

# THE CHORUS

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

RELICTOWN  
BOOK ONE

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THE CHORUS

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## BROWNIE

“*I* just can’t do it,” Brownie said.

He looked up at Heritage, who balanced on the top of the fence, ready to go. They had to leave soon if they were going to get to the show on time. The sun was already down, and they were still stuck inside the fence. Well, Brownie was anyway. Any *normal* cat could climb up and over it without thinking.

“I need some help here,” Brownie said. He backed out of the small hole. Just a few short months ago, Brownie had easily fit through that small hole that went under the fence. But Brownie was a growing kit, and now the hole had to be enlarged if he was ever going to get out of this yard.

“I’ll take another turn,” Hattie said. The little orange and white kit positioned herself in the hole and started digging. Brownie had to move back to avoid the clumps of dirt flying from Hattie’s paws.

“Come on,” Heritage called. He was perched on the top of the fence, looking out for any movement from the shed. Brownie could see Heritage’s silhouette, ears flicking in impatience.

“We’re gonna get caught before we even get going,” he moaned.

Hattie stopped digging and stuck her head out of the hole.

"Then why don't you come down here and help, little brother," she said.

"We're the same age," Heritage said. With an audible huff, he jumped down and took a turn enlarging the hole.

Brownie could really only stand there and watch. As a kit with no claws, Brownie was at a severe disadvantage in most situations that involved acting like a cat. He had to rely on others for almost everything, from food to protection. He couldn't even really help enlarge the hole he needed to escape the yard. Without claws, he couldn't break up the ground.

Brownie felt worthless. It was a feeling he was beginning to accept, and that scared him.

"Try it now," Heritage said. He backed out of the hole and licked the dirt off of his claws.

Brownie cautiously lowered his front paws and head into the hole. It looked just big enough to fit through. Pushing his way through, he felt the bottom of the fence scrape his back. A few wiggles, though, and he popped out the other side.

"I made it," he called into the hole. "Thanks, Hattie."

"No problem," she called.

"Let's go," Heritage said as he leapt over the fence with ease, landing next to Brownie. "Before someone spots us."

Brownie batted at him with a clawless paw. Heritage feigned injury, performing a quick roll, then jumped up. He leapt to the top of the fence again to talk to his sister.

"Okay, Hattie. We're going. You remember your lines?"

"When mom asks where you are, I tell her you're practicing your stalking out in the yard."

"What will you tell her about me?" Brownie called into the hole.

"She won't ask about you," Hattie's voice came back. Brownie's ears dropped and his heart beat harder for a second.

"She won't ask about either of you," Hattie called. "She'll probably be too busy having more kits today. Stay safe."

Heritage jumped down and batted Brownie with his paw.

"Come on," he said. "Time to see your first chorus."



They traveled in silence for a bit. Two kits, one brown and one orange, cutting across lawns, and darting across roads, on the lookout for adventure. Brownie's heart was beating as fast as his tail was wagging. They were on their way to see a chorus. Not just any chorus, though. One of the *Eight Great Cat Choruses* of the town. And not just one of the Eight Great Cat Choruses, they were on their way to see the *best* chorus in town, the Clowder.

Brownie noticed Heritage was choosing the easiest path for him with minimal climbing. Under most circumstances, Brownie would have resented this kind of move, but today he was too excited.

"I *have* seen a chorus before," Brownie said matter-of-factly, when they slowed down a bit to catch their breath. "Remember, I traveled with the Wanderlings. That's how I got here."

"Uncle Wendale's outfit isn't a real chorus," Heritage huffed. "They're just a traveling show. Real chorus cats have real responsibilities."

"It seemed real to me," Brownie said. He sprawled in the cool, wet grass, remembering his travels with Wendale and the Wanderlings. After a while, they let Brownie practice with them. One night, they even let him perform with them. There were only a few cats in the audience, and they didn't appear very engaged. Wendale made Brownie promise never to speak of it to any cat in the colony because it violated chorus rules. Brownie was sure that night was a disappointment to every member of the Wanderlings, but it was also the night Brownie fell in love with the chorus life and performing. On stage, it didn't matter if you didn't have claws. It was the only time since the humans took his claws that he truly felt like a regular cat. That all seemed like a long time ago, but it couldn't have been more than a few months.

"You were just a kit," Heritage said. He pawed at Brownie to get

him up.

"Still am," Brownie said. "So are you, for a little while anyway."

He jumped at Heritage, and they wrestled for a few seconds. He could feel Heritage holding back his claws. Brownie was sick of being treated differently. He disengaged.

"Let's go," he said.



Brownie loved the cat choruses. His dream was to one day be a member of one of the Eight Great Cat Choruses in the town. He gained most of his information about the various choruses from listening to the mollies gossip in the warren.

When Brownie first arrived in the town, he was a declawed, former domestic kit, who had fallen in with the Wanderlings. During his journey, Brownie saw them perform many times and even took part in their practice sessions. He quickly grew to love both the performance and the bonds between the performers.

The leader of the Wanderlings, an orange cat named Wendale, dropped Brownie off at his brother's warren. Wendale's brother, Kalmin, was the leader of the Weathervanes, the local chorus. That meant he was responsible for the safety of the various warrens throughout the territory. Each warren housed the pregnant mollies, and mollies with kits. Brownie was placed in the warren with Kalmin's mate Emmalina and was being cared for as one of their current litter, which comprised Heritage and Hattie. The warren itself was a large, abandoned shed in a fenced yard. The grass in the lawn was taller than Brownie, which led to many fun days of practicing stalking with Heritage, Hattie, and the other kits in the warren.

