THE GATHERING DARKNESS

SURVIVORS

A PACK DIVIDED
SURVIVORS

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Book Two: A Hidden Enemy
Book Three: Darkness Falls
Book Four: The Broken Path
Book Five: The Endless Lake
Book Six: Storm of Dogs

Survivors: Tales from the Packs

NOVELLAS

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Also by ERIN HUNTER

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MANGA
Toklo’s Story
Kallik’s Adventure
Special thanks to Gillian Phillip
For Fergus & Annie Nicol
PACK LIST

WILD PACK (IN ORDER OF RANK)

ALPHA:

female swift-dog with short gray fur (also known as Sweet)

BETA:

gold-and-white thick-furred male (also known as Lucky)

HUNTERS:

Snap—small female with tan-and-white fur
Bruno—large thick-furred brown male Fight Dog with a hard face
Bella—gold-and-white thick-furred female
Mickey—sleek black-and-white male Farm Dog
Storm—brown-and-tan female Fierce Dog
Arrow—black-and-tan male Fierce Dog
Whisper—skinny gray male
Woody—stocky brown male

PATROL DOGS:

Moon—black-and-white female Farm Dog
Twitch—tan male chase-dog with black patches and three legs
Dart—lean brown-and-white female chase-dog
Daisy—small white-furred female with a brown tail
Rake—scrawny male with wiry fur and a scarred muzzle
Breeze—small brown female with large ears and short fur
Chase—small ginger-furred female
Beetle—black-and-white shaggy-furred male
Thorn—black shaggy-furred female
Ruff—small black female

OMEGA:
small female with long white fur (also known as Sunshine)
“What’s wrong with him?” The little pup’s whiskers shivered as she nudged the long grass fearfully with her nose. “I don’t understand. What’s wrong?”

Flinching back as her nerve deserted her, she pressed closer to her two litter-brothers. The other pup, the one who lay in the grass in front of her, didn’t so much as stir. She could make out the hollow curve of his tiny flank through the green blades, but it didn’t rise and fall with his breath. One small ear was visible too, but it didn’t twitch, not even at the tip. She couldn’t see the little pup’s eyes, but some instinct told her she didn’t want to, anyway. She trembled with uncertainty and fear.

One of her litter-brothers, the smaller one, cuddled tighter against her, and she felt the dampness of his wet nose against her ear. “He’s sick, I think. Like Mother-Dog?”
The female pup shivered. Yes, Mother-Dog was sick. She hadn’t been well since that fight they’d heard. Mother-Dog had crept under the house, telling the pups to leave her alone for a little while. That she’d be better soon. *But leave me be, pups.*

She’d been under the house now for a very long time. *Oh, Mother-Dog,* the pup thought with an inward whimper. *Aren’t you better yet? It’s taking so long . . . and now this pup is sick, and we don’t know what to do . . . .*

“Perhaps we should wake the pup now,” her litter-brother piped up. “Take him inside, where it’s warm and safe?”

“I don’t know if he’ll wake up,” she whined unhappily. “He looks so very asleep.”

And there was something else, something she didn’t want to put into words. As her nose twitched and she sniffed hesitantly, she caught it again: that odd tang, the one that made her shudder. It wasn’t a proper dog scent. It wasn’t how a pup should smell, she thought, bewildered. It was like old meat, like what the grown dogs had left behind uneaten.

“You’re both being silly.” Her other litter-brother, the largest of the three of them, sounded stubborn and squeakily gruff as usual, but even he couldn’t hide the tremor in his voice. “We don’t have to do anything. The Pack will be home soon. Alpha
will make Mother-Dog better, and she’ll make her own pup better too."

“Are you sure Alpha is coming back?” asked the smaller male pup hesitantly.

“Of course she is,” the bigger one said with an air of superiority. He nodded toward the motionless little dog. “That’s Alpha’s pup. So she’ll come back. See? Mother-Dogs never leave their pups.”

“Oh.” The littlest pup wagged his tail, hesitantly. “When she makes her pup well, maybe he’ll play with us?”

This time the bigger pup said nothing, and neither did the female. She caught his anxious, uncertain look. That motionless pup didn’t look as if he’d be able to play with them anytime soon.

Gathering her courage, she squirmed forward on her belly through the damp grass. It was nearly all she knew, this sheltering greenness. It had always been her whole world, and the sweet, fresh, familiar scent of it almost masked the pup’s strange odor. She made herself creep closer till her quivering nose almost touched his flank.

She could just make out the bristly hair on the pup’s neck. It looked stiff and dark, as if it had once been wet, and had dried a long time ago. Curious, she blinked. There were punctures, she
realized, beneath those rigid prickles of fur. They looked a bit like the marks she and her litter-siblings had left on the soft-hide where they slept: ragged and torn at the edges. Their tiny teeth made those marks, she knew; chewing the hide gave them all comfort. But the marks here looked much bigger than that.

It didn’t make sense. But she couldn’t concentrate on working it out: the hunger that had nipped all day at her belly tightened, suddenly and sickeningly. She gave a low, miserable whimper.

“Don’t worry,” came her bigger litter-brother’s voice again. “Everything will be fine when Alpha comes back.” But he didn’t sound so definite anymore. His voice quavered, as if he didn’t quite believe it himself.

His new uncertainty made her belly twist with pain, and her ribs seemed to tighten around her heart. Throwing back her head, she gave in to a volley of high, yelping howls of fear and heartbreak.

“Mother-Dog is so still! The pup is cold! They won’t move! Why won’t they move?”

“Where’s Alpha?” Her small litter-brother joined his miserable yelps to hers.

“There’s no dog here!” she cried. “The food is gone and the Pack is gone. We’re all alone and they’ve left us! We’re alone!”
Now even her bigger, stronger litter-brother was howling his panicked grief. “They went away and left us, they’ve gone, they’ve all gone . . .”

Their high, frantic yips echoed through the grass and the trees and the sky, but she knew there was no dog in the whole world who would hear them. The awfulness of that thought filled her whole small being, and she could no longer stop her helpless crying.

Suddenly, though, she felt her bigger litter-brother’s nose nudge her flank. “Hush!” he whined in a trembling voice. “Quiet, both of you. Some dogs are coming!”

At once all three fell silent, stiffening with a new, immediate fear. The female pup took gulps of air, trying to calm herself, trying not to whimper anymore. As she licked her soft jaws, she smelled them, too: unfamiliar dogs.

Strangers, and they were coming this way.

She glanced at each of her litter-brothers, seeing in their eyes the same mixture of hope and terror that she felt.

We’re so alone . . . oh, Mother-Dog . . .

In sudden, desperate panic, the pups scrambled back to their soft-hide bed, climbing over one another in their haste. The soft-hide is safe! thought the female pup, as she wriggled between her
litter-brothers’ paws. *Nothing can catch us there!*

They tumbled into the bed, panting. In its familiar-smelling warmth, they huddled together. She pressed her empty belly tight against the soft-hide, knowing she had to stay down low. She was too afraid to look. She mustn’t make a sound, not a sound. Mustn’t twitch . . .

*Maybe they’ll help. Don’t dogs help pups? They always do . . . right?*

Something awful, something long lost, trembled in the depths of her memory, and she shut her tiny eyes tight.

*Or maybe they’ll kill us. . . .*
Pausing as she stepped out of the forest’s shade, Storm took a moment to stretch her paws and her back, and to claw the ground blissfully in the rays of the morning Sun-Dog. His light shone warm on her sleek fur and, in the rippling grass around her, he kindled rich scents of rabbits, mice, and squirrels. Storm sniffed appreciatively at the soft breeze. There were good prospects for their hunting patrol.

Storm felt full of optimism on this glittering New Leaf day. It was her first chance to be in charge of a hunt, and she was proud that her Pack Beta, Lucky, had shown such faith in her. He always has, she thought gratefully. She owed so much to the golden-furred Beta who had once been a Lone Dog.

