

THE COURAGE IN A SMALL HEART

HAZEL HALFWHISKER

A WORLD OF MURID SHORT STORY

BOO LUDLOW

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And thank you, reader, for giving this short story a try. If you enjoy it, please pass it on to someone else who might enjoy it, too. And if you hate it... go ahead and pass it along to someone else who will also hate it :)

The Courage in A Small Heart

Hazel Halfwhisker

The forest outside Whiskerroot was far larger than Hazel had imagined—impossibly large. Mind-bogglingly *huge*. Titanic trees stretched skyward; Hazel had to crane her neck until her nose pointed directly upward to see where the tops of trunks disappeared into leaves; they must share the same space as the clouds. Any one of their leaves would cover her entirely if it fell upon her. Their fallen sisters shifted under her paws as she walked by.

Leaves could be beautiful, but they also obscured danger. Up in the high leaves, owls could perch, unseen, unheard. A mouse would never know one was there until one of her companions squeaked in terror as he was snatched up—or worse, until *she* felt those cold, sharp talons pierce her own hide. Down in the low leaves, a snake could strike without warning, materializing as if it had been instantly formed from the brown, fallen leaves.

Hazel shivered and pulled her furred cloak tight around her. Feeling its soft skin helped her to imagine that she was still in her mother's nest, surrounded by brothers and sisters, in a pile of safety and bliss. She kept walking on her back paws alone, hunched and alternating between steps and hops as her chest grew tighter and tighter.

She wore little beyond the cloak: a belt with a pouch tied to it, in which she kept pebbles of interesting colors or shapes; a bag on her back, over the cloak, which carried some seeds and empty sacks for collecting the spoils of foraging; and a spear, tied the side of her back-bag, crafted from a short, sturdy stick, mouse-fur rope, and the sharp-

ened tooth of a cat. The cat had been found dead, she was told; cat-tooth spears were the results of fortunate opportunity and nothing more. A mouse never had any hope of killing one.

And yet, she was trailing a cat. The thought made Hazel's body start to shake.

"Keep up, Halfwhisker," another mouse called.

Hazel tried to, but after a few steps she stumbled, leaned against a root—taller than she was, and gnarled like an aged mouse of six winters—and focused on breathing.

Halfwhisker was a descriptive moniker. Before she had weaned and left her mother's nest, Hazel had run snout-first into a bloodskræcher's fire while exploring the depths of Whiskerroot. The whiskers on the right side of her face had never regrown, although most of the fur had. The bloodskræcher that had found her and nursed her back to health told her she was lucky enough that her nose still worked and shouldn't ask for anything more.

"Craemus slowing us down," another voice grunted.

Hazel couldn't respond. The knowledge that she was frozen in place, helpless if a predator should appear, now captured her mind, further stiffening her limbs and quickening her breath. Overwhelming smell flooded her nose with each inhalation: the familiar stink of the mice she travelled with, the mustiness of rotting leaves, a promise of edible fungi, and multiple species of insects. Her twitching ears caught the rustling of leaves, the scraping of branches, skittering that could be a fleeing beetle, the stepping of her companions as they sighed and turned around. Moments later, Hazel was surrounded.

Mouse paws grabbed her own and began licking them, then helped her to thayma. Feeling her own paws running up and down her snout, through her whiskers, and over her

ears was soothing, and soon Hazel calmed down enough to groom herself. As she did so, she glanced upward at the mouse in front of her.

Hulking over her was Pebble Cloudeye; Hazel locked up again. At seven inches tall fully stretched out, Pebble was a mountain of a mouse, and the leader of this band of Sharpteeth. Her body was all muscle, her tail short and thick, and she had one black eye and one the uneven color of a puddle full of chalky dust. She was infamous for being fearless, even compared to other gorskrmus, and had once scared a fox into flight by biting its nose. That all said, her fearlessness had also cost her sight in an eye, which was evidence enough for many mice to think she was insane. She was *almost* everything Hazel wished to be, yet being this close to her was terrifying.

“Heart and heroism, Halfwhisker,” Pebble grunted. Pebble jerked her head the direction they had been traveling. “Sunrise soon. A little farther and we’ll have shelter. Not safe to pause here.” She turned her head to give Hazel a long look with her good eye, then hopped off, using her long spear as a walking stick. She was tailed by the band’s bloodskræcher, bundled in a thick cloak; the other mice surrounding Hazel followed, moving in single file.

The last mouse to leave paused as he passed Hazel. He offered a paw; she took it and he pulled her onto her back paws. He was an average mouse in every way, a little over four inches from the tip of his nose to his bottom and covered with grayish-brown fur. His ears were large and round as the two moons that hung in the sky. He smiled and said, “I was terrified my first time leaving Whiskerroot, too. Now I’m just nervous.” Then he nudged Hazel onward.

Brushing under bushes and scurrying over roots, treading lightly on soft soil, keeping dense underbrush

between herself and any unknown dangers above, Hazel hurried along, heart still pounding within her chest.



THEIR INTENDED SHELTER was a hollow underneath a knot of mossy tree roots, accessible by a tunnel wide enough for two mice to walk abreast. The tree above had deeply pitted bark—it made Hazel think of her home, and how easy it was to climb within it to reach the various nests of woven grass that craemus loved. Though hard to judge from the outside, the hollow appeared to be large and dry. It would be comfortable, and Hazel looked forward to rest after a long night of hiking.

Pebble didn't lead her band directly inside. They first stopped within a bush densely covered in thick leaves with pointed edges. The regular mus struggled a little to get in, complaining about getting jabbed, but Hazel easily slipped between the leaves and waited near the bush's base. There were unexpected advantages to being small; then again, Pebble had no issue getting in either, shoving her way through the foliage, apparently unaffected by the sharp leaves. There were obvious advantages to being large.

The bloodskræcher followed close behind Pebble, protected by her bulk, then began scratching at the base of the bush. With a deep hood pulled over his head, Hazel had a hard time observing more than his pink, twitchy nose and the yellowish fur on his snout; she thought it very odd that a mouse would wear so much.

A pawful of mice were sent ahead. Ears alert, noses sniffing, spears held before them, they crept forward into the hollow and disappeared from view. A few minutes later they returned, three holding up spears with twitching

brown spiders stuck to their ends, each one's body as large as Hazel's head; the fourth had armfuls of blubbery, wriggling things, a pale yellow in color. Hazel's stomach rumbled when she recognized them.

"Grubs!" the mouse shouted with a grin.

"Quiet!" Pebble snapped. That didn't diminish the band's enthusiasm in the slightest, however; many mice rushed forward, hoping to find at least one grub to munch on before they were all claimed or escaped. Most signs of apprehension disappeared as the band wandered into the tunnel leading to hollow under the tree. Hazel, Pebble, and the average mouse took the rear; before they all disappeared underground, Pebble stopped one last time, tripoded on her back paws and the base of her tail, and looked around. She snorted and ducked inside.

In the tunnel, the average mouse spoke to Hazel again. "How are you feeling?"

Hazel had only been introduced to her new band once, briefly, before they had hurried away from Whiskerroot. She'd been given all of their names, but the fear that had clouded her mind since leaving the land she knew had made them difficult to remember. Now that she was more comfortable, memory of this mouse returned: Twitch. His name was Twitch.

She said, "I'm looking forward to food and shelter."

Twitch hummed pleasantly. "Me too!"

They stepped into the hollow; it was an irregular circle, two feet in diameter at its longest and eight inches tall at its highest, with root-laced earthen walls and a relatively flat, soft floor. Several mice were crowded in a corner, likely hunting for more grubs, while others dropped their bags with relieved sighs.

Twitch grinned as he looked around the hollow. “No sleeping tails-to-whiskers tonight!”

Hazel wasn’t as excited. She was used to sleeping in a tight bunch with her brothers, sisters, and mother; watching mice scratch out solitary spots on the ground left her feeling lonely. Was this what it would be like as a Sharptooth? Alone, even in a crowd? Perhaps she had made a mistake.

Hazel shook her head. No—she couldn’t let herself think that. She needed this. She was tired of always feeling so afraid, and if being a Sharptooth couldn’t cure her of that, nothing would.

Twitch wandered off and began scratching out a spot near the hollow’s edge, where fibrous tendrils from nearby roots made the ground springy. Hazel followed him, hesitantly, and stood nearby, not quite looking at him. After a minute, Twitch looked up and said, “You can nest by me, if you want.”

“Thank you,” Hazel said. She untied her back-bag with her tail and slid it to the ground, then placed her spear on top of it, her cloak on top of them. She left her belt and pouch around her waist and wondered if she’d find any interesting rocks to add to her little collection.

“We’re probably not going to see that cat, you know,” Twitch said. “I mean, if we do, we’ll have to be cautious—leading terrible beasts away from the great nest and then losing them is no easy feat. But they also move around a lot on their own. Most of the time they wander off without our intervention and we come back home with our pouches full of mushrooms and seeds, nothing more.”

A nearby mouse interjected, “Cats can disembowel a mouse with one swipe, send him flying to break against a tree at the same time.” His name was Clearwater; his fur

was mottled different shades of brown and his whiskers drooped.

“Crunch your entire body without a thought; little more than a snack,” another mouse growled—Bramble. His ears were short and wide, his belly brightly white.

Hazel began to shake and curl in on herself. “OOOOooooooooohhhh...”

“Lay off her!” Twitch said, nose keeping his namesake as he glared at Clearwater and Bramble. “She doesn’t understand that you’re joking around.”

Clearwater laughed, but Bramble’s ears were flattened against his head. He said, “Only half-joking. She ought to know that most of the Sharpteeth who die are the new ones—survive two or three outings and you’ll know everything you need to if you want to keep your tail out of something’s belly. That’s not to scare her—if she’s smart, that will keep her careful.” He gave Hazel an appraising look. “Then again, if she’s too scared to take care of herself, it might not matter anyway.” Bramble shrugged, then he and Clearwater wandered off toward where the grubs had been found.

“Don’t listen to them—hey! It’s all right. I’m on my third outing and haven’t seen any real danger,” Twitch said, but Hazel was past hearing. She’d never seen a cat before, though she’d heard stories—and the vicious canine at the end of her spear was more than enough to invite visions of a terrible creature, as tall as the trees and mostly made of teeth and claws.

Twitch hummed thoughtfully, then curled up next to Hazel and pressed his side against hers; Hazel leaned into him, feeling her anxiety still for just a moment.

Pebble and most of the other mice were eating at this point, some with a grub in each paw and alternating juicy bites. They chatted as they relaxed, winding down before

preparing to sleep. Hazel's eyes widened when she saw the bloodskræcher; he was standing in front of a ring of stones with dried sap at its center. He reached into a pouch at his waist, pulled out a pawful of rust-colored powder, and tossed it on the sap, then began etching it. The powder—dried blood, Hazel knew—began smoking, and then the sap burst alight. The bloodskræcher huddled in front of the fire, rubbing his paws; when a mouse handed him a grub, he stuck it on the end of a spear and held it over the flames.

