

Berry Brave – Part Two

This was it. One more step and he would be further from home than he had ever been. Berry stood quivering at the edge of the wide, flat path that the grumbling furious monsters raced along. This hard path marked the end of the tribe's territory, it was far too dangerous for anyone to cross. His parents had brought him here only once, and that was to show him what it was and to warn him to be careful in his avoidance of it. Dawn was just coming, and there were no monsters on the path. He had looked and he had listened and it seemed that now, right now, was the best time he was going to have to cross the wide, terrifying expanse. But he was having a hard time getting his paws to move.

It wasn't too late to go home. It would be easy to turn around. He wouldn't make it back before his para woke and found him missing, but he could easily find an excuse. There was always food to be gathered and he'd passed several bushes on his way here that would certainly suffice. The purple faife huddled in the patch of grass he'd found beside the path, staring at it and the open sky above. Even without a monster there was still the risk of a predator. He would have nowhere to hide out there. Cookie would have called him a sweetheart for this, but his para would tell him 'better safe than sweet' again and be glad he was home safe instead. Berry quivered all over, feeling like a leaf in a big wind. He still wanted to go home, he could still go home. No one would hold it against him, not Cookie, not Smoldering, not even Tack. Everyone had made a choice of some kind to be where they were. No one would blame Berry for any of it.

Except for Berry. He would blame himself.

His earstub twinged as he reached out a paw and placed it on the cool, firm surface, bringing with it the memory of the predator that nearly bit his head off again. Berry flattened under the familiar fear, trapped with one paw on the hard path and the rest of himself hidden in the brush. "I wanna go home," he whimpered, pulling his paw back so he could curl into a ball and hide his face. He knew the action was as pointless as it was childish but Berry couldn't help it. He shivered there for a moment, tempted again to simply turn and race back to the great tree. But if he did that, Tack would never see his parents again.

Every bit of his tiny body quivered as Berry uncoiled himself. It was just too awful. He might not be brave enough to be a Blue Guard but even a squeaky scaredy-faife like him knew that selfless courage could *not* be rewarded so cruelly. Tack deserved a chance to say goodbye. Smoldering and Cookie deserved to see their baby again. The new sibling, still unsprouted, deserved to have a family.

Berry bolted across the open expanse. He stumbled when he reached the rough ground on the other side, and tumbled into the bushes with a squeal of surprise. A spider's web tangled in his fur, and he bucked and clawed in terror as he tried to escape the sticky strands. Somehow the fact that he was outside his tribe's territory made everything horrifying. He hadn't been able to see the great tree for hours, and now he'd crossed the hard path. He was on his own, and that more than anything else struck fear into his heart. But he had come this far. He'd come further than he'd ever imagined he would. Further than he'd imagined he could. Breathing squeakily, he disentangled the sticky web from his fur and, with a good shake to try ridding himself of the sensation, the faife continued on his way.

The star Shura had given him as a guide was gone now, hidden by the bright warmth of the sun. Berry tried not to think of what his parents would think when they woke to find him gone. He hoped they would not blame Shura for not stopping him. He hoped they would not worry too much, though

he knew Plum would be beside herself until he got home. Berry didn't want to think about the part where he might not get home. Nervous, but determined, Berry put the road at his tail and pressed on. He was too scared to sleep, but was a good thing. He had a lot of ground to cover, he had to find the Blue Guardians with enough time to bring Tack back to say goodbye to his parents. Remembering one of Shura's tales of adventure, Berry let his instinctive desire to run and hide give him the energy to run through the unfamiliar woods. It was easier than trying to force himself to be calm, and running would bring him closer. Each step he took away from home was another step sooner to being safely tucked under the great tree with his para.

As frightened as he was Berry still felt exhaustion creeping into his legs and a heaviness starting in his eyelids. He hadn't been able to sleep since yesterday night, and he'd never traveled so much before in his life. His paws were wobbly when he stopped running at last, and Berry gave up on keeping straight from the hard path in an attempt to find a good place to hide long enough to nap. If he slept until night he could just use the star to align himself again so it wouldn't matter if he'd lost the monster trail.

