring grin at his daughter.

“I wish I was as talented as Berry,” muttered Thorn, thrilled but embarrassed. As Stinger turned away to ask the little baboons how they liked their pieces of scorpion, Thorn shot a glance at her. His heart felt warm and huge inside him. Impulsively, he put the egg into Berry’s paws. “I want you to have this,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Why, thank you, Thorn!” The delight in her eyes was all the reward he needed. He was still smiling a little stupidly at her, speechless, when he felt a massive paw strike his back, knocking him onto the ground.

He rolled over, staring up into gaping jaws. Sunlight glinted on long fangs and cast over him the shadow of a powerfully muscled creature.

Thorn gave a shrill yelp as he scrambled back up.

“Fearless! Watch those clumsy great paws of yours!” The big lion cub roared happily, right in his face.

“You got your egg!” he exclaimed, licking Thorn until he staggered. “I want to hear all about it!”
Fearless gnawed desperately at the rotten log between his paws, sticking his tongue deep under the peeling bark. I’m hungry. I know it’s ungrateful but I can’t help it. I’m always hungry. He felt another few termites stick to it, so he lashed his tongue back into his jaws and chomped noisily, pretending they were a mouthful of antelope.

Oh, antelope . . . I still remember you, antelope. . . . You were so delicious and meaty and big. . . .

Mice and birds were tasty enough, but they were the most substantial prey he’d eaten in ages, and they didn’t fill the belly of a growing lion. He thought with aching longing of zebra-flesh. Mother and the other lionesses used to bring us zebra. And wildebeest. And bushbuck . . .

He mustn’t think too much about it, and not only because
he missed the taste of warm, chunky meat. Thinking of his family sent a wrench of pain through his gut.

_I’m one of Brightforest Troop now. They are my family._ He knew how lucky he was that Stinger had found him and rescued him, and how kind the other baboons had been to let him stay. That was down to Stinger, too: with his charm and tact and clever words—and the backup of the kindly Starleaf—Stinger had talked his whole troop around.

Some of them might have had second thoughts, but Fearless had been one of the troop ever since, and they could hardly kill him and eat him now. _I need to feel more thankful, I know. I might have had no family at all, now. I might have been dead._

_It’s just . . . zebra . . ._

Fearless gave a deep sigh.

“Hey, Fearless!” Berry, Stinger’s gentle daughter, loped toward him. “I’ll show you a better way. Look.” Taking a twig, she sat down beside him and began to poke at the log. Her gold-speckled brow furrowed in concentration, then she brightened as she pulled the stick back out. Its whole length was clogged with termites. “There!”

“Thanks, Berry.” Fearless dutifully licked the termites from the twig. “The trouble is, I don’t have paws like yours.” He raised one dolefully, showing the pads. “I can’t pick up a stick myself.”

“Maybe you could use your claws to grip it?” she suggested. “You do have very long claws. . . .”

That didn’t sound like a bad idea, but before Fearless could try Berry’s suggestion, Stinger bounded to his daughter’s side
and greeted him cheerfully. “Fearless! I need you to come to the Council meeting with me.”

Fearless sat up on his haunches at once. “Of course, Stinger.” The Council that advised the Crownleaf was made up of the fourteen eldest Highleaves of the troop, and each of them was allowed to choose a retinue—a small group of baboons, selected from any rank, who would help them carry out their Council duties. Highleaves usually picked out baboons they thought had a glowing future, so Fearless was proud to be one of Stinger’s retinue; he knew it was a great privilege, especially since it let him attend Council meetings to watch and listen. More than almost anything else, it was this that made Fearless feel he belonged in Brightforest Troop.

Getting to his paws, he said good-bye to Berry and followed Stinger to the place where the Council sat: an almost circular clearing beneath the tallest acacia of the grove. Vines and ferns hung thickly from the surrounding trees, giving the glade privacy as well as an atmosphere of solemnity and shadow. Right in the center of the clearing was a huge, smooth-topped boulder: the Crown Stone. On it sat a big, grave-faced baboon, waiting in silence for the fourteen councilors to gather. Dappled sunlight played on her brown fur, shifting with the movement of the foliage above her. Her eyes were deep-set, solemn, and wise. Fearless dipped his head in respect to Bark Crownleaf, head of the troop.

Stinger and the other councilors settled in a circle around the Crown Stone, their retinues sitting behind them. Fearless crouched beside the two young baboons who also served
Stinger—Grass Middleleaf, who was tall and always chewing on a stalk, and Fly Lowleaf, who was slight but fast. An ant crawled up Fearless’s leg, and Fly’s front paw shot out to grab it. He swallowed it and grinned at Fearless, revealing chipped teeth.

The peaceful birdsong of the glade was interrupted abruptly by Grub Highleaf, the baboon with small yellow eyes and thin lips who had been keenest to kill Fearless when he was a cub.

“What’s he doing here?” Grub complained. “Do you really have to bring your lion, Stinger? Do you think he’ll get you your way in the Council?”

Stinger drew himself up onto his hind legs, curling his lip in offense. “This is Fearless, Cub of the Stars,” he exclaimed. “He’s one of our troop, Grub, as well as a member of my retinue, and don’t you forget it.”