Hazel shrank into herself more.

"You don't like fire?" Twitch asked.

"It's the reason—Halfwhisker, my name," Hazel said. She forced herself to ignore the bloodskræcher's fire and focus on breathing: she wasn't anywhere close to it. It couldn't hurt her.

"I don't like it either. But I understand why he uses it. He's an acomus—they're always cold. Now, what I really don't get is why he's *cooking* the grub. Drying food for winter storage is one thing, but cooking it just to turn around and eat it?"

"M-maybe he likes the texture," Hazel said. She had to force the words out, but talking helped her relax again.

"Yeah. Maybe." Twitch didn't sound convinced. "I'm going to go get us some food before it's all gone—I'll be back."

He pushed himself to his back paws and walked off; a few minutes later he was settled beside Hazel again, a grub and some spider legs in front of both of them. Hazel started nibbling on the spider legs first; she didn't like how spiders crunched, so she wanted to get them out of the way.

"Why'd you join the Sharpteeth anyway?" Twitch asked between bites.

Pebble stomped by, seemingly unstoppable as a rock

rolling down a hill; mice moved out of her path, rather than the other way around. "I don't want to be afraid anymore," Hazel whispered.

Sensing something in her tone, Twitch nodded and was quiet. Shortly after, Clearwater and Bramble approached. Clearwater cleared his throat and said, "Uh, sorry for the joking around earlier. Didn't mean anything by it. Just, you know, making light helps some of us feel better."

Bramble nodded.

"Thank you," Hazel said.

They both nodded awkwardly, looked around, then walked to their things and sat on their haunches, chatting as they ate. They had surprised Hazel; she hadn't expected them to apologize. Then again, she hadn't expected most of what she'd experienced as a Sharptooth so far.



IT WAS EARLY; the sun had not yet gone down, judging from the waning yellow light that spilled into the hollow's entrance. Hazel stirred, stretched, then sat on her haunches and yawned. She felt much better after a long day's rest. The cat, and all the other dangers of the world, seemed distant things now.

There was some rustling in the hollow: mice were rousing themselves and gathering around the blood-skræcher's dead fire. Its remnants were now greasy, black charring in the dirt, coupled with a scent that offended Hazel's nose. Standing behind the dead fire was a mouse that Hazel easily remembered the name of: Nusk No-Tail. He stood as tall as he could, but without a tail to tripod on he couldn't fully leave a hunch. Still, he held his head high, giving him an easy view of the crowd as mice sat. A rope

was tied to his tail-stump, trailing behind him in poor imitation.

The gathered mice munched on remnants of the previous night's meal, tender roots clawed out of the dirt walls, or sunflower seeds from their back-bags. "We don't want to miss this," Twitch said. "Nusk is an excellent story-mus." He hopped up to stand, waved a paw to invite Hazel to join him, and scurried away.

Hazel's side felt cold after Twitch left. She followed him to where he sat, next to Pebble and the bloodskræcher. She felt uncomfortable sitting near him, but she didn't want to sit far from Twitch.

Clearwater noticed Hazel and wiggled his nose at her with a smile. After Hazel smiled back, he returned his attention to Nusk.

"So, what's going to prepare you all for the day, eh? Cat hunting we go—something about the mighty Purrecta and her wicked litter of mouse-eaters? Prepare us for their tricks?" Nusk waved his pink paws as he spoke and twitched his long oval ears to accent each sentence.

"There's nothing so distressing as the merciless Purrecta!" a mouse grumbled.

"I want to hear about Ha-Thitsle," Bramble shouted. "Any of his stories, really."

"Yes, Ha-Thitsle!" Twitch added.

"I'm feeling for a Fryth story," Pebble said. At that, the bloodskræcher snorted quietly.

Nusk cleared his throat. "Well, Ha-Thitsle was on my mind already, as luck would have it—but let me see if I can serve those who wish to hear of Fryth as well. Here's a story my great-grandfather, a spectacularly wise mouse of five winters, would tell to me. Let's see if I can keep your whiskers twitching." His voice was high but clear, which

made it easy for Hazel to keep her attention on him. As he spoke, Hazel found herself transfixed.

BACK WHEN THE world was new and had never been touched by winter, Fryth lived alone. Because he sought variety, he commanded the ground to reshape into unique formations, and it did. Because he sought beauty, and food, he commanded the ground to grow forth plants, and it did. Because he did not wish to be lonely, he commanded the ground to grow him a companion, and up sprouted a shell with two halves—not unlike a walnut, although much larger.

Fryth was pleased with his creation, for he saw within it life unformed. He whispered to it, told it what shape and attitude to take, and let it grow until he was satisfied. Then he cracked that nut open and set it free.

That was the first, and greatest, beast born of Fryth's animal garden—and the mere description of such a wondrous creature would fill up much more time than we have now. So pleased was Fryth with his own creation, immortal like himself, that he continued commanding the ground to produce these life-bearing nuts, and he continued to whisper to them, instructing them to take the forms and attitudes that he imagined. From these came all creeping beasts, and those that climb, those with wings that claim the sky; hungry monsters and satisfied creatures, ones with mouths full of sharp or flat teeth, or none at all; in short, all beasts that are, Fryth imagined and created their first forebear, and named each one.

Fryth thought to garnish his work with a small but clever creature to live in the spaces where his larger beasts could not. But when Fryth called this beast forth from the

depths of the nut, his paw outstretched to invite the creature into the light of day, instead it emerged and bit Fryth before scurrying off.

“Cursed Matagroskr!” Fryth said of the beast that would one day become known as *the hungry*, the Rat King. But Matagroskr was already gone, and it was too late for Fryth to finish a curse befitting the creature’s betrayal. Disappointed in his supposed last creation, Fryth began again, whispering all the more carefully this time, creating a creature like Matagroskr, but lesser. He knew this creature would have a hard time in a world with beasts like Matagroskr in it, not to mention Purrecta and the many other predators Fryth had envisioned, so he gave it a clever mind and a will to live anywhere. With this, Ha-Thitsle emerged from the nut and into a world that thought itself already complete.

Seeing the world and the dangers within it, Ha-Thitsle was concerned. He knew Fryth had made him to produce more mice, but he did not see a place for them in all of creation. Even in the short time that Matagroskr had been free, he had been hard at work filling the small spaces of the world with his breed.

“Oh Fryth, how will we survive?” Ha-Thitsle cried.

“By your wits and your wariness; by your willingness to live where none other will,” Fryth said.

“But another that you have created is already doing this!” Ha-Thitsle protested.

Curiously, Fryth did not respond immediately. Instead, Fryth sat by Ha-Thitsle and watched as the distant sun set and waited for Ha-Thitsle to calm. Eventually he responded, “You are my sunset creation, Ha-Thitsle, to fill even the spaces Matagroskr could not. I have had much

practice. You must trust that I know what I am doing." And he left.

Ha-Thitsle did not have long to ponder on Fryth's words, for shortly after Ha-Thitsle had been left alone did Matagroskr appear. That great rat, the pattern of his kind, ambled toward Ha-Thitsle, urinating on everything that he passed, claiming it as his own. When he reached Ha-Thitsle he stopped and grumbled, "So this is the false creation Fryth has set to replace me. Well, I don't see much merit in it. Hardly more than a mouthful, I imagine!" Then he opened his mouth and lunged toward Ha-Thitsle.

Fortunately, Ha-Thitsle was too quick for Matagroskr, or none of us would be here to tell this story. He leaped to the side and led Matagroskr in a great chase around the broken nut, barely keeping in the lead, wondering what he could do to save his own skin. He was quick; so was Matagroskr. He was clever; he had every reason to believe Matagroskr was the same. But he was small, and Matagroskr big. What could be done?

The other beasts heard the noise of Matagroskr's cursing and came to witness what was happening. Soon a large crowd had gathered round and were laughing at the sight of Matagroskr chasing Ha-Thitsle. Ha-Thitsle despised the attention, but Matagroskr laughed with the rest of them; in fact, at times he stopped to pose and to boast in his greatness. This gave Ha-Thitsle time to think, to plan how he would escape. He noticed the pieces of the nut he had been grown in were far more than two; it appeared that Fryth had been hasty in releasing his final creation, and many shell fragments littered the ground.

This gave Ha-Thitsle an idea. He leaped on one of the fragments and covered it with his hindquarters while Matagroskr's face was turned; he waited as the great rat

charged toward him, then slowed, suspicious. Matagroskr realized that Ha-Thitsle had a plan, but did not yet suspect what it was.

“Great Matagroskr, are you so afraid of me? The least of Fryth’s beasts?” Ha-Thitsle asked. The creatures surrounding him snickered. Matagroskr glared at them out of the corner of his eye.

“Puny, pathetic Ha-Thitsle, I merely wanted to give you a moment more to appreciate the life that Fryth had blessed you with while it lasted.” Matagroskr smiled a yellow smile.

“Funny, but other beasts do not sit before helpless food as you do; even El-Aifaynra pounces on lettuce the moment he catches up to it, though it cannot run away. Surely you are braver than a rabbit, great Matagroskr?” Ha-Thitsle crouched to make himself as small as possible.

Matagroskr’s eyes flashed red. “None of Fryth’s creations are braver than me!” he roared. He leaped upon Ha-Thitsle! That was almost the end of the father-mouse: he hadn’t expected Matagroskr to strike like a viper. But just in time, he jumped so that he fully entered Matagroskr’s mouth, and Matagroskr’s teeth snapped right on the shell fragment that Ha-Thitsle had left behind. When Matagroskr’s large incisors struck the shell, his top-right one shattered with a spray of tooth and blood!

Matagroskr roared in pain, giving Ha-Thitsle the moment he needed to leap again from Matagroskr’s mouth, leaving pellets behind as a gift. While Matagroskr writhed on the ground, and the other beasts of Fryth’s creation rolled on backs and bellies with laughter, Ha-Thitsle escaped into the world, so ensuring that you and I could be here today.

. . .

HAZEL HUNG BREATHLESSLY on Nusk's every word. When the storyteller finished and bowed his head, she broke into squeaking applause along with the rest of the band, cheering for Ha-Thitsle's cunning. Many mice jumped on each other and began wrestling in imitation of Ha-Thitsle's and Matagrosker's first fight.

"Nusk always knows the right story," Twitch said, his round ears happily perked upright. He hopped to his paws and wriggled his whole body, then began bounding about the hollow, joining in the explosion of energy. The hollow felt like a nest of pups exploring what they were capable of; Hazel watched with pleasure, thinking she was just the right size to play the Ha-Thitsle to any other mouse's Matagroskr, when Twitch's celebrations brought him near the hollow's entrance—

"Stop!" Pebble shouted—

A paw, claws, movement so fast Hazel almost couldn't register it—

Then Twitch was gone.