She glanced over her shoulder at the team she was leading. Some of the Pack’s best dogs, she thought with pride. Snap, who had
long been part of Sweet’s Pack, had always been a fine hunter, and Mickey, despite his Leashed Dog origins, had learned to track down prey with the best of the Wild Dogs. Arrow the Fierce Dog had been one of Blade’s Pack, and his focus, discipline, and deadly accuracy were invaluable assets. And Whisper, who had been one of the mad dog Terror’s underlings . . . well, he was extra keen to please his leaders and prove his worth, now that he wasn’t cowed by Terror’s horrible threats.

They were an unlikely combination, but that was what made Storm happiest. Before her own birth, the Earth-Dog had shaken in the Big Growl. If that had never happened, the Packs represented in her hunting party would never have come together as one. After all, Mickey and Snap had come from very different circumstances—Snap from Sweet’s Pack, which had once been the half wolf’s Pack; and Mickey from his home with longpaws—but that was before the Big Growl had destroyed the city, changed the world, and forced every dog to fend for himself. Now they all worked together despite their differences, all of them bringing their own strengths and skills to their new, united Pack.

Storm had never quite understood why Lucky was always barking back to the Big Growl. Yet now that she had lived through a great battle—the one they called the Storm of Dogs—she saw
clearly why the disaster of the Growl meant so much to him. When a dog had lived through such a world-changing shock, it did affect everything: the world beneath her paws, the scents in her nostrils, each sound that reached her pricked ears. Everything held new significance—and not just potential threat and unexpected danger, but fresh possibilities, too.

Prey had been thin and hard to catch throughout the long Ice Wind season, but now buds were popping into life on the trees, small leaves grew thick on the bushes and shrubs, and the meadows were green with new life. Storm was determined that today’s hunt would be swift and successful. “Try that hollow, Storm.” Mickey’s kind voice was in her pricked ear, and it set her fangs instantly on edge. He and Snap had been trying to advise and guide her all morning, when it was Storm herself who needed to make the decisions. Couldn’t Mickey understand that?

“There, see?” the black-and-white Farm Dog went on, oblivious as Storm ground her jaws in frustration. “The hollow beyond the hill.” He nodded in the direction of the far side of the shallow valley, toward a dip in the grassy ground circled by young birch saplings.

“Yes, that might be worth a try,” Storm managed to growl.

“We can surround it easily and drive out the prey,” Mickey
went on. “The creek runs close to it, and there’s a rabbit warren there.”

“I know that, Mickey,” said Storm sharply.

Mickey pricked his ears in surprise, then licked his jaws. “Did I say something wrong, Storm?”

“It’s just that—” Noticing the slight hurt on his face, she softened, and gave her old friend a lick. “Sorry, Mickey. I’m just a bit preoccupied.”

He was only trying to be helpful, after all—and Mickey, along with Lucky, had been one of the dogs who had rescued her and her two littermates when they were helpless, abandoned pups. He’d always looked out for her.

*But I want to be able to prove myself. If they’ll let me...*

Snap was the next to trot over and push her narrow snout in.

“I’m not sure about those high trees, Storm.” Her head tilted as she stared at the horizon. “Rabbits could duck around them, and we’d be blocked at several points.”

Storm somehow managed to hold on to her temper, though the urge simply to run and hunt was growing unbearable. Her paw pads ached, as if she’d been walking over rough stone, and she wanted to be moving now, not standing still. She could already see distant tawny flashes through the grass. The unwary creatures
weren’t alarmed—yet—but the dogs would have to move quickly once they were nearer to the warren.

“I think we can cope with the trees, Snap,” Storm told her in a low voice. “Let’s head toward the hollow, but keep our noses sharp for other prey on the way. We can’t rely on catching enough rabbits for every dog.”

She reminded herself sternly that Snap and Mickey were her seniors in the Pack hierarchy. Though I wish they didn’t treat me as if I’m still that vulnerable pup Mickey and Lucky rescued. She gave a silent inward sigh, then nodded at her patrol.

“I want to plan ahead of time, so that we don’t have to make a sound later. Arrow and Snap, when we’re closer to the warren, you circle around toward the creek. If the rest of us take points between the warren and the wider plain, the rabbits will have nowhere to go. We should manage to take two or three. Stay low, and remember to watch for other prey.” With a nod that Storm hoped showed both respect and quiet authority, she led the patrol carefully toward the line of aspens on the horizon.

All the dogs were alert now, placing their paw pads with care and keeping their bodies low, but Whisper slipped past the others to stalk at Storm’s side. She gave the young dog an inquisitive glance.
“I think this is a brilliant strategy, Storm,” said Whisper, in a low but enthusiastic growl. “You’re a great hunt leader!”

“Thanks, Whisper,” Storm told him, pricking her ears in slight surprise. “I’d really like to lead the hunt more often, so let’s hope this goes well.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will. So what else do you think we’ll find? Maybe a deer!”

Storm gave a huffing sound of amusement, and shook her head briefly. “I doubt we’ll be that lucky, but let’s stay alert.”

“You always do,” said Whisper. There was a light of adoration in the gray dog’s eyes, and Storm looked away, trying to keep her focus on the careful stalk-and-slink of the hunt.

A ripple of unease traveled between her fur and her skin. Whisper had treated her with something close to hero-worship ever since Storm had killed Blade, the Fierce Dogs’ vicious leader, in the great battle last Ice Wind. Storm had had to do it—and she’d been glad to do it, after all that Blade had done to her litter-siblings and to her Packmates—but the days of battle were over. She was a hunter now.

She hoped Whisper wouldn’t always be bringing up the dreadful Storm of Dogs, and Storm’s role in it. They had a new life to look forward to now, and Storm was determined to play
her part in making it one of peace and plenty for the Pack. It had taken her so much time and effort to live down her reputation as a savage Fierce Dog, a struggle made far harder by the hostility of their old half-wolf leader, Alpha. She didn’t want to have to go through all of that again.

Storm raised her muzzle to test the wind direction, pausing with one paw lifted.

_Forest-Dog, if you’ll listen to me as you listen to Lucky, grant us good New-Leaf prey today!_

Her optimism returned as she leaped easily over a small tributary of the stream, enjoying the sleek movement of her muscles and the springiness of the earth beneath her paws. Every sense in her body felt awake after the long, hard Ice Wind, and a slight flash of movement at the corner of her eye sent her twisting in pursuit almost without a thought.

The squirrel shot up the trunk of a tree, panicked, but Storm’s snapping jaws found their target. Crunching down, she felt the brittle bones of its body through the scrawny flesh. _Skinny_, she thought, _even for a squirrel. Ice Wind has been hard for every creature._

Her swift kill, she realized, had served as a signal to the others: the hunters bolted into the chase. Arrow sprinted across a dry streambed, sniffing and searching without luck, but Mickey and
Snap began to work together at the foot of a gnarled oak, digging in showers of earth until their paws and muzzles were filthy. Just as Storm bounded to join them, they unearthed a nest of mice. As the tiny creatures skittered in panic, blinded by the light, the two hunters pounced and bit and snapped till they’d created a pile of tiny corpses.

“They’re barely a mouthful each,” said Snap, pawing at them.

“Every mouthful feeds the Pack,” Storm reminded her, pleased. “Well done!”

Her praise, though, seemed to fly straight above Snap’s head. The tan-and-white dog pressed her head to Mickey’s, and for a moment the two successful hunters rested, panting, rubbing their muzzles affectionately together and licking each other’s dirty ears. With a surprised prick of her own ears, Storm took a few paces backward.