“Council!” Bark Crownleaf stood up on the Crown Stone, and Stinger respectfully dropped back onto all fours. “We are not here to discuss Fearless’s place in the troop.” She stared at Grub until he lowered his eyes, grumbling. “And I am not interested in revisiting old arguments. We have come together to discuss moving Brightforest Troop to a new settlement.”

The wizened figure of Beetle Highleaf rose. “It is a weighty question, Bark Crownleaf. We have kept our base here in Tall Trees for an unusually long time, but to move from here would be a drastic decision. The fruits are plentiful, the creek provides water, and the trees give us good shelter. There is room for all.”

“Indeed,” mused Bark. “But such abundance does not last
forever. The dry season will return as it always does; and it is not natural for baboons to stay in one place for so long. We are nomads and wanderers, Beetle Highleaf, and at some point we will have to leave here. Best to discuss it now, before it becomes urgent.”

“Frankly,” muttered Grub, “the movements of the troop are not the lion’s concern.”

“Grub, that’s enough.” Bark gave him a reproving glance.

“Well, Bark,” murmured Mango, clearing her throat, “I think Grub has a point, actually.”

Branch Highleaf pursed his thin lips. “Me too,” he muttered. There were more sounds of agreement from around the Council Glade. Grass stopped chewing and shot Fearless a sympathetic glance.

Bark hesitated, seeming about to speak, then closed her mouth and gave a slow, regretful nod. Stinger coughed tactfully and turned to Fearless.

“Perhaps, then, the Cub of the Stars could leave us, this time,” he said. He blinked apologetically at Fearless. “It might make our discussions run more smoothly. Would you mind, my friend?”

Fearless shot a quick look around the glade, but no baboon stood up in his defense. One of Grub’s retinue, smirking, whispered something to his neighbor that made the other baboon snort with laughter.

Embarrassed, Fearless gave a rapid nod. “Of course, Stinger. No, I don’t mind, not at all. I’ll, er . . . leave you all to it.”

“Bad luck,” muttered Fly.
Fearless backed up a few paces, then turned and left the glade with as much dignity as he could muster.

He felt the stares of the councilors and their retinues on his rump, and was glad when he was out of sight among the trees. The trouble is, I do mind, he thought sadly. I understand why Stinger said it. And I’m happy living here with Brightforest Troop.

I just wish they all accepted me the way Stinger does.

He’d just have to prove himself, that was all. Fearless picked up his paws, trying to feel more confident. I’m a good guard for the troop, Stinger said so. No animal dares to mess with Brightforest Troop while I’m around.

Among Stinger’s responsibilities as councilor was to keep the troop secure, and Fearless helped him with this. He patrolled the boundary, watched for threats, defended his friends, and deterred their enemies. “You’re the troop’s protector,” Stinger had told him, and Fearless still remembered the glow of pride he’d felt at these words. It was an important job, and he did it well—better than any baboon could. Surely that made him indispensable?

As he padded toward the Tall Trees boundary, he heard a yelp of greeting.

“Hey, Fearless!”

He flicked his ears forward. Thorn was scampering toward him, Mud at his side as usual. At the sight of his best friends, Fearless’s spirits lifted, the Council meeting forgotten.

When the troop had brought their Cub of the Stars back to Tall Trees, the kind Starleaf had introduced him straight away to her son. Mud had taken to Fearless immediately and
had become the cub’s staunch friend and defender—which might not have meant much practically, given Mud’s size, but Mud had also introduced him to Thorn. And Thorn, completely loyal to Mud, had befriended Fearless wholeheartedly and without hesitation.

Fearless growled in cheerful greeting. “Thorn! Mud! I’m going to patrol the camp.”

“Then we’ll come with you. Right, Mud?”

Mud nodded eagerly, and Fearless crouched down to let his friends scramble up onto his back. His mood lightened instantly; it was hard to be gloomy in the young baboons’ company. But he had to stay focused on the patrol too.

“The next Feat is coming up,” chattered Mud. “Crossing the Crocodile River!”

“We’ve been wondering how we’re going to do it,” said Thorn, idly grooming Fearless’s neck as he rode along. “You can help us work it out, Fearless.”

“I will,” Fearless promised. “We’ll find a way, but . . .” An idea struck him. “Hey! Why don’t I try the Three Feats too?”

He looked over his shoulder to see the two baboons exchange a surprised glance.

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t,” said Mud, though he sounded doubtful. “The rules say you have to be six to take part, though.”

Fearless tossed his head. “That’s in five years’ time! I can’t wait that long—and anyway, I’m a lion. I’ll be fully grown when I’m three. No, I’m going to do the Three Feats now.”
He looked back at his friends once more. Thorn was studying him curiously. “What’s brought this on?”

“Something Grub said.” Fearless told them what had happened at the Council meeting. “So if I do the Three Feats,” he said, climbing carefully over a branch, “no baboon could say I wasn’t a true member of the troop.”

Thorn gave a snort. “Don’t listen to Grub! He talks a lot of monkey dung. Of course you’re one of us.”

“You don’t need to prove anything,” agreed Mud. “Besides, the deadline for the First Feat has gone. I failed, remember? Even if you did get an egg, it wouldn’t count.”