Brownie could tell Emmalina resented this added responsibility, and a mutual dislike for each other was present under the surface. Emmalina was a gossip, though, and Brownie liked that for selfish reasons. The mollies talked for hours about the different choruses

and their favorite toms in each one. Brownie learned the current rosters of most of the choruses and the physical traits of many of the key performers. The top of his list to see was the Clowder, and that's where he and Heritage were heading. As he ran to keep up with Heritage, he kept repeating the names of the toms on the Clowder to himself.

*Pavaroni, Darger, Taj, Meadow, The Closer.*

*Pavaroni, Darger, Taj, Meadow, The Closer.*

On a normal night, he and Heritage would play chorus out in the yard. They used the rusted table on the patio for a stage and the other kits in the warren would sit in awe at the wondrous sights and sounds of the great Brownie and Heritage. Soon, though, they would be in the presence of these toms he had heard so much about over the last few months. He couldn't wait.

It was a clear night. They stopped for a drink in a small pond behind a group of houses. The ducks swimming in the pond eyed them as they drank, but didn't bother them otherwise.

"That could be us someday," Brownie said. He was getting excited. As they traveled closer to Clowder territory, Brownie noticed the houses were getting bigger, and the lawns were getting nicer and full of more landscaping.

"Can't swim," Heritage said.

"I was talking about being in a chorus," Brownie said. He stood up and stretched his four legs, ready to be off again.

"I know. You're always talking about being in a chorus," Heritage said. He was still looking at the ducks.

Brownie did a quick turn and pose move in front of him.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe we'll be in the same chorus."

"I'll be on the Weathervanes," Heritage said. He was still looking past Brownie. "I don't have a choice."

"You're lucky," Brownie said.

"You're crazy," Heritage said. He finally turned to face Brownie, but he said nothing. He stood up, took one last look at the ducks, and started moving again. Brownie had to rush to keep up.

"Not crazy," Brownie said as they ran. "I bet lots of Weathervane cats would kill to get your spot."

"My *spot* is a legacy spot," Heritage said. "You know this. Dad's past his prime. I get the first shot at his position. As long as I'm not terrible, they have to accept me. That way, Dad and Mom can keep the warren, and they won't be *thrown out into the wild*, like they always say."

"Yeah, but still, it's a spot in one of the Eight Great," Brownie said. He may as well have been talking to himself. Heritage wanted a life of adventure, not to be tied down to a life he didn't want. But, it was up to him to keep the family spot on the chorus. Emmalina was due to have her kits any day now, but Kalmin was already past the normal age for a chorus cat. He didn't have time to wait for one of those kits to grow up and take his spot. Heritage was their family's last hope to uphold their social standing past Kalmin's retirement.

Brownie wished he could change places with Heritage.

Soon they passed into Clowder territory. The scent markers changed. This made Brownie feel uneasy and unsafe. He could tell that Heritage sensed the change too. Both kits continued on with their tails and ears flattened.

"Are we safe?" Brownie asked.

"Sure," Heritage said. "I think so. What threat could two kits possibly be?"

Brownie tackled Heritage. They rolled in the short grass that smelled like it was recently cut.

"What was that?" Heritage asked.

"I just thought maybe we should get some of the local scent on us," Brownie said. "That is what the Wanderlings do when they enter a new territory. Sometimes it helps to blend in."

"Good idea," Heritage said. They rolled on the grass together.

Something suddenly bathed them in light. Both kits sprung up and darted off. A human with a flashlight gave a halfhearted chase until he reached the end of his yard.



"I don't think it's other cats we have to worry about," Heritage said as they ran. "Humans in this territory are quicker to call other humans with nets and cages than in Weathervane."

Brownie gave him a look that said he didn't quite believe his friend.

"That's what Dad always says, anyway," Heritage said.

"You're already such a protector," Brownie said.

"Shut up."

They traveled in silence again.



Suddenly, Heritage stopped. Brownie stopped too. He sat on the sidewalk and watched Heritage get his bearings. He licked his white paw while he waited. Brownie liked his white paw. It reminded him of his mother. But tonight was about fun. He tucked the sadness away, and strained to see if he could hear the sounds of the Clowder performing in the distance.

"Do you really know the way?" Brownie asked. He was getting anxious and didn't want to miss a note of the performance.

"Of course," Heritage said. "Dad took me here a few weeks before you moved in. I think the park is near those dark towers." Heritage moved his head to show what he was talking about.

Brownie looked. There they were. Those dark towers always made Brownie uneasy. They were all over the town but were in no other town that Brownie visited on his journey with the Wanderlings. They were skinny, like other towers in town, but each was topped by a large imposing black sphere. Brownie always felt like the towers were the eyes of some imaginary monster. If he stared at them for too long, he got a headache. He ignored them as much as possible.

"Let's go then," Brownie said.

"After you," Heritage said. With the promise of a great night inching closer with every step, Brownie took the lead.



As they approached the park, they saw a lot more cats milling around. Most of them were in small groups headed the same direction as Brownie and Heritage. They slowed their pace down to a walk to blend in as they passed under the large arches with human letters on them. Brownie looked up as they passed. There were a few cats hanging out on top of the arches. The places a cat with claws could negotiate themselves constantly amazed Brownie.

"Keep your eyes out for members of other choruses," Heritage said. "They all like to keep up with each other. I spotted Pavaroni himself at the Weathervanes' last performance."

"Okay," Brownie said. "I'll look."

He scanned the cats around him and didn't see anyone he recognized from the descriptions of the chorus cats he learned from listening to the the mollies. Or did he? He looked back, near the arches at the entrance to the park. The street lights were brighter there. Brownie thought he saw a line of almost identical yellow tiger-striped cats walking together in the crowd.

He head-butted Heritage and flicked his head toward the yellow cats.

"The Yellowtons?" he asked.

