

WHISPERS OF CHANGE
WARRIORS
Eye of the Storm



Warriors: Whispers of Change

Book 4: Eye of the Storm

Allegiances:

ThunderClan

Leader: Bramblestar·dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy: Berrynose· cream coloured tom with a stump for a tail

Medicine Cats: Jayfeather· gray tabby tom with blind, blue eyes

Eagleheart· small, fluffy orange tabby she·cat with green eyes

Warriors:

Poppyfrost· pale tortoiseshell·and·white she·cat

Lionblaze·golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Bumblestripe· very pale gray tom with black stripes

Blossomfall· tortoiseshell·and·white she·cat with petal·shaped white patches

Ivypool· silver·and·white tabby she·cat with dark blue eyes

Molewhisker· brown·and·cream tom

Dewnose· gray·and·white tom

Stormcloud· gray tabby tom

Fernsong· yellow tabby tom

Sorrelstripe· dark brown she·cat

Sparkpelt· orange tabby she·cat

Shellfur ·tortoiseshell tom

Plumstone ·black·and·ginger she·cat

Twigbranch· gray she·cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Ratpaw (calico she·cat)

Brambleheart· small brown tabby she·cat with blue eyes and a fluffy tail

Apprentice, Ashpaw (gray tabby tom)

Ravenwing· small black tom with a white chest and green eyes

Apprentice, Sorrelpaw (calico-tabby she-cat)

Hawkfeather· thick-furred, fluffy silver tabby tom

Apprentice, Tinypaw (black-and-white tom)

Queens:

Squirrelflight· dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

Bristlefrost· pale gray she-cat with aqua eyes (mother to Weedkit, a tan-and-white tom, Milkkit, a light cream she-cat, and Nightkit, a black tom; fostering Cloudkit, an orange-and-white tom)

Elders:

Graystripe· long-haired gray tom

Thornclaw· golden-brown tabby tom

Honeyfrost· white she-cat with yellow splotches

Whitewing· white she-cat with green eyes

Birchfall· light brown tabby tom

Mousewhisker· gray-and-white tom

ShadowClan

Leader: Tigerstar· dark brown tabby tom

Deputy: Cloverfoot· gray tabby she-cat

Medicine Cats: Puddleshine· brown tom with white patches

Shadowsight· gray tabby tom with black stripes and dark ginger eyes

Warriors:

Stonewing· white tom

Sparrowtail· large brown tabby tom

Berryheart· black and white she-cat

Grassheart· pale brown tabby she-cat

Whorlpelt· gray-and-white tom

Antfur· tom with a brown-and-black splotched pelt

Blazefire· white-and-ginger tom

Flowerstem· silver she-cat

Snaketooth· honey-colored tabby she-cat

Slatefur· sleek gray tom

Ravenheart· black tom with white flecks and stripes

Lightleap· brown tabby she-cat

Conefoot· white-and-gray tom

Gullswoop· white she-cat

Spireclaw· black-and-white tom

Hollowspring· black tom

Sunbeam· brown-and-white tabby she-cat

Flaxfoot· brown tabby tom

Hopwhisker· calico she-cat

Darkpounce· large black tom

Apprentice, Littlepaw (brown-and-gray tom)

Queens:

Willowlight· beautiful calico she-cat

Dovewing· pale gray she-cat with green eyes (mother to Moonkit, a gray-and-white she-kit, and

Firkit, a brown she-kit)

Cinnamontail· brown tabby she-cat with white paws

Elders:

Scorchfur· dark gray tom with slashed ears

SkyClan

Leader: Hawkstar· dark gray tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: Sagenose· pale gray tom

Medicine cat(s): Fidgetflake· black-and-white tom

Alderheart· dark ginger tom with amber eyes

Mediator: Tree·yellow tom with amber eyes

Warriors:

Dewspring· sturdy gray tom

Harrybrook· gray tom

Blossomheart· ginger-and-white she-cat

Sandynose· stocky light brown tom with ginger legs

Rabbitleap· brown tom

Apprentice, Wrenpaw (golden she-cat)

Reedclaw· small pale tabby she-cat

Mintfur· gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Nettlesplash· pale brown tom

Quailfeather· white tom with crow-black ears

Pigeonfoot· gray-and-white she-cat

Fringewhisker· white she-cat with brown splotches

Gravelnose· tan tom

Sunnypelt· ginger she-cat

Violetshine· black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

Turtlecrawl· tortoiseshell she-cat

Kitescratch· reddish-brown tom

Rootspring· yellow tom with spikey fur and blue eyes

Needleclaw· black-and-white she-cat with bright eyes

Queens:

Bellaleaf· pale orange she-cat with green eyes

Nectarsong· brown she-cat (mother to Whitekit, a snow-white tom, Specklekit, a brown-and-white she-kit, and Oakkit, a brown she-kit)