Fearless picked up his paws, stepping around a crawling nest of termites. “It’ll still show Grub and the others, won’t it?”

Thorn laughed. “There’s no point arguing once you’ve got an idea in your head, is there?” He ruffled the fur between Fearless’s ears playfully. “It’ll be hard for you, though. You don’t have fingers like ours. How will you get hold of an egg?”

“I’ll find a way,” Fearless told them.

“I’m sure you will,” Mud said, “and we’ll help you. Hey, Thorn—this is a good place. Look at those logs. Let’s practice here.”

The two sprang down from Fearless’s back, and he watched them wrestle two big logs into place so that they were positioned across from each other, like the banks of a river. Thorn clambered onto the bigger log, squatting on his stocky haunches as he scratched his broad, gray-furred face thoughtfully. On the opposite log, Mud was gesturing excitedly with
his skinny forelegs, pointing out ways to dodge the imaginary crocodiles between him and his friend.

“IT’ll depend on the part of the river the Council chooses. See, if there are sandbanks, we should be able to swim to each one and take a break. Not for long, because the crocs won’t just stay in the water, but see what happens if we change direction a few times. . . .”

Fearless’s confidence waned a little. Mud’s so smart—and Thorn’s so clever with his paws. They hadn’t seemed hugely convinced by his plan. And even if he did manage to complete all the Three Feats, would Grub and the others still say he didn’t belong?

He shook himself. That kind of thinking wouldn’t help. And anyway, he had more pressing things to think about at the moment—keeping the troop safe.

Solemnly he began to pad along the boundary of Tall Trees, where the lush, cool greenness of tree and palm and fern ended in an expanse of savannah that shimmered gold in the heat. He sniffed and narrowed his eyes. When I’m a Highleaf warrior, he thought, this is how I’ll protect my troop. Take that, Titan! He swiped his paw at some rustling leaves, and saw a big furry spider scuttle away in panic. That showed you. . . .

Above him, starlings were jabbering in a thorn tree. He gave a grunting roar and slammed his paws against its trunk, sending the whole flock screeching skyward. You won’t ambush me from a tree, Titan! He was feeling much more confident now, and far happier. I’m good at this.

Following the boundary, Fearless checked each tree
thoroughly. By the time he’d scared a snake back into its hole and scattered some lazy egrets in a panic of white wings, there was a swagger in his step.

He was so wrapped up in important defensive measures, he barely noticed the dimming of the sky. Only when Thorn hooted, “Fearless, where are you?” did he realize dusk was falling.

Surprised, he turned back to see his friends loping toward him. The sky above was a deeper, darker blue, and flat-topped acacia trees were silhouetted against a far orange horizon.

“Time to get back to camp, Fearless,” called Mud. “We’ve been looking for you!”

“I didn’t realize,” he told them. He glanced back at the deep golden glow that lay along the horizon. Something was moving between two solitary acacias; Fearless narrowed his eyes.

“Wait a moment. . . .”

The figure was a lion, its stride easy and relaxed; a lone adult male with a crooked tail, silhouetted against the sunset. Fearless didn’t often spot lions, now that he lived in Tall Trees, but whenever he did, a wistful feeling came over him. He watched the great beast as it padded unhurriedly over the line of the horizon many hundreds of paces away, and disappeared.

What would it be like, living like a real lion? Would I be going back to my pride now, like he is? Would I spend the night hunting, or leave it to the lionesses?

The savannah looked so open and inviting, stretching out to what seemed like infinity. The haze of twilight was deepening to dark blue as the horizon faded to bronze, and the vast
The web of stars had begun to twinkle into life. Behind Fearless, the forest lay dark and deep and damp, already echoing with the chirp and croak of insects and frogs. It was home, but it was not a place a lion could run forever, where he could leap and bound and stretch his muscles pursuing the herds.

He swallowed hard. He’d had his own pride once, a place where he truly belonged. The old guilt crept into his belly. *Maybe I should have stayed to fight Titan. I should have tried to protect my family, even if it was hopeless. But I fled.*

“Fearless, come on!” called Thorn impatiently. “If you don’t hurry up, we’ll be eating twigs tonight.”

Fearless turned from the open savannah. It was useless gnawing over his regrets. *The baboons are my friends, and I care about them. That’s what I do. I keep them safe.*

All the same, as he padded back to his friends and paused to let them climb on his back, he couldn’t help a last, longing stare toward the sunset where the lion had vanished.

Fearless stood up on his hind legs, clawing in frustration at the bark of a kigelia tree. He peered up through its branches and its long, dangling fruit, some even larger than Mud, and stared longingly at the eagle’s nest in the topmost branches. *It’s not that far. It’s not. I can do this.*

“What are you waiting for?” Nut slapped the ground impatiently with his big foreleg. “You’re wasting your time, though. The Council will never let this count as a Feat.”

Thorn frowned. “Why were you so keen to find him an eagle’s nest, then?”
“Oh, it isn’t a waste of our time,” sneered Nut. “We’re going to enjoy watching him make an idiot of himself.” The small cluster of cronies around Nut yammered in agreement. “The eagle will come back soon,” barked one. “Get on with it, Fearless!”