Luckily, this patch of forest had the same sort of plants as his home forest did. It seemed that crossing territories didn't change as much as he'd felt like it would. Berry found a thorny plant that didn't smell like it belonged to anyone else. He dragged some of the early fallen leaves to pile against the thorny stem and burrowed to hide beneath them. As safe as he could make himself while alone and away from home, Berry fell into an exhausted sleep very quickly.

The haunting screech of an owl woke him with all his fur standing on end. Berry quivered and burrowed deeper into his leafy nest as he stared at the darkness above with wide eyes. He couldn't see the predator, but he knew it was there. The thing that scared him most was whether or not *it* knew *he* was there. Berry worked his way backwards until he was pressed completely flat against the thorny plant's stem, still blanketed by the yellowish leaves. The owl did not make another sound. That was worse than it being noisy. A quiet predator was a hungry one, he knew this. Every faife knew this. Noise didn't make a predator safe, but silence did make it even more dangerous.

He waited. His heart raced frantically as Berry tried to count the seconds from the screech until now. How long had it been? Was the owl still close by? Was it waiting for him to move? He couldn't see it, the trees still had too many leaves and there were too many patches of darkness that *could* be a waiting predator. Berry whimpered, then quickly covered his muzzle with his paws to stifle the sound. He could hide under the bush. He could wait until the sun came up, surely the owl would give up by then. But if he waited that long he might not find Tack with enough time left to say goodbye.

Berry stayed paralyzed in frightened indecision. It was important that he not waste the night. But it was also important to *not* die. *I'm sorry*, Berry thought pitifully as he hunkered down in his spot beneath the thorny bush, *So so sorry*. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to risk it. Berry just didn't dare move without knowing whether the predator was still there or not.

The night crept on as the young faife waited frozen in his shelter. Other noise stirred to life around him, but there was no sign of the owl. Finally, when a field mouse scurried through the undergrowth and surprised itself by almost running into an equally startled Berry, the faife dared to creep out. He'd wasted almost the entire night and all signs pointed to the owl being nowhere nearby. All that time lost for nothing but his silly fears. Trying to swallow around the guilt in his throat, Berry peered up through the branches to try to pick out the special star. He searched for a while, hoping he wasn't mixing it up with another one, then very carefully put it on his left and began to run again.

Nothing bad happened the rest of the night. Berry paused around dawn to sample some of the slightly wilting flowers he found, digging into them a bit found a little sweetness left. He drank from a small creek, wishing he'd thought to pack some sort of snack, and then forced himself to continue onward. He still had to find the Blue Guardians. He still had to give Tack the message. He had to.

That afternoon saw Berry dragging instead of running. He was tired and starting to wonder if he was even going the right way. If he'd picked the wrong star, all his efforts would be pointless. If he'd gotten himself turned around on the way, all his efforts would be pointless. They would also be pointless if he got eaten. Nothing had indicated to him that the third 'if' was especially likely, but it was an ever-present thought lingering and circling in the back of his mind. Berry focused on how much he cared about Smoldering and Cookie, and how important it was that Tack get to see his parents one more time, instead of letting himself whimper about how sore his paws were getting. He'd never traveled so much in his life. It was exhausting, and Berry added his physical exhaustion as yet another reason why he'd never be a Blue Guard. They traveled all the time. They traveled all over and fought frightening monsters and looked after all the tribes and clans instead of just their own. They were the bravest, strongest, and most admirable clan ever to exist. And, as Berry trudged around a toppled oak near the top of a low hill, he discovered that they were also the noisiest.