Elders:

Fallowfern· pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

Frecklewish· mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs

Macgyver· black and white tom

WindClan

Leader: Harestar· brown-and-white tom

Deputy: Crowfeather· dark gray tom

Medicine cat: Kestrelflight· mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

Apprentice, Whistlepaw (gray tabby she-cat)

Warriors:

Heathertail· light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Brindlewing· mottled brown she-cat

Leaftail· dark tabby tom with amber eyes

Emberfoot· gray tom with two dark paws

Smokehaze· gray she-cat

Breezepelt· black tom with amber eyes

Crouchfoot· ginger tom

Sedgewhisker· light brown tabby she-cat

Apprentice, Flutterpaw (brown-and-white tom)

Slightfoot· black tom with white flash on his chest

Featherpelt· gray tabby she-cat

Oatclaw· pale brown tabby tom

Fernstripe· gray tabby she-cat

Appleshine· yellow tabby she-cat

Queens:

Larkwing· pale brown tabby she-cat

RiverClan

Leader: Mistystar· gray she-cat with blue eyes

Deputy: Minnowtail· dark gray-and-white she-cat

Medicine cat: Willowshine· gray tabby she-cat

Warriors:

Mallownose· light brown tabby tom

Shimmerpelt· silver she-cat

Lizardtail· light brown tom

Apprentice, Fogpaw (gray-and-white she-cat)

Sneezecloud· gray-and-white tom

Jayclaw· gray tom

Apprentice, Leechpaw (taupe tabby tom)

Owlnose· brown tabby tom

Softpelt· gray she-cat

Gorseclaw· white tom with gray ears

Nightsky· dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Harelight· white tom

Breezeheart· brown-and-white she-cat

Dappletuft· gray-and-white tom

Queens:

Curlfeather· pale brown she-cat (Mother to Frostkit, a gray pointed she-kit; Graykit, a dark gray tom;
and Mistkit, a calico-tabby she-kit)

Havenpelt· black-and-white she-cat

Elders:

Mosselt· tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Icewing· white she-cat with blue eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Stoatail· white tom with black ears and tailtip and a double limp

Rosecloud· dark russet she-cat with yellow eyes

Prologue

“Exile him!”

The screech of his fellow warriors made Breezepelt shiver. He had been caught red-pawed, helping Stoattail spy on WindClan. But it was for their own good— what if ThunderClan was conspiring against them? After all that Onestar had kept secret from the Clans, and RiverClan suffering from being shut out from the other Clans, it had been made very clear that transparency was the way to go. If every single cat’s true intentions and character were known— the cats they were outside of Gatherings and battle— then peace would come. No cat would have the burden of carrying dark secrets.

Breezepelt had learned all too well the pain that lies and cover-ups had caused. If he’d have known that Crowfeather had kits with Leafpool, then everything he faced growing up, the hatred his mother gave to Crowfeather, the jealousy he had for his siblings that grew with seemingly loving and real parents, it would make sense. But instead, he turned to the Place of No Stars, where even worse cats taught him to turn his pain into hatred and a thirst for blood. Breezepelt had thought the dark training had worked, he had felt stronger, happier, and able to prove himself to his peers; but in the end, he had become ever more isolated. After the Great Battle, Breezepelt had to actually prove

himself to his Clanmates of being loyal and strong. That had made him realize that the evil spirits were wrong, and he already had a place in WindClan.

After proving himself once more and mending the relationship with his parents, Breezepelt went on to have kits. He spent so much time with them, but his happy days were overshadowed when Onestar's biggest lie and cover-up had come back to haunt the late leader's Clan. Darktail, his secret, forbidden son that he disowned, nearly destroyed the Clans to take revenge. Although Breezepelt hated the rogue's actions, he couldn't help but pity him. Darktail must have had the same feelings Breezepelt had had. Breezepelt also wasn't a fan of Onestar, especially the horrid actions he had done later in life. Why would a leader deny herbs to a dying Clan for simply being the closest to Darktail? It was to overcompensate, to show he had no connection to the rogue. It was all to cover up a dark secret.

So, moons later, Breezepelt's second litter were to become apprentices. He didn't want them to have the same trials of youth that his first litter did. So Breezepelt, along with some other WindClan warriors, decided to take action. Stoatpaw was keen on the idea, as well. He was an ambitious cat who suffered too much as a kit. He had suggested spying. It was his way to prove himself useful. And one leaf-fall day, the plan worked! Stoatpaw finished his training in ThunderClan, and continued his spying, until he got caught by Eagleheart, ThunderClan's new medicine cat.

"Care to explain yourself, Breezepelt?" Crowfeather hissed.

