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WARRIORS

MISTYSTAR'S OMEN



**SHORT STORY
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ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS

MISTYSTAR'S
OMEN

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HARPER

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Allegiances

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

LEOPARDSTAR—unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

DEPUTY

MISTYFOOT—gray she-cat with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat

APPRENTICE, WILLOWSHINE (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

REEDWHISKER—black tom

APPRENTICE, HOLLOWPAW (dark brown tabby tom)

GRAYMIST—pale gray tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, TROUTPAW (pale gray tabby she-cat)

MINTFUR—light gray tabby tom

ICEWING—white she-cat with blue eyes

MINNOWTAIL—dark gray she-cat

APPRENTICE, MOSSYPAW (brown-and-white she-cat)

PEBBLEFOOT—mottled gray tom

APPRENTICE, RUSHPAW (light brown tabby tom)

MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom

ROBINWING—tortoiseshell-and-white tom

BETLEWHISKER—brown-and-white tabby tom

PETALFUR—gray-and-white she-cat

GRASSPELT—light brown tom

QUEENS

DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

ELDERS

DAPPLENOSE—mottled gray she-cat

POUNCETAILED—ginger-and-white tom

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

FIRESTAR—ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt

DEPUTY

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

MEDICINE CAT

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom

MILLIE—striped gray tabby she-cat

DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom

SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

BRACKENFUR—golden brown tabby tom

SORRELTAIL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches

THORNCLAW—golden brown tabby tom

SQUIRRELFIGHT—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

LEAFPOOL—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

SPIDERLEG—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes

BERRYNOSE—cream-colored tom

HAZELTAIL—small gray-and-white she-cat

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, IVYPAW

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICE, DOVEPAW

FOXLEAP—reddish tabby tom

ICECLOUD—white she-cat

TOADSTEP—black-and-white tom

ROSEPETAL—dark cream she-cat

BRIARLIGHT—dark brown she-cat

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

BUMBLEFLIGHT—very pale gray tom with black stripes

APPRENTICES

(more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

DOVEPAW—pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

IVYPAW—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

FERNCLOUD—pale gray (with darker flecks) she-cat with green eyes

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

POPPYFROST—tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Cherrykit, a ginger she-cat, and Molekit, a brown-and-cream tom)

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

MOUSEFUR—small dusky brown she-cat

PURDY—plump tabby former loner with a gray muzzle

LONGTAIL—pale tabby tom with black stripes, retired early due to failing sight

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

BLACKSTAR—large white tom with huge jet-black paws

DEPUTY

RUSSETFUR—dark ginger she-cat

MEDICINE CAT

LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom

APPRENTICE, FLAMETAILED (ginger tom)

WARRIORS

OAKFUR—small brown tom

APPRENTICE, FERRETPAW (cream-and-gray tom)

ROWANCLAW—ginger tom

SMOKEFOOT—black tom

TOADFOOT—dark brown tom

APPLEFUR—mottled brown she-cat

CROWFROST—black-and-white tom

RATSCAR—brown tom with long scar across his back

APPRENTICE, PINEPAW (black she-cat)

SNOWBIRD—pure-white she-cat

TAWNYPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

APPRENTICE, STARLINGPAW (ginger tom)

OLIVENOSE—tortoiseshell she-cat

OWLCLAW—light brown tabby tom

SHREWFOOT—gray she-cat with black feet

SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom

REDWILLOW—mottled brown-and-ginger tom

TIGERHEART—dark brown tabby tom

DAWNPELT—cream-furred she-cat

QUEENS

KINKFUR—tabby she-cat, with long fur that sticks out at all angles

IVYTAIL—black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat

ELDERS

CEDARHEART—dark gray tom

TALLPOPPY—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

SNAKETAIL—dark brown tom with tabby-striped tail

WHITEWATER—white she-cat with long fur, blind in one eye

WINDCLAN

LEADER

ONESTAR—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY

ASHFOOT—gray she-cat

MEDICINE CAT

KESTRELFIGHT—mottled gray tom

WARRIORS

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

OWLWHISKER—light brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, WHISKERPAW (light brown tom)

WHITETAIL—small white she-cat

NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

WEASELFUR—ginger tom with white paws

HARESPRING—brown-and-white tom

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

ANTPELT—brown tom with one black ear

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, FURZEPAW (gray-and-white she-cat)

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICE, BOULDERPAW (large pale gray tom)

