

# Kin

Runi dangled from his tail on the uppermost branch of the tree he and his mother called home, batting at a leaf hopelessly out of reach with his front paws. A short gurgling sound came from the branch above, his mother chastising him for playing when it was night, and time for the hunt. He drew himself back up, licked his paws thoroughly, and scampered along the limb to where she sat waiting, balanced easily fifty feet from the ground. Her eyes narrowed, studying the darkness below for any danger before she began to climb nimbly down the trunk. Runi followed closely behind, dropping down next to her on the moonlit floor.

His tufty kitten fur brushed the vines of a neighboring plant as they walked, and a clump of twigs snapped under his clumsy paws. The tip of his mother's tail twitched in annoyance, and he quickly stepped back in line behind her, innocent eyes wide.

Uneven rock faces scaled the sides of the pool and water trickled down the cracks, pencil-drawn lines of molten silver. Stars illuminated the central area, but left enough shadow for hungry predators such as themselves to hide. The pool itself was slight, and algae lurked at the bottom. His mother flicked her tail, beckoning him across the clearing to the shadows behind a large boulder. He pranced along beside her, nerves jumping as he anticipated another successful hunt.

Her form slunk into the bushes to the left of the rock, and Runi paused for a moment, dipping his head down to lap from the pool. Suddenly, a cry sounded from the direction his

mother had gone. His head shot up, droplets flung from his whiskers, and raced across the clearing. Thorns and twigs scored his sides as he scrambled through the shrubs, but he ignored the pain, pushing through to the other side.

The sight he saw there made his blood turn to ice, frozen in his veins. His mother lay struggling on the floor, sending up wails of terror and pain. Runi forced his legs to work, to move to her side. *Get up!* He wanted to say. *Why can't you get up?*

Her cries echoed in his ears, becoming more frantic. Why was she just lying there? Just then the moon escaped the cover of a cloud and light glinted off something around his mother's neck. He stepped around her flailing head, crouching to study the thin silver branch that encircled her neck and disappeared up into the trees. The more she moved, the tighter it got, sinking into the pink of her skin; she cried out in pain with every movement, but instinct forced her to move all the same.

Every nerve in Runi's body told him to run. Run far away from this contraption, this thing that was beauty and death in one stroke.

He forced his feet to stay where they were, by his mother's side. He could see the silver line getting tighter and tighter, drawing a line of blood from her neck. He had to stop her struggling, and he had to get her out. Now.

Runi thought of opposites. He knew opposites; they governed his life. Hard earth and light air. The fear of death; the love of life. Warm sun and cold rain. The push of the wind, the pull of the vines. Push and pull.

He watched as his mother pulled on the wire, watched it constrict tighter and tighter around her neck. Push and pull. His eyes followed the silver of the line, stretching from his mother to high in the tree above them. If pulling was not the answer, then its opposite must be. He gurgled to his mother, telling her to stay calm, and moved to where the line reached into the tree.

Runi waited a moment to make sure his mother had stopped struggling before he took the line in his jaws. It slipped, too taut for him to get a grip. Immediately a sting set in, fire shooting through his head, as the metal cut into his gums. He shook it off; his mother was in much worse pain. He motioned to her to move towards him, and she scrambled a few feet, putting slack on the line. Using all the strength he had, Runi pushed towards her, watching with satisfaction as he saw the loop around her neck widen. Her eyes opened and whimpers of pain stopped as the pressure around her neck lessened. Slowly, she drew her head out through the shining wire, and collapsed on the other side, exhausted.

Runi bounded over the roots of the tree and crouched by her side, nuzzling her nose with affection. Relief pulsed through his body like the warm glow of a summer sun. The line around her neck was pink and raw, but no longer bleeding so profusely. *I will help you home*, he murmured. *No. Find food. We must eat. We must hunt.* Her reply was in short gurgles, struggling to take in a full breath. *You cannot hunt*, he responded, using his snout as a lever to help her up. She stumbled as she stood, but eventually found her footing, eyes dull with an aching pain. *We must.*

No. This time he was firm, and she had no energy to reply. He started to walk forward, and she padded beside him, slow, as if half asleep. They moved past the bushes at the edge of the clearing, and stepped into nothing.

The land ahead of them had been stripped bare of trees in a wide arc, leaving only barren ground scattered with bracken and twigs. The ground was the color of unleavened bread, dust rising up in choking clouds provoked by every gust of wind. The floor was pockmarked with black rivets and slashes, as though left behind by some unearthly claws. The air was stale and sour, a harsh contrast to that of the lush rainforest behind him. Grains of sand and gravel spit up into his eyes and caught in his throat. All he had known in his short life was green and blue, light and life. This was none of that. This was unnatural, evil, kin to the silver branch from the pool.