*Is this really the moment for snuggling up to your mate?* she thought with a shiver of puzzled distaste. *What a silly waste of time. It’s only a couple of mice, for the Sky-Dogs’ sake.*

Turning her rump on them, she snatched up her squirrel and dropped it into the hole Mickey and Snap had dug out at the base of the oak. It was as good a place as any to store their prey till they’d finished their hunt: a deep gap between two thick roots. As
she raised her head, a light, warm breeze moved through the trees, bringing with it that tantalizing scent of rabbit. Storm shook off her moment of discomfort. *We’re downwind of the prey—this is a good beginning!*

Excitement rose in her once again, and she gave a low commanding growl to summon the others. She felt a spark of pride, swelling to a warm glow, when they answered her call at once. The four dogs fell in at her flanks and followed her lead as she prowled forward, closer and closer to the shallow bowl of land.

The rabbits must be hungry after the long cold, Storm realized: they had still not noticed the patrol’s approach. They were too busy browsing and tearing at the new grass with their blunt little teeth. *We should be able to cut them off from their burrows,* thought Storm, *if we all play our part.* Her heart beat fast in her rib cage with anticipation.

Lowering her sleek body still closer to the earth, she crept forward, nodding to the others. They were all in place, just as she’d directed them; again she felt that frisson of satisfaction in her leadership. When she finally sprang, hurtling into the hollow, every nerve in her body sang with the joy of hunting, with the certainty of her own speed and strength and skill. She felt her blood racing, the flex and stretch of each muscle as she dived and
dodged and leaped in pursuit of the terrified rabbits. It was like pure energy and fire running through her. *Is this how Lightning of the Sky-Dogs feels?*

And it was working just as it should. White bobtails flickered all around the hollow, and the panicked creatures were scattering straight into the jaws of the waiting hunters. Mickey’s powerful teeth clamped down on one of them, and he shook it violently as another doubled back and fled from him—straight into the jaws of Storm. Panting, Storm flung down its limp corpse, then took a moment to watch as Whisper drove the fattest rabbit of all toward the waiting Arrow.

Arrow was loping along on exactly the right line, and Storm could see he would intercept the fleeing rabbit with ease. So she was stunned to see Whisper’s head flick to the side. Mid-stride, he veered away slightly and herded the rabbit in a different direction, toward Snap.

But Snap wasn’t watching; she was too busy chasing down a dark-furred rabbit of her own. Whisper’s rabbit crossed her field of vision just as she was about to pounce on hers, and Snap’s pace faltered in surprise and confusion.

Arrow was racing furiously after the rabbit now, but the abrupt change of tactics had spoiled his line and his focus. Both rabbits,
the dark-furred one and the lighter one Whisper had been driv-
ing, bolted straight between Arrow and Snap, and vanished into
their burrows with a flash of two white tails.

Storm raced toward them, but she knew she was already too
late. Skidding to a halt in a flurry of sandy earth, she stared at
the dark burrow entrances, swamped by frustration and anger.
Behind her, Arrow and Snap had drawn up too, snapping their
drooling, empty jaws.

As Whisper bounded to a faltering, shamed halt between
them, Storm turned on him.

“Why did you do that?” she barked furiously. “We lost two
good rabbits!” And more, she realized. In the confusion of Whis-
per’s mangled hunting attempt, several other rabbits had reached
the safety of their warren.

“That was the fattest rabbit!” added Arrow in an angry snarl.
“Those two would have fed three dogs between them!”

“What were you thinking? Were you thinking at all?” Storm
laid her ears back and growled furiously at Whisper.

The dog ducked his head, lowering his forequarters and shuf-
fling forward, his tail clamped down tight. He looked as if he
wanted to sink right through the earth and join the rabbits under-
ground.
“I’m sorry, Storm,” he whined miserably, blinking and flattening his ears. “I didn’t mean to . . . I thought . . . I just meant . . .”

Storm gave her head a violent shake. “What? What did you mean?”

“I—” Whisper’s glance flicked quickly toward Arrow, then back to the ground.

“Don’t be hard on him, Storm.” Snap took a pace forward, and nodded at the unhappy Whisper.

Storm turned to her, surprised at the hunt dog’s tolerance. “He spoiled your hunt too, Snap.”

“Look, Storm, it’s obvious.” Snap tilted her head and sat down, curling her tail around her haunches. “Whisper was nervous of Arrow. He doesn’t like hunting with him, and to be honest? I understand why. I don’t blame Whisper.”

Storm stared at Snap’s cool expression, her jaw loose. “What?”

“After all we went through with the Fierce Dogs, it’s hard for us to trust any of them.” Snap hunched her thin shoulders. “I know Arrow’s in our Pack now, but it’s hard to treat him as a true Packmate.”

Not knowing what to say to that, Storm turned to Arrow. His short black fur bristled along his shoulders and spine, and
resentment oozed from him, but the Fierce Dog said nothing. He licked his jaws angrily, and looked away. Then he padded across to one of the dead rabbits, picked it up in his powerful jaws and paced in the other direction.

And what do I do now? Snap wasn’t being fair, and this felt so wrong to Storm. Just when I was thinking how good it was that we were united, that members of all Packs were working together.

But if she spoke up for Arrow, Snap would think she was only siding with her fellow Fierce Dog. She might even accuse Storm openly of favoring her own kind, of being Fierce Dog to her core. What might she say aloud—that I’m ruled by my bad blood?

“You all trust me,” she said at last, staring at her Pack-mates. Snap, Mickey, and Whisper looked so resolute, and Storm’s head spun with confusion. “You trust me, and I’m a Fierce Dog too. Just like Arrow!”

Mickey caught Snap’s eye, and Storm saw a look pass between them, one that she couldn’t quite read. Snap’s ear flicked once, dismissively. Then, tentatively, Whisper gave a soft growl.

“You’re not like Arrow,” he mumbled. “You’re different.” He glanced at Snap and Mickey. “Storm’s different, isn’t that right? She killed Blade!”

Storm stared at him, open-jawed. With a crawling sense of
horror, she realized that Whisper’s eyes were fixed on her again, worshipful.

She shook herself, dumbfounded. “Let’s gather the prey,” she told them. “What there is of it.” Gazing dismally at the pitiful haul of rabbits, she felt a crushing sense of disappointment. Her hopes had been so high for her first time as hunt leader. “We’ll try another spot before we return to the camp, but we’ll have to go some distance. All the prey around here will have heard us by now.”

“Of course, Storm.” Whisper got quickly to his paws and trotted after her like a devoted pup.

As she led the small patrol farther from the cliffs and the Endless Lake, heading for a far belt of pines, Storm’s stomach squirmed and her fur prickled. She’d begun this hunt with such high hopes and excitement, yet now they were returning with a poor prey-haul—and a bunch of dogs who didn’t, after all, want to work together as her perfect team.

*Is that terrible battle the only thing they care about? If I hadn’t killed Blade, would they trust me at all? Or would I be just another Arrow—alone in a Pack that thinks I’m the enemy?*
Hungry as Storm was, the rabbit dangling from her jaws didn’t even tempt her as she led the hunting party back to the camp. Her paw pads hurt, more than she thought they should, and her appetite was dampened by the sinking sense of failure in her gut. The dogs had tried their luck at a few more likely spots, but the rabbit warren in the hollow really had been their best chance, and by the time the Sun-Dog was loping down the sky, they had caught little more: a gopher, a couple of voles, and a skinny rabbit Storm suspected had been ill anyway.

Long shadows lay across the camp by the time they returned, making golden stripes through the trees that glinted on the freshwater pond. Storm’s heart lifted a little as she carried her rabbit to the prey pile beneath the two trees in the camp’s center. Bella had taken out another hunting patrol and they’d come home with
their own catch—not much better than Storm’s, but together the
two patrols had found enough to feed all the dogs. Storm felt a
tide of relief; at least her first day leading a hunting patrol wouldn’t
end with a hungry, discontented Pack.

Across the glade she could make out the golden shape of Lucky,
sprawled with his mate—the Alpha, Sweet—and the white-and-
black Farm Dog Moon. The three senior dogs were talking softly,
but their conversation couldn’t have been too serious because
Lucky rose to his paws as he caught sight of Storm. He stretched
lazily, then padded across to greet her, giving her an affectionate
lick on the jaw.