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

SWALLOWTAIL—dark gray she-cat

SUNSTRIKE—tortoiseshell she-cat with large white mark on her forehead

ELDERS

WEBFOOT—dark gray tabby tom

TORNEAR—tabby tom

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

SMOKY—muscular gray-and-white tom who lives in a barn at the horseplace

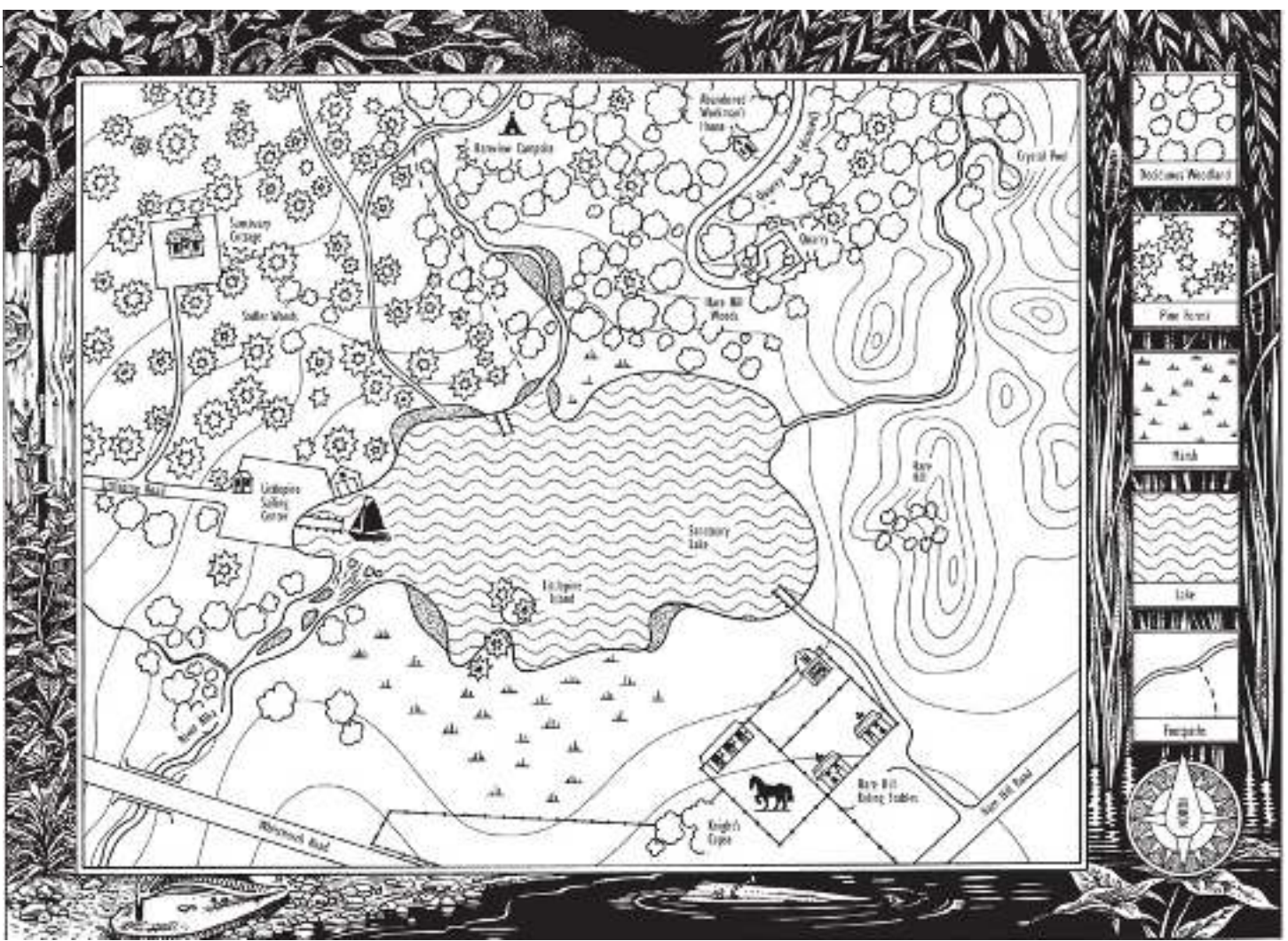
FLOSS—small gray-and-white she-cat who lives at the horseplace

OTHER ANIMALS

MIDNIGHT—a star-gazing badger who lives by the sea

Maps







Chapter 1

Mistyfoot stood at the edge of the rock and watched the water swirl below her paws. It was brown and thick with debris—twigs, scraps of leaf, even a knot of roots that had once held up a tree—and however hard Mistyfoot stared, she was unable to glimpse the stones on the bottom of the lake, or the distinctive flash of silver that gave away the position of a fish. She stretched down to lap at the surface with her tongue. The water tasted bitter and muddy.

“It’s not the same, is it?” Leopardstar commented beside her. Mistyfoot raised her head and looked at her leader. Leopardstar’s golden fur looked dull and dusty in the gray dawn light, and the dark spots that had inspired her name seemed to have faded in the last moon. “I thought when the water returned that everything would be as it was before,” Leopardstar went on. She dipped her paw in the lake, staggering a little as she straightened up again, and watched the drips fall from the tips of her claws onto the stone.

“The fish will come back soon,” Mistyfoot meowed. “Now that the streams are flowing, there’s no reason for them to stay away.”

Leopardstar gazed at the ruffled water. “So many fish died in the drought,” she sighed, as Mistyfoot hadn’t spoken. “What if the lake stays empty forever? What will we eat?”

Mistyfoot moved closer to her leader until her shoulder brushed Leopardstar’s fur. She was shocked to feel the she-cat’s bones sharp just beneath the skin. “Everything will be fine,” she murmured. “The beavers’ dam has been destroyed, the rain has come, and the long thirst is over. It’s been a hard greenleaf, but we have survived.”

“Blackclaw, Voletooth, and Dawnflower didn’t,” Leopardstar snapped. “Three elders lost in a single season? I had to watch my Clanmates starve to death because there were no fish to catch, nothing left in the lake but mud. And what about Rippletail? He was as brave as any of the other cats who went to find where the water had gone—why didn’t he deserve to come back? Did he go too far beyond the sight of StarClan?”

Mistyfoot let her tail curl forward to rest on Leopardstar’s back. “Rippletail died saving the lake and all the Clans. He will be honored forever.”

Leopardstar turned away and began to pad up the shore. “He paid too high a price,” she growled. “If the fish haven’t returned with the water, we’re no better off than we were during the drought.” She stumbled, and Mistyfoot jumped forward, ready to support her. But Leopardstar shrugged her off with a hiss and continued over the stones, limping.

Mistyfoot followed at a respectful distance, not wanting to fuss over the proud golden cat. She knew Leopardstar was in pain most of the time now, worn down by a sickness that had resisted all of Mothwing's medicine skills, although it wasn't unknown: the ravaging thirst, the dramatic weight loss in spite of constant hunger, the growing weakness that dulled a cat's eyes and hearing. Mistyfoot felt her gaze soften as she watched Leopardstar reach the end of the pebbles and push her way into the ferns that ringed the RiverClan camp.

Suddenly there was a muffled cry from the depths of the undergrowth.

"Leopardstar?" Mistyfoot bounded into the green stalks. A few strides in, she reached her leader's side. She was slumped on the ground, her eyes stretched wide with pain, her flanks heaving with the effort to draw another breath. "Don't move," Mistyfoot ordered. "I'll fetch help." She thrust her way through the rest of the ferns and burst into the clearing at the heart of the territory. "Mothwing! Come quick! Leopardstar has fallen!"