"Yep," Heritage said. "Dad took me to their show last week. Talk about old-fashioned."

"Well," Brownie said. "They are the oldest of the Eight Great."

"You learned that from *me*."

"I wish Kalmin would take me to the shows too," Brownie said.

"No way he'd do that," Heritage said. That stung Brownie. It looked like Heritage caught on because he added. "To him, it's all business, and getting me ready to take over. It wasn't like a fun time out with Dad or anything."

"I guess. Do you see anyone else from a chorus?"

Heritage gave the crowd another scan.

"No, and that's a good thing, I guess. We need to keep out of

sight. Even if we don't get in trouble tonight, if we're recognized, word could get back to the warren. You know how those old mollies gossip."

"No," Brownie lied. "I've never heard of that." He rolled his eyes, and Heritage laughed.



The park that held the Clowder stage was beautiful. There was a winding stone path that branched off in many directions, with large strips of flowers on either side. Most of the flowers were closed up for the night, but Brownie could still smell them. There were no flowers inside the fence where Brownie had spent the last few months, so even this small touch seemed decadent to the small kit.

On one side of the path were pavilions with long wooden picnic tables. Many cats were hanging out on these tables, talking and enjoying the clear, crisp evening. On the other side of the path were large metal structures for humans to climb.

"For humans to pretend to be cats," Wendale had told Brownie when they encountered similar structures in other towns.

"Do we pretend to be humans?" Brownie had asked. In recent experience, Brownie had been ripped away from his mother, had his claws taken, and had found himself in a family of humans. He did not have any contact with other cats. Brownie wasn't sure if he was supposed to mimic their behavior, or listen to his instinct.

"Don't know," Wendale had said. "Never gave humans much thought. What's the point?"

Brownie couldn't argue with that. He was in an ocean of cats now, but he was still apprehensive. They headed down the middle path to the stage that was at the far end of the park.

"Do you think they've found us out?" he asked Heritage.

Heritage scanned the crowd of cats.

"No," he whispered. "I think we're okay. I don't see any cats I

recognize from Weathervane.”

“I mean, do you think your mom or dad noticed we aren’t in the yard playing yet?”

Heritage stopped to think. He scratched behind one ear. Brownie noticed he did this often when he was nervous.

“I don’t know. Dad’s probably sleeping. He had day patrol yesterday. Mom’s so ready to have those kits, I don’t see her going outside to look for us. She’ll just ask Hattie, and Hattie will tell mom what we told her to.”



Brownie got a good look at the Clowder stage as they approached it. The entire structure was built from stone. There was a raised platform set inside a large half shell. A pair of large white columns supported the shell on either side of the stage. This structure was enormous. In front of the stage, a field of stone benches were slowly being filled by residents of the Clowder territory, all waiting eagerly for the evening’s entertainment to begin.

Moving toward the stage, Brownie noticed that all the tails of the cats sitting on the stone benches seemed to be subtly wagging at the same rate. Brownie marveled that the singing of a handful of cats could be of such interest to the entire colony. Someday, Brownie would be that important. It wouldn’t matter then if he didn’t have any claws. Everyone would love him.

“Where should we sit?” he asked.

“As close to the front as we can,” Heritage whispered. “Dad always says the proper measure of a chorus is how the mollies react to the performance. He told me to always try to sit as close to them as you can. That way you might learn something you wouldn’t have learned otherwise.”

“So we’re sitting with the *mollies*?” Brownie whispered back.

“And what’s so bad about sitting with the mollies?” a female voice asked from behind them.

## THE CLOWDER

They turned to see a white kit about their age following them close enough that they should have noticed. Brownie looked again. She was not entirely white. She had a calico tail, black and brown splotches mixed with the white. Brownie looked to Heritage for support.

"I *said*," the kit repeated. "What's so bad about sitting with the mollies?"

"Nothing," Heritage said. "If you're a girl. We're here to see the show. Not to listen to molly gossip."

The white kit got so close to Heritage, Brownie thought they might touch noses.

"It sounds like we have a couple of Weathervane spies," she said exaggeratedly. That made the hair on Brownie's back stand up. How did she know where they were from? Was it that obvious?

"Brownie," Heritage said, still eye to eye with the white kit. "This is Bacia. Pavaroni's daughter."

Bacia broke eye contact with Heritage and nodded to Brownie.

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "Are you one of Kalmin's sons? You don't really look the part. Too much brown, not enough orange."

"He's a friend," Heritage said, getting her attention back. "Shouldn't you be sitting with your mom and the rest of the mollies?"

"They're right over there," she said, flicking her ears toward the very front rows. "But why are you here, and where is your dad?"

Heritage held his chin up and pranced around Bacia.

"We're here alone," he said. "I do this all the time."

"You mean, you two snuck out of whatever passes for a warren in Weathervane territory and somehow made your way here to see the greatest performance in town," she said. "For now."

"What do you mean, *for now*?" Heritage asked. Brownie was thinking the same thing, but he was too nervous to get into the conversation. He was afraid that some cat would decide to get a bunch of other cats together to throw them out. Brownie wanted to see the show much more than argue with this kit.

"I mean, for now," Bacia whispered. "Because soon, the Clowder's going to be an all molly chorus." She did a little twirl and beamed at the shock on Heritage and Brownie's faces.

"What?!" they both exclaimed.

"And I'm going to be the leader," she continued. "We have it all worked out. One night, we'll challenge the chorus and dazzle everyone with our awesomeness. The mollies will have no choice but to vote us in unanimously."

Brownie had heard of *the challenge* before. After each performance, the chorus issues a challenge for any other group of cats to entertain the audience as well as they just did. If the mollies liked them better, they would become the new chorus for the territory.