"I know this sounds horrid, and looking back, it is," Breezepelt started. "But it was for the good of the Clan, I swear!"

“Go on,” Harestar prompted, twitching his tail.

“It wasn’t too long ago when the Clans were filled with pain and fear because of Darktail,” Breezepelt began. “I, along with some other warriors, decided that we wanted to do something. Our Clans make it so that cats have to keep dark secrets, and often, keeping those secrets do more harm than good.”

Crowfeather nodded, regret and knowledge glazing his eyes.

“We wanted to do something, to make the Clans see that sometimes, the consequences of keeping a secret for so long is worse than whatever must make them keep it,” Breezepelt stated. “If Onestar had been honest about Darktail, then we would have been prepared. WindClan may have taken him in. He would never have to do what he did. And think of all the pain RiverClan went through after being so isolated.” He sighed. “And the badger in the room, SkyClan. Our ancestors wiped their misfortune from our memories. Our Clan almost had the same fate when Brokenstar repeated history. And don’t you think that they wouldn’t have suffered in isolation if we knew they were there? That we could help?”

Harestar nodded. “I understand your heroics,” he mewed. “But breaking trust isn’t the answer. We have just started mending our relationship with ThunderClan and ShadowClan. When this comes out, they will hate us! War may happen!”

Stoattail yowled, interrupting the leader. “If I may, I have a confession. Breezepelt may have wanted change, but he never wanted to break trust. It was my idea to spy. He opposed it, but I

insisted. I felt it was the only way forward. If anything, punish me, not my father, for what happened.”

Harestar’s neck bristled. Breezepelt had never seen him that angry, not even in the Dark Forest. “Very well,” he hissed. “You and Rosecloud do not deserve to be here a moment longer,” he hissed. “But Breezepelt can stay. Though he will be punished! Breezepelt will be treated like an apprentice for the next moon. He will eat last. He will do all the chores usually done by apprentices. He will even sleep alone in their den. And with that, he is not allowed to leave the camp alone. Everything he does must be told to a Clanmate. We’ll see how open you want cats to be once this punishment ends!”

Breezepelt knew that his past self would throw a fit. He would growl, puff up, say things that should never be repeated, but that day, he didn’t. He just dipped his head, nodded submissively, and padded to the apprentice’s den when the meeting ended.

Meanwhile, he saw Stoattail and Rosecloud leaving the camp. Rosecloud looked as if she wanted to gauge the eyes out of Stoattail, Breezepelt, and Harestar. *I’m glad she isn’t staying in my Clan.*

Chapter 1

“Ravenheart, come here!” Shadowsight mewed. “Our new siblings are here!”

Ravenheart padded away from the shade. Greenleaf was super warm, and Ravenheart always was too hot. He had been sharing some prey with Willowlight, who was excitedly boasting about how Littlepaw was so excited to be an apprentice at last. But with one kit out of the nursery, Dovewing had announced that she was expecting her own litter. And now they have finally been welcomed to the world. Ravenheart slowly entered the nursery. Cinnamontail, a newly expecting queen, was kneading her nest to take a nap. Dovewing was happy to see her son, joy and exhaustion coating her expression.

“Two new sisters,” Dovewing purred. “I can’t wait until Tigerstar and Lightleap get to see them!” Ravenheart stared at the two little scraps who snuggled at their mother’s belly. They were so cute! It was hard to believe that he was that small once.

“Do you have any names?” Ravenheart asked.

“Tigerstar and I were talking,” Dovewing replied. “He wanted to name one Firkit. I decided to call the brown kit that for now. But I really want to name the gray kit Moonkit.” Dovewing

turned the kit around. Surely enough, she had a large gray moon shape on her chest, similar to the heart-shaped patch Ravenheart was named for.

“They’re beautiful names,” Ravenheart replied. “I’m sure Tigerstar will love them.”
Dovewing purred. “And I’ll be sure to spread the word to ThunderClan. Our kin there will be so happy!”

Shadowsight had purred in agreement as he entered the den with borage and a toad in his jaws. “Let me know if you need anything,” he told Dovewing and Cinnamontail. “Willowlight will spread the word. I need to get back to my den. Cloverfoot’s wound reopened and I need to make sure it heals properly.”

Ravenheart nodded, then trailed off to invite Willowlight to see the new kits. He couldn’t help but worry for Cloverfoot. The ShadowClan deputy was attacked by stoats, and although Darkpounce had proven himself a worthy warrior by saving her, she still got wounded pretty badly. Her shoulder was wrenched and her hip had a huge scar. Although she initially healed nicely, Cloverfoot’s wounds frequently reopened when she would overwork herself. Gossip spread through the Clan that she would have to step down from her duties.