“Well done, Storm,” he told her, pricking an ear at the prey
pile, where the other members of her party were already dropping
their catch. “Your first hunt seems to have gone pretty well.”

The rabbit in her mouth immediately tasted more appealing.
“Not bad,” she murmured through its flesh, glancing away a little.
“Could have been better.”

“It was a good first hunt for a new leader, take my word for
it.” Lucky nuzzled her reassuringly, but she saw that his dark eyes
were distant, already drifting back to Alpha. The slender swift-
dog was not so lean anymore: her sides were rounded with her
and Lucky’s pups, and even as Storm watched, their Alpha shifted
position and stretched her hind legs as if she was uncomfortable. Lucky’s gaze was a combination of love, pride, and faint anxiety, and Storm felt a prickle of fondness for him, even as she cocked one ear in bewilderment. *Is it really that exciting? I know they’re his first pups, but hunting’s got to be a lot more fun than fatherhood.*

He was obviously distracted, so Storm sidled away and padded to the prey pile herself to lay her rabbit on top. The little twist in her stomach was odd. It was right that Lucky should be focused on Alpha now, and on their soon-to-be-born pups. He’d be a wonderful Father-Dog, that was obvious—and Storm knew it from experience. He’d helped to bring her up after he and Mickey had found her and her littermates abandoned, and she’d never stop being grateful for Lucky’s kindness, his bravery in defending her, and his constant good advice.

But she was almost fully grown now. She was an adult dog, or very nearly, and she didn’t depend on Lucky anymore. She *shouldn’t,* Storm reminded herself.

*And it’s not as if Lucky is my real Father-Dog.*

Shrugging off her confusion, Storm glanced around for a friendly Packmate to while away the time with before prey-sharing. She was glad to spot Moon’s nearly grown pups Thorn and Beetle, tumbling on the ground in a play-fight. As she padded up...
to them, Thorn took her teeth out of Beetle’s ear and bounded up to her, yelping a cheerful greeting. “How did your first hunt go, Storm?”

“It was fine,” she said, still a little reluctant to talk about it, and the worries it had stirred inside her about her role in the Pack. Quickly she added, “What about your patrol?”

“All quiet,” barked Thorn, shaking her muscles loose after her tussle with her brother. “Except for a trace of fox, but it wasn’t very new. We’re not too worried.”

“Hah!” Beetle nipped affectionately at her muzzle, then bared his impressive teeth. “No fox had better dare come near this camp, or there’ll be a new fox-hide bed for Alpha and her pups!”

“You’re all jaw,” yapped Thorn. “Any fox you could catch would only have a skin big enough for one milk-pup.”

“Is that so?” With a growl of laughter, Beetle twisted and pounced back on Thorn’s haunches, dragging her down and tumbling her over and over till both dogs were covered in sandy earth and dry leaves. Thorn ended up on top, though, and she grazed her teeth along her litter-brother’s exposed belly.

“See? All talk!”

With a swift and tricky squirm Beetle flipped her over again.

“Storm, help me teach my litter-sister some manners!”
Yelping with glee, Storm piled into the play-fight, gnawing and snapping lightly at both pups. All three were soon wrestling and tumbling in a chaotic heap of legs and bodies. Beetle’s paws shoved her down into a pile of leaves, but Storm wriggled free and grabbed his neck in her jaws, sending them both thudding to the ground—with Thorn pouncing on top of them, yapping her triumph.

“Oof!” barked Storm hoarsely. “Why are you two so fat after Ice Wind?” She felt almost giddy with happiness, with the sheer fun of acting like a pup again. Maybe not quite fully grown, then, said a cheerful small voice in her head.

“Fat, eh?” Thorn clamped her jaws around Storm’s. “I’ll—”

“Prey-share!” Alpha’s clear, commanding bark rang out through the glade, and all three young dogs paused in their tussle, ears pricking. “To me, Pack.”

Getting to their paws, Storm, Thorn, and Beetle shook themselves free of earth and leaf scraps and shared a few friendly licks. But Storm noticed both the other youngsters tense as they stared at the spot where the Pack was gathering.

Thorn’s eyes narrowed. “Twitch had better not try to eat before our Mother-Dog,” she growled, and Beetle nodded grimly.

Storm pricked her ears, surprised. The play-fun had gone out
of the young dog’s voice entirely. Thorn wasn’t joking.

“I’m sure Twitch wouldn’t do that,” Storm reassured her. “Anyway, what does it matter?”

“Twitch has been getting above himself lately,” rumbled Beetle, with a glare at the three-legged dog. “Our Mother-Dog outranks him, and he’d better not forget it.”

Storm gave a sigh, but kept her jaws shut. Who cares, so long as every dog eats?

With a slight hunch of her shoulders she trotted ahead of Beetle and Thorn to join her Packmates. They were all settling into their circle, lying or sitting with their friends and littermates. Every dog watched with respectful affection as Alpha nosed the prey pile, selecting a modestly sized rabbit and carrying it back to her place.

It was a sparing choice, thought Storm admiringly, for a soon-to-be Mother-Dog. Enough to feed her and her unborn pups, but not too much. She’s a thoughtful leader as well as a strong one.

Lucky was next, as Pack Beta. Like Sweet, he took a reasonable but not greedy portion, choosing a smaller rabbit. When he had settled back at Sweet’s flank, the Alpha nodded to her third-in-command.

“Go ahead, Snap.”

The sleek lead hunter nodded and stepped forward, but Storm
couldn’t help but notice the tension that rippled through some of the Pack. *Twitch’s former comrades*, she realized. There seemed to be an undercurrent running through those dogs, an unseen force she could feel, like the frightening pull of the deepest part of the river. Storm flicked her ears nervously. One of Twitch’s former Pack growled softly, but no dog reacted, and none said a word.

After Snap, the hunters were summoned in strict order of rank. Storm felt proud to be called in the middle of them, and she was careful to follow the example of Sweet and Lucky, selecting a modest half of one of the rabbits she’d caught. She felt even prouder when Mickey, the steadfast Farm Dog, growled to her quietly as she passed him.

“Sensible choice. And well done on your catch, Storm. A good hunt!”

She lifted her head higher as she resumed her place in the circle, her belly comfortably full, her heart light with happiness. It felt good to be respected for more than her part in a violent, bloody battle; to be appreciated for what she could bring to the Pack’s day-to-day existence.

The hunters of Twitch’s Pack ranked below the original hunters of Sweet’s Pack, and Alpha let them wait almost till the end—only Arrow, the lowest-ranked hunter, who had been one
of Blade’s Pack, was left to follow them. Woody, Whisper, and Breeze fidgeted and muttered among themselves, looking agitated, and when it was his turn, Woody glanced hesitantly toward Twitch, as if waiting for his former Alpha’s permission to eat. Twitch said nothing, however, and when Sweet prompted Woody again, he stepped up to the prey pile. Whisper looked relieved that the awkward moment had passed—but Breeze glared sullenly at the dogs of Sweet’s original Pack. A nervous tingle unsettled Storm’s back fur, and she felt a creeping sense of unease.

“Patrol dogs next,” announced Alpha, turning her warm gaze on the dogs who came below the hunters in the Pack hierarchy. “Twitch?”

The buzz of tension instantly intensified, as if Lightning had leaped from the sky and run unseen through every dog. Storm glanced around, alarmed. Moon’s hackles were bristling, though she said nothing; Thorn, on the other hand, gave a single angry yelp. Beetle’s low growl was hostile.

“My Mother-Dog Moon has always led the patrol dogs,” he grumbled.