“Fearless, ha!” Scornfully, Nut peeled back his lips from his fangs. “What a ridiculous name, when you think about it. You can’t even get up the nerve to climb a tree!”

His gang hooted with laughter. “That’s right, Nut. You’re right!”

“Maybe your name should be Big Talk,” Nut went on, warming to his theme. “Because you say you’re Fearless, but you’re all Big Talk!”

This was almost too much for some of his gang. They shrieked hysterically, bouncing up and down, jaws gaping wide with hilarity. Only Mud and Thorn stayed quiet, glowering at Nut’s accomplices.

At last Mud scratched his head and furrowed his brow. “I think it’s odd the eagle’s been gone for so long,” he muttered. “Birds need to sit on their eggs to keep them warm, or they won’t hatch. Why isn’t it here?” He narrowed his eyes, scowling deeply as he watched the nest. “And anyway, surely all the flesh-eating birds around here will have realized by now that we’re after their eggs?”

“You’re such a know-it-all,” mocked Nut, baring his teeth at Mud. “Pity that didn’t help you get an egg of your own.”

Thorn gave an angry growl. “You only got your egg by
cheating and stealing,” he reminded Nut sharply. “You’ve got nothing to be so proud about.”

Nut made a rude face. His gang sniggered, but the rest of the young baboons fell silent as Fearless dug his claws into the tree. He began to haul himself up, pushing with his strong hindquarters, dragging himself with his forepaws.

He gritted his jaws. *Thorn says the secret is not to look down.* . . .

Higher and higher he climbed, until he was in the fork of the first branches. He paused, panting. He was bigger and heavier than any of the baboons, but the tree was thick and sturdy. He was sure it would take his weight.

“Watch so the fruits don’t fall and hit your great thick head!” yelled Nut.

Fearless heard Thorn screech and snap angrily at Nut: “Let him get on with it.” But he didn’t look down. Tensing his muscles, narrowing his eyes, he began to clamber up through the branches. There was one just above him that looked strong; he sprang for it, clutching with his claws, and hauled himself up. He lay along it, getting his breath back, feeling it sag a little under his weight.

Now the branches above him didn’t look quite so big and thick. They were getting downright spindly.

*Kneep going, Fearless!* Clenching his jaws, he balanced himself, wincing as a memory surfaced. *Not so long ago I was desperate to get down from an eagle’s nest! And now I’m desperate to climb up to one.* . . .

He scrambled onto the next branch quite easily, but it bounced wildly and sagged beneath him. With a growling
yelp, he felt himself slip around it, though his claws were dug
deep. He clung to its underside, panting with fear.
“Just above you, Fearless!” cried Thorn from below.
“There’s a stronger branch. You can do it.”
“What’s wrong, Big Talk?” yelled Nut. “Given up already?”
Fearless gave a deep, angry growl, and hauled himself back
on top of the branch. He could see the one Thorn meant; he
grabbed it with the claws of one forepaw and lurched clumsily
onto it. Before he could think any harder, he reached for the
next, and then the next.

He wasn’t held up by a single branch now—they were too
thin to hold him. He was sprawled across a mesh of three or
four skinny ones that seemed barely more than thick twigs.
Fearless gulped. The boughs creaked and groaned.

“Fearless!” barked Thorn. “Come down! Forget the egg,
the branches are going to snap!”

“No,” he gasped, though he wasn’t sure if Thorn could even
hear him. “I’m nearly there!”

The sun was shining full on his back now, and the edge of
the messy nest was only a paw stretch away. He was at the top!
Fearless brightened, feeling his courage return. Taking a deep
lungful of air, he scrambled across the treetop and lurched
onto the side of the nest, squashing the rim of cracking twigs.
He flattened himself on his belly, afraid the nest would topple
right off the tree with him still clinging to it.

Blinking, he stared in horror. There were no eggs. The nest
was empty, and now he could see it was dilapidated, with a
hole in the base. The twigs were broken and falling away, and the lining of leaves was dry and crispy and brown.

“It’s abandoned!” he roared in dismay.

The sound of cackles below sent birds scattering in alarm from the trees around him. The gang screeched and hooted, and Nut himself was hopping on the spot, slapping the ground and yelping with helpless laughter.

“Nut!” Thorn roared angrily. “That was mean and stupid!”

“You tricked me!” yelled Fearless, jumping to his paws.

“Fearless, no—stay still!”

Mud’s shout of warning came too late. The broken nest collapsed around him; both it and Fearless tumbled down through the tree, cracking branches and dislodging long, heavy fruits that plummeted to the ground.

The crashing, thumping descent seemed to last forever. Fearless snatched desperately at branches, but none of them would hold his falling weight. Every time he clawed for a hold, the boughs splintered and collapsed. And there’s no Stinger to catch me this time. I’m going to die, I’m going to— He slammed through the last branches and hit the ground hard.

It knocked the breath from his chest, and for a moment Fearless thought he really was dead; but Nut and his cronies were still screeching with helpless laughter. Even Nut wouldn’t laugh if I was dead . . . I think. Fearless scrambled awkwardly to his paws and shook leaves and twigs from his coat. He was scratched and battered, but he was alive.