A high-pitched squeak rent the air, nearly striking Hazel dead with dread on the spot; it just as quickly was silenced by a wet crunch. Hazels bones threatened to shake out of her as a throaty purr followed, reverberating through the hollow.



A FALSE STILLNESS invaded the hollow after the cat attack, paired with palpable anxiety that hung like smoke. Perhaps the cat was still outside, waiting for another mouse to draw near; perhaps it had its fun and left.

Hazel wanted to thayma and never stop, but she didn't have time. Even hours after the cat had taken Twitch,

Pebble kept the band working too hard to have a moment to give in despair. She forbade any mouse from approaching the hollow's entrance and then split the band in two, setting the bloodskræcher as leader of the second half. Hazel found herself scurrying about under the bloodskræcher's directions, his soft-spoken words somehow clearer to her ears than anything Nusk had said, as the two halves of the band dug tunnels in opposite sides of the back of the hollow.

An aching pit formed in Hazel's stomach as dirt was moved and roots gnawed through or dug around. Pebble and the bloodskræcher had ordered each tunnel dug as narrowly as possible. Only one mouse in their band would comfortably fit through once they reached the moonlight.

As both halves of the band wound down their digging, Pebble took Hazel to the side and sat nose-to-nose with her. The leader of this band of Sharpteeth stared for a moment while Hazel fidgeted, then said, "You know what you need to do."

"You want me to look for the cat." Hazel's voice trembled.

"Yes, but I want you to do it by climbing the tree. Cats can climb, but I'm told craemus are faster. Is that true?"

Hazel tried to think on the stories she'd grown up hearing. She wasn't aware of any where a cat had caught a mouse that was already halfway up a tree. But she had heard of mice being snatched off the side of a trunk by an owl. She gulped. "I hope so."

Pebble glared, then pushed Hazel a little. "You already froze once, Halfwhisker. Don't do it again. Remember Twitch. Remember the rest of us—if we're going to survive, we need *you*. You are small and quick. The cat might not even notice you, or care to put forth the effort to catch such

a small mouthful. Be brave—have heart.” Pebble motioned at Hazel’s things. “Wear your cloak, but keep the knot loose—if the cat does catch you, it might bite and catch the cloak instead, and you don’t want to be pulled up into the air with it. Carry your spear with your teeth or your tail so you don’t risk losing it with the cloak.”

Hazel nodded. She collected what little she needed, freezing only once when another purr echoed through the hollow. She tried to keep her mind on Twitch; he had been so kind to her, so friendly in ways that made her think of home. He would never know what an impact he’d had on her in a short time. Such small sacrifices—surely it would have been more fun to commiserate with the rest of the band than the scared newcomer, and yet he did the latter.

Every mouse turned their eyes from the hollow’s first tunnel to Hazel. She felt like she was obligated to say something before she went down the tunnel. “I’ll do my best!” Hazel squeaked. The words nearly stuck in her throat.

“Heart and heroism, Halfwhisker!” Clearwater called.

“Ha-Thitsle be with you!” said Nusk.

“Don’t die,” Bramble stated.

Other mice called their support, looking up from thaying to raise their paws in the air and wish her well. Hazel turned and scurried down the bloodskræcher’s tunnel; a desire to prevent them from seeing her tears kept her from stopping and freezing. How could they put so much trust in her? This was her first time leaving Whiskerroot—and she was the smallest, the weakest, the least of them all.

They had no choice. Like Ha-Thitsle, they had to work with what they had. Hazel had to work with what she had—little as it was.

Near the tunnel entrance, Hazel stopped to thayma. It was difficult to keep her breathing even. Every fear she had

told her the cat was waiting just outside, somehow aware of the new tunnels already, that the only reason it hadn't already snatched her like Twitch was that the tunnel exit was too small—

"For Twitch. For the rest of the band," Hazel muttered. She had keen ears and a clever nose; once in the tree, she could scurry up and down its side as easily as she ran upon the ground. She wasn't helpless. Those thoughts helped soothe her, though the hairs of her back were still raised as she sniffed around the tunnel entrance, listened for several minutes, then poked her head out and looked around.

The tunnel had been dug out between two surface roots, limiting Hazel's vision—but before she let that thought panic her, she reminded herself that it would also make it harder for the cat to see her. She crept out of the tunnel, then slowly slunk to the top of one of the roots and looked in all directions. The tree rose to her right, a giant of nature; ahead, behind, and to her left, she saw trees, bushes, tall grass, all sorts of green leafery, their sharp colors pleasantly dulled in the milky moonlight. No cat—no sign of any other animals, really. Not that they would be easy to spot in the thick canopy made by forest floor undergrowth. Hazel scurried up the tree trunk.

The tree's bark featured many deep, rough clefts, which made for convenient pawholds and easy climbing. Hazel rushed up its trunk, feeling more and more comfortable as she did so, despite the weight of the spear her tail held. Climbing in a cloak wasn't incredibly convenient, but she managed to avoid tangling her paws. Within moments she was halfway up the trunk.

Hazel circled the tree, slowly moving round and round, with her eyes fixed on the forest's undergrowth. She had never seen a cat before. She knew they had big teeth and

were furred, even their tails—which made them sound almost squirrel-like, although far too big. And not nearly scary enough.

Perhaps it didn't matter; the undergrowth was so thick Hazel wouldn't see anything that stayed low and still.

Leaves rustled and shifted; Hazel froze, then slowly turned her head to follow the sound. Thick foliage prevented her from getting a clear image; she caught glimpses of rippling muscle, rusty fur with grey spots and speckles, and pointed ears with tufts of hair at their tips. Still, these flashes were enough to make her shiver so hard she almost lost her grip. That had to be the beast that ate Twitch.

As a branch shifted, she spotted where the beast had been and gasped: there was a bird in the dirt, a bloody raven with blue-black feathers, its beak open and head twisted to the side. Little was left of its lower half. Hazel could see into its hollowed-out chest cavity. The cat must have hunted and killed without it or the raven making a sound.

Then the branch swung back into place and she could see the bird no more.

She'd heard of beasts like this—enormous, terrible cats called *bobbers*. The pointed, tufted ears evoked gripping memories of being a terrified pup, surrounded by shivering siblings, while one of her fathers wove a tale of Purrecta's wicked litter and the devastations they inflicted upon mice. They killed for food, they killed for sport—they killed for *boredom*. They possessed a power above that of hundreds of mice—hundreds of gorskrmus, even. They were beyond sense or reason.

Hazel had to bite her lips to keep from moaning. The bobber's ears were the only part of it consistently visible

through the undergrowth as it moved, shifting and twitching after sounds; they stopped near the hollow's original entrance, then lowered until Hazel could see them no longer.

It was crouching just outside, waiting for her band! Hazel doubted any of them could have seen the beast without stepping outside, easily within range of a pounce, and with the wind direction they wouldn't even have smelled it in advance. It was perfectly placed for an ambush. With its belly full from a half-eaten bird—and Twitch—why was it still hunting them? Shouldn't it have left? Despair poisoned Hazel's joints, nearly taking her strength from her.

What mouse could ever hope to stand up to such a monster? Surely it was larger than whatever cat had provided its tooth for her spear. The importance of their mission dawned on Hazel, a flash of insight like the moons cresting the horizon: if this beast, or another like it, discovered Whiskerroot and knew of the wealth inside—of the bloody sport to be had at such a concentration of mice—it would never leave. They'd become trapped in their great nest. Preparing winter storage would become nearly impossible, and with winter would come starvation. Even if the beast stayed for just a time and forced them to live off what they had, then left, it would mean a very lean winter indeed.

Great nests where many different mice worked together would not be possible if predators were allowed to sit directly outside. Hazel had been *told* what the Sharpteeth did for their survival, but it wasn't until this moment that she *felt* that importance.

She'd only been a Sharptooth for two nights. But she now felt their purpose.

And yet, Hazel was still scared.



HAZEL KNEW she had to return to her band to warn them. Eventually, she worked herself up to release one bark-clutching paw, reach farther away, and grab the tree again before moving another paw. One at a time, limb by nearly uncontrollable limb, she crawled sideways along the bark, toward the side of the trunk with the tunnel she had emerged from.

Another shudder ran through Hazel's bones, causing her to tear a piece of bark off the tree; she dropped it as she scrabbled for a hold. It skittered down the side of the trunk, making scratching sounds where it struck, before rolling into the grass below. She froze again, whiskers stiff, eyes fixed where the bobber had disappeared into the underbrush.

Its ears appeared, rising above the leaves. They twitched; one turned toward Hazel. But their overall positioning suggested the bobber was still staring at the hollow's original entrance.

Hazel didn't allow herself to breathe. She crawled as quickly as she dared, staying as silent as possible, around the trunk and down the tree, lungs burning and heart galloping. Back on the ground, the edges of her vision darkening, she was forced to let out a squeaking gasp and inhale again before dashing back into the tunnel. Once she was several inches inside—comfortably farther than she hoped the bobber could reach—she leaned against the tunnel wall on her left shoulder, feeling comforted by the brush of her remaining whiskers on the dirt, and focused on breathing and thymainging.

A rustle behind her. Hazel flinched, head turning to stare back at the tunnel entrance: it was filled by a single yellow eye, bloodshot at the edges, black-rimmed with a slitted black pupil in the center. The pupil narrowed, the eye turning to focus on Hazel.

Hazel screamed and fled. A hiss reverberated after her.



“FRYTH AND HIS GARDEN! A BOBBER,” Pebble snarled. She stalked back and forth within the hollow, short tail whipping behind her whenever she turned to change directions. She grumbled under her breath, then turned to Hazel, who was shaking beside Bramble and Clearwater. “And it knows the tunnel exits?”

“Yes—well, one. I saw its eye just inches from me,” Hazel stuttered.

“You should have speared it,” Pebble said. Then she waved her paw. “But don’t—I didn’t want you in my band because I thought you’d fight like a gorskrmus. I wanted you to go unnoticed, to be our best climber, our best scout.”

Hazel tried not to focus on what went unsaid: *But you were noticed.*

Pebble turned her attention to the bloodskræcher, a grimace on her face. “Do... you have the Man-blood to turn it away, make it flee?”

“I don’t think you understand how precious powdered Man-blood is—there isn’t enough in the whole forest to do that,” the bloodskræcher said. He patted a tiny pouch on his belt. “I have enough to confuse it, or draw its attention, for a few moments. That’s all, the end.”

Pebble bared her teeth and looked away. “What about *your* blood?”

“Similar results, but it would cost all that I am carrying.” The bloodskræcher rested his paws on other bulging pouches at his waist. “That would be... an issue if any are wounded and I don’t have time to powder their own blood. And it would just buy us moments, anyway—not enough for all to escape.”

“We might have to risk it,” Pebble growled.

“Bobber’s at the other tunnel!” a mouse—Leaf—shouted.