Brownie had heard a few stories where the challenge was accepted, but no stories where it was successful. The most powerful mollies in a territory were usually the mates of the current chorus. The challenge seemed to be a relic of ritual that hadn't yet faded away into obscurity.

Heritage laughed. Brownie thought he was faking it when Heritage rolled on the ground, but he wasn't.

"It's *not* funny," Bacia said. Her ears went back and her calico tail stopped playfully wagging.

"Yes, it is," Heritage said between gasps. He regained his composure and stood up.

"Everyone wants to be in a chorus..." He stopped.

"*Except me,*" Brownie could hear Heritage continue in his head.

"Except your brothers?" Bacia cocked her head and twitched the end of her calico tail.

Brownie wondered how Heritage would take this. It's true that all of Kalmin's other sons ran away rather than submit to choral tutelage under their father. Brownie had heard many whispered jokes about it in the Weathervane warren from various mollies. He did not realize that a kit in a different territory would know the troubles of Heritage's family. If Bacia knew this personal fact and used it as a joke, Brownie figured it must be public knowledge, joked about by cats who would never even meet the principal players in the story.

Did Heritage understand this? Brownie saw a flash of hatred in Heritage's eyes when Bacia made her comment. Just like that, though, the anger dissipated. Heritage took a quick breath and changed the subject. That impressed Brownie.

"At least *I'll* be on a chorus someday," he said. "My dad has taken me to see almost every chorus in town."

"Me too," Bacia said. "The Yardies?"

"Yep. Yellowtons?"

"Twice. They're here tonight to see Daddy's chorus."

"Japers?"

Heritage looked away.

"Not all the choruses then," she said. "That's a shame. The Japers are the best chorus in town. I like them even better than Daddy's stuffy old chorus."

"Weren't you scared of... you know... something happening?" Heritage asked.

"What?" Bacia asked.

If Brownie knew what Heritage meant, Bacia surely knew. It was something usually only talked about by the cats afflicted with it. It was rude for normal cats to talk about such an issue.

"You know... because of... the..." Heritage stammered.

*The Pull.*

Suddenly, the crowd grew completely silent. Brownie saw that they were the only three cats not sitting. The Clowder was coming out onto the stage. The show was beginning.

"Gotta go," Bacia said with a wink. She quickly trotted to the front row and jumped up on the bench for a seat next to her mother.

Brownie nudged Heritage with his head.

"Let's find a spot," he said. "The show's starting."



The spot they found was on one of the stone benches just behind the group of benches occupied by the Clowder mollies. Brownie spotted Bacia's calico tail wagging in the front row, right next to a larger calico cat, who was probably her mother.

Brownie looked toward the stage. The Clowder cats lined up across the back, in shadow. There was something strange about their silhouettes though.

"Here we go," Heritage whispered.

"There's only four," Brownie whispered back. "Who's missing?"

There were always five cats in a chorus. Brownie wasn't sure if it was a rule or a tradition, but it was a fact. Heritage leaned his head over to Brownie.

"Let's see," he said. "Pavaroni is the fat one. Taj is the scrappy one next to him. The Closer is the tiny one on the right, and that creepy looking one on the other side is Meadow. So Darger is missing. I wonder what happened."

"Me too," Brownie whispered.



Cats sitting around Brownie and Heritage started hissing quietly at them.

"We'd better shut up," Heritage whispered. He straightened back up.



Pavaroni, Bacia's father and the leader of the Clowder, lumbered up to the front of the stage and sat. He was one of the largest cats Brownie had ever seen, an enormous mass of tan and dark brown fur elegantly groomed. Not a whisker out of place on this tom.

"I'm afraid our little show will be shorter and a lot sadder tonight," he boomed. Pavaroni's voice was smooth and deep. Brownie realized that the structure of the half shell that covered the stage was acting as an amplifier. Brownie could feel the sound waves of Pavaroni's voice bouncing off the sides of the large shell and being directed forward, toward the audience.

"As you know, poor Darger is not with us anymore. An unfortunate accident is waiting around the corner for all cats. Darger confronted his and was bested by it. Few can stand against a car..."

Pavaroni's voice cracked when he said the word car, and he stopped for a second to compose himself.

"After such a fall..." Pavaroni stopped again, clearly in pain.

Brownie heard whispers from cats around him. From what he could make out, Darger was attempting to court a domestic cat in a third-floor window by climbing an adjacent tree and singing a bit of one of his songs, when a boot thrown from the same window connected with his head and sent him crashing down into the road, where a passing car ran him over.

The way the cat whispered *domestic* made the story sound scandalous. Many whispers opined that this *domestic* must have been really something to look at because colony cats don't usually associate with them on principle.

*Well, I'm a domestic cat and have the paws to prove it. I had better watch myself.*

Pavaroni seemed to get ahold of himself.

"Anyway, Darger was a friend, a member of the Clowder, and a protector of this territory. He will be missed."

Pavaroni and the other members of the Clowder behind him all bowed their heads. Everyone in the audience also bowed their heads, including Brownie and Heritage, who didn't want to seem out of place.

"We will do our best to entertain you tonight," Pavaroni continued. "And after our short performance, we will have tryouts for Darger's replacement. Any cat in attendance may try out, but as you know, our lovely mollies will make the final decision." With a bit of effort, Pavaroni lifted one of his front paws and gestured toward the front rows where the mollies sat.

"All right," Pavaroni said in a voice that sounded like it was trying to be festive. "On with the show!"



The first cat to step forward was Taj. He was a small cat with very short, unhealthy looking, straw-colored fur. Nevertheless, he exuded confidence as he stepped up to the front of the stage. He bowed his head for a few seconds, then he sang.