And he was furious.
“Nut!” he roared.
“You idiot, Nut!” barked Thorn. “Fearless could have been killed!”
“So what?” Nut sneered, in between gasps of amusement. “He shouldn’t be pretending he can do the Three Feats. This’ll teach him a lesson—he’s no baboon!”
“That doesn’t matter!” cried Mud angrily. “He’s part of Brightforest Troop!”
“Hardly,” scoffed Nut. “He can’t even climb a tree without falling off it!”

Their squabble intensified, accusations and insults flying faster and louder, but Fearless was suddenly distracted. He frowned. There was an odd smell on the air, one that shouldn’t be there. Falling quiet, he tilted his head and twitched his tail. He opened his jaws to taste the faint breeze, trying to ignore the screeching of the quarreling baboons.

“Thorn,” he said, “something’s coming.”
“What’s your problem, Nut?” Thorn was yelling. “You’ve always been a stupid bully and—”
“Thorn. There’s a strange scent.” Fearless lashed his tail faster. “I don’t like it.”
“—And all you do is cause trouble, and—”
“Thorn!”

Thorn finally swung his head toward Fearless, a quizzical, annoyed look on his face. But just at that moment, something huge leaped from the spiky undergrowth. It was bigger even than Fearless, with a long, sloping back, and greasy fur spotted in yellow and brown. Its jaws hung open, dripping saliva and
displaying savage fangs. Its breath was rank and hot, and its wild black eyes glinted with ravenous greed.

“Hyena!” screeched Thorn. “Run!”

Fearless stiffened in shock, his hackles springing erect. The baboons bolted in several directions, and the chaos momentarily confused the hyena. It snapped wildly, trying to pounce on one baboon and then another.

But Mud was closest to it. Fixing on Mud, the hyena flung itself in pursuit. Eyes white-rimmed with terror, Mud scampered toward a tree—but the hyena was closing, looming over him, jaws wide for the kill. Fearless sucked in a shocked breath, his ears flattening and his muscles coiling.

He saw Thorn dart into the hyena’s path, snatching his scrawny friend in the nick of time and yanking him into a hollow behind a thornbush. The hyena’s jaws snapped shut on empty air, but it turned on both baboons with a snarl.

*It’ll kill them both!*

The heat of fury rushed through Fearless’s veins. Bunching his shoulders, he opened his jaws wide in a screaming roar of challenge, slaver flying from his bared fangs. Then he sprang at the hyena, forelegs stretched out and claws extended to slash and tear.

It spun on its haunches, astonished. Fearless landed on its back, clawing and snarling; as it gave a shriek of pain, he sank his jaws instinctively into the side of its neck.

Beneath him the creature wriggled and writhed, its wild struggles yanking at his fangs; the stench of its fear and shock filled Fearless’s nostrils, and the hyena’s hoarse, screeching
yelps were all he could hear. It had tremendous strength, but Fearless was too enraged to let go easily. It kicked and fought and yelped, and at last it flung Fearless off and shot into the trees, still hollering.

Panting, Fearless stood for a moment, staring after it, chest heaving. A sense of exhilaration filled him to bursting. Opening his bloody jaws wide, he gave a great roar of triumph.

One by one, the baboons were creeping out from the undergrowth and swinging down from the trees where they had sought refuge. They were blinking, gaping; some looked awestruck, some unnerved, and some positively terrified. Only Thorn and Mud bounded up to him, whooping with delight.

“You were great, Fearless!” cried Thorn.

“Young a hyena is a *lot* better than stealing an egg,” hooted Mud with a grin of satisfaction.

“Hmph.” Nut was creeping out from the hollow of a rotten log, picking bits of wood and bark out of his fur. “You’re all overreacting. It was only a hyena. It wasn’t *that* scary.”

“You looked scared enough,” mocked Thorn, contemptuously eyeing Nut’s messy fur.

“I thought it was a young, strong one,” snapped Nut. “It must have been old and sick if Big Talk there could beat it.”

But for once, Fearless didn’t care about Nut’s malicious tongue. *I know I saved them all. And from their faces, Nut’s cronies know it too!*

It made him feel good, better than he had in a long time.
The baboons clustered around him, bouncing with excitement and hooting their approval as they all made their way back to Tall Trees. Fearless picked up his paws, strutting proudly. He raised his head high, imagining his neck was already swathed in a flowing, golden mane.

The troop gathered to watch as the young baboons paraded into the glade around their new hero, Thorn and Mud riding on his back. As they jumped down and scampered off to share the story, Fearless caught sight of Bark Crownleaf. Their imposing leader sat on a fallen branch, studying him thoughtfully.

“Fearless,” she called gently. “Come to me for a moment.”

He trotted over to her, still warm with pride and pleasure. “What is it, Crownleaf?”

“Sit with me, Cub of the Stars.” She laid a paw against his shoulder. “I was high in the fever tree when the hyena attacked. I saw what happened.”

Fearless dropped his gaze, a little embarrassed at such attention from the Crownleaf herself. “It was nothing,” he mumbled awkwardly. “I didn’t really think about it.”

“No, you did it instinctively. You knew what had to be done. And I’m very grateful to you. You saved Mud’s life, and Thorn’s, and probably more.” Bark smiled at him.