Pebble swore again. “It’s circling the tree!”

“Maybe we can time an escape carefully—slip out of one tunnel while it’s on the opposite side of the tree?” Nusk said.

“No. If it keeps circling, it would smell us, follow us, and we’d get trapped elsewhere—if we found shelter. If we just ran, we’d be slaughtered—it would pick us off one by one until it was bored, or until one of us broke heart and ran back to Whiskerroot, the bobber right behind. Not happening to my band,” Pebble said.

Another mouse, Honey, opened his mouth to speak—

Claws tore the air. The original entrance to the hollow, empty a second before, was now filled with vicious claws, rusty fur, black pads. Mice screamed as the paw swiped, severing the last third of a mouse’s tail before withdrawing, taking dirt with it and widening the hollow’s entrance slightly. The mouse with the injured tail shook, afraid beyond sound, as the mice near him helped him thayma and looked to the bloodskræcher to tend his tail.

“Waiting it out brings other problems,” Pebble said, apparently unfazed by the attack. “If it gets the idea to dig—well, the tree roots will slow it down, but won’t stop it forever. As bad, if it gets bored and heads toward Whiskerroot...”

Hazel could hardly think straight. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the bobber staring at her again: a stare that burned like fire, one that nearly stopped her heart and made the whiskerless side of her face ache. "How were we going to lead it away from Whiskerroot in the first place?" she gasped.

"We'd set up a trail," Bramble whispered. "We'd figure out where it is, find places to hide, then let it see one of us. It chases; that mouse hides, and another mouse appears, taunts it until it chases, and repeat. It takes a long chain of mice, but, once it's far enough away, they usually don't wander back. At least, not for a while."

Pebble stopped muttering and stared at Bramble for a moment, then grinned. "There you go, Bramble, that's the answer. Yes!"

Bramble looked alarmed. "What?"

"You, Clearwater, me... Hazel... Nusk." Pebble nodded. Then she looked at each named mouse. "Well? Get ready to go. A pawful of us could sneak out, lead the bobber away, and then try to lose it. By Fryth, if we do well we might just lead it far enough away that Whiskerroot's problem is taken care of, too." She tripoded and looked at the rest of the band, ten or so mice excluding the bloodskræcher. They were leaning against each other, most thymainging. "Well? The rest of you hole up here—don't try to run until it starts chasing us, unless there's no other option. If I come back and find that even one of you broke for home, leading it back to Whiskerroot, you'll need to hope the bobber finds you before I do."

"Me?" Hazel gasped.

"Yes, you," Pebble looked down at Hazel. "Leave your bags—we're not doing any foraging until this bobber is taken care of."

Pebble looked around; The rest of the mice Pebble had chosen still stared at her blankly.

“Move!” she shouted.

They jumped to their paws and scurried around. Hazel had shed her bag before climbing the tree and still had her spear gripped in her tail, so she remained in place, watching the flurry of activity with wide eyes. The energy in the hollow felt heightened, anxious, like the very air after a lightning strike.

“I’m coming with you.” The bloodskræcher looked up at Pebble. “I have an idea for a skræchim—but I need their blood and spears before we leave.”

Pebble’s eyes narrowed. “How much of their blood?”

“Little—they won’t likely notice it.”

“Will they get their spears back?”

“Better than before.”

Pebble thought for a moment, nose twitching, then said, “Do it.” She stomped off.

The bloodskræcher turned to Hazel; she immediately regretted not busying herself with some meaningless task when Pebble had commanded the other mice to prepare to leave. “You first, craemus.”



HAZEL NIBBLED MISERABLY on a tender root while the bloodskræcher produced a strange, twisted thing made of a grey substance. “Metal—a Man-thing,” the bloodskræcher explained, then set it on the ground points-down and placed a long, flat stone on its circular top. He set a piece of dried sap under the construction, rubbed a pinch of powdered blood on the sap, then scratched at the blood

while muttering under his breath. Within moments the sap was aflame and the stone heating up.

Hazel edged away from the fire.

"You're scared?" the bloodskræcher asked.

Hazel shook her head. "I don't like fire."

The bloodskræcher nodded. "Wise. It's destructive, indiscriminate... unrelenting. Not unlike our bobber." Then he extended a paw toward Hazel; what she could see of his fur was strange, with many strands that were far too thick and pointed at the end. These were black, while the thinner, softer, shorter fur underneath was a dirty yellow. His eyes glittered from within his deep hood. "If you've been healed before, you know what to do."

Hazel tensed, then stretched out a paw. "What are those? On your arms?" she asked.

"You've never met an acomus?" he asked. "Interesting—though I suppose most of us keep to ourselves." He plucked one of the strange, thick, pointed hairs from his arm. "This is a quill—all acomus grow them." He used the quill to make a cut on Hazel's paw; blood dribbled, bubbling as it fell onto the heated stone.

It was all Hazel could do not to gag. The bloodskræcher watched until a small pool of blood formed on the stone, then had Hazel press a paw tightly against the cut. He used his quill to stir the blood on the heated stone, and after a few minutes pulled the stone off of the metal Man-thing, protecting his paws with the edges of his cloak, and set it on the ground. Moments later, only powdered blood remained on the stone.

"Why?" Hazel asked as the bloodskræcher took a pinch of her blood and sprinkled it around her cut—the cut he had made. "It's so—it's so disturbing. Why can't we use what's in your pouches?"

“Hmmm. We ought to preserve *my* blood. And besides,” he paused to mutter as he used his nails to etch lines, curves, and whorls in the powdered blood on Hazel’s paw. Before Hazel’s eyes, her skin knitted together, leaving a thin, pink line where the cut had been. The bloodskræcher continued, “using your own blood on yourself is much more powerful than using mine.”

Hazel shivered. “Thank you.” She looked at the blood—her blood—remaining on the flat stone. “Why did you need so much?”

“Your spear,” the bloodskræcher said, paw outstretched. Hazel used her tail to hand it to him. The bloodskræcher tested the spear, attempting to bend its haft, then tugged at its tooth-head and the mouse-hair rope that held it together. “Very solid. Whoever gave this to you—if she made it—is extremely talented. That makes my job easier. Watch.” He spread the rest of Hazel’s blood on the haft of the spear, edges of the tooth, and the rope holding the tooth in place. As he etched the powdered blood, he said, “This skræchim will do many things—here, these symbols tell the tooth ‘Be sharper, cut better,’ as if it were still in its maker’s mouth. This one will strengthen the rope, binding it, tooth, and shaft like they were grown as one piece. These, here, reinforce the haft, making it much stronger than you are ever likely to need.” He handed it back to Hazel.

“Thank you,” Hazel whispered. Something about the spear felt like it was wriggling in her grasp—almost as if its haft had been turned into a long, stiff caterpillar. She didn’t like it.

The bloodskræcher shook his head. “Be wise with it—your blood will give it power until the end of tomorrow night, perhaps. It will only work for you. If another mouse

takes your skrächim, it will be a normal spear in his paws—maybe worse, if the powder makes it harder for him to grip it.” The bloodskrächer then began to collect his things.

As he walked away, Hazel tore her gaze from her spear. “I’m sorry—I didn’t ask your name. I don’t think it was shared when I first met... everyone.”

Facing away from her, the bloodskrächer paused, then turned his head so Hazel could only see his pink nose and a few black, black whiskers. “Tell you what—if we both live, you can have it. You might need it.”



THE MICE WERE all in position. It wasn’t long until night was over; the brightening air promised imminent sunrise. After such a busy, stressful night, Hazel should have been exhausted, ready to sleep through the day; instead, her heart was thudding against the inside of her chest like rain pounded on the trunk of her home during a storm.

She clutched her spear with her tail, ready to run on all fours. Bramble, as still as a stone and white belly flecked with dirt, stood behind her, spear held upright in one paw. She couldn’t easily see the mice behind him. Of Pebble, Hazel could only see her hindquarters, her tail pink as a worm, as she crouched ahead of Hazel. Hazel could only guess what their leader was doing or thinking as they waited to dash.

Hazel wished they would get it over with and run already. She wished could cower in the hollow with the rest of the band. She wished she was braver. She wished she didn’t have to be.

The bobber yowled somewhere outside. The sound rose all of Hazel’s hairs on end.

A voice squeaked, "Go!"

Pebble surged forward, as did those behind Hazel—Bramble, Clearwater, Nusk, and the bloodskræcher. With her tiny legs, Hazel found it difficult to keep from getting trampled as she dashed to the edge of the tunnel, scrambled onto the dirt outside, and ran blindly forward, the bright morning light blinding her and hurting her head. Fortunately, her nose and ears told her most of what she needed to know: cat-smell wasn't strong, so it probably wasn't near; bird calls were in the air, but theirs sounded like the cries of seed-eaters; the whiskers on the left side of her face helped keep her from running into branches and other underbrush, but the whiskerless right side of her head kept bumping and scraping into things; the vibrations of Pebble pounding on the ground ahead of her rolled up Hazel's paws and legs, telling her where to follow.

Hopefully they wouldn't be noticed.

There was a bird cry above them and Pebble switched directions; Hazel scrambled to follow her, felt the mice behind her disorganizing, and nearly froze up as a winged shadow passed by overhead. Was that one a mouse-eater? Branches cracked and leaves whipped through the air behind them. Were they being chased?

Eyes on Pebble. Eyes on Pebble. Eyes on Pebble. Hazel needed to keep her mind clear. All that mattered was the next step, the next step, the next step, ignoring that growing musky scent that made her stomach feel ill—

A loud hiss. A mouse scream. The bobber was on their tail!

How had it caught up so fast? Had the diversion distracted it at all?

The undergrowth was thinning, and Hazel's eyes were adjusted to the light. She wanted to look back, but she

couldn't risk it—just keeping up with Pebble was hard enough. On this uneven soil, covered in twigs and leaves, it would be so easy to trip and fall, snare whoever was behind her, turn them both into a quivering meal—

A low ridge of soil ahead of her, no nearby plants in sight rising above it. Pebble reached the top, leaped into the air, shouted, "Jump!"—

Crossing the ridge, the ground dipped sharply; Hazel tumbled through the air. She had the foresight to bring her tail to her paws and clutch her spear as she bounced against sheer soil, then she was plunged into icy water without breath.

Grabbing at the water with her paws, one still holding the spear, Hazel popped upward, coughing and spitting water as her nose and mouth broke the surface. Water dipped and surged as it pulled her along, tugging her whiskers, but Hazel found it unexpectedly easy to stay on the surface after her initial dive—she floated like a leaf, bobbing along with the current.

Hazel looked around.

Pebble was far ahead of her, paddling to the other side of the river. The bloodskræcher—somehow—was riding on a floating strip of bark behind her, hunched on his haunches, scratching at something. She couldn't see Nusk or Bramble; a moment later, Clearwater soared through the air from the shore, chunks of brown fur trailing behind him, and landed with a splash.