His ears perked forward, the hubbub of a large group ahead making his heart speed and lending knew strength to his flagging feet. It had to be them, it *had* to be. He trotted around the dead tree and, for the first time, he saw the clan he'd admired since he was too tiny for his tail. They were ranged out around a stump that was almost flat halfway down the other side of the hill. Three stood atop the stump and they seemed to be having a discussion of some kind about... zigzagging? He wasn't sure exactly, there was a little too much mixed noise for him to pick out the details from so far away. But it was definitely them. Each faife had some bit of blue adorning them. Many were scuffed or scarred, he spotted more than a few missing ears and horns. The big green faife on the log was missing a horn, and Berry thought he might faint when he saw the long blue cloak and noticed the monsterfang weapon fastened at her hip. Thyme. The founder of the Blue Guardians. The best warrior, bravest hero, most valiant faife ever to exist *ever*. Shura talked about her green leader in every story of her time with the clan.

He couldn't continue. All his fears and inadequacies swamped the young faife and he felt himself sink to his belly on the hillside. There they were, his heroes, and he was too afraid to speak to them. Of all his fears, this one was the most humiliating. Berry was sure they'd know how much of a coward he was. He was sure they'd notice how badly his paws hurt, how tight his chest was from his comparatively short journey. He was sure they'd know how he hid from an owl that wasn't there for half the night. They would *know*.

They would laugh at him.

It was this that almost made him turn back. Not the wide hard path of the human's roaring monsters. Not the strange lands away from his home. Not the darkness of the night, or the screech of the owl, and not his empty stomach. He didn't think he could survive the scorn of his heroes. But... Tack.

Berry crept tremblingly down the slope. He didn't want to, but he had to. It would be wrong not to finish his task. It would be so wrong to have come this far, to have come *so far*, only to give up and not let Tack know what had happened.

“U-uh... um... excuse me,” he squeaked, worming his way clumsily through the crowd. The Blue Guardians were all packed together, sitting hip-to-hip and all but standing on one another's tails. They barely budged as he tried to make his way through, clearly invested in the debate. He picked up pieces of it as he picked his way through the clusters. It sounded like they were deciding whether to double back for a second check or to press on for a wider safe-zone. Berry thought doubling back would be a good idea, things weren't completely safe yet, but he kept that thought to himself. He was sure it could be a lot worse without the Blue Guardians doing their jobs. His tribe wasn't the only one that needed protecting after all. How selfish could he be?

Someone stepped on his tail and Berry shot sideways with a frightened squeal. The faife who'd trod on him wasn't looking at him. She was laughing and playfully shoved the faife beside her who, it seemed, had shoved her first. Berry glanced apprehensively at the yellow faife he'd just run into just in time to get a flick on the nose. He yipped and stepped hastily back with a “Sorry!”, only to tread onto another faife's paws.

“Sit still,” the red faife he'd stepped on grumbled, grabbed Berry by the tail and dragging him to sit beside him. “Honestly, this is *important* so pay-” The faife stopped, frowning at Berry. Berry shrank into a quivering huddle, still ensnared by the red faife's grip on his tail. “Where's your blue?”

“I-I'm not- I just- I n-need to talk to-” Berry stammered, and bit his tongue. With a whimpered, “Excuse me,” he squirmed himself out of the red faife's grip, too embarrassed to look back at the cluster he'd just shouldered and stepped on. His nose still stung from the yellow faife's flick, that had almost *hurt*.

This was just as bad as he'd imagined and he hadn't even given Tack the message yet. Berry realized he'd been so worked up on getting to the Blue Guardians he hadn't thought of what he was going to say. It was very bad news. How could he possibly tell someone something as terrible as that their parents were dying? What was he going to say? He'd somehow reached the stump before he thought of it, and Berry cringed against the bark of it. Maybe he could ask to talk to Tack after the meeting? It would at least be in private that way. It might be better to tell this sort of thing in private. But if the meeting took a long time, he had no idea how such things worked, then it would be bad to waste so much of what would be the family's last time together.