There was the sound of racing paws; then Mothwing's sandy pelt, so close to the shade of Leopardstar's, appeared at the entrance to her den. The medicine cat paused, looking around, and Mistyfoot called, "This way!"

Side by side, the cats pushed through the ferns to their leader. Leopardstar had closed her eyes, and her breath rattled in her chest as she gasped for air. Mothwing bent over her, sniffing and tasting her fur with her tongue. Mistyfoot leaned forward but recoiled from the musty stench coming from the sick cat. Close up, she could see dirt and scurf in Leopardstar's pelt, as if the leader hadn't groomed herself in days.

"Fetch Mintfur and Pebblefoot," Mothwing mewed quietly over her shoulder. "They haven't gone out on patrol yet. They can help us carry Leopardstar to her den."

Relieved to have an excuse to leave, and guilty that she wanted to, Mistyfoot backed away and raced to the clearing. She returned with Mintfur and Pebblefoot and watched as Mothwing eased Leopardstar to her paws, propped heavily on either flank by the warriors. Mistyfoot held the ferns aside as the cats half guided, half dragged their leader into the camp.

"Is Leopardstar *dead*?" Mistyfoot heard one of Duskmour's kits whisper.

"Of course not, dear. She's just very tired," Duskmour mewed.

Mistyfoot stood at the entrance to the den and watched Pebblefoot pat moss into place beneath Leopardstar's head. This was more than mere exhaustion. Already the den seemed darker, the shadows thicker, as though warriors from StarClan were gathering to welcome the RiverClan leader. Mintfur brushed past Mistyfoot as he left, his pale gray pelt smelling sharply of ferns. "Let me know if I can do anything else for her," he murmured, and Mistyfoot nodded. Pebblefoot followed, his head lowered and the tip of his tail leaving a faint scar in the dust.

Mothwing tucked Leopardstar's front paw more comfortably under the she-cat's chest and straightened up. "I need to fetch some herbs from my den," she meowed. "Stay with her; let her know that you are here." She rested her muzzle briefly against Mistyfoot's ear. "Be strong, my friend," she whispered.

The den seemed deathly quiet after Mothwing had gone. Leopardstar's breathing had grown shallow, a barely audible wheeze that did little more than flex the moss by her muzzle. Mistyfoot crouched down by her leader's head and stroked her tail along Leopardstar's bony flank. "Sleep well," she mewed softly. "You're safe now. Mothwing is gathering herbs to make you feel better."

To her surprise, Leopardstar stirred. "It's too late for that," rasped the she-cat without opening her eyes. "StarClan draws near; I can feel them all around me. This is my time to leave."

"Don't say that!" hissed Mistyfoot. "Your ninth life has barely started! Mothwing will heal you."

Leopardstar let out a grunt. “Mothwing has served me so well, but some things are beyond even his skills. Let me go peacefully, Mistyfoot. I won’t fight this last battle, and neither should you.”—

“But I don’t want to lose you!” Mistyfoot protested.

One clouded blue eye opened and gazed at her. “Really?” Leopardstar wheezed. “After what I did to your brother? To all the half-Clan cats?”

For a heartbeat, Mistyfoot was plunged back into the dark and stinking rabbit hole in RiverClan’s old camp in the forest. Tigerstar and Leopardstar had united to form TigerClan, and in their quest for the purest warrior blood, they had imprisoned all cats with mixed Clan heritage. Mistyfoot and Stonefur, who had been the RiverClan deputy, had recently learned that Bluestar of ThunderClan was their mother. This had been enough to condemn them in Leopardstar’s eyes, and she had allowed Tigerstar to persecute them until Stonefur had been killed, murdered in cold blood by Tigerstar’s deputy, Blackfoot. Mistyfoot had been rescued by Firestar and taken to ThunderClan until the terrible battle with BloodClan had ended Tigerstar’s death-soaked rule.

“I never deserved your forgiveness,” Leopardstar whispered, jerking Mistyfoot back to the cold, quiet den.

“Tigerstar was responsible for the death of my brother,” Mistyfoot growled. “Tigerstar and Blackfoot. The time of TigerClan had nothing to do with the warrior code that I believe in. I was always loyal to RiverClan—and to you, as our leader.”

Leopardstar sighed. “Your life has been harder than I wanted, Mistyfoot. Losing your brother and three of your kits. You have borne your heartache well.”

Mistyfoot stiffened. No cat would ever know the pain she had felt when she buried her children. “Every queen knows that the life of a kit is a precious and fragile thing. I will see them again in StarClan, and I walk with them in my heart every day,” she mewed.

There was a pause as Leopardstar strained to take a breath, and Mistyfoot half rose, ready to call for help. Then Leopardstar relaxed again. “I am sorry not to have known the joy of having kits. There was a time when I thought it might happen, but it was not to be.” Her words faded away as though she was picturing something she had dreamed of long ago. “Perhaps it was for the best. But I would have been proud to call you my daughter, Mistyfoot.”

Mistyfoot couldn’t reply. Her heart ached with the familiar sorrow that she had never had a chance to know her real mother, Bluestar. The ThunderClan leader had revealed her darkest secret to Mistyfoot and Stonefur just before she died on the banks of the river. For a moment, Mistyfoot had been scorched by the love of a mother, but then it had vanished, leaving a cold emptiness that could never be filled.

She curled herself around Leopardstar, just as she had tried to warm Bluestar’s sodden body a few of those moons ago.

“Sleep now,” she murmured into Leopardstar’s ear. “I’ll be here when you wake.”