Not every cat can sing. In fact, Brownie had only met a few that could do more than screech and howl. The Wanderlings were all very good at singing, but none of the cats in the audiences Brownie experienced, in any of the towns, had a cat that could even possibly sing along. Brownie's mother sang to him when he was tiny and he learned to sing back to her just before the humans took him. He remembered the feeling of hearing her voice with his ears and through his whiskers. Every time he heard a really great cat singer, like Finbar in the Wanderlings, Brownie felt the same warm, encompassing glow he felt coming from his mother. Taj's

voice was one of those rare voices that brought back those good feelings.

He did not know how such a pure, confident voice came from such a small cat. Taj only moved a little during his performance, but he sang with such emotion and heart. Brownie looked at the mollies and saw them all swaying in unison to Taj's vocals.

Next up was Pavaroni. He lumbered back up to the front of the stage after Taj retreated and belted out songs that Brownie couldn't understand the words to. His voice was deep and his style of singing was full of vibrato.

"I can't understand him," Brownie whispered to Heritage.

"He's singing in a different language," Heritage whispered. "Or he's just making it up as he goes along. Either way, Dad says it's sophisticated."

"Maybe we should make up our own singing language," Brownie whispered back.

"It couldn't hurt," Heritage said, thoughtfully.

Brownie observed the body language of the mollies and found that the older ones were leaning forward, taking in every note of Pavaroni's strange singing. The younger mollies, though, were restless and whispering to each other. It appeared that Pavaroni's appeal came with age.

Pavaroni retreated from the stage after a standing ovation from half of the mollies. Meadow stepped forward, a sleek white cat with a long body and legs. He was a physically striking cat, but Brownie couldn't stop looking at his mismatched eyes. Meadow's right eye was blue. His other eye was yellow.

Just as he opened his mouth to sing, a molly in the audience started whooping and cheering for him. Meadow smiled, nodded down to the molly and said something to her that Brownie couldn't make out. She stopped. Meadow sang.

Meadow's performance was the opposite of Pavaroni. He was all movement and little singing talent. The young mollies, however, went crazy for it. They were all screaming for most of the perfor-

mance. The older mollies appeared uninterested. Brownie couldn't make out much of Meadow's performance over the screaming, but from what he had heard, he didn't think he was missing much.

After Meadow retreated, the stage remained empty for a few minutes. Brownie figured that this was when Darger would have taken his turn. After an uncomfortably long time, The Closer slowly walked up to the front of the stage. He was a small tiger striped cat, not much bigger than a kit, with large saucer shaped eyes.

The Closer only sang one song, but there wasn't a dry eye in the crowd when he finished. His voice was high and pure. His words told of a cycle of love and heartbreak. Brownie found himself tearing up near the end. He looked over at Heritage and saw him pretending to groom around his eyes. The Closer finished his song and closed his eyes. The screeching and howling from the audience rivaled the response Meadow had elicited.

Brownie was very impressed with the Clowder. He had, of course, heard all the talk about how great they were, but this performance was so much more than he was expecting. The Wanderlings, in comparison, seemed like amateurs. Maybe that's why they were just a traveling chorus. Brownie wondered what kind of performer Darger had been. After the howling died down, all four members of the Clowder came back out to the front of the stage for another round of howling.

"Thank you very much," Pavaroni said after the howling died down again. "And thank you to the grand mollies. We are here by your grace to protect and entertain this great territory. We are the Clowder!"

More howling. Pavaroni continued.

"Before we start the auditions for poor Darger's replacement, we issue the ritual challenge. If any group of toms feel they can win the hearts of our mollies and protect this territory more securely than us, please come up now and prove your worth to us all."

As expected, no group of cats came forth.

"Excellent," Taj said. "We will now start the auditions. If you would like to try out, please line up along the back of the stage. We will call you forward one at a time. One song each. Our wonderful mollies have the ultimate choice." Taj gave the mollies an exaggerated wink. The crowd predictably chuckled.

The members of the Clowder then jumped down from the stage and found seats on the front benches next to their mollies. Brownie saw Pavaroni sitting right next to Bacia.

A group of about a half dozen cats lined up at the back of the stage.

"What a group," Heritage whispered. "This is where the fun begins."

"They all look pretty nervous," Brownie said.

"Wouldn't you be nervous after that performance?" Heritage asked. "They're way better than dad's chorus."

"What was Darger like?" Brownie asked.

"Shhhhhhhh," Heritage hissed, motioning to the stage where the first contestant was stepping up to sing. He was a big tabby, and he swaggered up with no hesitation, and confidently sat down in front of the mollies and the Clowder.

"Name," Taj called.

The big tabby opened his mouth, and his whole body jerked. A hairball fell out of his mouth and hit the stage with a sad, wet plop. The crowd went wild.

The big tabby looked at the hairball for a few seconds. It looked to Brownie like he was trying to will it back into his mouth. When he grew aware of the sounds of the crowd, he leapt off the stage and started running. The crowd went wild again.

When Brownie caught his breath a bit and looked back to the stage, he saw one of the other contestants sneaking away down the back stairs.

Heritage was one of the last cats to compose himself. Some mollies looked back to see what was going on. Brownie saw Bacia looking at them. She pawed at her father. Brownie saw the back of

Pavaroni lean over to hear whatever Bacia was whispering in his ear.

The next cat up was named Scooter. He was a lanky, tan tiger striped tom. He got the same enthusiastic greeting from the same molly as Meadow. Scooter sang the same song Taj had performed earlier, but he was nowhere near as talented as the chorus tom. Only one molly applauded Scooter's performance.

Two more cats came and went. Both were clearly nervous. Neither were very good.

Every contestant seemed to be flustered by the hairball still sitting on the front of the stage. Brownie wove a story in his head about the magical hairball that sucked out the talent from anyone who tried to upstage it.

