HERITAGE

SAMPLE CHAPTER

RELICTOWN
BOOK THREE

CHRISTOPHER P. MENKHAUS

TIMEALPHA
MEDIA

HERITAGE

Edited by Ashley T. Menkhaus

Cover illustration by Margarita Gizzatullina

Logo design by Nodsaibot

Lyrics to "Down for a While", The Weakest Suit, 2010

Published by TimeAlpha Media

www.timealphamedia.com

ISBN 978-1-956720-03-7 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-956720-11-2 (paperback)

First Edition: May 2022

Version 1.3

1

PARK BENCHES

Stupid Brownie.

Taj and Meadow walked on either side of him. They were escorting him home, for his own protection, after the debacle on the Clowder stage. Heritage didn't know exactly what they would do if he ran, but he was sure he wasn't faster than them.

Stupid Brownie. Why did I ever let him talk me into sneaking out?

"So," Taj began again. "Who was that *domestic*, and why was he up on *my* stage singing better than the son of the head of one of the Eight Greats?"

"Yeah," Meadow chimed in. "We're gonna find him eventually. It'll go better for you both if you tell us where he is."

Meadow turned his head toward Heritage as they walked and focused his eyes on the kit. Meadow was a white tom with one blue eye and one yellow eye.

He knows that's intimidating.

Heritage remained silent. Better not to say anything that his father might contradict when these two talked to him. He was in trouble. His parents already didn't like Brownie, and now, because he was going along with what Brownie had wanted, he had embar-

rassed himself, his parents, the Weathervanes, and his whole territory.

"Still not talking?" Taj asked.

Taj was a scrawny, tan colored cat, not much bigger than Heritage, but his hair was much shorter and looked kind of sickly. It also had a smell to it that made Heritage's nose burn a little.

"That's fine," Meadow said. "I'm sure old Kalmin will have his tongue."

Both Taj and Meadow were members of the Clowder, one of the Eight Great Cat Choruses in Relictown. Heritage and his friend Brownie had snuck into their show, and somehow ended up on stage trying out for the open position on the chorus. When it was discovered that Brownie was a domestic cat, the cats in the audience went wild.

Heritage focused on looking at his front paws as he walked. His heart was racing, and he was scared. They were passing into Weathervane territory, where Heritage lived. He didn't have to look up to see it. The scent markers were clear. A chance for him to get out of this situation was at hand.

After they traveled a little farther, two big tabbies jumped down from a nearby fence and sat in front of Taj and Meadow. That caused Taj, Meadow, and Heritage to sit, too.

Wilford and Foley. Heritage knew them well. They both worked as patrol toms for the Weathervane chorus. Surely, they would send these two Clowder toms back to their own territory and allow Heritage to get home safely. He would still be in trouble for sneaking out, and what happened on the Clowder stage would eventually get back to his father, but at least his father wouldn't be blindsided by accusations from Taj and Meadow.

"Is there a problem?" Taj purred.

Wilford chuckled. He tapped Foley with a paw and then pointed at Heritage. Taj and Meadow put their ears back.

"We were just wondering," Wilford began. "How two Clowder

kits, such as yourselves, came to be traveling with our young Heritage here."

Heritage saw Taj flinch at the insult.

"There's nothing funny going on, is there?" Foley queried.

"On the contrary," Taj purred. He returned his ears back to facing forward, with some difficulty, it seemed. "This kit wandered into our territory, and onto the Clowder stage, where he made a fool out of himself. We're on a mission of mercy to protect this misguided youth, who we recognized as one of Kalmin's sons, and return him safely to his father, lest he run away like all the others."

Wilford and Foley cocked their heads.

"Why don't you run that by us again," Foley said.

Heritage had to listen to an extended version of the events as Taj carefully explained them. By the looks on the faces of Wilford and Foley, Heritage could tell that they would not save him. Soon, they were laughing along with Taj and Meadow, and agreed to escort the whole party to the Weathervane Molly Warren.

Stupid Brownie.

Soon, Heritage found himself sitting outside of the warren, with Taj and Meadow loudly calling Kalmin out. Kalmin was the only tom allowed in the warren. It was a sanctuary for mollies with kits, or those about to have kits. Heritage was due to be kicked out soon. He wasn't really a kit any longer. He didn't think he'd miss the never-ending gossip between his mother and the other mollies about everything outside the warren that they had no firsthand knowledge of.

Kalmin emerged from under the shed. The shed itself was raised off the ground by blocks of stone place on the corners. A large pit was dug under one side to give pregnant mollies a more comfortable way to enter through the hole in the floor. As Kalmin approached, Heritage saw the eyes and ears of as many mollies as

could peek out of the hole at one time. He knew others had their ears pressed to the wall of the shed.

Kalmin's eyes found Heritage, flicked around to look for Brownie, then settled on Taj.

"What's this business?" Kalmin asked.

"Your kit found his way onto our stage with his *domestic* friend," Taj purred.

Kalmin's ear flicked at the mention of Brownie. Taj noted this and smiled.

"We were concerned about the safety of your… legacy," Meadow said. "And took it upon ourselves to make sure we delivered him safely back to you."

"Why was he on your stage?" Kalmin asked, calmly.

Taj and Meadow got quiet. They were thinking up a lie. Heritage needed to mitigate with the truth.

"Pavaroni called me up there, Father," he said. "He wanted to see how I was getting along with my singing."

"Is this true?" Kalmin asked Taj.

"Yes, but… the *domestic*," Taj sputtered. Heritage turned to look at Taj. He had never seen Taj's cool demeanor broken. Up close, Taj's sandy fur looked brittle and patchy.