*Beetle, shut up,* thought Storm, nervous and angry. *What does it matter? Can’t you see there’s enough for every dog? Sweet and Lucky made sure of that!*
Twitch took no notice of the tension in the atmosphere, but simply limped up to the prey pile, silent and dignified. Alpha turned her elegant head to stare at Beetle, then at his litter-sister Thorn.

“Your Alpha makes the decisions here,” she said sharply. “Remember the Pack.”

When Twitch finished eating and returned to his place, Moon stepped up. The two dogs did not look at each other.

Storm was relieved when at last the meal was over, when Sunshine the Omega had gulped down the two little mice that were left for her. Sharing the prey had been an unnerving experience tonight. Though every dog had eaten, none seemed satisfied, and each dog shifted and scratched with nervous energy.

Storm got to her paws and turned to Beetle and Thorn, dipping her head slightly and letting her jaw fall open in a friendly grin. “Play-battle some more?”

“I don’t think so.” Thorn’s growl was stiff, and Beetle shook his head and turned away to nibble angrily at his flank.

Rebuffed, Storm paced uncertainly among the small groups of dogs who were curling up to murmur among themselves. None of the conversations seemed very high spirited, and any excitement in the evening had been dampened by the awkward prey-sharing.
Ducking her head, Storm glanced surreptitiously at Lucky and Sweet, nestled against each other on the highest patch of ground. They looked as much on edge as any other Pack dog.

Alpha stretched and rose to her paws, gazing around at her Pack. “I think now would be a good time for a tale of the Spirit Dogs.”

One or two of the Pack grunted sullenly, but most looked relieved to have their minds distracted. Little Sunshine gave a yelp of determined enthusiasm, wagging her bedraggled white tail. “I’d like that!”

“So would I.” Mickey lay down, forepaws extended, and gazed expectantly at Sweet.

Alpha shared a glance with Lucky, whose tail thumped encouragingly. “Shall I tell you about the Wind-Dogs?” she asked.

“Yes! I love hearing Spirit Dog stories!” Daisy the patrol dog panted happily.


Twitch tilted his head curiously. “I think I might have,” he said, “but it was a long time ago. I don’t remember anything about them.”

“Well.” Breeze stood up on all four paws, wagging her tail as
her tongue lolled. “The Wind-Dogs sound good to me! Especially with my name!”

Alpha nodded. “Then I’ll tell you who the Wind-Dogs are, and how they move through our world as silent and swift as the breeze.” She blinked at Breeze, who pricked her ears in pleasure.

“Of course, they are the fastest of all the Spirit Dogs,” Alpha went on, lifting her slender head so that every dog could hear her. “That’s why the Wind-Dogs watch over swift-dogs like me and the members of my birth Pack.”

“But what do they do?” yapped Daisy.

“Sometimes they hunt the Fastest Hare, a mischievous creature who once tried to trick them, and whose family must now run from us swift-dogs forever. But mostly they chase after the Golden Deer. They hunt her across the world, from forest to lake, over cliffs and plains and mountains. You can feel the breeze as they pass—sometimes so fast they leave destruction in their wake. Sometimes they run idly, loping gently along, and the wind of their passing is soft and soothing. But as they run, they take the world from warm to freezing cold, and back again. When Long Light ends, we know that they have caught the Golden Deer at last. But the Deer rises and runs again at the end of Ice Wind, and we feel the world grow warm once more.”
Daisy gazed up at her Alpha, awestruck. “So the Golden Deer has begun to run again now,” she said dreamily.

“Oh, yes. She’s running now, on her long course through the world toward the next Ice Wind.” Alpha cocked her head fondly at Daisy. “But she will run for a long time first. She is fresh and fast, and the Wind-Dogs have only just begun their new chase.”

Sleepily, Storm settled herself against Thorn’s flank. Even Moon’s two youngsters had fallen under the spell of the story, and the tension had drained from their bodies. Storm could feel Thorn’s calm heartbeat through her rib cage, and suddenly all seemed well. Once again, she could feel like a pup, safe and secure with the adults of the Pack.

*Martha used to tell us stories,* she remembered with an aching sadness. *She’d tell Grunt and Wiggle and me all about the Spirit Dogs. We didn’t know anything, because our Mother-Dog died before she could tell us.*

*But Martha was my Mother-Dog, too, really.* Lucky and Mickey had raised her too, but it had been Martha, the huge and gentle black water-dog, who had come closest to replacing her lost Mother-Dog. She had comforted Storm when she was only a helpless pup called Lick; she had shared the warmth of her body, consoled her, protected her from the hostility of the other Pack members.
I miss Martha. . . . When she died, it was like losing my Mother-Dog for a second time.

Alpha’s voice penetrated Storm’s wistful thoughts, and she was glad. “Only the Wind-Dogs may hunt and capture the true Golden Deer, who runs free through every forest. But she casts a shadow. And if we run hard and run fast, we can catch that shadow, a living Golden Deer, as the real one races on into the sky. That’s when a Pack is truly blessed by the Spirit Dogs.”

Storm liked this story. I’ll catch a shadow of the Golden Deer one day. And when I do, I’ll remember to thank the Wind-Dogs for it. I never knew about them before. . . .

It was odd, yet strangely reassuring, to know that the swift-dogs had stories of their own, stories about Spirit Dogs that other dogs had never heard of. Perhaps all dogs had their own Spirit Dogs. Storm’s eyes ranged around the Pack until they fell on Arrow, sitting proud and alone as he listened in silence to Alpha’s tale.

Do we have our own Spirit Dog, he and I? Storm wondered. Perhaps there’s a Fierce-Dog Spirit that I don’t know about. . . .

Her hackles sprang erect, and she shook off a thrill of suspense.
What does it matter if there is some unknown Fierce-Dog Spirit? This is my Pack! I belong here.

She drew in a breath, and clenched her jaws, feeling the soft night wind ruffle her short fur as if a Wind-Dog had licked her as it passed.

The stories of my Pack: Those are my stories! Their Spirit Dogs are my Spirit Dogs.

They’re all I need; they’re enough for me.
“What will we do today, Martha? What will we do?” Storm leaped excitedly around Martha’s sturdy legs, nipping at her fur with her baby teeth. “Let’s do something fun. I know! You can teach me to swim!”

She was so tiny next to Martha, Storm thought with amazement. Then she realized: she wasn’t Storm at all, not yet . . .

I’m still Lick!

One huge webbed paw swiped her gently, making Storm tumble over on the soft grass, but she wriggled up again, forequarters lowered, tail wagging eagerly. Martha bowled her over once more and Storm lay on her back, squirming with delight as the big dog nuzzled her belly affectionately.

I’m a pup again . . . !

A wave of happiness rippled through her short fur. This was better! This was life when it had been fun, and so much simpler. Hopping to her paws, she panted eagerly as Martha licked her face.
“Where are Wiggle and Grunt? I want to play with them! Where are my litter-brothers?”

Martha gave a soft, gruff laugh, wrinkling her muzzle. “Patience, little one. I’m sure they—”

Then her huge head jerked up, and her dark eyes narrowed. Storm stopped, quivering as she watched her foster-mother snuff the breeze. She pressed close to Martha’s flank, feeling the big dog’s fur bristle.

Something was wrong . . .

The clearing that had been so sunny and bright and warm seemed suddenly full of shadows. Darkness shifted at the edge of the trees, and the wind was cold now. A darker shadow slipped between the trunks, or so Storm thought. It was hard to see, hard to think clearly, but there was something out there. Something terrible.

“Martha?” she whispered, her whine trembling. “What is it?”

“Quiet, little one. Wait . . .”

“Is it Blade? Has she come back? Oh Martha, what will we do?” Her whole small body felt cold and vulnerable, and the trees seemed so very big.

Martha turned, dipping her great head to Storm’s tiny one. “Oh, Lick,” she murmured. “Little dog, I don’t know what to do. There’s no danger out there.”