Chapter 2

The wind had risen, stirring the bushes and making the waves splash against the shore, when Mistyfoot woke. The den was pale with dawn light that flickered as the branches of the rowan tree swayed in the breeze. Beside Mistyfoot, Leopardstar was cold and still. Mistyfoot rested her muzzle on the old cat's head, then slipped out of the den and padded through the sleeping camp down to the shore. She stared over the choppy gray water, wondering if Leopardstar had joined their ancestors yet.

Paw steps behind her made Mistyfoot turn. Mothwing was stepping carefully over the stones. "Leopardstar is dead," the medicine cat announced.

"I know," Mistyfoot meowed. She closed her eyes against the rush of pain. She felt Mothwing come to stand beside her, spilling warmth and softness from her fur. "I don't feel ready to lead this Clan," Mistyfoot confessed in a whisper without opening her eyes. "How can I follow in Leopardstar's footsteps?"

Mothwing rested her tail on Mistyfoot's back. "You are more than ready," she promised. "Think of the path you have traveled so far. You have seen more than most cats ever will in their lifetime."

"That's because I am old," Mistyfoot pointed out. "Blackclaw was only a few seasons older than me! Sometimes I feel as if I have outstayed my welcome here, as if I should be walking in StarClan with Stonefur by now."

"That's mouse-brained, and you know it," Mothwing retorted. "You have a long life yet to live. Nine long lives, in fact."

Nine lives! For a heartbeat, Mistyfoot felt overwhelmed with tiredness. How would she find enough energy to lead her Clan when she could barely move her paws? Would she have a chance to feel sad about Leopardstar's death, with so much to do? Mothwing seemed to sense her hesitation.

"There will be plenty of time to grieve for Leopardstar. I will be here whenever you need me. You are not alone, Mistyfoot. You must summon our Clanmates; tell them about Leopardstar. You are the leader now, and they need you as much as they needed Leopardstar."

Keeping her tail on Mistyfoot's spine, Mothwing led her back to the camp. Mistyfoot breathed in the delicate scent of herbs from her friend's pelt and began to feel better. "I couldn't do this without you," she murmured.

"Nor should you have to," Mothwing replied briskly. "I am your medicine cat, and I will do everything I can to help you."

The clearing was already filling up with cats, who circled anxiously, whispering. Mistyfoot jumped

onto the broad willow stump outside Leopardstar's den and called to her Clanmates. "Let all cats old enough to swim gather to hear my words!" In spite of her grief, she couldn't help feeling a rush of excitement as the cats stopped circling and settled on their haunches around the tree stump, gazing expectantly up at her. *Mothwing was right! They see me as their leader even before I have been given my nine lives and my new name!*

"Leopardstar has gone to walk with StarClan," she announced. A murmur of sadness spread through the cats like a gust of cold wind.

"We were lucky to have her as our leader for so many moons," Graymist mewed. "She was brave and strong-willed on behalf of all of us."

"She told me I was doing really well in my battle training," the apprentice Mossypaw commented mournfully.

Duskfur drew her kits closer with a sweep of her tail. "I had hoped she would live long enough to see these little ones become apprentices," she sighed.

Beetlewhisker stood up, his brown-and-white pelt gleaming in the early rays of the sun. "When will you be getting your nine lives?" he asked Mistyfoot.

Mistyfoot winced. This was what she had been afraid of, that she would scarcely have time to draw breath—let alone mourn the former leader—before she was plunged into her new life. But she had been Leopardstar's deputy for a long time, and she had always known what her duties would be when this moment came. And she couldn't help looking forward to the chance to walk with Mothwing among her warrior ancestors, to learn the secrets of the future that would help her to lead her Clan. "I'll go to the Moonpool as soon as I can," she declared.

Mothwing stirred, and Mistyfoot looked questioningly at her. "We can wait until tomorrow," she meowed the medicine cat. "We must sit vigil for Leopardstar tonight."

A black tom stood up and nodded to Mistyfoot. "I speak for all the warriors when I say that I will be honored to serve you as my leader," he announced.

"Thank you, Reedwhisker," Mistyfoot purred. Her mind flashed back to the time she had nursed the cat at her belly with his littermates; he was the only one of her kits who had survived, and every day she took pride in the warrior he had become.

Petalfur twitched her tail. "Some of us can speak for ourselves," she mewed irritably. "But I will be as loyal to you as I was to Leopardstar, may she walk in peace among the stars."

"Mistystar!" called Troutpaw.

Mistyfoot narrowed her eyes at the pale gray apprentice. "Not yet, Troutpaw. Not until I have received my nine lives." *Tomorrow I will walk with our ancestors, and say good-bye to my warrior name forever.*

Mistyfoot jumped down from the tree stump and called to Grasspelt: "Could you lead a hunting patrol before sunhigh? Take Minnowtail and Mossypaw, and Icewing if she feels up to it."

The white she-cat sniffed. "Of course I'm up to it! I've spent the last three sunrises stuck in the camp, so I'm more than ready to stretch my legs."

Mistyfoot hid a purr of amusement. "You're allowed to rest as much as you want after journeying to the beavers' dam," she reminded Icewing. "But if you feel like hunting, then we'd all be grateful for your sharp eyes."

Reedwhisker padded up to Mistyfoot. "Would you like me to visit the other Clans and let them know about Leopardstar's death?"

Mistyfoot shook her head. "No. They'll find out soon enough. We must honor Leopardstar by carrying out our duties as usual."

“In that case, should I lead a boundary patrol?” Reedwhisker offered. “I want to be sure that the fish we scented yesterday hasn’t come any closer to the camp.”

Mistyfoot nodded. “Yes, please. And keep an eye out for squirrels or mice while you’re on that side of the territory. In case there aren’t many fish to be found in the lake yet.” She wondered if any of her Clanmates knew just how empty the water seemed to be. *If they haven’t noticed on their own, I’m not going to point it out to them. But we might need to stock the fresh-kill pile with other prey for a while.*

“You won’t have to do this for much longer,” mewed Graymist close to her ear.

Mistyfoot jumped. “Do what?” She wondered if she had said something about the lack of fish so loudly.