Is he sick?

"I don't know from any *domestic*," Kalmin said. "But I sent my son to your show tonight as part of his education. He was to learn what he could from your… performance, and report to me."

He lied. He lied for me.

Kalmin continued while Taj and Meadow were stammering.

"Now, I'm curious to hear what my son learned from watching a *superior* chorus. I thank you for returning him. *You* can return now… to Clowder territory. There is no reason for toms to be hanging around outside this molly warren."

Heritage heard snickers from the mollies.

Kalmin nodded to Wilford and Foley, who herded Taj and

Meadow toward the fence. Heritage wanted to turn and watch, but he didn't dare.

"That kit of yours will never make it to the Great Eight," Taj sputtered.

"We'll see to that," Meadow piped in.

Once they left, Kalmin's eyes shifted down to Heritage, who sat alone in front of him. Even the mollies who were peaking out of the hole had retreated to start up a whole new series of gossip within.

"Now, son," Kalmin said. "We need to talk."

"What did he say?" Hattie, Heritage's littermate, asked. Her fur was orange. Just like every cat in their family.

She had come outside after Kalmin left. Heritage was moping about in the yard, weighing his options.

"I'm a tom, now," Heritage said, shrugging his shoulders. "Officially. I can't go back in the warren."

Hattie looked like she was going to cry. They touched heads.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's okay," Heritage said. "It would have happened any day now. Mom's about to have another litter. It's… time for me to leave."

Hattie moved her mouth to Heritage's ear.

"Are you going to run away, like Garvie and all the others?" she whispered.

Yes.

"Of course not," Heritage said, quickly. "I'm Dad's last chance at a good life after he leaves the Weathervanes. They're not going to let him hang on much longer."

Hattie nodded. She seemed more convinced than Heritage.

"What happened?" she asked. "And where's Brownie?"

"Brownie's been made an official tom, like me," Heritage said.

"Dad won't let him back in. He made me fill in the hole before he left."

"Oh, that's awful," Hattie said. "Brownie doesn't have his claws. How will he survive?"

Heritage was wondering the same thing.

"I have no idea, but Dad says I have to get on with my life and stop worrying about some *domestic*."

"But he's your friend," Hattie pleaded.

"What can I do, Hat?" Heritage said. He lifted one of his paws. "I have my claws, but I can't hunt for another tom's food for his whole life."

"But…" Hattie whispered.

"Dad's right. I like Brownie, but I have to focus on the family."

"I thought Brownie was family," Hattie said.

"So did I," Heritage said. "When I was a kit. Turns out, I was wrong."

They put their heads together and felt their tears mix.

Heritage was given permission to sleep within the fenced yard until he found a place of his own. He was also given patrol duties. Each night, he patrolled a different area to keep it free of intruders and update the scent markers. This displaced some toms who routinely patrolled, and they didn't take so kindly to Heritage taking their shifts.

That's how he ended up sitting on a park bench one night staring at the large free-standing weathervane that the Weathervanes used as their stage. If he went with the flow and did nothing drastic, he would spend much of his life there, performing and practicing. He hated this place. Ever since he could remember, he was expected to take his father's spot. No one ever asked him what he wanted.

He knew all too well why every one of Kalmin's sons had aban-

doned him. Heritage might have coveted the opportunity to be a chorus cat if it hadn't been expected of him, or if he had any genuine talent at singing. Brownie had genuine talent at singing. But he was also prone to do drastic things. Heritage was jealous of Brownie's talent. He also suspected that if Brownie had claws, Kalmin would have treated Brownie more like a proper son than he had treated Heritage. That stung.

Well, Brownie wasn't a problem anymore. He had tried to return to the warren the night after Heritage was brought back. Kalmin gave him the news that he was a tom and sent him on his way.

As Heritage continued his patrol, he recognized a familiar scent. It was Brownie. He was looking wet and miserable.

"I knew you'd come back," Heritage said, hopping out from behind a bush, hoping to startle his old friend. It didn't work. "Thank you for helping me the other night on the stage."

They rubbed heads. It was strange to see Brownie. Heritage had spent the previous twenty-four hours coming to the realization that they would not see each other again. This conversation felt like a memory as it was happening.

"I'm a tom, now," Heritage said. "I'm on patrol. I think I'm going to have to ask you to move on."

Heritage felt himself emotionally distancing himself from Brownie with every rote response he gave.

Harden your heart, Heritage.

That's what his dad had said. Heritage did his best to get through the rest of the conversation without getting emotional. But Brownie had to ask the question that Heritage desperately wanted to answer differently.

"Why don't you come with me?" Brownie asked.

Each rain drop that hit Heritage felt magnified. He went over his excuses in his head. As he did, he realized they were his father's excuses. Heritage didn't have any excuses of his own, just an over-abundance of guilt.

"I can't leave my family. I'm their last chance at a good life," he said.

"But that's not what *you* want," Brownie read from Heritage's mind.

Heritage finally lost his temper. He had to cut ties with Brownie before he gave in.

"How do you know? You can't understand the pressure I'm under. You don't have a family to think about."

Heritage saw something break behind Brownie's eyes, and he was instantly sorry for what he said, but he couldn't take it back.

"I have a mother somewhere," Brownie whispered.

Heritage wanted nothing more than to go on some grand adventure with Brownie to find his mother, but he was a tom now.

"I didn't mean it that way," he began.

Brownie just stared at him.

"Goodbye, tom," Brownie said.

He walked away.

Heritage was free of his last temptation to defy his father.

The rain still fell.

Life would still go on.

Harden your heart, Heritage.