Motion at the end of the clearing caught the corner of Runi's eye, figures milling about. They were making a commotion about some large structure that they stood around. Its skin shone in the moonlight, but harshly, nothing like the caress of the stars.

One of the figures made a loud noise, and a light flared up at the edge of the clearing, red and golden. It was like nothing Runi had ever seen; it flickered and danced, fingers reaching. Then all the figures disappeared into the side of the monster beside them, and it began to move. It was like a bird right out of the nest, awkward and out of place in its forest surroundings. Its round black paws chewed the dry ground, spitting more dust up in its wake as it disappeared into the forest behind them

Just then Runi felt his mother slump against him, eyelids fluttering, fur hot to the touch. He had to get her home.

His mother collapsed on the ground as soon as they made it to the foot of their tree, no energy to climb further. Runi looked warily into the shadows; they weren't safe sleeping down here, especially with the unknowns of the pool and the clearing. He tried to nudge his mother up, but she was unresponsive. There was no way she would make it up the trunk.

Runi curled up in the crook of a root, feeling exhaustion wash over him in a wave, hunger making his stomach growl. He tried to keep his eyes open; to keep watch, but soon succumbed to the pull of rest. His mother would be better in the morning, right? He tried to imagine everything they would do together; hunt, run, climb, but as he fell into a troubled sleep, his mind was filled with horrifying images from the clearing.

Runi's eyes snapped open and he immediately turned his head, searching for his mother's sleeping form beside him. Her breaths were even but shallow, and the ring around her neck oozed yellow liquid. He stood up to go over to her, but leapt back onto the root with a yowl. The ground was searingly hot, and his pads burned with pain. His mother's eyes opened blearily, confused. His gaze snapped from her to the undergrowth around them, and dread slammed into him. Flickering in and out from vines, from branches, crimson and gold fingers reached and twisted, akin to those at the clearing the night before. It was mesmerizingly beautiful, it was hot, and it was death.

Something slammed into the ground in front of him, black and smoking. Curls of flame wrapped around, turning it to ash. He looked up, into the tree above him. It was a branch. A branch had fallen, and it was on fire.

Soon, flames were racing at them from all angles, and Runi's heart pounded strangely in his chest. His nose stung, and an acrid smell surrounded him. His eyes began to burn too, vision getting blurry. Runi pawed his mother roughly, again and again, but her response was slow and lethargic. Panic swirled in his chest, rising up with the fire around him. Without thinking, he ran.

He dodged falling ash and sparks, smoking stumps and logs. Everything was on fire. Other animals ran alongside him, feet pounding in an erratic rhythm of fear. The flame was like a living beast, taking their home stride by stride. As he ran, he saw animals around him fall prey to the beast; forms disappearing into the raging inferno.

Then his front legs buckled and he careened into a flaming shrub. Knives of pain cut through him like nothing he had ever experienced. His skin was burning, and his throat wouldn't make a sound. He felt like he was dying, slowly being consumed by the unbearable heat.

Runi forced himself onto his feet, head full of nothing but hurt. Half of his fur was scorched off and his left hind leg was almost useless. He could feel nothing but heat so great it was cold. He was about to collapse on the spot, but heard something that made his heart beat again. Rushing water.

All of them headed in the same direction, desperation leading their paws. They plunged into the river whatever their size or shape, letting the cool water run over them,

putting out the fires on their skin. Runi followed, pushing away his instinctive hatred of water for the release of fear and pain. The burning in his side turned into a pulsing ache, though he still couldn't put weight on his foot. He managed to pull himself onto the far shore, taking breaths in short, painful gasps. Then he realized something. Mother. He had left his mother. Runi curled up in a ball on the hard stone, desolation cutting through him.

A warm nose nudged his side. He uncurled, and saw a small kitten, younger than him, with wide terrified eyes. He searched for any sign of its mother, but there was none. *Help*, it mewed, soft and afraid. *No mama*. The kitten's fur was singed, and there was desolation in its eyes, kin to his.

Runi felt a flame unfurl inside him, soft. This kitten needed him, was relying on him to help it through. Just like his mother had nurtured him, taught him, he would pass that on, help this youngster find its way.

All of the animals turned to watch as all vegetation on the far shore slowly turned black and crumbled to the ground, but the flames spread no further.

Runi turned to the kitten and nuzzled its side. *I will help*.