“Um, excuse me?” Berry squeaked, leaning to paw at the bark of the stump. He couldn't get a grip. Had the other faife just jumped up? “Excuse me?” he squeaked again, but his voice wasn't cooperating very well. “I-I need to talk to Tack...”

“What's that?” Berry felt dizzy when he saw Thyme herself had heard him and was now leaning over the edge of the stump. He tried to tell her that he was sorry to interrupt but really, really needed to talk to Tack. All that came out of his open mouth was a strangled squeak. “We can't hear you! Climb up,” Thyme said, and Berry scrambled to obey. He jumped at the stump, but wound up scrabbling uselessly at the smooth bark until he fell clumsily, tumbling ankles over muzzle. Dizzy, he heard a chorus of laughter follow his humiliating sprawl on his back. He wanted to bury his head in the dirt, then realized he'd landed *on* a pair of Blue Guardians.

“I-I am so sorry!” he choked, feeling as though he wanted to cry. “I-it's so high-” The pair just glanced at each other and chuckled. As a unit they rose to two legs and, gripping a very startled Berry, the pair hoisted him up onto the log. Now that he was up there, Berry wanted to be anywhere else. He

could see all of the Blue Guard from here, and they were all staring at him.

They were all staring.

“Er, w-well, that is to say-” Berry tried, but his voice died. He could only stare in terror at the sea of faces watching him. They'd already seen him mess up. He'd fallen and tripped and stumbled and *stepped on* his heroes. He was wasting their time. He was wasting Tack's time. He tried to speak, but he couldn't. Berry started to shake, cringing smaller and smaller against the surface of the stump. He felt tears prick at his eyes and knew he was going to start crying and there wasn't anything he could do to stop it. He'd never been so afraid in his entire life.

“Hey.” The soft voice cut through the chatter, and a gentle hand came to rest between his hunched shoulders. “It's all right,” the voice continued softly, “They're a loud bunch, but no one's going to hurt you. No one is angry. You're okay. Just take a deep breath.” Berry tried, but choked on it instead. “It's okay, try again. With me, all right? Ready? In...” As the faife beside him drew in a breath Berry struggled to do the same. “Out... In... and out...” Slowly, Berry found that air was coming to him more easily. The urge to cry passed as he focused on imitating the breathing of the faife beside him. “There you go. Feel better?” Berry looked up to answer, and choked on the words again.

It was Thyme. Thyme was crouched beside him. Thyme had watched him fall apart. She was close enough to see the tears in his fur. She had felt him shaking. “I-I-”

She ruffled his fur gently, a smile on her face. “You had something you needed to say?” she prompted him softly. Berry nodded. “Then go ahead,” she said, adding quietly, “I'm right beside you.” before she straightened up. Berry stared up at her for a moment, then gulped a breath.

“I-I'm looking for Tack.” That was a start anyway. Berry looked over at the sea of faces, trembling again. There were so many of them. They had *all* seen him panic on the stump. All of them.

“That's me,” a tan and buff colored faife called. Peering at him, Berry managed to pick out the fiery mane he remembered from when he was smaller. “I'm Tack. What do you need me for?” he asked. Berry started to answer, then tensed as Tack turned to one of his clan mates and snorted with laughter. He was going to be so upset. Berry hated to tell him, he hated to make that laugh go away. But he had to. He *had* to. Tack needed to know.

“It's your parents. There's been an accident.” Tack stopped laughing. The clan went still. The sudden silence was more unnerving than the chatter and laughter. Berry had thought it was overwhelming to be on the stump before, but now that the clan had stopped speaking among themselves at all it was so much worse. He shrank again, then felt Thyme's hand come to rest again on his shoulders.

“Wh-what happened?” Tack asked. His voice sounded strained.