“But Martha—”

“No danger, little Lick, no darkness in the forest, I promise.” Martha’s tongue gently caressed her ear. “The darkness is in you.”
Cold horror rushed through Storm’s body like a freezing river, and the shadows swirled, engulfing her.

And she jerked awake, gasping for breath.

Reeling on her paws, Storm stumbled, then gazed around in a daze, the dream still clinging to her like tendrils of night. Violently she shook herself. Beneath her claws she could feel hard, cold rock, and there were no warm bodies near her, no gentle rise and fall of flanks. She wasn’t in the camp; she wasn’t with her hunting mates. There was no sound of them, no scent.

The Earth-Dog was still, the night black, but Storm could make out the looming shadows of trees. She became aware, as the dream finally drifted away, that her paw pads hurt, and as she bent to lick them, she realized they were cut and bruised, as if by a long walk over rough ground.

Blinking, Storm forced herself to focus on her surroundings. She knew this place. It was a knoll far from the camp, where Twitch and his friends used to hunt, but still within the new Pack’s territory. How did I get here?

She had no memory of leaving the camp. She clenched her fangs, shook her head. No, this wasn’t her dream any longer. This was real.

Exhausted by panic, she let her head droop as she turned in...
the direction of the camp and began to plod back down the rocky
slope. *But I don’t remember climbing up it.* A fragment of the dream
flitted through her brain once more, and she shivered and gave a
stifled whimper.

*Is this why my paw pads have been hurting lately? Have I done this before?*

Panic squeezed Storm’s chest. *If I have, how often has it happened?*

The woods seemed darker and deeper than ever, the moon
no more than a cold sliver glimpsed now and again between the
overhanging branches. The thought of running into a patrol dog
horrified her: What would she say? *I don’t want to face any questions.*

*How can I give the answers when I don’t know them? What if they start thinking
I’m odd? That I’m not quite one of them?*

She knew just where Daisy would be on patrol, so she lay qui-
etly in the long weeds until the pale little shape passed, sniffing
dutifully at the camp’s fringes. Storm held her breath as Daisy
paused, raised her head, and sniffed the air as if she’d caught a
strange scent. But then she shook her head and moved on, and it
was easy enough for Storm to slip through behind her on her belly,
staying low and silent.

She thought she was home and safe, thought she had made
it back unseen, and her fur began to settle and her breathing to
calm. Then she raised her head to see two dark figures cross the
path right in front of her.

One halted, turning in shock, and she saw glowing eyes blink in the shadows.

“Storm?” asked the dog. “What are you doing out here?”

“Bella!” The name was hoarse in Storm’s throat: *Lucky’s litter-sister*. Her heart sank. Beside Bella was the slender, powerful shape of Arrow the Fierce Dog, and he too had cocked his head, eyeing her with suspicious curiosity.

“Yes, Storm.” He looked at Bella, then back at her. “What’s going on?”

“I . . .” Storm’s throat felt dry as dust. *I don’t know what’s going on, Arrow*. “I couldn’t sleep. I thought—I decided to take a walk.”

There was a sharp bark of *Liar!* in her own head, but Bella only nodded, and hunched her golden shoulders.

“All right,” she murmured. “A walk does help a dog to sleep, it’s true. But you ought to get to your den now, Storm. You’ll have another hard day’s hunting tomorrow.”

Storm dipped her head. “You’re right, Bella. I am tired.” She forced her jaws into a friendly panting grin. “Good night. Good night, Arrow.”
She padded on, glad to feel the soft grass of the glade under her sore paw pads again. What she’d told Bella was true: Tiredness weighed on the nape of her neck like a stone, and she felt a wave of it wash through her as she trod heavily through the entrance of the hunters’ den. Her nest of leaves had never looked so welcoming, yet she wouldn’t be in it for long before the Sun-Dog rose.

It was only when she had curled into it, and her eyelids had almost closed, that the vague, nagging question at the back of her skull finally took shape in her mind. But she was right on the verge of sleep, and just as she thought it, she began to tumble over the edge into blissful unconsciousness. . . .

*What were Bella and Arrow doing out there?*
Storm was surprised at how fresh and awake she felt as she bounded through the woods with the hunting party the next day. It was good to stretch her muscles properly, to feel the tiredness of the previous night fall away with the touch of the cool breeze in her fur.

*I won’t think about that dream. I won’t think about waking up on cold rock, far from my den.* That was in the past; now she was hunting in a team led by Lucky, and she was determined to make a good showing for him. The air was cool and crisp and sunlight dappled the forest floor, betraying the scuttle and rush of small prey. It was going to be a good day.

The weasel in front of her was fast, but she was faster. Her paws pounded through drifted leaves as she raced to intercept the flash of red fur. It was panicking, darting this way and that in
search of escape, but she was too experienced to let it slip away. Lucky was driving it toward her, with Bruno and Breeze, and Bella was out at her flank in case it shot away in a sudden diversion; all she had to do was wait for the weasel to come within reach of her jaws. She could trust Lucky, she thought as she halted and crouched behind a grass tussock.

There was her Beta now, muscles stretching under his golden fur as he raced after the prey. Storm forced herself to stay still and low in the shadow of her tussock; she didn’t need to use up all her energy by pouncing for her prey. She could wait for it to come to her. It was as good as dead.

And then Lucky’s head jerked abruptly up, his nostrils flaring to scent the air. As his pawsteps faltered, the weasel took its chance. It shot to the side, not yet near enough to Storm’s snapping jaws, and darted into the trees. With a flicker of red fur, it was gone.

Breeze skidded to a halt, raising her head to give a howl of frustration and anger. Storm rose to all fours, disbelieving. *He let it get away! It’s just like the hunt with Whisper and Arrow! But this is Lucky. . . .

Does he hate hunting with me? The notion crawled inside her skull like a biting insect, making her nape prickle with horror. *Lucky hesitated. He didn’t drive the weasel to me. Doesn’t he trust me?*
She almost didn’t dare look at her Beta, but when she did, Lucky wasn’t watching her. He seemed to be paying her no attention at all; he was turning, searching the landscape as if he was hunting for something besides a weasel. And none of the other dogs wore hostile expressions; they all looked just as confused as Storm felt.

Bella gave a yip of bemusement. “Beta, what’s going on?”

“Hush, Bella.” Lucky’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the trees. “Don’t you smell it?”

The other dogs glanced at one another, then Bella shrugged and began to sniff at the shifting breeze. Bruno and Breeze tipped their heads back and joined in. There was something, thought Storm as a tang of something rich and dark tickled her nostrils.

“Deer?” Bruno echoed her suspicions aloud.

“Not very fresh deer-scent,” said Breeze, with a thoughtful wrinkle of her muzzle.

“It’s probably long gone,” sighed Bella.

All the same, Storm found herself licking her chops. It had been a long time since any of the Pack had tasted the warm flavor of deer, had filled their bellies as only a deer could fill them. But she would wait for Lucky’s word. He was their hunt-leader.

“It could be worth tracking,” said Lucky at last, slowly. “The
scent’s faded, but it isn’t that old. This deer can’t have gone far, and if we brought back a whole carcass it would feed the entire Pack.”

Storm bounded to his side. “It’s worth a try, Beta.”

The other dogs nodded, and at a yelp from Lucky they sprang into the chase, following the scent with their heads low to the ground. The hills rose from here in a series of broad shallow steps away from the Endless Lake. It was hard running, but each dog was fired by a new hunger, and Storm’s paws raced in strong, eager strides.

The scent trail grew more pungent as they ran, leading them in a more or less straight line up the slope until it rose abruptly into a black rocky cliff. Storm’s pawsteps faltered as she took in the impossible precipice, but only for an instant. In that moment she caught another scent, the tang of a second deer crossing the trail of the first. She was about to bark her discovery to the others when Breeze gave a high yelp.

“Another deer! Over here!”

Storm jerked her head around, surprised. Breeze was some rabbit-chases away, but she was indeed sniffing hungrily at clumps of grass at the foot of the cliff. Bruno bounded toward her, but almost immediately slithered to a stop, plunging his
muzzle into the scrubby undergrowth.