"Name," Taj called to the last contestant.

"Milton," the tom said. He had a uniform tan coat. Before he sat down, he made a show of swinging his abnormally large, thick tail back and forth in front of the mollies. Brownie heard quite a few gasps.

Milton was the best of the bunch. He sang a song Brownie knew from his travels with the Wanderlings. He did not look down at the hairball even once. It seemed the curse of the hairball was about to be broken. When Milton was halfway through his song, he stood up and pranced back and forth, singing the final chorus and hypnotizing the audience with his large swinging tail. Brownie thought the tactic was tacky, but he had to admit, it was effective.

After the howling died down, Milton retreated to the back of the stage with the rest of the contestants. Pavaroni stood up and turned to face the audience.

"I believe we have one final contestant before the mollies vote on our new chorus member," he said, looking directly at Brownie and Heritage. Brownie felt his stomach drop.

"It has come to my attention that we have a future Weathervane member in our midst tonight. Heritage, son of Kalmin, if you

would be so kind as to step up and show us the brilliant future of the Weathervanes, we would be in your debt."

Brownie could see Bacia peeking around her large father, smiling at them. She winked at Heritage. Brownie looked over at Heritage, who was trying to shrink down into the stone bench they were sitting on.

"Who knows?" Pavaroni said. "Maybe the mollies will vote you into the Clowder. What a story to tell old Kalmin, huh?"

"Come on up," he continued.

Heritage remained frozen in place.

"I insist."

Bacia started chanting Heritage's name. Soon, the entire crowd was chanting.

"Her-i-tage! Her-i-tage! Her-i-tage!"

"Good luck," Brownie whispered to him. "You can do this."

Heritage slid down from the stone bench and made his way down the center aisle.

"Her-i-tage! Her-i-tage! Her-i-tage!"

The crowd was in a frenzy. Brownie felt bad for Heritage, but there was nothing he could do at the moment but wait to see what happened.

Heritage jumped on stage, carefully avoiding the cursed hair-ball. He took a seat and waited for the crowd to die down.

## HERITAGE

“*A*t your pleasure,” Pavaroni said.  
Brownie saw Heritage take a deep breath. Then he took another.

“Get going,” Taj yelled. “Or are you planning to run away like every one of your brothers?”

Heritage’s eyes flared. Then he took a deep breath and started singing.

He wasn’t very good. Heritage sang one of the traditional songs in the Weathervanes’ repertoire. His voice was shaky, and he looked like he was about to pass out.

Then the catcalls began. Cats in the audience began hissing and yowling. Heritage was trembling now, barely able to keep singing.

Brownie had an idea. He had to act fast, while Heritage could still recover.

He jumped down from the bench he was sitting on and ran down the side of the benches toward the stage. When he got there, he found that the stage was too high for him to leap onto. He quickly circled behind the stage, looking for an easier way to gain access.

Then he saw it. There were stairs and a ramp behind the stage.



Brownie quickly vaulted up the ramp, and collided with something large and furry that knocked him off his feet.

"What do you think you're doing, kit?" Milton said. He had blocked Brownie's way with his large tail.

"Going to help," Brownie said. He stood back up and gave his body a quick shake.

The other contestants hanging around the back of the stage gathered around Brownie, forming a barrier.

"What can you do, kit?" Scooter said.

"Scrawny brat," another cat hissed.

Brownie closed his eyes and listened for Heritage. He sounded defeated, barely singing the last part of the song. Brownie took a deep breath and started singing with Heritage. The surprise of such a pure, practiced voice coming from such a little kit was enough to cause a few of the cats surrounding Brownie to momentarily lower their guard. Brownie used that split second to run past them and get to Heritage.

The look on Heritage's face when Brownie sat down next to him was pure gratitude. Together, they sang the last part of the song. From all their practices, Brownie knew that Heritage performed noticeably better when he was singing with another cat. When the last note died out, there was silence.

"Get that other kit off the stage," Taj screamed. "Who is that kit?"

"Wait," Pavaroni said. "Another song, please. For me."

Heritage looked at Brownie.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"Let's do this good," Brownie whispered back. "Your favorite one."

Heritage nodded. He tapped his front paw to establish their tempo. Brownie sat next to his best friend, took a deep breath, and sang with everything he had. The acoustics of the shell behind the stage amplified their voices to where he could feel them all throughout his body.

Heritage was singing better with each line. Brownie could feel

the confidence growing in him. He could also feel the energy of the audience. It surged with excitement. The cat calls became positive chants of “Her-i-tage! Her-i-tage!”. Some of the younger mollies even swayed with their rhythm.

Brownie was having the time of his life. He looked over at Heritage. Against all odds, it looked like Heritage was having a pretty good time too. The song ended. The applause was deafening. As they did in their practices, they stood up in unison and gave a small bow.

“Very good, little ones,” Pavaroni said. “Very good indeed. And who is your friend, Heritage? He was indeed born to sing. Not fully refined, but full of talent. Yes. Yes. Step forward and introduce yourself, young kit.”

This was it. Brownie was being recognized by one of the best singers in the colony. He couldn’t believe it. Maybe they would offer him the open spot on the Clowder. All of his dreams were about to come true.

Brownie leapt forward to introduce himself. He found himself off balance again, sliding toward the front edge of the stage. He had felt something wet and squishy when he landed that sent him sprawling. It was that cursed hairball.

If Brownie possessed claws, this wouldn’t have been an issue. He would have been able to stop himself from going over the edge of the stage. But that didn’t happen. He hit the ground hard, on his side, and lay stunned for a minute.

*So much for cats always landing on their feet.*

Immediately, there were cats all around him, checking him out. Taj was there. His scent was strangely artificial. Brownie only noticed it because it was so out of place. He was checking Brownie’s paws.