Still, Ravenheart knew he needed to find Tigerstar and Lightleap. Tigerstar had gone on a walk to clear his mind, which was full of panic and fear for the health of Dovewing and the new kits. Lightleap, meanwhile, was on a patrol with Hollowspring and Frondwhisker. Ravenheart left the camp, where he saw his father pacing.

“Are they here?” Tigerstar asked anxiously.

“Two she-kits. Dovewing already sorted out their names. The brown one is Firkit, and the gray-and-white one is Moonkit!” Ravenheart beamed alongside Tigerstar, who rushed to camp to meet his daughters.

Finding Lightleap’s whereabouts was trickier. Ravenheart had tracked her patrol to be hunting near the Twoleg nest, where Jaques and Susan lived. After the fiasco with Sleekwhisker, ShadowClan cats took extra care marking their borders, but never strayed too close to the aggressive kittypets. He finally caught up with the patrol, who were tracking muskrats.

“Lightleap! I need to tell you something!” Ravenheart called out as he ran to the patrol. He caught his breath before sharing the news of Dovewing’s new litter. Lightleap dropped her prey and ran back to Camp, telling Ravenheart to carry on.

“At least this litter is Clanborn,” Hollowspring jeered as Lightleap went out of earshot. “I would never mentor a cat as oblivious as you were!”

“What do you mean by that?” Ravenheart asked, narrowing his eyes. “You know, you weren’t born here either. If it wasn’t for my father, you’d never be alive, let alone in ShadowClan.”

“I would have been born here, if my parents weren’t displaced by Darktail!” Hollowspring yelled. “Your parents chose to have you in the Twolegplace, which, for your information, I never stepped foot in.”

“Hey!” Frondwhisker snapped, batting Hollowspring’s head. “Not all of us had the ability to leave Darktail!” Frondwhisker had been born during the reign of the Kin, knowing nothing else for her first few moons. “I’d rather be born somewhere else than having to see my parents suffer!”

“Hmmp!” Hollowspring pouted. He took the muskrat that the patrol had caught, and marched away, tail raised in attitude. He had always been tormenting Ravenheart and his littermates. It really hurt, especially as Ravenheart struggled with finding his place in ShadowClan. Shadowsight was a victim of the bullying too, but Lightleap always found a way out of Hollowspring’s torment. Today was no different, and she had taken the easy way out.

But Ravenheart couldn’t blame his sister. It was a big day!

Chapter 2

“Alright, apprentices! Time to see what you’ve got!” Brambleheart yowled. Three moons had passed since she had become mentor to Ashpaw. Despite her worries of not being a good mentor, it had been one of the best experiences of her life. Ashpaw learned so much from her, but she also learned a lot from Ashpaw. They made a great team!

Now, the apprentices were beginning to be assessed. They had been training for a long while, and today was the beginning of the assessment process. It was to take place over a quarter moon. Two days for hunting, two for fighting, two for patrolling, and one more for overall work and last minute teachings. Then, if StarClan allowed, the newest group of warriors would take their places in the Clan.

Greenleaf was the perfect time for assessments, a stark contrast to the leaf-bare one Brambleheart had taken. The peak of the season had passed, and it was having its final moons before leaf-fall would cool the forest. Prey was running well, and the apprentices were expected to do wonderfully well on that part of the assessment. Ashpaw especially was excellent at catching mice and smaller prey. Brambleheart wasn’t worried about him at all, and, after moons of regaining his confidence, neither was he.

Each apprentice was instructed with catching three pieces of prey: a bird, a squirrel, and a small animal. Today, they were doing so on the ground, but tomorrow, they would do it on trees. It was sunhigh, and they had until sunset to fulfill their quota. Twigbranch was explaining these rules to the apprentices, as Brambleheart was thinking of a place to take Ashpaw.

“Have you picked a place yet?” Hawkfeather whispered. “I’m taking Tinypaw to the birch forest!”

“Not yet,” Brambleheart replied. “Perhaps near the ShadowClan border. There’s Twoleg activity, and I want to see if Ashpaw will be distracted or not.”

Hawkfeather nodded. “Nobody else wants to go there,” he commented. “Twigbranch wants to take Ratpaw near the lakeshore, and Ravenwing wants to go to the abandoned Twoleg nest.”

Twigbranch had finished briefing the apprentices, and Ashpaw padded towards Brambleheart, eyes widened in nervousness. Brambleheart was actually relieved, as it wasn’t the fear he had shown with Rosecloud. It was typical assessment jitters, just like any other apprentice would have.

“Where are we going?” Ashpaw asked.

“Follow me!” Brambleheart led the way towards the clearing that marked the border with ShadowClan. Ashpaw followed enthusiastically, tail held high. When they made it to the clearing, the sun beat down on them. It was a relatively mild greenleaf, but too much time in the sun is not good in any greenleaf.