Graymist nodded toward the cats who were gathering into groups. “Organize patrols. You’ll have to appoint a deputy before moonhigh, won’t you?”

“A deputy?” Mistyfoot echoed. “Yes, of course.”

The she-cat looked at her closely. “Do you know who you’ll choose? You must have thought about it before now.”

Mistyfoot didn’t think she could admit that no, she hadn’t. Of course she had known that Leopardstar was sick, but she hadn’t really imagined that the leader’s ninth life would end. There was so much to do! And all of it seemed to rest on her shoulders. To her relief, Reedwhisker called Graymist to join his border patrol and Mistyfoot didn’t have to answer.

For a moment the bushes were alive with movement as cats headed out on their patrols; then suddenly the clearing was empty and silent. Mistyfoot drew a deep breath and looked around. Everything was reassuringly familiar, from the well-trodden bare earth where the cats sat to eat and share tongues to the carefully draped brambles that hid the different dens. Only Mistyfoot felt changed beyond recognition, daunted and breathless at the thought of what lay ahead.

“Mistyfoot?” Willowshine was standing at the entrance to the medicine cats’ den, which was shielded between two mossy rocks. She trotted across the flattened grass with her tail kinked over her back. “Do you want me to come with you to the Moonpool? When you go to receive your nine lives, I mean.”

Mistyfoot blinked. “Isn’t that Mothwing’s duty?”

“Well, yes,” mewed Willowshine, sounding a little uncertain. “But as it’s your first time sharing tongues with our ancestors, I thought you might like more company.”

Mistyfoot purred. “I’m not afraid of walking in StarClan, little one. But you are kind to offer, and one day I’m sure you will accompany your leader as they receive their nine lives. But it’s Mothwing’s responsibility this time.”

Again there was a puzzling flash of hesitation in the gray tabby’s eyes; then she nodded. “Of course,” she meowed. “Whatever happens tomorrow, I wish you well.” She ducked away, back to her den, leaving Mistyfoot frowning after her. *Whatever happens tomorrow? Was there something she should be afraid of? She shrugged, deciding that Willowshine was just a little too eager to prove her merit as a medicine cat, and perhaps not quite experienced enough for all of the responsibilities.*

She crossed the clearing to the Clan’s favorite basking place, a sandy slope that was a poor substitute for Sunningrocks, according to the cats who remembered the forest. Dapplenose and Pouncetail lay in the soft golden light, their tails twitching and their eyes half-closed. *But I bet they haven’t missed a single moment of what’s happened this morning,* Mistyfoot thought.

“We need to find somewhere to bury Leopardstar,” she mewed, feeling grief weigh in her belly like a stone.

The elders nodded, and Dapplenose stood up, shaking sand from her mottled gray pelt. “I know just

the place. Follow me.” Pouncetail got to his paws more stiffly, stretching out each ginger-and-white leg in turn. Dapplenose led them over the crest of a slope and into the spindly trees on the other side. She swerved along a half-hidden path through a dense patch of comfrey until they emerged in a little clearing, shaded by a young rowan tree with a clear view of the lake and the island where the Clans gathered at each full moon. Behind the island, the hills where WindClan lived rose up to meet the clouds—and beyond that ridge lay the forest, Leopardstar’s first home.

“I’ve always thought this would be a good spot for Leopardstar to rest,” Dapplenose explained.

Mistyfoot nodded. “It’s perfect. Are you able to dig the hole, or should I fetch some help?”

Pouncetail snorted. “For StarClan’s sake, trust us to do this one last duty for our leader! Do you think we’ve lost the use of our legs?”

Dapplenose lay her tail across her denmate’s shoulders. “Ignore this bad-tempered old trout,” she told Mistyfoot. “But he’s right that we can manage. You should go back to the clearing and have something to eat. You look exhausted, and you’ll need your strength for the journey to the Moonpool.”

Feeling a little overwhelmed by the old she-cat’s motherly sympathy, Mistyfoot thanked them and pushed her way back through the comfrey. In the clearing, Grasspelt’s patrol had returned with a catch of two tiny minnows, and set out again. Duskmur was prodding the minnows thoughtfully, but when Mistyfoot appeared, she pushed them toward her. “You take these,” she urged. “My kits and I can eat later.”

Mistyfoot blinked. Was she so old that her Clanmates were worried about her ability to cope with becoming leader?

Duskmur seemed to guess her thoughts. “Let us help you however we can,” she prompted gently. “We know the sacrifices you will be making for us from now on.”

Mistyfoot didn’t argue. She couldn’t tell Duskmur how isolated she suddenly felt from the cats who had been her friends and denmates all her life. Leopardstar’s death had changed everything. *That StarClan I have Mothwing*, she thought. *She’s the only cat who understands how it feels to be responsible for the entire Clan.*

As she chewed on the minnow, she watched the two medicine cats carefully pull Leopardstar’s body out of her den and cover her pelt with rosemary and watermint. The scent of the fresh herbs hung in the air, smothering the taint of death. Mistyfoot heard Willowshine warn Mothwing that they were using the last of their supplies of watermint, but Mothwing just shook her head and told her to keep going. “Leopardstar needs it more than we do now,” she insisted.

Mistyfoot’s heart swelled with warmth toward her old friend. She knew how lucky she was to have Mothwing as her medicine cat. There was no way she could even contemplate the path ahead without her.

As the light began to fade, the cats of RiverClan gathered around the body of their former leader for the start of the long night vigil. The air was filled with the scent of herbs, and the wind had dropped so that the waves were little more than a gentle whisper beyond the bushes. Mistyfoot sat by Leopardstar’s head, watching her Clanmates file sadly past.

Mothwing appeared beside her. “Are you ready to name your deputy? The moon is rising.”

The cats closest to them pricked their ears, and Mistyfoot felt their gazes prick her pelt. She nodded and stood up. “Let all cats old enough to swim gather to hear my words!”