*Oh, no!*

“He has *no* claws,” Taj yelled. “He’s a *domestic!*”

“Get him!” a random cat yelled.

“For Darger!” another cat yelled.

The surrounding cats all lunged toward him with their backs arched. Their hissing and spitting competed with the flurry of batting claws for his immediate attention.

*I'm dead.*



“Wait!” screamed Heritage, who was still on the stage. All the cats around Brownie turned toward Heritage. Brownie wasted no time in bolting toward the park exit as fast as he could. By some miracle, he slipped out of the circle of cats closing in on him and felt the cool night air on his body. He could hear Heritage still yelling. It sounded like Pavaroni was yelling something too, but Brownie was in flight mode and could only concentrate on getting away.

As he approached the gates of the park, he realized he did not know where he was and had no idea where he could go to be safe. If he just took off in a random direction, he could easily be trapped in a dead end. He chanced a glance back and saw that he was further ahead of the crowd than he thought. Heritage and Pavaroni must have stalled them a bit.

That was good. Brownie needed to look like he left the park, but not actually leave it. He at least knew the basic layout of the park. Out in Clowder territory, he would be completely lost. So, just as he was about to go under the park arches, he turned a bit early and ran straight into the bushes that bordered the park, just inside the gate. He didn’t slow down at all. Either he fooled them, or he didn’t, but he had to get some place where they wouldn’t think to look for him. The only place he could think of was the open space under the ramp that lead up to the back of the stage.

Brownie tunneled through the bushes as fast as he could, following the perimeter of the park until he thought he was close to the back of the stage. He stopped for a second and stuck his head out. He was getting close. Most of the cats had dispersed. The mollies were still there, as were the members of the Clowder.

Heritage was there too, right between Taj and Meadow. Brownie didn't think they would actually hurt Heritage, but there was no way they were going to make it back home undetected. They were in big trouble. He saw a glint of an eye from the direction of the mollies and quickly stuck his head back into the bushes.

Brownie kept to the shadows and snuck into the small space under the ramp he had used a short time ago. This blocked his sight and most of the sounds coming from the stage area. Brownie planned to wait a bit and then see if he could somehow find Heritage and travel back with him. However, when the panic wore off, Brownie fell fast asleep.



When he woke up, it was daylight. Brownie hadn't seen daylight since he ran away from the human home. When he fell in with the Wanderlings, he had to adjust to the nocturnal life of a feral cat. He ventured out of his hiding place and into the park. There were humans sitting on benches and some of the smaller ones were crawling over metal structures, pretending to be cats.

Brownie was hungry and very thirsty. He quenched his thirst in one of the small ponds in the park, but as for food, Brownie did not know what to do. Without claws, he had never hunted for his own meals. At the warren, food was brought to him, either by Kalmin or one of the other Weathervane hunters. It was a perk of being taken care of by the leader of the chorus. Brownie did not know how he was going to survive. Of course, Heritage was not there waiting for him. In fact, he didn't see any other cats. There were some dogs, but they were more interested in what their humans were eating or throwing to them. There was no one left to help a little kit.

The sun was also boiling. Brownie slunk back to his hiding place, sad and lonely, and fell back asleep.



When he woke, it was night again. He tentatively stuck his head out and looked around. He sensed another cat was around, but he couldn't tell which direction the scent was coming from.

"Hello there, little one," a deep voice said from above him. Brownie looked up and hit his head on the top of the ramp.

"Ow," he winced.

Pavaroni dropped off the ramp. He dropped a dead mouse in front of Brownie.

"You've had quite a time of it lately," Pavaroni said. "And I don't think you've eaten in the last day."

Brownie quickly started eating.

"Thank you, sir," he said between bites. "How'd you...?"

"Just eat, little one," Pavaroni said. "My dear daughter, Bacia. You met her, yes? She saw you return last night. She was too scared to say anything about it to me until this evening. Lucky you were still here."

"Yeah, lucky," Brownie said, after he finished his meal. "I don't know what to do. I don't know the way back to the warren."

"I do," Pavaroni said. "I'll take you home, little one, on one condition."

Brownie waited. He was in no position to turn down anything at this point.

"I'd like to know where you came from, and how you learned to sing," Pavaroni pointed to Brownie's paws. "It's a shame you had those taken from you. With that voice, every chorus in the town would court you. A shame."

Brownie's ears drooped. The truth was finally spoken out loud. He had no chance of getting into any of the Eight Great Cat Choruses. He had always suspected that having no claws put him at a disadvantage, but to have it spoken out loud by a cat who would definitely know the situation broke something inside Brownie's chest.

"Yeah," he said. "A shame."



They walked through the park together. Brownie felt the eyes of every cat they passed. They must surely know that he was the *domestic* from the night before. He didn't think any of them would start anything since he was walking with Pavaroni, but he didn't want to test his luck by making eye contact with any of them. Instead, he looked down at his front paws as he walked. Brownie looked back at the stage as they passed in front of it. He didn't see the cursed hairball.

They walked back down the path with the flowers on either side. What smelled so sweet the night before almost made him choke now. He wondered what happened to Heritage, and what would happen to him when he got back to the warren.

Brown paw. White paw. Brown paw. White paw.

"See that building with the tall spires?" Pavaroni said. "We're going to turn left there."

Brownie noted it.

"If you are going to live in this colony in your state," Pavaroni nodded towards Brownie's clawless paws. "You are going to have to know the whole territory, and always have a safe place to hide. I will show you what I know on our way." They turned at the building Pavaroni had pointed out and made their way in silence for a while.

"Why are you helping me?" Brownie asked.