“Alright, Ashpaw. You have until sunset!” Brambleheart touched noses with her apprentice to wish him luck, and hid in the edges of the clearing to observe her apprentice. At first, Ashpaw was carefully observing his surroundings, before starting to track. Despite prey being plentiful, greenleaf was very hard to track during. The humidity and the scents of warmth were very overwhelming. Still, it wasn't a particularly humid day, and Brambleheart watched as Ashpaw quickly followed a scent he found.

Brambleheart snuck through the bushes, getting a better angle to carefully observe the gray cat. He had found a plump vole that must have been on its way to drink some struggling dew from that morning. Brambleheart's whiskers twitched in humor and pity for the vole. The dew had quickly evaporated, and it seemed as determined as Ashpaw. But she had no time to dwell on prey! Brambleheart saw Ashpaw catch sight of the vole. He started stalking, carefully not stepping on any sticks or dry earth. Ashpaw crouched down, wiggled his flanks, and pounced, swiftly catching the vole. He sent a prayer of thanks to StarClan, and Brambleheart did the same.

When Ashpaw was looking for his second piece of prey, Brambleheart caught some ShadowClan scent. She went to investigate, not wanting to bother or distract Ashpaw. She padded through the undergrowth to the scent line, where her eyes met with none other than Ravenheart.

“Hello,” the ShadowClan warrior mewed.

“Hi,” Brambleheart replied. “What are you doing here? You're awfully close to the scent line. I can't deal with an invasion— Ashpaw is being assessed.”

“How’s he doing?” Ravenheart asked. “I’m sure he’s doing well. Remember the last gathering? Littlepaw was so impressed with his hunting crouches!”

“He just caught a vole,” Brambleheart shared. “He’s looking for his next piece, so I need to”

“I don’t want to keep you,” Ravenheart interrupted. “But I wanted to find someone here. Dovewing had her new litter. They’re so pretty!”

“Congratulations!” Brambleheart trilled. “You must be a proud brother. I’ll tell the Clan. Do they have names?”

“There’s Moonkit, she’s gray and white; and there’s Firkit, she’s brown,” Ravenheart explained. “They’re both really healthy!”

Brambleheart congratulated her friend. They nodded farewell, and went their separate ways. Brambleheart found Ashpaw again, now stalking a sparrow which was grazing on the grass. Once more, Ashpaw pounced, and nearly missed the sparrow, which flapped its wings to attempt an escape. But Ashpaw was quick, and pinned the bird down before killing it and thanking StarClan. *One more to go!*

It took a while before Ashpaw could find his third piece of prey. He hid the two catches from scavengers by covering them with grass, and washed himself to get the scent of prey blood off of him. He finally rolled around to cover his scent as a cat. Unfortunately, it seemed as if any large prey was hiding from the heat, and wouldn’t come out until the sun started to set. It was now late afternoon, and although the temperature had hit its peak, it was starting to cool down.

Luckily, the sun was on Ashpaw's side. Brambleheart saw him perk up as he caught the scent of what should be his last catch. When the scent drifted to Brambleheart, she identified it as a squirrel. Ashpaw was about to pounce on the squirrel when it unfortunately decided to look behind its shoulder to see him. The squirrel dashed away into some tall grass and out of Ashpaw's—and Brambleheart's—sight. Crestfallen and now very worried, Ashpaw tried to desperately find his last piece of prey before the sun started setting. In this state, however, Ashpaw did catch sight of the squirrel, using an alternate route to get to its shelter. Ashpaw ran as fast as he could, confusing the squirrel, and managed to catch it.

After Ashpaw brought the squirrel to its pile, Brambleheart emerged to congratulate her apprentice. "You did it," she praised. "I knew you would!"

"Thanks!" Ashpaw beamed. "Let's go back to Camp!"

Ashpaw carried both the vole and the squirrel by their tails. Brambleheart remembered when Ashpaw was first apprenticed, and he could barely carry a squirrel since it was half his size. When Brambleheart started mentoring him, Ashpaw was bigger, but was still clumsy carrying large prey. Now he could carry two at once!

At Camp, Ashpaw chattered with the rest of the apprentices, while Brambleheart spoke with her fellow mentors. "How did everyone do?" she asked.

"Good. Everyone passed," Hawkfeather reported.

“You should have seen Sorrelpaw. You know how clumsy she can be. But today she was very agile!” Ravenwing said.

Sorrelpaw, however, wasn't too agile after the assessment. She was demonstrating to the other apprentices what she had done, but tripped over herself, much to everyone's humor. Still, the other apprentices respected her. Sorrelpaw was very sweet, and loved by the whole Clan.