“Smoldering lost her horn,” Berry explained. It was a little bit easier to talk looking just at Tack. “You're getting a sibling but, um.” This part was too much. Even with Thyme's reassuring presence beside him Berry felt himself try to shrink again. “You'd better hurry if you want to say goodbye.” He'd done it. Berry wobbled as Tack stammered something to the faife he was sitting with. The purple faife slumped on the stop, his flank resting against Thyme's as he trembled from the effort of speaking. Just speaking. It had almost been too much for him. “I'm s-sorry,” he whispered at

Thyme. He'd interrupted her meeting. He was taking one of her guardians. And he was a weakling and a coward. She might not have expected anything of him, but Berry still felt like he'd let his hero down.

"You did well," Thyme told him softly, "That is a very difficult message to carry. You were brave to come all this way with such a burden." Berry stared at her, not certain he'd heard correctly. Before he could say anything, Tack was on the stump. The fiery-maned faife, Berry noted, had hopped up with no trouble at all. Berry stared as Tack and Thyme gazed at one another, then Tack began to paw at the blue cloth around his neck. "Keep it," Thyme told him. "You'll always be a part of our family." Tack nodded, and Berry slunk away to try to give them privacy, or at least as much as could be given on a stump in the midst of their clan. He tumbled off the stump again, though this time the black and white pair of faife who'd hoisted him up were waiting to catch him.

"Thanks," Berry mumbled at them, and jumped as Tack landed on the ground beside him. Berry didn't know what to say to him, he just felt that he should say *something*. Before he could even try, another faife called after them.

"Wait!" Tack stopped and looked over his shoulder as a green faife bounded towards them. "Here," it said, tearing a thick strip the blue cloth it wore and offering it to Tack. "For your sib. Though I hope it's not as reckless as you!" Tack smiled weakly as the faife ruffled the fiery fluff of mane on his head instead of saying goodbye. Berry looked at the exchanged, guilty of the stab of envy he'd felt towards Tack's unborn sibling. He was sure it *would* make a good Blue Guard. Berry just wished he were brave enough to earn a strip of blue too.

"Maybe we should hurry?" Tack suggested softly when he caught up to where Berry had paused to wait. Berry nodded, and forced his tired paws into a run again.

The trip home was faster. With Tack beside him, Berry was loathe to ask for rest. He only stopped when he felt about to collapse. He could sense Tack's urgency and feel the faife fidgeting beside him each time Berry made him wait. Berry wanted to apologize a thousand times for every moment he needed to catch his breath. He wanted to beg Tack's forgiveness for the night he'd wasted hiding from a predator that wasn't there. He wished he'd remembered to thank Thyme for helping him deliver his message. He wanted to lay down until his feet stopped hurting, or to eat a whole bush of sweet berries, or to just drown himself in a creek he was so thirsty, but he just kept trotting along beside Tack. The Blue Guard knew how to get back to the tribe. Berry felt like just an extra tag-along. He wanted to tell Tack to just go ahead without him, but he was too afraid to be out in the strange woods alone and exhausted.

The tribe greeted them when they returned. Tack was polite as the other faife surrounded him, but Berry wanted to shout at them to just get out of his way. Couldn't they see how badly Tack wanted to see his parents? Didn't they know how precious the little time they had left was?

"Berry!" He looked up to see Plum bounding towards him through the shadow of the great tree. He was too exhausted to close the distance between himself and his para. All he could do was slump against her as she swept him into her arms. "Don't you dare do anything like that again!" she cried, burying her face in his fur.

"Sorry," Berry mumbled, "I didn't... mean to worry you... so much..." Now that he was back, he was even more tired than he'd felt on the trip. It felt like his limbs had all turned to water and he could

barely keep his eyes open. He was dimly aware of Plum scolding him, and crying on him. As his eyes started to drift shut, he caught a glimpse of Shura perched high on the twisted root. Raz was sliding off the root, his para must have been keeping vigil beside the old guard. The grizzled veteran unwrapped the scrap of blue around her forearm and brandished it in his direction. Berry was puzzled by the gesture for only a moment, sleep claimed him even before his eyes had finished closing.