Fearless’s chest swelled. “I’m just glad I could help,” he grunted. Hurriedly he added, “I was trying to get an egg to show everyone I could do the Three Feats... I didn’t manage, but maybe chasing off the hyena could count instead?”
She was gazing at him, her expression kind, and Fearless found he was holding his breath. His heart beat painfully. There was something about the look in Bark’s eyes. . . .

“What you did,” she said at last, “the way your instincts told you to attack and save your friends? That shows just how much of a lion you are, Fearless.” She patted him gently. “What it tells me is that the Three Feats aren’t for you. It’s not that I don’t think you could do it,” she added, as he opened his jaws to protest. “It’s just that . . . Fearless, you’re a lion. A hunter. You shouldn’t be seeking a permanent place with Brightforest Troop. You need to live with lions and lead a lion’s life.”

Fearless stared at his leader, speechless. Bark gave him a final consoling scratch and turned away, stalking off toward the rest of the troop. Fearless watched her go, his heart thudding painfully in his chest.

*She’s wrong,* he decided.

Maybe he’d belonged with lions when he was little, but that life was over, and his home was here now. What pride would ever have him? His place was with his friends—Thorn, and Mud, and Stinger. He could even put up with Nut.

*I’m glad I saved them all from the hyena, but I mustn’t let my instincts take over again. That’s what made Bark say what she did—I let my lion side take over.*

He set his jaws.

*I’ll show her. I’ll prove I’m more of a baboon than any of them.*
CHAPTER 5

Sky Strider peered out between the legs of two grown elephants. It was hard to see anything through the dust clouds, but she could catch glimpses of zebras and wildebeests stampeding in panic, hordes of them. The herds jostled and shoved, but the protective circle of adults stood firm, stamping, bellowing, and flapping their ears. Red dust flew up in the whirlwind created by their great feet and their snorting, swinging trunks.

Angling her ears forward, Sky frowned. She too spoke Grasstongue, but the sheer clamor of frightened voices made it hard to pick out any words. Then an outlying zebra fled past, closer to the elephants, and she heard its bellow of warning.

“Lions! Lions!”

Sky gave a gasp and shambled back another step. Lions. All she knew of them was that they had killed her mother,
bringing her down while she was still weak and ill after Sky’s birth. *Lions!* A chill rippled down her spine.

“Sky, I’m frightened.” Inside the defensive circle, the small voice was just audible.

At once Sky turned to her little cousin and stroked his trunk with hers. *I must pretend to be brave, for him.* “It’s all right, Moon. They can’t reach us here. The grown ones won’t let them.” Gently she rubbed the back of his bristly neck. “I’ll keep you safe, and the family will protect both of us. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“But *lions*...”

“Think, Moon, Great Mother is with us! What lion would dare to attack her?”

Moon thought for a moment, then nodded, looking hugely reassured. He snuggled his head against Sky’s flank and tried to hook his tiny trunk over her back. “You’re right, Sky. I feel better now. Thanks.”

“Remember, the Great Spirit lives in Great Mother,” she whispered to her little cousin. “Sometimes lions frighten me too, but she won’t let them touch us.”

“I wish we didn’t have to share Great Mother with all the animals,” murmured Moon.

“Oh, it’s a great honor, Moon—be proud of her!” Sky glanced adoringly at Great Mother, who was facing the stampede with her trunk raised. Her noble face was lined with age now, the edges of her ears torn, but her long tusks still gleamed as white as the stars. For as long as Sky could remember, and long before that, her grandmother had been far more
than just the loving matriarch of the Strider Family. Lowering her voice, she whispered to Moon: “Our own grandmother is the leader of the whole of Bravelands!”

Great Mother, as the holder of the Great Spirit, gave advice and counsel to all the creatures of the savannah. She judged their disputes, interpreted their omens, and resolved their fights, all with wisdom and stern patience. Great Mother might be growing old and frail, but she could still face down stampeding herds and prowling predators.

Right now, she looked downright irritated.

“That is quite enough,” Great Mother trumpeted. She stamped a foot, making the ground vibrate. “The pride have their prey, and it is over!”

Almost immediately, the chaos began to subside. The galloping hordes slowed, cantering and trotting and finally halting to mill around the elephants. Some even looked a little embarrassed about their panic. As the hubbub died down, one wildebeest brayed a sad call to a friend who would never answer again.

Great Mother strode forward, and the ring of elephants broke up, relaxing. Sky took the chance to peer across the savannah, nervously seeking out the lions. At last she caught a glimpse of them, a long way across the dry grassland, dragging their kill beneath the shade of a spreading acacia. She let herself breathe a sigh of relief, keeping it silent so that her little cousin wouldn’t notice.

“You see, Moon?” Sky rubbed his small head gently. “We were safe the whole time.”
The panic might be over, but some of the zebras and wildebeests were still barking and neighing furiously at one another, pawing the ground and peeling back their lips from their teeth. Great Mother paced closer until she was standing right over them, and they were forced to look up.

“What, by the Great Spirit, is going on here?” she demanded.

A wildebeest stepped forward, dipping its head respectfully. “The zebras didn’t keep watch properly! And now the flesh-eaters have taken one of ours!”