“I have to do something,” Brambleheart said quickly, thinking of Ravenheart's words. She found Ivypool chatting with her parents in the elder's den. “Hi,” she greeted. “I was doing Ashpaw's assessment when I bumped into Ravenheart. He told me that Dovewing had her new kits!”

Whitewing and Birchfall smiled at the news. “We need to pay a visit soon,” Birchfall remarked.

“What are their names?” Whitewing asked. Brambleheart explained the details, and told the elders that their new kin were very healthy and happy. Even Ivypool, who had a somewhat strained relationship, was extremely happy for her sister.

Brambleheart later went into the warrior's den where she took Ashpaw's vole and ate it. It tasted wonderful.

Chapter 3

“What are you doing?” Nightkit squeaked.

Eagleheart was busy sorting herbs. So many dried up due to the season, but they were relatively easy to replenish. But while she was putting her stocks in their respective places, she had every move watched by a curious kit. Nightkit, along with the others, was five moons old now. While Weedkit, Milkkit, and Cloudkit eagerly practiced hunting and fighting moves, Nightkit was ever so fascinated by Eagleheart’s work.

“I’m sorting the herbs,” Eagleheart replied. “We want to make sure that everything is in the right place, so it’ll be easier to get the right medicine when someone is unwell.”

“Can I help?” Nightkit asked nicely.

“Sure! It’s never too bad to have extra paws!” Eagleheart taught Nightkit simple ways to sort four different herbs. The marigold was Eagleheart-colored, the lavender smelled like calm, the catmint was irresistible, and the dandelion was fluffy. These mnemonics helped Eagleheart a lot as an apprentice, so she was more than glad to pass the knowledge onto Nightkit. The kit picked up well, despite him being more scattered than fallen leaves during a storm.

Soon enough, the herbs were sorted. Nightkit proudly showed off his piles, while Eagleheart put the rest of the piles that she was working on in their places. She then did the same with Nightkit's, praising the tom who looked as if he would explode in pride.

"I can't wait to be an apprentice," Nightkit squealed. "I want to be just like you when I'm grown-up!"

"If you really want to, you need to take your nap," Bristlefrost meowed sternly, having just padded to the medicine den entrance.

"I don't need one!" Nightkit protested.

"Your siblings are tired from playing, and they don't think it's fair that you get to sort herbs," Bristlefrost explained. She put her tail on Nightkit, and the two left the medicine den. Eagleheart looked at Nightkit's herbs. They were done well, but some tansy was mixed with the marigold. Eagleheart fixed it. Nightkit wasn't an apprentice yet, so he had a lot of time to learn.

As the sun set, Eagleheart remembered that she needed to prepare some mouse bile. Graystripe had gotten fleas, and had commented that itching his fluffy fur felt like torture. Sorrelpaw and Ratpaw had offered to help out that evening after their assessment. That day, according to Brambleheart, the apprentices were finishing the battle training portion, and were then going to be assessed on problem solving skills. Sure enough, the two calicos eagerly entered the den, looking for their supplies.

Eagleheart gave Ratpaw and Sorrelpaw sticks covered in the bile, and padded to the elder's den with the apprentices. She needed to give a health check anyways, as the heat often brought cracked pads and lethargy in older cats.

Sorrelpaw had taken one side of Graystripe, trying awkwardly to get his fleas off while avoiding covering herself in the bile. Poor Sorrelpaw was so clumsy that she often got the icky goo on her, having to swim in the lake to wash off. Luckily, her motor skills had improved after tending to the elders for so long. She swiftly got each flea off of Graystripe, who eagerly told stories of his own warrior ceremony.

"You know, in my day, warriors were made after doing something special," he rasped. "Firestar and I became warriors after freeing ShadowClan from Brokenstar."

"You did that?" Sorrelpaw gasped.

"I couldn't have done it without my mentor, Lionheart. He was a noble cat who gave noble teachings. I still see him a lot in ThunderClan today," Graystripe mused.

"He was my father," Thornclaw murmured. "He died when I was a kit." Sorrelpaw and Ratpaw gave the elder a sad and empathetic look. They had lost their father, Larksong, when they had just been born. They never knew him, and as such, took Bristlefrost's kits under their wings as they had the same issue after Stemleaf's death.

"How did you become a warrior?" Ratpaw asked Thornclaw.

“I had an assessment, just like you,” Thornclaw responded. “But my leader didn’t want to make me a warrior. She was sick, and lost trust in her Clan. But then, she gained it back before dying. The new leader, Firestar, made me a warrior after because I was brave.”

“I got assessed too,” Birchfall continued. “I should have been the only new warrior the day I earned my name, but Whitewing waited to earn hers just for me!”

“I wouldn’t have had it any other way,” Whitewing purred, nuzzling her mate. Mousewhisker then spoke about his assessment, and how he had caught the most prey out of all his siblings. Everyone then turned to Honeyfrost, who was oddly silent throughout the whole conversation.