No sign of the bobber. Had it given up?

Bramble surfaced a pawful of inches from Hazel, gasping and slapping at the water. "Help, help!" he cried, before going back under.

Hazel looked around; the bloodskræcher, on his floating bark, was too far away to be useful. Besides, he

was looking the other way, perhaps focused on the other mice...

A floating branch. Hazel powered her legs through the water, moving distressingly slowly for how hard she was working. While she swam, Bramble surfaced again, his slaps weaker, and went back under faster than he had before. Hazel's whiskers stiffened—she wasn't sure she would be fast enough.

She bumped up against the branch, pushing it with her nose and turned it toward Bramble. Her lungs burned; her legs felt as if they were melting; holding on to her spear was becoming more and more difficult. Where was Bramble? Was she too late?

Hazel took a deep breath and stuck her head underwater.

Bramble was a long inch below the surface, practically right under her, kicking weakly, but still sinking...

Hazel didn't have time to surface for breath. She wasn't strong enough to pull Bramble up on her own—the mouse was twice her length and more than that her weight—but maybe she could leverage the branch bobbing on the surface. She wrapped her tail around its slimy bark and began paddling downward. Every stroke brought her closer. Slowly, slowly, stroke by stroke—

The tips of her nails couldn't quite reach Bramble or his cloak.

Hazel gasped involuntarily, afraid, frustrated, bubbles tickling her ears as they rose, air wasted. Bramble was *right there*, slipping away, and yet just out of reach. She needed to breathe—her chest hurt. Did she dare let go of the branch?

Hazel remembered the spear.

Wishing she had practiced with it more, Hazel thrust forward, hoping to tangle it in Bramble's cloak—and

hoping Bramble had tied his cloak tightly enough that it didn't just rip off when she pulled at it. She speared near his collar, passing through the cloak, drawing a little blood—

Bramble's eyes opened.

He looked up at Hazel, began weakly kicking again. Between his paddling and Hazel's pulling, she soon had the bigger mouse in her paws and could slowly pull them both upward by her tail. It was hard—harder than anything Hazel had ever done before—and Hazel nearly let go of Bramble when she inhaled a little water, but they broke the surface, gasping and coughing, Hazel throwing Bramble's paws over the branch before draping herself on it, sides heaving as she gulped breath after delicious breath.

It had probably taken only seconds, but Hazel was exhausted, half-drowned herself. She looked up and saw Pebble dragging herself onto the shore, several feet away, on a flat area with pebbly soil.

"Kick, Bramble," Hazel gasped, then began paddling as hard as she could. Bramble was still coughing water, but he added his weak kicks to her own; they began inching toward the shore. When their toes touched dirt they flung themselves from the branch and crawled out of the water, pressed themselves against each other and Pebble for warmth.

Bramble couldn't stop shaking. "Thank you, Hazel—oh! I could nearly see Fryth's garden. I was dead—thank you, Hazel. Thank you."

Hazel was too tired to tell him to stop: she had done what any good mouse would have.

"Looks like... we're not being followed," Pebble grunted. She pushed herself onto all four paws and shook, sprayed water in the air. "I wish I knew about that river! It's going to take a while to hike back. The band better last," she

finished with a growl. She looked over Bramble and Hazel, gasping on the ground. “And we need shelter and rest. We’d be useless to them if we pushed through the day. Or dead, if anything else found us.”

A crunching sound behind them; Pebble and Hazel turned and saw the bloodskræcher, miraculously dry on his floating bark. He had another mouse on the bark beside him, and Nusk was swimming around the bark toward shore—he had either been pushing it, or holding on.

“Fryth-cursed bobber was just playing with us!” Nusk gasped as he staggered onto dry land. “Just clawed and batted at poor Clearwater like he was just a toy—tossed him!” Nusk shuddered and collapsed beside Bramble.

“Help me get him to shore—he’s very near gone,” the bloodskræcher said.

But Pebble was scanning the area around them. “We need shelter,” she muttered. She looked over the half-drowned mice scattered around the shore, then nudged Hazel. “You look the most alive. Can you move?”

Against her body’s aching wishes, Hazel forced herself to a hunch on her back paws. “Sort of.”

Pebble nodded. “Get these two to help you. Do whatever the bloodskræcher says. Don’t. Let. Clearwater. Die. I’ll find us somewhere safe to shelter for the day.” She gripped Hazel’s shoulder, and ran off, taking time to tiredly build up to a sprint.

“OOOOooooohhhh...” Hazel couldn’t stop herself from moaning, but she forced herself to hop over to the bloodskræcher... and Clearwater. It had to be Clearwater—the others were all accounted for. Hazel squeaked in horror when she saw the ravages of the claw marks that had raked Clearwater’s body, turning him to a nearly unrecognizable lump of mottled brown fur and, with water no longer

actively washing it away, dark blood. Somehow, his chest still moved with short, shallow breaths.

The bloodskræcher kissed his teeth, crouched beside Clearwater, and scanned the mouse's wounds. "And Pebble wanted me to use up *my* blood *before* there was an emergency."



BY THE TIME Nusk and Bramble recovered enough to help with Clearwater, Hazel and the bloodskræcher had dragged him onto shore and begun attending to his wounds. Hazel nearly fled each time the bloodskræcher poked another injury, so she avoided watching except for what was minimally necessary to assist. Instead, she looked around, feeling a growing sense of unease as the sun rose in the sky. With an injured mouse and nothing obscuring them from above, they were easy prey.

The other mice betrayed anxiety as well. Nusk kept bemoaning the loss of his rope tail—it had caught on something during the chase and Nusk had to wiggle free. Bramble, when he wasn't thaymaing, hovered beside Hazel in a way that made her ears flatten.

Only the bloodskræcher seemed unaffected, hardly even wetted by the water and somehow unspotted by Clearwater's blood. Hazel wondered if anything disturbed him. It was hard to read his body movements through his cloak and hood—then again, with how busy he always kept himself, perhaps he didn't have time for petty emotion.

Hazel also didn't understand the bloodskræcher's work on Clearwater's wounds. They weren't mystically closing the way Hazel's cut had; then again, they were far more serious than Hazel's had been. At least the blood-

skræcher had stopped Clearwater's bleeding. When Pebble arrived and announced she found a decent shelter, the bloodskræcher said Clearwater was "Safe enough to move."

"If you must, use the Man-blood—if you must," Pebble whispered into the bloodskræcher's ear, drawing out the last words. He shook his head firmly. Hazel wasn't certain she was supposed to hear that, but Pebble released a long, long breath afterward.

The bloodskræcher kept to himself as Pebble, Nusk, and Bramble carried Clearwater to Pebble's shelter, Hazel hopping behind and keeping an eye out for danger. He stopped once to inspect Hazel's spear, whisper, "The skræchim is still strong. Interesting," before retreating back into himself. He inspected the other mice's spears, but Hazel couldn't hear if he softly spoke the same things to them.

Pebble's shelter was a moldering pile of deadfall, with plenty of space to crawl around within. While the bloodskræcher resumed work on Clearwater, Pebble set the others to digging, creating a nest by filling in holes and deepening the space in the very center of the deadfall. They also hunted for dry twigs and sap, which the bloodskræcher set alight.

Hazel never thought she would be excited to see a fire, but she huddled around it with the others, warming paws and drying fur, seeing steam rise from their furry cloaks. Food wasn't an issue, with fungi and insects plentiful within the wet deadfall. If it weren't for Clearwater's ragged breathing, the mood might have even been cheery.

Nusk drifted off quickly; Bramble, too. Hazel swayed from side to side, taking too long to decide between burrowing between the two for warmth or passing out

where she sat. Even Pebble seemed drained, slumped as she was. Eventually, the bloodskræcher sat beside her.

The fire crackled with mocking pleasure.

“Will he make it?” Pebble asked.

“He’s dead.” The bloodskræcher curled into a ball and fell still, save for the slow movement of his sides as his breathing evened. A glimpse under his cloak revealed most of the blood pouches at his waist, once tightly filled, were flat and loose.

Hazel was shocked into brief lucidity after hearing that. She glanced from the bloodskræcher, motionless and unreadable in his cloak, to Clearwater’s body. There seemed little difference between the two. Pebble, though, Hazel almost couldn’t believe. That great mouse, who had seemed untouchable despite her raggedness following the river, was thaymaing, wiping away tears from her good eye as she did so.

Hazel was too exhausted to mourn Clearwater long. She fell into troubled slumber.



SLEEP HARDLY CAME THAT DAY, and when night fell Hazel awoke before the others, only marginally rested. Clearwater’s body was gone, but a mound of soil suggested that Pebble had taken care of it before she’d slept. It was smaller than Hazel had imagined it would be; her ears flattened at the sight of it.

Before foraging for her breakfast, Hazel paused in front of Clearwater and thought of him and Twitch. She’d barely known them, yet the emptiness following their loss revealed they’d meant more to her than she could have guessed. She thaymaed, then hunched over and pulled

pebbles out of her belt-pouch. She arranged them on the soil covering Clearwater in a pattern that made her think of him and Twitch, adjusting pebbles of different colors used here and shapes used there until it felt just right.

“Clearwater, thank you for your joke, and apologizing for it,” she said. She rubbed her snout before continuing. “Twitch, you aren’t here...” She shuddered. “We would bury you if we could. I’m sorry. Thank... thank you for being my friend. The first in the band.”

There was nothing else to say. For all the *feeling* Hazel had, she’d only first gotten to know these mice two nights ago, and much of that time had been spent trembling in fear over dangers both real and imagined. She wished she’d spoken to them more, been more outgoing. Instead, she’d let fear shake her into shyness.

Eventually, Hazel walked away.



“BUGS, BUGS, BUGS,” Nusk grumped. He bit into a red gorskrmite, causing the plump creature to burst. He squeaked grumpily. “What I’d give for some seeds... Some berries... Oh yes, fresh blueberries! Large as Hazel’s head, almost round, smelling like moonlight...”

“Berries can’t smell like moonlight,” Bramble said.

Nusk glowered at Bramble. “If you can’t understand what that *really* means, you’ll never be a storymus.”

Bramble twitched his whiskers dismissively.

“Are you going to eat?” Hazel asked, looking up at Pebble.

“Already did,” Pebble said. She was twitchy, looking around the inside of the deadfall and pacing, ready to leave. Hazel thought it was only out of their need to eat, and

respect for Clearwater, that kept Pebble from rushing them out.

Nusk and Bramble hadn't needed to ask about Clearwater when they awoke. His absence, and the mound of soil at the edge of the nest, was enough. Nusk had said a few words about Clearwater being a magnificent addition to Fryth's garden of animals, while Bramble spent a while curled up beside the mound, whispering too low for anyone to hear, even with their sharp mouse ears.