“That’s nonsense!” a zebra snapped at the wildebeest. But when he turned to Great Mother, he too lowered his head. “Great Mother, the wildebeest tried to direct the lions toward my herd. Self-preservation is all very well, but a deliberate attempt to sacrifice a zebra instead—”

“That’s not true!” retorted another wildebeest. Yet again, she turned toward the huge elephant with respect. “There was chaos, Great Mother. You know how it is.”

Great Mother swayed thoughtfully, then blew with her trunk into the ground, sending up a small flurry of dust. “Listen to me,” she said patiently. “As grass-eaters, you must trust one another, and you must accept that other herds act in good faith. You rely on one another to keep watch and survive.”

Not one of them argued; they simply dipped their heads and pawed lightly at the ground, looking faintly ashamed. “Yes, Great Mother.”

“And remember,” she added in a kind voice, “predators will follow you and they will hunt you. It is the Bravelands way.”
Remember the Code? *Only kill to survive.* Lions too must survive, my friends, and they have a right to eat.”

“And this time,” admitted the zebra gruffly, “every zebra survived to run and graze again. We were lucky.” He shook his stiff mane and turned back to the wildebeest. “May your herd-mate’s spirit run free in the savannah of the stars,” he said gravely.

Both wildebeests dipped their heads in acknowledgment. “May the Great Spirit repay his sacrifice,” they intoned together, “with sweet grass that grows fresh forever.”

Reconciled, the three grass-eaters walked away from the elephants and were soon lost once more in the milling multitudes of their herds. Great Mother nodded in satisfaction, then turned without a word and began to march on with her steady, ponderous stride. The other elephants fell in behind her, and the zebra and wildebeest herds moved alongside them, grazing and talking civilly once more.

Sky was glad it was over; she had hated the idea that lions were so close, and secretly she didn’t blame the grass-eaters for being angry. *No wonder every beast is grumpy,* she thought. She was tired and thirsty; they all were. The herds of elephants, zebras, and wildebeests had been traveling through the dry season, after all, and though the rains had begun, there was still a way to go before they reached the watering hole where the Great Gathering would take place.

All the same, Sky was excited about the journey. Throughout the year it was the vultures who carried news from across Bravelands to Great Mother; even now, as she marched at the
head of all the herds, the huge birds spiraled down from the sky to speak to her, bald heads gleaming, and she answered them in their own screeching Skytongue.

Moon was watching the vultures too. “If those birds bring all the news to Great Mother, why do we have the Great Gathering?”

“Because that’s when all the animals know she’ll be there, and they can come and talk to her,” Sky told him patiently. “Hundreds and hundreds of them travel to see her and ask for her help with their problems.” She blew dust at the little elephant with her trunk. “Besides, Moon, the Great Gathering is fun!”

“Oh. Well, I can’t wait.” Moon darted in a circle at a floppy canter.

At least Moon isn’t too thirsty, thought Sky. He’s full of energy. But then he was still drinking his mother’s milk, and while poor Star looked tired and much thinner after the dry season, she was still producing enough to sustain her little one.

Sky plucked a blade of grass as she walked and tickled Moon behind the ear. He giggled and dodged, so she picked another, enjoying the game.

It was when she reached for a third that her trunk brushed a bone fragment on the ground.

Something flashed, white and bright, inside her head. Sky gasped. It was a blur of images, and she could barely make sense of it; she knew only that a huge bird was swooping toward her out of the sun. Then, as fast as it had come, the vision was gone.
Sky paused and shook her head, her breath rasping, her heart thudding hard. *What was that?*

She squinted back at the bone. It was small, thin, and splintered; maybe it had broken from the leg of a small gazelle? *It was certainly no elephant bone!* All elephants could read the bones of their ancestors—but Sky knew that only Great Mother herself had the power to read those of other creatures.

*I was mistaken. I’m tired and thirsty and I imagined it.* Sky glanced above her. *The sun’s high and my eyes got tricked, that’s all. There are lots of birds around.* . . . She started, anxiously. *Oh! Now I’ve lost Moon!*

But he had only drifted to the edge of the herd, capering around the grown ones’ legs. “Moon, are you all right?” she called.

“Yes,” he trumpeted squeakily. “Just playing!”

“Well, be sure to keep up with the herd,” she warned him. “And don’t wander off!”

“I won’t!”

At least the distraction of Moon had taken her mind off that silly bird-illusion, she realized. Feeling better, Sky trotted to catch up with Star and Rain, who were chatting together, reminiscing about previous treks to Great Gatherings. They turned as she approached, greeting her with caresses of their trunks.

“Sky,” murmured Star in a singsong voice. “Are you tired?”

“Not too bad,” Sky told her cheerfully. “But it’s a long way yet and I want to listen to your stories, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course we don’t mind.” Rain laughed, her mottled
trunk swaying. “I was just reminding Star about the year of
the Three-Legged Cheetah. . . .”

Sky listened happily, glad to while away the time. She loved
all the grown ones; they’d raised her together after the death
of her mother. *I still miss her*, she thought, *but having Star and Rain
and the others is like having a whole herd of mothers.*

“Go on, Sky,” said Star, nudging her. “It’s time for you to
tell us a story. What’s your favorite memory?”