“I became a warrior, yes, but it wasn’t any different than any other cat,” Honeyfrost said. “But I did switch to a medicine cat, so I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“We still want to know!” Sorrelpaw mewed.

“I became a warrior when Darktail was here,” Honeyfrost replied. “Shortly after I earned my name, I was in a huge battle.”

“I don’t want there to be a battle!” Sorrelpaw whimpered.

“Me neither,” Honeyfrost replied. “But the Clans have been at peace. I doubt anything will happen.”

Eagleheart nodded at her former mentor's words. Despite being the youngest elder by many moons, she still retained a lot of wisdom from all the trials she had endured in her life. If Honeyfrost said not to worry, then she was most likely correct. Besides, if anything did happen, ThunderClan would soon have four new warriors ready to defend it.

Chapter 4

Ravenheart was leading a patrol. He was tasked with marking the borders near where those with SkyClan and ThunderClan met. Luckily, he was with pleasant company. Sunbeam, Darkpounce, and his apprentice Littlepaw were by his side.

“Will we see a patrol?” Littlepaw asked.

“Maybe,” Darkpounce replied. “Ravenheart says that the ThunderClan apprentices are being assessed.”

“When will I be assessed?” Littlepaw asked.

“Soon enough,” Darkpounce replied. “But only when you’re ready.”

“Good,” Littlepaw said. “I like being an apprentice!”

Ravenheart giggled in his head. Most apprentices couldn’t wait to be warriors, or deputies, or leaders. He sure was like that. But Littlepaw was different than most. He was always content for

whatever position he was in, and grateful for what he had. Some of the ShadowClan cats could really learn from the young cat!

The patrol made it to the border with ThunderClan. They were scenting for any trespassing, and to see how fresh the markers were. Stale markers needed to have an extra marking compared to fresh ones. But Ravenheart couldn't tell the status of the border, because something else overwhelmed his mouth.

“Dogs!”

A pack of dogs emerged. From what it smelt like, they had come from the Greenleaf Twolegplace. So why were they at the border? The dogs ranged in size. Some were small, not much bigger than a cat. But others were huge, nearly the size of a fox, or even bigger. The dogs at first seemed playful, like they were on their own adventure. But dogs were not to be tolerated in ShadowClan land.

“Littlepaw! Get help. We need to drive out the dogs!” Ravenheart ordered. Littlepaw dashed back to the Camp while Ravenheart and the other warriors stood their ground. Ravenheart faced the biggest dog. He arched his back, and puffed up. While Darkpounce was the largest cat in the patrol, Ravenheart looked the largest when in an intimidating stance.

The large dogs, despite the efforts of the patrol, surrounded the smaller dogs and lunged at Ravenheart. He dodged their blows, taking shelter in the shadow of a large spruce tree. Sunbeam and Darkpounce were taking care of the small dogs, which promptly went running back towards the

Twolegplace. Angry, the large dogs continued their attempts at pummeling the patrol. Sunbeam was bleeding from a nicked tailtip, and Darkpounce struggled to escape a pin from a medium dog.

“I’ve got you!” Ravenheart yowled, sneakily lunging at the dog. Darkpounce wriggled free, and helped Ravenheart rake the dog’s sides. The dog howled in pain and surprise, and retreated. The fighting continued for what seemed like moons. All cats got scratches; some mild, some deep. But luckily, Littlepaw returned with Cloverfoot, Slatefur, and Flowerstem.

“I brought help!” The apprentice announced.

“Why is Cloverfoot here?” Sunbeam asked between pants.

“I insisted,” Cloverfoot meowed. She, along with Slatefur, lunged at one of the biggest dogs, and the fighting became a whirlwind. Pummels of paws, teeth, claws, and fur overwhelmed Ravenheart, and if he hadn’t known better, he may have accidentally attacked a Clanmate in the chaos. But he didn’t. He focused on the large paws, the stinky fur of the dogs, and... nothing.

Almost as soon as the fighting began, a caterwaul sounded from the trees. The dogs ran towards it to investigate, leaving the battered patrol behind.

“Is everything okay?” Ravenheart asked. His vision was blurry as blood blocked his pupils. Some was his own, and some was of the dog. He wiped the blood from his face with his paw, where he noticed that one of his claws was chipped. Everyone gave ragged nods, except for Cloverfoot. The deputy was still able to walk, but winced in pain. Her wounds had reopened, and were even worse than before.

“I told you you should have stayed!” Flowerstem fretted.

“How could I watch my Clanmates suffer and do nothing about it?” Cloverfoot murmured.

“That’s the job of a leader,” Slatefur said. “You still have only one life!”