At once the line of cats stopped moving and turned to face her. They all knew what was coming. Would they approve of her choice? Mistyfoot wondered. Once more she felt her legs tremble beneath the weight of new duties, and she took a step toward Mothwing so she could draw strength from the

warmth of the medicine cat's fur.

"It is time for me to name my deputy," Mistyfoot announced, her voice sounding sharp and high pitched in the cool night air. "Reedwhisker, I invite you to walk beside me and help me to lead the Clan. May StarClan hear and approve my choice."

There was a moment of silence; then the cats broke into cheers. "Reedwhisker! Congratulations!"

Mistyfoot's son stepped forward, his dark gray eyes shining. "I am honored to be chosen," he purred. "And I will lay down my life to protect you and my Clanmates."

"Hopefully it won't come to that," Mistyfoot told him. She stretched out her neck to rest her muzzle on top of his head. Reedwhisker's fur still smelled as it had when he was her kit.

There was a cross-sounding mutter from the shadows at the edge of the clearing: "I bet she only chose him because he's her son!"

"Hush, Mossypaw!" snapped Minnowtail. "Reedwhisker is a loyal and brave warrior, and will make a great deputy."

I hope so, thought Mistyfoot. She had expected some criticism for naming her son as her deputy, but she wanted to believe that wasn't the reason behind her decision.

"A brave choice," murmured Mothwing in her ear. "But the right one, I think."

Mistyfoot felt a bit better, but she would have been more comforted if Mothwing had mentioned some sign of approval from StarClan, or even an omen that foresaw her announcement.

"Excuse me, Mistyfoot?" Duskfur was standing in front of her. "Is it okay if I take my little ones home now? They're getting tired."

Mistyfoot looked at the two kits, who were yawning and blinking their huge, round eyes. "Of course," she purred.

As Duskfur herded her family across the clearing, the line of cats started moving again.

"Farewell, Leopardstar. May you have good hunting in StarClan."

"We'll meet again, old friend. Save me a place to enjoy the sun."

"Wow! I've never seen a dead body before! What's all that green stuff on her fur?"

"Rushpaw, go to your den if you can't behave properly. And put that watermint down!"

Finally Mistyfoot was alone in the clearing with Leopardstar and the elders, who would stay beside their former leader all night. Mistyfoot bent and touched her muzzle to Leopardstar's cool, leaf-soft ear. "May the sun warm your back and the fish leap into your paws," she murmured.

"I haven't heard that said for a long time," rasped Pouncetail. "Not since we lived in the forest."

"Graypool used to say it when Stonefur and I were going to sleep," Mistyfoot mewed. "It was his way of wishing us good dreams."

"Ah, Stonefur," sighed Pouncetail. "I still miss him." He looked at Mistyfoot, narrowing his eyes through the gloom. "You had much to forgive Leopardstar for, didn't you?"

Mistyfoot swallowed. "She was a good leader for most of her life," she replied. "That is what should be remembered for." She lay down with her nose pressed against Leopardstar's fur. *I promise to be the strongest, wisest leader I can be. I will do my best to echo your loyalty to RiverClan and your courage to speak out on our behalf, and I will learn from your mistakes. I know that I don't need to prove to the other Clans that RiverClan is the strongest or most powerful. I just want my Clanmates to be happy and at peace.*

"And that is the best ambition of all," murmured a voice behind her.

Mistyfoot sprang up and spun around. A gray cat stood behind her, his thick fur glowing with starlight. "Stonefur!"

The cat nodded. "Did you think I would miss this night?" he meowed. "I have been watching you a

this time, and I am so proud that you are going to lead our Clan.”

Mistyfoot’s tail drooped. “It should have been you.”

Stonefur shook his head. “That was not my destiny. I wish you well, Mistyfoot. You will need great courage for what lies ahead, but remember that you are not alone. I will always walk beside you. We will meet again soon.”

His fur began to fade, until Mistyfoot could see the dark leaves on the bushes behind him. “Wait!” she called. “What do you mean? Why will I need great courage? Is there a battle coming?”

But there was no answer, just a muffled snore from Pouncetail, who was sleeping beside her. Mistyfoot stared wildly around the clearing, but her brother had gone. Had he been trying to warn her that something dreadful was on the horizon? There was no chance that Mistyfoot would be able to sleep now. She padded carefully past the sleeping elders and went to the entrance of the medicine cat den.

“Mothwing!” she called in a loud whisper.

There was a faint murmur from behind the boulders; then the medicine cat appeared. She looked wide-eyed and ruffled, as if she hadn’t been able to sleep either. “What is it?” she asked. “Is something wrong?”

“I need to go to the Moonpool now!” Mistyfoot told her. “Stonefur visited me in a dream, and there are things I need to ask him.”

Mothwing looked alarmed. “Why? What did he say?”

“Nothing that made sense!” Mistyfoot hissed. “Come on, we have to go!”

“It would be safer to wait until dawn,” Mothwing hedged. “Since we have to cross WindClan territory.”

“No, we have to leave now,” Mistyfoot insisted. “If trouble is coming, RiverClan cannot be without a leader any longer! There is so much I have to learn!”

Mothwing padded out from her den and shook a few clinging scraps of herb from her fur. “Yes,” she murmured. “There is more to learn than you know.”



Chapter 3

The first light of dawn was beginning to appear on the horizon when Mistyfoot and Mothwing reached the top of WindClan's ridge. It had been too early for any patrols, so they had crossed the moonstone unchallenged, traveling in silence apart from the soft brush of their paws on the grass. Mistyfoot paused to catch her breath at the crest of the hill and looked back down at the lake. The water looked thick and almost black from here, pushing against the curls and points of the shoreline. The RiverClan camp was a dark smudge on the far side; Mistyfoot pictured the cats in the clearing, and she wondered if any of them were looking up at the ridge at this moment, spotting her silhouetted against the mill of sunrise.