Sky dipped her head shyly. “I’m not really old enough to
have a story,” she murmured. “But my favorite memory is . . .
Oh! My mother, spraying me with water at the end of a hot
day.”

The two older elephants laughed. “Well, now that’s a lovely
memory!” rumbled Rain. “What I wouldn’t give for a trunk-
ful of water right now!”

“Is my son all right?” asked Star, glancing over at him. “It’s
time he had more milk.”

“Moon’s fine,” Sky told her happily, nodding at her little
cousin as he stirred up a miniature dust storm with his trunk.
“Look, he’s still playing. I’ll go and get him if you like.”

She ambled over to where he had wandered a little way
from the herd. “Moon!” she called, raising her trunk. “Your
mother wants you!”

“Sky, look what I found! A huge blue beetle!” he squealed
happily. “Come and see!”

Sighing patiently, Sky trotted over. “Where is it, Moon?
Listen, I told you not to wander away from the—”

She gasped as a massive, pale shape lumbered out of the
scrub, broad horn pointing accusingly at the two young elephants.

Rhinoceros! Oh no. Sky’s heart sank in trepidation.

“Hey, this is my territory!” grunted the rhino. “Keep out! Hooligans!”

Swallowing hard, Sky lowered and swung her head in apology. “I’m sorry, Moon’s little and didn’t realize. I’ll just—”

“I said go on! Be off with you!” The rhino pawed the ground and dipped its massive head in a clear threat.

“Sorry!” squealed Sky again. Hustling Moon with her trunk, she hurried back to her family.

Great Mother turned her huge head as the two youngsters trotted toward her, and blew a soft rumble of greeting. “Don’t mind him, young Sky,” she called. “Some of the rhinos in Bravelands are bad-tempered, that’s all.”

Letting Moon scurry back to Star, Sky fell in beside Great Mother as she strode along. “Why are they so angry?” she asked. “I thought he was going to charge us!”

“Oh, the rhinoceroses are envious,” sighed Great Mother. “As long as any creature alive can remember, and further back even than that, the Great Mother or Father has been an elephant. The Great Spirit passes from one Great Parent to the next when we die. You know that, Sky, don’t you?”

Sky nodded.

“Well, it has never passed to a rhino!” Great Mother told her with a dry, rumbling laugh. “And they’ve thought for a long time that it should be their turn.”

“A rhino wouldn’t be nearly as good and kind as you,” said
Sky loyally. “And that’s silly anyway. The Great Spirit chooses where it wants to go, so it’s not our fault it’s never picked a rhino.”

“That’s right, Sky.” Great Mother stroked Sky’s neck with her trunk, but the gesture meant she’d had to turn her head a little. Her foot knocked against a small rocky outcrop, and she stumbled, only just righting herself.

“Great Mother!” cried Sky in alarm. “Are you all right? Do you need to stop and rest?”

The old elephant rumbled a deep laugh. “No, Sky. Don’t you worry about me.” She lifted her head and walked on, scanning the horizon ahead. “I may be very old, but I have a long way to go yet. I’ll know when the time has come for the Great Spirit to leave me.”

Sky was silent for a moment. “How will you know?” she asked in a small voice. The thought of being without Great Mother was unbearable.

“I just will, my dear. And when the time comes, the Great Spirit will tell me where to find the next Great Mother or Father, so that it can pass to them. That is how it has always been, and how it always will be.”

“Well,” muttered Sky, “please don’t pass the Spirit to that horrible rhino.”

Great Mother laughed. “If that’s what the Spirit wishes, that’s what will be. Ah!” She pointed ahead with her trunk. “Water, look!”

Peering, Sky could see it now: a shimmer on the horizon,
fringed with lush greenness, dark against the paleness of the plains. A murmur of delight and relief went around the herd, and they picked up their speed.

Sky gave a trumpet of excitement as the small lake came properly into view, brownish-green, still, and cool. It looked delicious.

“We can have a water fight!” cried Moon.

“Good idea!” Sky trotted to the muddy bank and dipped her trunk toward the water’s surface.

“Wait!” commanded Great Mother.

Sky hesitated, glancing over her shoulder as the matriarch approached the pool.

“No.” The old elephant shook her great head and pointed with her trunk. “The water is tainted, my dears. I’m sorry.”

Sky followed her gesture, and could barely repress a cry of dismay.

“You see it, Sky?” Great Mother shook her head slowly. “A dead impala. And it has lain there for some time.”

It floated just below the stagnant surface, half eaten and horribly bloated. Now that they were so close, Sky could indeed smell the rank rottenness that permeated the water; she blew it from her trunk with a shudder. Great Mother was right. There were soft cries of disappointment from the rest of the herd, but no elephant argued with her.

Sighing, Sky drew back. “Come on, Moon. Don’t touch it.”

Moon looked miserable, but he plodded back to her side.
The others looked no happier; Star in particular gave the pool a wistful, longing stare.

“Now,” said Great Mother encouragingly, swinging her trunk. “There’s nothing else for it. Come along, my dears.” She set off once more, resolute and stoic. “We must simply keep walking . . .”