“Another!” he barked.

In the next few moments all the dogs were barking, leaping off in different directions, almost bumping into each other in their desperation to follow each new scent. So many deer! Storm realized. A whole Pack of them!

“Spread out!” barked Lucky commandingly. “Stay calm. Search for the strongest trail and we’ll follow that.”

“But Beta, none of the scents are fresh,” yelped Storm. The words tasted bitter in her mouth, but she knew it was true. However many deer there had been here, they were long gone. The hunting party’s chase had been for nothing.

One by one the dogs circled, slower now as the trails faded away, then trotted back till they were clustered in the shadow of the overhanging rock. Bruno scraped at the stony earth with his claws, frustrated, and the others pinned their ears back and shared disappointed growls.

“Maybe this is the place where the deer live,” suggested Bella, flicking back one ear. “Maybe this is their camp, and they’re away just now, hunting for grass and leaves.”

“A camp like ours?” Bruno furrowed the skin above his eyes in puzzlement. “You mean, the deer live in Packs like we do?”
“I don’t know,” said Bella. “But maybe they do. Maybe there are deer Packs just as there are dog Packs.”

“Surely we’d know by now if that was true?” Lucky sounded unsure, and Storm glanced at him in surprise. “I suppose I’ve seen them in small groups sometimes. But mostly deer just seem to wander in ones and twos.”

“Well, a lot of them have been wandering here,” sniffed Breeze. She licked her chops longingly.

Storm drew away from their small group to nose at the ground again and scan the hillside. *Packs of deer: What a strange idea.*

And yet she couldn’t help thinking again of Alpha’s stories. She turned and yipped to the others.

“Maybe this place has something to do with the Golden Deer herself,” she suggested. “Perhaps her shadows gather here.” She licked her jaws hesitantly. “Don’t you feel the breeze? It sweeps across the cliff face. This hillside feels like it could be sacred to the Wind-Dogs.”


“No.” Lucky took a few paces forward, and Storm noticed that the fur on his neck was on end. He pricked an ear, and glanced at
the rock face, then away toward the rolling fall of the slope. “The other Spirit Dogs are real; why wouldn’t the Wind-Dogs be just as real?”

Bella barked a laugh. “Yes, yes. Of course the Wind-Dogs are as real as the other Spirit Dogs. They’re exactly as real. All those stories were made up by Mother-Dogs, just to send their pups to sleep. They’re no more true than the Fear-Dog, and we know Terror made him up out of cobwebs and air.”

Storm’s jaw felt loose. Her ears drooped, and her tail clamped tight against her rump as she stared at Bella. “You don’t think the Spirit Dogs are real? But Martha and Lucky taught me—”

“He’s real!” The bark came from Breeze, who stepped forward with an air of angry certainty. “The Fear-Dog is no story! He’s the fiercest and most powerful of the Spirit Dogs, just as Terror said!”

Storm backed off a pace, then another. Her tail felt as if it was going to disappear between her hindquarters. *The River-Dog is real, and the Forest-Dog and the Sky-Dogs and Lightning... all the Spirit Dogs are there, watching over us.* She swallowed hard. *But not the Fear-Dog. He’s not real. Lucky said so. I don’t want to believe in the Fear-Dog.*

Bella was staring at Breeze with a dumbfounded expression; Breeze looked resentfully defiant. It was Bruno who broke the awkward silence.
“My Alpha believes in the Wind-Dogs,” he growled. “And she believes in the Golden Deer. That’s good enough for me. It should be good enough for any dog in the Pack.”

Every dog watched him, tails tapping the ground thoughtfully.

“I hope,” Bruno went on, “that any deer we see today are real ones, not shadows. But whatever prey we find, it has to be real. I don’t care if it’s not a deer. We must find some food for the Pack, even if it’s small. So, do we plan to hunt today? Because this might be where some deer Pack lives, it might indeed. But they’re not here now.”

“Bruno’s right,” said Lucky after a short, impressed silence. “It’s getting late. We need to find something to take back to the Pack.”

He turned and trotted back down the slope with his easy, loping grace, but he looked, Storm couldn’t help thinking, quite regretful. Bounding to catch up with him, she nudged Lucky’s shoulder gently with her muzzle.

“What do you really think that place was?”

He shook his head. “Honestly, Storm? I have no idea. It doesn’t matter; we have to find living prey.” He gave a growl of gruff amusement. “Creatures that aren’t made of air and cobwebs!”
Still unsettled, Storm glanced back over her shoulder at the grassy dip beneath the cliff. It was such a strange place, with its network of scents and its silence, the still absence of any prey. A breeze blew from it to ripple through her fur even as she ran, and she felt a chill in her bones.

*Was that the Wind-Dogs? Did they speak to me?*

Bella’s words had riled her, but now they didn’t seem to matter because they rang so hollow. Storm could feel her heart thudding in her rib cage. Of course there were Spirit Dogs, of course there were!

Something rustled in the undergrowth to her side, and Storm almost tripped over her own paws as she was brought back to reality and the present. Bella was looking at her, eyes eager and ears pricked, and Storm nodded meaningfully at her.

*There’s prey down here!*

Bruno was right, she thought as she doubled sideways and sped toward the tangle of brush. Questions were unimportant right now, and so were wild notions about the Spirit Dogs leaping down to earth.

With a rippling shake of her muscles, Storm flung herself into the chase.
Today’s catch had been poor, Storm thought, ashamed—partly because of their pointless chase after the deer. She dipped her head as they all trailed into the camp later that day, avoiding the gaze of the rest of the Pack. A scrawny squirrel dangled from her jaws, but she wasn’t proud of it—we could have done so much better, she thought. Breeze carried another squirrel, and Lucky had a rabbit in his mouth—a fairly fat one, but still.

If only we could have found one of those phantom deer . . .

Alpha stretched, rose to her paws and paced forward to greet them and examine their catch. There was concern in her dark eyes as she glanced at Storm, then turned to Lucky.

“Snap’s still out with her hunting patrol,” she told her Beta. “I’m sure she’ll bring something back, and together with your prey, well . . .”
Their Alpha was trying to look on the bright side, Storm knew, but she shouldn’t have had to.

“I’m sorry, Sweet,” Lucky told her in a low growl. “We should have done better. The Moon-Dog is full tonight, and it’s good to have a satisfied belly for the Great Howl.” He nuzzled Alpha’s flank apologetically.

Storm didn’t hear Alpha’s reply, as the graceful swift-dog pressed her slender nose to Lucky’s ear, Storm turned quickly and trotted away, embarrassed to witness her leaders’ easy intimacy.

“Thorn,” she barked softly, relieved to spot Fiery and Moon’s female pup chatting with the feisty little dog from the former Leashed Pack. “Daisy!”

The two cocked their heads toward her, whining greetings.

“Was there no prey out there, Storm?” asked Daisy, letting her tongue loll. “Your catch doesn’t seem so good this evening.”

Storm lowered her ears, ashamed. “It was pretty scarce, and what there was—well, it was as skinny as we are. But it wasn’t that. I’m afraid we got distracted by deer scents.”

“Deer?” Thorn’s ears pricked enthusiastically.

“Yes, but we couldn’t find them,” sighed Storm. “We wasted a lot of time. I’m sorry.”

It was at the edge of her muzzle to mention the strangeness of
the place, and her suspicions about a connection with the Golden Deer, but Daisy was wagging her tail excitedly, and Storm decided it was best to keep her jaws shut.

“Lots of deer scents?” barked the little dog. “Well, maybe if you go back you will catch a deer!”

“You were just unlucky,” agreed Thorn. “Next time you go to that spot, you’ll probably see one!”

“Or lots.” Daisy licked her chops longingly. “Lots of deer . . .” Her voice faded to a hungry growl.