"It's my fault this whole thing between us and the Weathervanes started. I shouldn't have embarrassed Kalmin's son like that, and Taj and Meadow shouldn't have done what they did when they returned him."

"What happened?" Brownie asked.

"Here," Pavaroni said, stopping in front of a house with large bushes on either side of the front door. "Go under that bush on the right."

Brownie obeyed. He found a large depression hidden under the bush.

"I made that spot myself when I was a kit," came Pavaroni's voice from outside. "I don't think I'll ever fit in there again. Come on, little one, the night does not last forever."

They walked for a while in silence. Occasionally, Pavaroni would point out a landmark when they made a turn. Brownie thought it must be a struggle for Pavaroni to walk so far, being such an enormous cat. He could hear Pavaroni grunt every few steps, but didn't think it was polite to comment on it.

"When you sing, what are you singing?" Brownie asked.

"What?" Pavaroni said. Then he laughed.

"I sing in the tongue of my parents, who came from a faraway land. No one here can understand the words I sing, but to me they are beautiful. They are a way to keep the memory of my parents alive."

"I have a large family myself. Bacia, you have met. But I have many sons, and they all scheme and fight each other for the position I will leave behind when I retire from the Clowder. None of them are interested in carrying on the tradition of singing in my parents' beautiful tongue."

"Maybe Bacia will," Brownie suggested.

Pavaroni startled him with the volume of his laugh. They had to stop so Pavaroni could catch his breath.

"So, she's still talking nonsense, huh? And to strangers, no less."

"She wants you to be proud of her."

"Of course I'm proud of her," Pavaroni said. "She is my wonderful, precocious, little Bacia. In fact, I have just settled on a mate for her that any molly in the territory would be envious of."

"She's just a kit," Brownie said.

"Were you fooled by her size, or her attitude?" Pavaroni asked. "She is far from kittenhood and more than ready to join the ranks of our beautiful mollies."

Maybe Heritage would take some comfort in knowing that

Bacia would be just as miserable as a molly as Heritage would be as a chorus cat.

"When we cross this street," Pavaroni said. "We'll be in Weather-vane territory. Kalmin's warren is on the other side. I know the way, but I don't have any hiding places to show you, little one. You'll have to find those yourself."

They crossed the street.

"Milton got the open spot, didn't he?" Brownie asked.

"I thought that was obvious to everyone," Pavaroni said. "Except Candida, perhaps."

"Candida?"

"One of our wonderful mollies. Meadow's mother, in fact. Scooter is one of her other sons. It does not satisfy Candida to have only one mediocre son in our chorus. She wants to pack it with her offspring." Pavaroni chuckled. "I think she's the only one who knows that trick will not work. Our brilliant mollies are far too smart for that."

"We are almost at our destination," Pavaroni said. "And you have not kept your part of our bargain."

Brownie froze. What did he mean?

"You were to tell me where you came from and how you learned to sing."

"Oh, that. My mother used to sing to me when I was little. After I escaped from the humans who took me from her, I started traveling with the Wanderlings."

"Ah, Wendale's traveling experiment. I didn't know he and Relic were still at it," Pavaroni said. "Tell me, little one, have they established a chorus in any of the towns they have visited?"

"Not that I know of," Brownie said. "In fact, most of the cats in the other towns don't seem very impressed."

"Interesting," Pavaroni said. "Thank you, little one."

Brownie felt like he had just betrayed his friend Wendale, but he did not quite understand how.



"And Wendale just dropped you off at his brother's warren?" Pavaroni asked.

"That's about it," Brownie said.

"Thank you," Pavaroni said.

Brownie remained silent, still trying to figure out why Pavaroni was so interested in his story.

"For the song last night. It was beautiful. Life will not afford you another opportunity like that, I'm afraid. You were a good friend to help poor Heritage. I'm afraid he will not make such a great chorus cat."

"I think you're wrong."

"Is that your heart or your head talking, little one?" Pavaroni asked. "Some things you cannot pretend are something other than what they are. A cat is a cat. A dog is a dog. See?"

*I just see my friend.*



They stopped on a corner that Brownie thought he recognized from last night's journey with Heritage.

"This is where I leave you, little one," Pavaroni said. "You have been a pleasant traveling companion. Your warren is just down that street, on the left side, I believe. You can find your way from here, yes?"

"Yeah," Brownie said. He was dreading the return to the warren.

"Can you come with me to talk to Kalmin?" he chanced.

"After Taj and Meadow's performance there last night, I'm surprised I haven't been apprehended by any Weathervane toms yet and politely asked to leave their territory."

He leaned in close to Brownie.

"They have been tracking us since we entered their territory," he whispered. "I assume Kalmin has been notified about our errand."

"Will you be okay?" Brownie asked.

"Don't worry about me, little one," Pavaroni said. "You will have

enough troubles ahead of you. Honestly, a colony cat with no claws. You've got a hard life ahead of you, little one. I wish you luck."

"Thanks," Brownie said.

He watched Pavaroni turn around and stumble his way back the way they had come. It was time to face Kalmin and Emmalina.

Brownie extended senses as far as he could. He did not detect any cats watching him. Either they were very good, or they didn't register as any kind of threat the patrolling toms needed to monitor. They were probably shadowing Pavaroni back to Clowder territory, anyway.

Brownie slowly headed down the street toward the warren.

Brown paw. White paw. Brown paw. White paw.

When he got there, he didn't see the hole under the fence.

*I'm turned around. Where is the hole?*

Brownie started walking around the fence, looking for the hole.

Pretty soon, he had walked all the way around the house. He was back where he started. Then he saw it. Fresh, packed dirt where the hole had been. There was no going home for Brownie.

His ears flicked. Someone was watching him. He looked up and saw the silhouette of a cat sitting on top of the fence.