Beside her, Mothwing shifted her paws. "We should keep going," she meowed. Mistyfoot was surprised that she didn't seem more excited about the nine lives ceremony. Was visiting the Moonpool and sharing tongues with StarClan just a matter of routine for medicine cats?

Their pace slowed as they began the long, steep scramble over the rocks. Mistyfoot had once traveled this way once before, and she had forgotten how hard it was—or perhaps her legs had just grown older.

"Is it much farther?" she panted after losing her grip on one boulder and almost falling over backward.

"No," Mothwing replied over her shoulder. "See those bushes up there? The path that leads down to the Moonpool is just behind them."

Mistyfoot's head was spinning by the time they pushed their way through the thorny branches and started to follow the spiraling path downward. Her paws slotted into the imprints left by generations of cats before, and for a moment she felt their pelts brush past her, bathing her in musky scent. *Welcome, welcome.* Did she hear their voices, too, or was it just her imagination?

Mothwing led her to the edge of the pool. It gleamed under the pale sunlight, reflecting the clouds and the swift flight of a bird across its surface. Mistyfoot's heart started to beat faster. This was it. She was actually going to be the leader of RiverClan! She glanced at Mothwing and was surprised to see that the medicine cat looked nervous too. The tip of her fluffy tail was twitching, and she seemed reluctant to meet Mistyfoot's gaze. Perhaps she was feeling anxious about the unfamiliar ceremony after all.

"You'll be fine," Mistyfoot reassured her old friend. "It's the first time for both of us, but we'll get through it together."

Mothwing just blinked. "Lie down at the edge of the pool," she instructed, "and let your muzzle touch the water."

Mistyfoot settled down with her paws tucked under her. The stone was cold beneath her belly, but the water was colder still, sparkling like ice against her nose. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Good luck," she heard Mothwing say softly, as though she were very far away.

There was a rush of stars around her, and then a dizzying blackness swallowed her up. Mistyfoot fought the urge to cry out. *Am I falling?* There were whispers and cries in her ears, but none of them clear enough to hear, and the scents of many cats, some half-recognized, some strange and sharp. Just as Mistyfoot was about to shriek in terror, she felt firm sand underneath her paws. She opened her eyes and looked around. She was standing on a gently sloping shore beside a broad, shallow river that splashed over pebbles and carried the scent of fish. Above, the sky was bright and the sun blazed down, warming her fur. Mistyfoot felt an urge to wade into the water and let fish swim onto her claws, somehow she knew there would be no difficulty in catching a haul of prey.

The bushes behind her rustled, and a pale gray cat appeared. For a moment Mistyfoot thought it was her brother, Stonefur, but then she recognized the scent and knew it was Graypool, the RiverClan she-cat she had called mother for so long. Mistyfoot purred loudly, and in two strides Graypool was beside her, licking her fur and nuzzling her head with her chin. Mistyfoot buried her nose in Graypool's feather-soft chest, suddenly feeling like a kit again.

"I'm so worried I'll make a mistake in the ceremony," she confessed.

"Hush, little one," Graypool soothed her. "You'll be fine. There's nothing to get wrong; I promise. Are you ready?"

Mistyfoot straightened up and nodded. She was startled to realize that the shore was crowded with cats now, their fur lit by stars and their eyes shining with warmth. She wondered for a fleeting moment where Mothwing was, but then Graypool stepped forward and lifted her voice above the splashing of the river.

"My precious Mistyfoot, beloved nearly-daughter, I give you a life for loving your Clanmates as if each cat were your kit, borne of your body and your pain." She rested her muzzle against Mistyfoot's head, and a bolt like lightning shot through Mistyfoot's pelt. She squeaked and leaped back in pain, but Graypool's eyes glowed at her, giving her strength, and Mistyfoot dug her claws into the sand to hold her ground. The fire beneath her skin passed and she gasped for breath.

"Thank you, Graypool," she whispered. The she-cat nodded and stepped back.

Then a familiar shape loomed over Mistyfoot, and she basked in her brother's scent. "I told you you would meet again," Stonefur purred. "I give you a life for treating all cats equally, for fighting against injustice and unfairness wherever it comes."

Mistyfoot braced herself, but the shock from this life was less severe, feeling instead like a wave of strength building inside her, swelling from nose to tail-tip until she felt as if she could leap over mountains.

The next cat was a slender, soft-furred gray tabby with eyes that reflected the blue of the sky. "Feathertail!" Mistyfoot cried. "I have missed you!"

Feathertail's gaze softened. "I have missed you too, Mistyfoot. I haven't forgotten the lessons you learned as your apprentice. The life I give you is for accepting your destiny, however hard that may seem. Some things are beyond our control; that doesn't mean they should be fought against."

This life was uncomfortable, prickling like thorns and choking her like a fishbone caught in her throat. Mistyfoot struggled to keep still and not spit out the invisible bone. Perhaps this was a warning of how difficult her destiny was going to be? Mistyfoot felt a tremor of unease.

“Welcome, Mistyfoot,” purred a deep voice. She opened her eyes to see Crookedstar, leader of RiverClan before Leopardstar, looking down at her. Mistyfoot bowed her head. “You don’t have to do that now,” Crookedstar reminded her. “We are equals here. I give you a life with the wisdom and strength to carry the burden of leadership. It will weigh heavy, but remember that every problem is nothing more than a challenge to be overcome.”

Mistyfoot’s legs buckled as she felt a huge, invisible pressure crushing her. She forced herself to stand straight, and felt the pressure transform into a soft, powerful warmth. *I am strong enough to carry this burden*, she told herself.

The next life came from the broad-shouldered brown tabby Oakheart, who had been Crookedstar’s brother and deputy. But Mistyfoot knew him now as something else: her father. “My beautiful daughter,” he murmured, resting his muzzle against her ears. “I am so sorry I could not be a true father to you. Live well, believe in yourself, and we will walk in StarClan together one day. I give you a life with the courage to follow your heart,” he purred, and Mistyfoot braced herself against the joy of feeling that seared through her. She felt a flash of sorrow as her father stepped away from her, but almost at once another cat was close beside her, breathing warmly into her ear.