The bloodskræcher was nowhere to be seen. Pebble didn't seem concerned, so Hazel tried to keep down her anxiety. He'd reveal himself when he wanted to.

As Nusk and Bramble took their final bites of their breakfasts, Pebble bounced to her paws and said, "Let's hurry. Our band is waiting for us—lives are at stake. We move quick, but smart—we're only good to them alive. Stay close to me." She stared at each mouse, lingering until they hopped to their paws, then scurried away.

Nusk followed after, his hind end looking almost like a mole's face with how his tail stump stuck out from his fur. Hazel picked up her spear and, before joining, made a few practice thrusts, then shuddered as she imagined the bobber. The goal was to lure it away, not attack it—thankfully. As long as nothing else went wrong.

An attack would turn into a massacre.

"Hazel," Bramble said as Hazel was about to leave; they alone were left in the deadfall. Hazel paused and turned to him, curious why he had waited with her; then her eyes widened in shock, her paws covered her mouth, as he balanced on his rear, tail pointing toward her and belly exposed, with his paws held off the ground. The position, intentionally awkward and hard to balance, was one of

submission—Hazel had never been on its receiving end. “I owe you my life,” Bramble said soberly.

“Please, don’t do that,” Hazel said. She wanted to push Bramble over, to stop him, but doing so would emphasize her unexpected dominance in the moment. So she tightened up, shrinking into a ball instead. Why was he doing this?

Bramble stared at Hazel for a few moments, then rolled to his side. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable... I need you to know how grateful I am.” He paused for a second, swallowing, then continued. “I couldn’t figure out how to reach the surface. The sun’s light pierced through the waters, stabbing my eyes, making it hard to know where I was, which way was up. Then I saw you: somehow, you blocked out all the harsh light, just a craemus with whiskers on only half of her face, and yet I if I saw the face of Fryth himself I wouldn’t have felt more trust that I was going to be fine.”

He remained low on the ground. He was nervous, Hazel realized, afraid of being rejected. By her? She had done what any mouse ought to do—and any other larger, stronger mouse would have done it better. Their paws could have reached him, wouldn’t have needed to risk stabbing him with a spear.

Hazel took Bramble’s paw, then helped him to stand. Her throat was tight: no words that came to her mind seemed good enough. Instead, she stood as tall as she could and brushed what whiskers she had against his as she would with a close friend; Bramble immediately relaxed. She nodded her head the direction Pebble had left and said, “Let’s not fall too far behind.”

Bramble smiled, his wide ears fully stretched out in pleasure. “Yeah—we’ve got some mice to rescue.”



THE BLOODSKRÆCHER MET them outside the deadfall, and the band began running; Hazel quickly realized she wouldn't be able to keep up. At half the size of Bramble, Nusk and the bloodskræcher, her legs were not capable of matching the pace Pebble set. She lagged behind, her breath growing labored and her legs shaky as the moons slowly crossed the night sky. The others always kept her in sight, for which she was grateful, but at times she wondered why they bothered. Even if they arrived in time to save the band, their pace severely limited by her, she would be too exhausted to be any use anyway.

Bramble stopped at a turn through some thorn bushes and looked back at Hazel. She wasn't even hopping or jogging anymore; her sides heaved and she felt painfully hot. She wished she could throw off her furry cloak and collapse in the grass, panting until she passed out. She limped to Bramble's side.

"I can't keep up. Go," Hazel wheezed.

Bramble narrowed his eyes. His breaths were deep but, unlike Hazel's, they were controlled. He looked down the path Pebble was forging, then back at Hazel, whiskers pointed forward in determination. "Get on my back."

"What?"

Bramble picked Hazel up by the nape of her neck and tossed her on his back, then bounded forward on all fours. Hazel almost squeaked a complaint—almost. She hoped that Bramble didn't over-exert himself, leaving them both ultimately useless.

When Bramble caught up with the others, they were frozen at the edge of a dense bush, peering through its

browning leaves. Something in the air turned Hazel's stomach.

Pebble glanced at Bramble as he approached, grunted, "Good idea," then turned back. She crept forward with uncharacteristic caution, moving only a step or so at a time, ears turning to follow every sound and nose twitching to capture every scent.

"What did they find?" Hazel whispered.

Bramble padded up beside Nusk, head hung low so Hazel could easily see around it, panting all the while. She peered through the leaves and gasped.

Pebble was walking among corpses.

The bloodskræcher was already in their middle, crouched and looking around. Nusk and Bramble pushed out of the bush, following, their ears flat against their skulls. As the leaves cleared, the gristly sight grew clearer and clearer: Blood. Bones. Severed tails. Piles of shredded fur. Hazel could barely tell that these once were rats, from their smell, their size, the strange weapons laying on the ground: many were made of shiny black stone with edges she could almost see through, tied to hafts only long enough for a single paw to hold.

A gentle wind had kept the smell of death away until now, but piercing through it and the scent of blood was the stomach-turning scent she had caught before Bramble had reached the bush. It freed a fluttering memory, one that took her a moment to catch: it was the same scent from when the bobber had caught up with them. Now that she was immersed in it, Hazel sensed a wrongness to the smell, one she couldn't quite identify.

"Why are we walking into it?" Hazel whispered, fur on end. She gripped Bramble's cloak tighter.

As if woken from a trance, Bramble and Nusk looked at

each other, then walked around the corpses. As they did so, the bloodskræcher cursed and stood. He pointed at them. "Don't touch."

"Didn't want to," Bramble said.

"What happened?" Hazel asked.

"The bobber," Pebble said. She pointed at a four-toed pawprint in the ground that Hazel could have comfortably stretched out in, then at claw marks in the back of a dead rat. "This wasn't for food or sport. This was savagery."

"This was illness," the bloodskræcher said. He took a pawful of powdered blood from one of two bags with anything left in it and scattered the blood in the dirt, then scratched at it; Hazel flinched when a white foam welled up out of the bodies within an inch of him. "There are many names for it. Biting madness. Jumping disease. Once it infects a creature, it gets violent, *obsessive*—and, eventually, dies. Totally incurable, *always* deadly."

Nusk swallowed. "Did... the rats—"

"Most likely the bobber butchered them under its influence." The bloodskræcher began to walk away from the bodies; after a few moments, Pebble did as well. The bloodskræcher continued, "What's clear is the bobber is infected *now*."

"Obsessive..." Hazel said, throat dry.

Pebble nodded. "If it hasn't spent this entire time digging, I'll give my tail to Nusk." Once past the bodies, she stopped and sat on her haunches, staring at the ground. "Luring it away won't work. Whatever mouse is last in line would be hunted until it or the bobber died. Not boredom, hunger, or anything else would have stopped it." She looked up. "Then it would have hunted down the rest of us."

Hazel could feel Bramble's tension beneath her; every

muscle in his back had hardened with fear. She felt the same; yet, somehow, she forced out the words, "That's not true."

The bloodskræcher and Pebble looked at her.

Hazel swallowed. "It—the river. It didn't follow us in the river."

The other mice stared at her, Bramble over his shoulder, as understanding dawned on them. "We can still lead it away from Whiskerroot and the band," Pebble whispered. "If we can distract it long enough to lead the band to the river, then have the last mouse jump in before he's eaten, the bobber might not follow."

"*Might* not," Bramble said, "If it does, we'll have a much harder time escaping... Not all of us can swim." He shivered.

Pebble looked thoughtful, then shook her head. "It's still our best option—our only option. Good work, Halfwhisker." She twitched her whiskers, then hopped to her feet. "If we thought we had little time before, we don't have *any* now. Move!"



THE MOONS HAD LOWERED HALFWAY down the sky by the time Pebble's band found a branch crossing the river. They swung a wide route back toward the bobber; as they marched, now moving slow enough that Hazel could hop off Bramble's back, Pebble had them watch for shelters each mouse would use while luring the cat away.

Nusk hissed as they walked away from a shelter. "That beast is mad. It will ignore us, or eat the first mouse it sees and then go back to digging."

Pebble glared at Nusk and let go of a bent branch early: it slapped his side, eliciting a yelp. "We will die if we attack

it. So what do we do? Let the others get eaten while we escape? Risk it finding Whiskerroot?" She looked over the others, good eye blazing. When no mouse offered another plan, Pebble continued, "I will start the lure. If it follows me, and then the bloodskræcher successfully draws it away from me, *this will work*."

Hazel shuddered as she imagined the consequences of the plan failing. The bobber's claws filled her mind; images of the dead bird and slaughtered rats flashed by, the lacerations on Clearwater's body, Twitch appearing and disappearing instantly, all now joined by Pebble's bleeding-out corpse. She jumped when Pebble addressed her.

"Your role is most important, Halfwhisker. You sneak in, unnoticed, when the bobber is first lured away, and lead the band to the water. Once the bobber is gone, everything rests on you to lead them to safety." Pebble gave Hazel a very serious look.

Somehow, Hazel couldn't decide whether or not that was worse than having to face off against the cat.

"It will be tight," Bramble said. "I'm not sure we have enough mice to lead the bobber all the way to the river."

"We'll do what we must," Pebble said grimly. "And if we die, Fryth will know our sacrifice."

The bloodskræcher snorted.

"We don't need any of your pessimism," Pebble snapped. She ducked into a hole Nusk had found, returning moments later. "This one is good. Almost done. Stay sharp."

The bloodskræcher almost seemed like he wasn't going to respond, then he rasped, "Fryth doesn't care what happens to us—no one is looking out for mousekind. Not even Ha-Thitsle. Nothing."

Hazel gasped—she'd never heard a mouse speak like

that before.

He continued. "We live in a harsh world of cruelty where the strong thrive and all others are lucky to survive. It seems unconscionable that a being like Fryth would make us this way and then make us intelligent enough to comprehend our powerlessness."

"Perhaps our cunning is exactly what allows us to survive and overcome," Pebble said gruffly. "We'd be helpless otherwise."

The bloodskræcher's eyes glittered in his hood. "That, we can agree on."



PEBBLE SNIFFED the edges of a burrow; the dirt surrounding it was dry and clear of foliage, its entrance was long and narrow, disappearing into blackness that Hazel's eyes couldn't pierce. If it was safe, it would make a fantastic shelter for Pebble to hide in after luring the bobber away.

"Doesn't smell like mouse, or rat, and it's too small for a fox," Nusk said.

"Still feels off," Pebble growled. She pulled her long spear off her back and motioned at the others. "Nusk, behind me and to my left. Bramble, right. The rest of you, follow behind and alert me if anything tries to sneak up on us."

A yowl split the air, causing each of the mice to freeze. It wasn't the first time the bobber had growled as they drew nearer to it; Hazel had felt like her heart would stop with each cry.

But the sound came from near the hollow; the band had to be alive. Some of them, at least.

Hazel nervously gripped her spear and stepped lightly

behind Pebble and the others, mostly watching behind her as they descended into darkness. When it became too dark to see, she trusted her ears and her sense for vibrations in the ground to lead her, and kept the whiskered half of her face brushing the tunnel wall.