Storm opened her mouth to calm the two dogs’ expectations, but she was interrupted by a furious snarling argument from the nearest corner of the clearing. Turning in surprise, she saw that Rake and Ruff—two patrol dogs who had once been in Twitch’s Pack—were facing down Moon. They barked angrily at the farm dog, their muzzles almost touching hers. The fur of all three dogs was raised along their spines. Around them, looking distinctly unsettled, stood Twitch, Thorn’s litter-brother Beetle, and a couple of hunters who’d once followed Twitch. Breeze was one of them.

*Moon’s looking a bit outnumbered,* thought Storm anxiously, as Thorn trotted forward, growling, to stand at her litter-brother’s side.
“You’re not my Alpha dog, Moon!” snarled Rake.

Storm padded up to the knot of hostile dogs, Daisy at her flank. “What’s going on? Can’t you dogs just listen to Alpha and Beta and get along with each other?”

“We don’t want to make trouble,” growled Ruff, “but we won’t let ourselves be ordered around by just any dog.” She bared her fangs, and Moon gave her a warning snarl in response.

Wildly, Storm glanced around, and was relieved to see Sweet and Lucky pacing across the clearing toward them. But Rake, Ruff and Moon were still too busy glaring at one another to take any notice. Rake lunged suddenly, his jaws snapping on Moon’s fur as she jerked back. She spun and bit savagely at his shoulder as Beetle and Ruff circled, snarling and darting bites at one another.

“I don’t take commands from you!” barked Rake again as he dodged Moon’s angry jaws. “Alpha said Twitch was in charge of the patrol dogs. That’s who tells me what to do—Twitch! Not you!”

Moon stiffened, jaws dripping and blue eyes glittering as the dogs resumed their angry standoff. “You’re on guard duty tonight whether you like it or not. Do as you’re told.”

“Twitch!” Rake spun to face his old Pack leader. “You tell her. She’s undermining your authority!”
Twitch didn’t seem to want to be involved; in fact, he looked as if he’d rather be anywhere else. Shifting his hindquarters, he glanced from Rake to Moon to Ruff. He gave an uncertain growl, low in his throat, but before he could come up with an answer, Daisy bounded forward.

“You should respect Moon!” she told them in her high-pitched yelp. “We all should!”

Beside her, Thorn and Beetle growled their hearty agreement, then slunk protectively to their Mother-Dog’s sides. Storm realized Thorn was on the point of flinging herself violently at Rake’s throat. With some desperation, Storm glanced over her shoulder to find Lucky, but he had paused a few paces from the fight. His face was filled with uncertainty.

It was Alpha who shouldered her way into the middle of the quarreling dogs. She stood firm between Thorn and Rake, glaring at them sternly.

Alpha said nothing, but Thorn and Rake both dipped their heads, cowed. Each took a pace backward, as the swift-dog turned on her slim legs, meeting the eyes of the patrol dogs.

“I won’t have this,” she growled. “Do you hear? The last thing this Pack needs is fighting dogs.”

Rake opened his jaws, then seemed to think better of it. He
shut them again, and licked his chops nervously.

“Moon and Twitch are two of the most experienced dogs in this Pack,” Alpha went on, with a distinct undercurrent of threat in her soft voice. “They both deserve respect. If I hear of any patrol dog failing to give it to them—to *either of them*—there will be consequences. Serious consequences, do you all understand?”

Every patrol dog lowered his or her eyes, and tails dropped to clamp against their rumps.

“Yes, Alpha,” muttered Rake, and Ruff gave a hasty nod of agreement.

“Of course,” grunted Thorn.

They kept their gazes down while their Alpha studied them severely, but as she turned dismissively and stalked away, Storm didn’t take her eyes off the patrol dogs. From the looks they were giving one another, they weren’t at all submissive now. Fangs were subtly bared, eyes flashed with hostility, and as soon as Alpha was out of earshot, there was a distinct low snarling in several throats. Violence was on the edge of breaking out again; Storm could sense it in the air. Even Twitch and Moon, who had always got along so well, were avoiding each other’s eyes.

Alpha, with Lucky at her flank, returned to her sleeping-place and flopped carefully down, head on her paws as she watched
the patrol dogs from a distance. The tight group was breaking up now, but Storm did not like the way it was dividing. There was a very obvious split as the dogs turned their backs on each other: Twitch’s old followers, and the patrol dogs who had originally been with Sweet’s Pack. And there were no amicable licks or forgiving nudges as the two groups hurried to opposite sides of the clearing.

Daisy and Thorn were crouching in a huddle with Moon and her other patrollers, but as Storm trotted to join them, Daisy glanced up at her, brown eyes apologetic.

“Storm, if you don’t mind . . . I think this is patrol-dog business? We all need to talk. For a bit. Alone?”

Storm hesitated, one paw off the ground. Feeling horribly awkward, she glanced around the camp. The hunt-dogs were all in little groups of their own by now, chatting lazily about their day, and Storm didn’t think there was a single cluster of dogs she could butt her way into uninvited. She swallowed as she nodded at Daisy and slunk away from the patrol dogs.

With a suddenness that took her breath away, she was swamped by longing for Martha. In that moment she missed her foster-mother so badly, she wanted to howl to the sky all alone. When Martha had been alive, there had always been at least one
A small shiver ran along Storm’s spine as she remembered her dream from the previous night: Martha’s kind eyes filling her vision; her warm, gruff voice that had always been full of comfort.

_The darkness is in you._ . . .

Storm shivered and gave a plaintive whimper. _What’s wrong with me?_

Maybe nothing. After all, Lucky had had terrible dreams, once. He’d dreamed of the Storm of Dogs, and the nightmares had tormented him for many journeys of the Moon-Dog. But those dreams had predicted Storm’s victory over Blade; they’d been a _good_ omen. That wasn’t what her dream had felt like. It seemed to promise only horror and darkness.

Storm sat on her haunches, torn by different urges. She licked her jaws and gave a low unhappy whine. In the center of the glade, Lucky lay curled up with Sweet, talking quietly; Storm didn’t feel she could interrupt their moment of private intimacy. _But I need to ask someone about my dream, someone who knows what it’s like._ . . .

As she hesitated, the undergrowth rustled, and with a crunching of leaves and a snapping of twigs the dogs of the second hunting party trotted into the clearing. Storm breathed a sigh of
relief as she got to her paws, tongue lolling. Snap and her hunters had brought a good deal more prey than she, Lucky, and the others had managed. The Great Howl wouldn’t be a gloomy affair after all.

Wagging her tail, Storm waited until Alpha had risen to greet the hunters and admire their catch, then took her opportunity. She padded close to Lucky and settled down at his side.

“Storm.” He licked her ear affectionately.

“Lucky, can I ask you something?”

“Of course you can.” He seemed distracted, preoccupied with Alpha and the hunters, but Storm took a deep breath and plunged on.

“Do you still dream about the Storm of Dogs?”

His sidelong glance was a little startled, but then he shook his golden head and looked back at Snap and Alpha. “No, Storm, that’s all over. I haven’t dreamed about it since it happened.”

“Well.” She licked her jaws with a tongue that felt dry. “The thing is, Lucky . . . I had a dream last night. A bad dream.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry. All dogs have bad dreams sometimes. It’s natural.” He nodded toward Snap. “Look at that fine rabbit Snap caught!”

Storm opened her jaws. But Lucky, she wanted to blurt out.
Martha said something terrible, and I woke up outside the camp, and I still don’t know how I got there, and—

It was no use; she couldn’t bring herself to say it. The words dream-Martha had said, Storm realized, were something she was too ashamed to share with any other dog.

Even with Lucky . . .

Because what if it wasn’t an ordinary dream? What if, like Lucky’s nightmare, it had meant something?

Lucky’s dreams, after all, had warned him about a great battle. They hadn’t warned him about himself!

But what if my dream is true, too?