“Oh, my daughter,” Bluestar whispered. “If only you knew how much I missed you.”

Mistyfoot lifted her head and studied the dark gray she-cat. Bluestar looked young and lithe and strong, very different from the soaked and battered cat she and her brother had dragged from the river.

Bluestar let her tail-tip rest on Mistyfoot’s flank. “The life I give you is for doing what is right, however hard that might be.” The regret in her voice almost broke Mistyfoot’s heart. She forced out a purr, in spite of the fire that was scorching through her blood.

“I know you only ever tried to do the right thing,” she rasped.

Bluestar leaned forward until her muzzle was touching the tip of Mistyfoot’s ear. “Thank you,” she breathed.

A beautiful she-cat with delicate silver markings came forward. Mistyfoot tipped her head on one side. “Silverstream? Is that you?”

The she-cat purred. “Well met, Mistyfoot. I am so proud of what you have become. I give you a life for finding happiness, even in the most unlooked-for places. Whatever happens, never forget how to be joyful.” When she touched Mistyfoot’s nose, a bright silver light flashed, making Mistyfoot blink. Her fur tingled and she felt the hair stand up along her spine.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

A dark gray tabby took Silverstream’s place. Mistyfoot’s heart ached as she gazed at him. “Oh, Rippletail. I’m so sorry you didn’t return. You saved the lake, you know? The water came back!” *not the fish*, she added silently, though she wasn’t going to tell her former Clanmate that.

Rippletail dipped his head. “I only ever wanted to help my Clan,” he meowed. “My life was worth that. The life I give you is for curiosity, for the courage to find out what lies beyond the horizon. Never turn down a chance to learn something more.”

“I won’t; I promise,” Mistyfoot whispered as the heat burned through her once more. She was beginning to feel dizzy and weak, and her vision was blurred.

At first she thought no cat had come up after Rippletail. There was an empty space in front of her. She had one more life to come, didn’t she? Then there was a tiny squeak below her, and Mistyfoot looked down at a small black kit with piercing green eyes.

“Perchkit! My baby!”

The tiny cat bounced on his paws. “I knew I’d see you again,” he chirped. “They said I could give you a life, too. So mine is for bravery, even when you are walking into shadows. There will always be

light, even in the darkest night.”

~~He stretched up to press his nose against Mistyfoot’s chin. She inhaled his precious kit scent and drank in the energy that flowed from him. *I never forgot you, not for a single moment.*~~

“Mistystar! Mistystar!”

The cats on the shore raised their voices, sending her new name echoing up to the sky. Two more cats pushed through the throng and wound around Mistystar’s legs. “Pikepaw! Primrosepaw!” She felt a rush of love for her kits who hadn’t lived long enough to become the warriors they should have been.

“We will be waiting for you,” Pikepaw promised earnestly.

“We are so proud of you!” Primrosepaw added, pressing her cheek against Mistystar’s shoulder.

Mistystar opened her mouth to tell her kits how much she missed them, but the light was turning gray and misty, and the shore vanished to be replaced by curved cliffs of stone. Mistystar was lying beside the Moonpool once more, her ears ringing and her fur still ruffled from the agony of the nine lives.

Mothwing padded up to her. “Are you all right?”

Mistystar blinked. She pictured the cats by the shore again, and knew there had been one missing. “You weren’t there!”

Mothwing winced, then relaxed as if a weight had been lifted off her. “No.” She held Mistystar’s gaze without flinching. “You will always visit StarClan alone. They don’t exist for me in the way that they do for you.”

Mistystar stared at her friend in dismay. What was Mothwing saying? She was a medicine cat! How could this be true? She fought to speak, even though the ground was lurching under her feet.

“You . . . you don’t believe in StarClan?”



Chapter 4

“But you’ve been our medicine cat for so long! Have you never walked with StarClan in your dreams?”

Mothwing shook her head. “You have your beliefs,” she meowed calmly. “I have mine. The cats you see in your dreams guide and protect you in ways that I have lived without. I am skilled at healing and caring for my Clanmates, and that has been enough to serve my Clan.”

Mistystar’s mind was whirling. Surely this couldn’t be happening! How could a medicine cat not believe in StarClan? Why had none of the cats said anything to her during the nine lives ceremony? They must know that Mothwing never walked with them. What about omens? Did StarClan bother to send any if Mothwing would never be watching for them? She took a step forward, suddenly desperate to get back to the lake, to find a footing for her paws on ground that seemed to have shifted.

“Come on, let’s go home.”

As Mothwing followed her up the paw-printed path, Mistystar thought she heard the medicine cat murmur, “I’m sorry.” But there was nothing she could think of to say in reply.

They traveled quickly and in silence, leaping and scrambling down the tumbled rocks until they were standing on the short, springy grass of WindClan’s territory once more. Scents from ThunderClan drifted to them across the narrow stream that marked the boundary between the two Clans. “Let’s stop and tell Firestar what has happened,” Mistystar suggested. The other leaders would have to learn about Leopardstar’s death sometime.

Mothwing nodded. They jumped over the stream and trotted down the other side until they reached a clear path that led into the trees. Fresh ThunderClan scent hung in the air; they had clearly just missed a patrol. Mistystar took the lead along the trail, reminding herself that she was a Clan leader now, and had every right to visit her neighbors with this important news without being accused of trespassing. But it still felt strange to be walking in another Clan’s territory without constantly looking over her shoulder, wary of ambush.

They reached the gap in the walls of the hollow and forced their way in through the thorns. Mistystar shook her head to dislodge the prickles that had caught in her nose. She didn’t know how the ThunderClan cats put up with such an uncomfortable entrance to their home. Firestar was crossing the clearing to meet them.

“Is everything all right?”

Mistystar stood still and waited for him to reach her. “Leopardstar’s dead,” she announced.

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