After a few moments of walking, Pebble stopped. "Spear touched a wall—that's the end of it," she said.

Hazel shivered, which turned into a shudder as echoes of another bobber growl crawled down the tunnel—paired with a strange squeaking that raised Hazel's fur. Mice crying in terror?

Pebble's voice: "We've taken too long. I'll start the lure here. Thor—uh, bloodskræcher, take Nusk and Bramble, move quickly. Stay together until you reach your shelters. I'll give you a little time to get into position."

Hazel's shivering turned to shuddering. It was time. She was going to have to sneak around the bobber—tell the rest of the band their plan. She forced herself to still, even as that strange squeaking sound reached her ears again. Mice? No, something wasn't right—that wasn't a mouse-sound.

"Fryth's garden," Nusk whispered. "We need to leave, now!"

"What is it?" Bramble squeaked.

"Spider eggs," Nusk replied. "There's a huge pile over here!"

The strange squeaking grew louder, bouncing around tunnel walls toward them like a fly in erratic motion. Pebble turned and shoved past everyone, knocking Hazel over, and shouted, "Behind me! Spears up!"

Hazel pushed herself to paws and ran, spear in her tail and bounding on all fours to keep up with the others.

A shadow stretched down the tunnel—they were too late.

The tunnel entrance was already filled.

A gargantuan spider crouched ahead of them, legs constricted to fit within the tunnel as it inched forward. Its body alone was at least as large as Pebble's, thick and round, with brown-golden hairs and fangs longer than Hazel's head. It stared at them with beady eyes, tiny front legs rubbing together and making that eerie squeaking sound—a warning call. A mother gorspider come to protect her young.

Pebble bared her teeth and growled, holding her spear before her. Bramble and Nusk squeaked at her side, spears tightly gripped in paws. There was no way back, no way around, no way forward—mice and gorspider stared at each other, the gorspider's front legs raising in the air and waving hypnotically.

The bobber growled. Now they could hear screams—*real* mouse screams.

Pebble thrust her spear forward, but the gorspider's shell proved too hard; the spear struck a leg and deflected right, leaving a gouge. The gorspider leaped forward, knocking Pebble and the others over, ignoring Bramble's and Nusk's spears.

Hazel couldn't move. Her spear was in her hands, pointed forward, but terror filled her so that she couldn't do anything. This enormous beast was on top of Pebble, *right there*, and it took all of her effort not to drop her spear and run.

Fangs scythed downward into a terrifyingly still Pebble, piercing flesh with a disturbing kneading motion.

The bloodskræcher kept his senses. "Stab!" he growled, shouldering Hazel into a wall before thrusting a spear forward. He hit the gorspider in an eye, popping it and causing it to rear up again, legs waving, mandibles flicking

madly. As if she had been waiting for this moment, Pebble grabbed Bramble's dropped spear while Bramble and Nusk scrambled for safety, then stabbed upward, thrusting the spear halfway up its shaft through chinks in the gorspider's shell.

The gorspider danced and spasmed, fangs clicking, backing up, spear still in its belly. It shook again, then collapsed, pushing the tip of the spear all the way up through its back.

It twitched and was still.

"Fryth, oh Fryth, oh *Fryth*," Nusk swore. He crouched by Pebble, whose skin was pocked with bleeding fang wounds. "What do we do?"

The bloodskræcher was crouching by Pebble's head, pinching her. "Stay with me, stay with me," he muttered.

Slowly, Pebble focused. "Gorspider's dead?" she whispered.

Everyone nodded. Seeing Pebble downed tore at Hazel's spirits.

"We still need... the bobber..." Pebble grunted. Against the bloodskræcher's protests, she forced herself up to sit on her rump, then groaned. "The Man-blood! Must we?..."

The bloodskræcher took a pouch off his belt and turned it over, dumping just a pinch of powder on Pebble, and made a skræchim. He chuckled grimly. "Dry bites—no venom. Believe it or not, those were all warnings."

Pebble nodded. She pushed herself to her back paws. She swayed, holding herself up by her spear, then said, "Nothing changes. We start the lure now."

"No!" Hazel squeaked. She motioned at Pebble, who stumbled despite not having started walking yet. "You can hardly move!"

Pebble glared at her. "Don't question me. I'll stay near

the hole, make it a short dash.” She staggered forward, crawling over the dead gorspider, the other mice staring at her with mouths hanging open. She looked back and said, “What? Go! They need us!”



HAZEL HAD GIVEN up trying to mentally organize the most terrifying moments of her short life. Too many had come in the past two nights alone, and they were too hard to compare. The fear that turned her bones to water when the bobber stared at her and purred from inches away was completely different from the sick, belly-melting feeling of watching Bramble slip deeper in the water, or Pebble be bitten by a spider; or the shock and emptiness of watching Twitch get snatched away, awaking to see Clearwater’s body buried.

Too many flavors of fear. Why were mice made this way?

Or was it just her? The others didn’t seem to struggle as much as she did. Pebble never seemed scared at all.

Hazel shivered in a thicket. The bloodskræcher had fussed over Pebble, then helped her drive the other mice off to get into position. Soon, any second now, Pebble would try to draw the bobber’s attention—that would be Hazel’s time to run and alert the others.

But every second that passed felt like a year. Hazel wasn’t certain she’d live long enough to see the moment come. Her heart might stop first, if it kept constricting so tightly within her.

Thumpthump-thumpthump-thumpthump-thumpthump-thumpthump...

“Hey!” A mouse yelled. Pebble.

Hazel twitched, but forced herself to stay still. She couldn't leave until the bobber had actually been drawn away from the hollow.

"That's right, look at me! Blood! Injured mouse!" Pebble shouted. Hazel heard leaves rustle, followed by a long, low growl. "That's right, ugly, come on over! Faster!" Pebble shouted.

It was time. Legs shaking, Hazel crawled through a path she had already scouted out in the thicket, avoiding even the smallest twigs to stay absolutely silent. She rounded a tree, crept behind a fallen log, and dashed over a bed of moss. The whole while Pebble shouted and the bobber growled.

Hazel hopped on top of a gnarled root. The tree, and the hollow underneath, were just ahead. Small piles of dirt and a widened tunnel evidenced digging, but clawed roots and dislodged stones showed that the bobber hadn't had an easy time. The entrance was wide enough that Hazel could see shaking mice within, holding spears ahead of them, in the waning moonlight. There were gouges in the soil around other parts of the tree—the bobber had tried to find easier spots to dig.

If any more mice had been killed, she couldn't tell.

"Come on you—ugh!" Pebble's shouting stopped.

Hazel froze. She was supposed to run forward—no matter what she heard, it was her duty to get to the other mice unnoticed. The longer she stayed here, the more likely she was to be caught. But what had happened to Pebble? Hazel glanced over her shoulder.

The bobber was nothing like Hazel had imagined, even considering the glimpses she had caught of it the night before. It was mountainous—not nearly as large as the trees, but trees didn't *move*, or otherwise have a sinuous

grace that betrayed rippling muscle, wet teeth, and long claws. That was all the detail that Hazel could process, stuck repeating in her mind: bared teeth, white and sharp; extended claws; a low growl. The bobber padded slowly toward Pebble, as if it knew what was coming was inevitable.

Pebble was sprawled out on the ground, teeth bared. Perhaps she had collapsed from her wounds; perhaps she had tripped. Hazel couldn't tell. She tried to push herself up, collapsed again, then rolled to her back and pointed with her spear.

The bobber effortlessly batted it aside.

Someone was screaming.

Pebble's eyes widened. The bobber even reacted, ears twitching, looking over a shoulder. Its eyes, red-rimmed yellow, were just as terrifying from a distance as they had been up close. Pupils narrowed, focusing on Hazel.

Hazel realized she was the one screaming.

She didn't have words, just raw feeling, a need to stop another mouse from dying at any cost. Not Pebble—not anyone else. Hazel screamed until her head felt light, then refilled her lungs and screamed again. She stumbled off the root, hopped once toward the bobber, spear outstretched, and then her limbs locked up, out of her control.

Still, she screamed.

"Halfwhisker! What are you doing?" Pebble shouted.

White foam dripped from the bobber's lips. Something glimmered in its eyes; madness or recognition, Hazel couldn't tell. She had its attention. And she was petrified.

The bobber began loping forward.

"Halfwhisker! Hazel! No!" Pebble shouted. The mice within the hollow yelled with Pebble, telling Hazel that she could make it to them if she ran now.

Hazel wanted to listen to them. She truly did. Her legs would not obey her. She could only tighten her grip on her spear and tremble as she tried to force herself to do anything.

A span of infinite moments. Hazel's eyes did not leave the bobber's as it crossed the distance between them, foam and spit flowing into the air behind it, dirt spraying every time its enormous paws hit the ground; it lunged, red mouth open and wet teeth gleaming, flying toward her.

Something within Hazel wished that a braver mouse had taken her place; she fought herself as the cat's open maw grew larger, spear death-gripped in her paw, pointed out and up. Still, she screamed.

Her struggle amounted to something: the tension in Hazel's legs broke. She jumped at the bobber.

Pain lanced through her as the bobber struck, its mouth snapping shut, and all was darkness.



IT WAS a feeling like being underwater. Sound distorted, becoming blubbery and slow. Parsing meaning was difficult.

Can't believe we got her out of there. Can you?

Fryth's garden!

Light fractured and bent. What she could see was bigger than it was supposed to be, oddly shaped, blurry, and so far away.

She's sick. It would be a mercy to let her fade.

I can't accept that.

You would condemn her to the same madness as the bobber?

What would Fryth's garden be like?

The Man-blood. Use it.

*It would take all I have. You won't get this chance—
I don't care. Whatever it takes.*

Where were these voices coming from? Why were they getting quieter?

... To be clear, I think this is wise. But we had an agreement, so I had to be sure. I will need more than just the Man-blood. I'll need mus-blood. From every one of you. Mine is all used up.

Start with me.

No. You've lost too much.

Me, then.

And me!

It would be so much better to sleep; to curl up in a shell of safety and never fear again.

This might not work.



THE SCENT of fresh grass wafted into Hazel's nostrils. It made her think of home—perhaps her mother had been patching up the nest where her brothers and sisters had torn a hole in it. She smiled, then tried to stretch and winced when pain coursed through her head and shoulder.

When had she injured herself?

The sound of hustle and bustle, many bodies in a small space, the vibration of their feet step, step, stepping. That, too, was very familiar. The taste in her mouth wasn't—flat, but all-encompassing, it left her feeling as if there were a film over her tongue. A little too much like blood.

Blood.

Hazel's eyes flickered open. She wasn't in her mother's nest—the ceiling above her was mostly stone. It was nothing like—the hollow. That had been dirt and roots. This was some narrow hole underneath a pile of rocks. She

smelled water—possibly rain had pooled somewhere nearby.

“She’s awake! She’s awake!”

Squeaky voices pierced her ears. She flinched—her right ear, for some reason, felt particularly sensitive. Her eyes opened, vision briefly fuzzy as she pushed herself up to lean on her side. She was surrounded by mice, bright-eyed and covered in furry cloaks, some bearing bags filled with the spoils of forage, others toting spears. All had their eyes on her.

A familiar voice, female, but on its deepest, gravelliest side: “You are *terrible* at going unnoticed, Hazel,” Pebble said.

Mice gathered around her, smiling and chuckling. Hazel noticed the bloodskræcher across the hole, leaning against a wall, head bowed. He appeared exhausted. The many bags on his belt hung empty.

How much of his blood would it take to refill those?

Bramble pushed to the front of the crowd. There was a tension in his eyes that Hazel didn’t understand. He stuck his snout forward, brushed his whiskers against hers, and whispered, “Well? Can you speak?”

Hazel weakly waved a paw. “Hello. I am alive.”

The most utterly bizarre thing happened. Mice burst into cheering, jumping up and down and throwing bags in the air, scattering seeds and mushrooms everywhere. Some ran in circles, others flopped down and looked immensely relieved. A word repeated on their lips, one that confused Hazel more than anything: Catkiller.

Hazel looked up at Pebble, sitting on her haunches nearby, her fang-wounds just pink lines barely visible through her fur. “You... killed the bobber?”

Pebble shook her head. “You did, Hazel Catkiller.”

Hazel couldn't process what Pebble was saying. It was impossible—it was literally impossible. She was two inches long.

The hole felt too tight, the air hot and still. Hazel struggled up to sit on her haunches, pushing away paws that reached out to help her, and tried to thayma—then felt a long, thin line, already puckering and scarring, on the right side of her face. It ran up her snout, just missed her eye, and split her right ear in two.

Tears welled in Hazel's eyes. What had happened to her?

Pebble explained as fast as Hazel could take it in—very slowly. Somehow, Hazel had held her spear just right so that it pierced right through the bobber's skull inside its mouth. The spear would have broken without the skræchim on it, but between her instincts and the bloodskrächer's art the bobber was slain. The rest of the mice had to pry open the dead bobber's jaw to free Hazel, who had been in a state of blind, squeaking panic. She passed out shortly after.

The bloodskrächer then patched her up—she was lucky how relatively little damage there was. The scar would fade with the years, her ear could still hear. The force of thrusting her spear into the bobber's head had bent her arm at an angle that Pebble described as “Disturbing,” but the bloodskrächer was convinced that, too, would return to normal in a month's time.

The rest of the mice had waited anxiously for Hazel to awake. Each had donated their blood to help heal Hazel. In the meantime, Pebble had kept them busy, foraging for food and harvesting claws, fur, whatever else they safely could from the bobber—it had been terribly sick, after all. No one wanted to catch its disease.

Bramble, perhaps foolishly, had crawled into the bobber's mouth to recover Hazel's spear. At this part of the story, he produced the spear and laid it reverently at Hazel's feet, chest puffed up with pride as he did so. Hazel didn't want anything to do with the thing, but felt it kinder to pick it up, thank Bramble for his sacrifice, and place the spear beside a nearby pile of her few possessions. The bloodskrächer's etchings in her blood were still visible.

"We owe you our lives, Catkiller," Pebble said. She smiled. "You are a brave mouse, with the heart of a true Sharptooth. Could learn to follow direction better."

Hazel shivered. A sick feeling had taken root in her stomach at the beginning of Pebble's story, and now she wanted to throw up. She wished she could leave, but there were too many mice around, too many of them watching her. "It's not true," she whispered.

Pebble narrowed her eyes. "Listen here—" She cut herself off and looked around. "Now isn't the time. But stop thinking that way. We... need to talk. Later." She hoisted herself to her feet and began yelling at the band, preparing them to finish the march home on the morrow.

Hazel endured the attention of the band. Nusk complained that the bloodskrächer hadn't let him cut off the bobber's tail to tie to his stump—even if it were far too large for daily use, it would have made an incredible prop when Nusk shared Hazel's story, he said. Honey, Leaf, Scratcher—the entire band—congratulated and thanked Hazel. Bramble, despite his earlier exuberance, seemed subdued. He watched her with concerned eyes as Hazel sat through minute after miserable minute, until finally each mouse nodded off, hours later, to sleep through the day.



“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

Hazel jumped; she wondered if she should flee or confront whoever had caught her. Her face still ached and her sore shoulder complained about the bag and spear on her back; she held her injured leg to her chest. She probably couldn’t escape if she were chased. Hazel pulled her cloak around herself with one paw and turned around.

Brilliant rays of sunrise filtered through leaves shifting in a breeze, casting an amused-looking Pebble and the bloodskræcher in a shadowed light. Hazel almost didn’t recognize the bloodskræcher—his hood was pulled back, revealing very large, round ears that were mostly yellow, like his non-quill fur, but faded to black near the edges. His expression was serious.

“Thorn,” the bloodskræcher said.

“What?” Hazel asked.

“My name. I promised to give it to you if we lived.” Thorn nodded at Hazel, then looked up at Pebble. “She’s all yours.” He pulled his deep hood over his head and face again and walked back into the hole they were sheltering in, tail swishing in the dirt as it dragged behind him.

Hazel didn’t care about the bloodskræcher’s name anymore. She avoided Pebble’s eye and said, “Are you stopping me?”

“Maybe,” Pebble said. She walked over to Hazel and hunched over, getting on eye level; one of the strange stone weapons that had been with the rat bodies hung from her hip. “Do you really want to leave?”

Hazel couldn’t respond. She didn’t want to, but she felt like her heart and her head were being ripped in two. The things she had seen would haunt her nightmares as long as she lived. She had felt purpose with the Sharpteeth, and

now she truly believed in their cause—but she couldn't live a lie.

That poisonous truth bubbled within Hazel's stomach, threatening to froth out of her mouth like the foam on the bobber's lips.

"I'm still scared," Hazel said at last. "Maybe more than before."

"You—what?" Pebble asked.

Hazel felt something breaking; she buried her face in her paws. "I couldn't bear to tell them... to tell them how *wrong* they all are. Catkiller? Me? That was an accident—a fluke. I was scared. I was so scared that I couldn't even move. I was scared so stiff that my arm *couldn't* move—I didn't try to kill it." Now Hazel was shaking, tears leaking down her snout. "I failed you, Pebble. I didn't do anything when the gorspider attacked you. I froze. If it had just been me and you in there, we both would have died." She hung her head. "I became a Sharptooth to *stop* being scared."

Pebble exhaled, long and slow, then settled down on her belly. "Hazel, we're all scared."

Hazel shook her head. "That's not true."

"Yes, it is," Pebble said sharply. "And you know it. But that's a shell without the nut. You saved Bramble from drowning—that took courage. *Real* courage. He's told everyone about it! He wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Hazel started backing away. Why did she feel cornered? "But he still tried. He fought—he didn't freeze up, even when he lost all his strength. That's not me. I'm—"

"I froze, Hazel," Pebble said.

Hazel stared at Pebble. There was a delicate connection between them, as fine as a single strand of spider silk. She spoke as boldly as she dared. "Please, don't lie to me."

"I'm not," Pebble said. "I'm scared all the time. I show it

different. I get mad, want to fight. But when that gorspider deflected my spear, jumped me, bit me—it was this bite, right here.” Pebble angled her head and pointed at a wound on her shoulder. “Next to my neck, close to my heart. I would be dead if it had been envenomed. I didn’t try to push its fangs away. I stopped fighting.”

Hazel searched Pebble’s eyes, looking for something, anything, that told her the gorskrmus was lying. But her good eye was clear, her gaze steady. If Pebble was lying, she could fool Ha-Thitsle himself. “But... you stabbed it. You killed it.”

“And you screamed like a lunatic at a bobber.” Pebble pushed herself to all fours. “You held your ground when it charged you. And some part of you knew to hold that spear just right when it leaped on you.” Then she pressed her paw against Hazel’s chest. “Heart and heroism. You have it. You’ve *shown* it.”

Something warm was blossoming in Hazel’s chest. Perhaps Pebble was telling her the truth. She could *feel* it, somehow drawing her up while feeling heavy all at once. She was scared of it—what it meant if Pebble was right, with everything said and unsaid. Hazel took Pebbles paw in her own, pressed it against her face as she began shaking again. “But that’s so *hard*—fighting the fear.”

“You can’t be brave without being scared. Maybe those with the most fear have the most potential for courage.”

Hazel shivered. She felt so much fear. Suddenly, that felt like a lot of responsibility.

“The choice is yours, Catkiller,” Pebble said. “But I think you will make a great leader of a band of Sharpteeth one day. Perhaps you’ll be the first of your kind—we need more craemus in the Sharpteeth. You can do things the rest of us can’t.” Pebble stood and turned as if to leave.

“Wait!” Hazel said. Pebble looked down at her. “When I was dying—I thought I heard voices. Something about Man-blood. You...”

Pebble sighed. “That’s a long story. Thorn told me he could heal my eye with his Man-blood if I requested that a little craemus, the last of the Sharptooth recruits, join my band, rather than being given to a random one. I guess he saw something in you the rest of us overlooked. Well, you were in that bobber’s mouth, all bloody. Caught whatever it had. There was only one thing strong enough to purge you. I wanted my bravest mouse more than I wanted two eyes.” Pebble chuckled darkly. “I still have *one*.”

Hazel stared up at Pebble, completely in awe of the sacrifice she had made. Eventually, she traced a paw over the whiskerless right-half of her face, over the scar and up to her split ear, then reached out and touched just under Pebble’s clouded eye. “I’m a little more like you now, aren’t I?”

Pebble laughed, then winked at Hazel. “Our Whiskerroot has enough angry gorskrmus. What we need is for everyone to have the shivering courage of a craemus.” She straightened on her back paws. “Well, I’m tired. Hope I see you tomorrow night, Catkiller.”

Hazel watched Pebble go. Once she was out of sight, Hazel touched her face again, then the tooth of her spear. “Catkiller,” she whispered. She shook her head. “I don’t like that. Halfwhisker is better.” She walked back into the band’s shelter and curled up beside Bramble, ready to sleep out the day and then return to Whiskerroot with her band.

END

GET TO KNOW THIS GUY

Boo Ludlow was named after Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book he has not read, not Boo from *Monsters, Inc.*, a movie he has seen. He's fully aware of the tragedy there. His most re-read book is *The Hobbit* and his most re-watched movie is *The Princess Bride*. Boo happily—and mostly by choice—resides near family in Utah, living with his wife and finger-chomping toddler.

You can read more of Boo's work and learn about upcoming projects at booludlowbooks.com. He also posts once in a blue moon on X/Twitter.