“Tigerstar lost a life in the Great Freeze,” Cloverfoot explained. “And another with the stoats. He hasn’t much left, and he has kits to raise! What if the dogs kept on killing him?”

Before any cat could reply, Tigerstar himself emerged from the bushes. “What happened here?”

“Dogs,” Cloverfoot reported.

“You need to go to the medicine den,” Tigerstar growled. “And everyone else should go. Ravenheart and I are going to investigate.” The patrol nodded, and left the father and son to themselves.

“Why do you need to talk with me?” Ravenheart asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Quite the opposite,” Tigerstar said. “I need advice on who should be my new deputy. Cloverfoot told me before Littlepaw warned us that she was considering retirement. But she insisted on going. I came to stop her, but now it’s too late. It looks like her injuries are way too severe now to heal properly.”

“But Shadowsight.”

Ravenheart was interrupted when one of the large dogs returned to the site of the battle. It was huge, with brown and gray fur. It stunk of the scent of a foul beast. Ravenheart prepared to pounce on it. He could tell that although the dog didn't have any external wounds, it was still exhausted from the battle. When he was about to lunge, Tigerstar shoved him back, and took the dog down. After yet another whirlwind wrestle, Ravenheart saw the dog run back to the pack, and Tigerstar victorious.

“We need to get treatment!” Ravenheart gasped. His father had bites and scratches all over his pelt. One eye was swollen shut from a hard blow, and blood dripped from his belly fur. But Tigerstar didn't follow Ravenheart. Instead, he collapsed into the ground. *He's losing a life!*

Chapter 5

Sunlight shone as Brambleheart led the apprentices towards the WindClan border. It was the final day of their assessment, and it seemed fitting that their apprenticeships ended how they began— with a tour of the territory. Because nearly all of the apprentice’s skills have been assessed, this final day was more of a relaxed, casual patrol, with a few teachings sprinkled in.

“Hey, Sorrelpaw!” Ratpaw giggled. “Remember when you fell into that bramble bush during tree training? You are so clumsy!”

“Yes,” Sorrelpaw responded darkly. “My pelt looked as tufty as a thistle.”

Ratpaw tried to give her sister a playful cuff, but Sorrelpaw rejected it, batting Ratpaw’s head.

“Alright, apprentices. We’ve made it. Now here’s a surprise encounter...” Brambleheart announced. “What would you do if you were to catch a dog’s scent?”

“Track it,” Sorrelpaw mewed.

“And what if you find the source?” Brambleheart prompted.

“Assess the problem,” Tinypaw replied.

“If it’s a smaller dog, or a Twoleg pet gone astray, it wouldn’t pose a threat. But a bigger dog, a wild one, or even a pack of dogs is bad news,” Ratpaw added.

“So, you’ve caught the scent of a dog, and you’ve realized it is a lone pet,” Brambleheart concluded. “What now?”

Tinypaw smiled. “We chase it off, or give it a bat! Then it will hopefully run away. Then we report the dog to Bramblestar or Berrynose.”

“Good job, apprentices!” Brambleheart praised. “Now, Ashpaw,” she continued. Poor Ashpaw was so eager to answer the questions, but his eager peers always answered before him. Brambleheart could tell that he was starting to get frustrated. “What if there is a dangerous scenario?”

“Well,” Ashpaw mewed, going into deep, careful thought. “We’d need backup. I’d get the quickest cat— an apprentice, hopefully— to get help from our Clanmates. Then, with help, we will make a strategy and get the dogs!”

“Very wise,” Brambleheart praised again. She saw Ashpaw’s eyes shine in happiness and pride. “You see, apprentices, this is why every cat must be listened to, from a small kit to an ancient elder. Everyone has something to say!”

“Okay!” Sorrelpaw trilled. “But I have something to say.”

“What is it?” Ratpaw asked, taking care to listen to her sister.

“Sniff the air. I think there really are dogs here!” Sorrelpaw whimpered nervously.

Brambleheart tasted the air. There were dogs, all right. And a whole pack of them! “You are correct with your tracking. Let’s take Ashpaw’s advice and warn the Clan!”

Tinypaw also gave a sniff. “They’re not in our land,” he pointed out. “They’re in WindClan.”

“We should still report this,” Brambleheart said, beckoning the apprentices to follow her home. “If the scent is this fresh here, StarClan knows if they were here, or if they will come!” The quick walking turned into a run, as the fear of a dog discovering them watching grew. The patrol made it back to camp, panting from exhaustion.

Poppyfrost greeted Brambleheart, concern shining in her eyes. “You look ruffled,” she meowed. “Did the apprentices tire you?” When Brambleheart didn’t laugh, Poppyfrost’s tone became more serious. “What’s wrong? I’ll get Berrynose!” The calico ran to summon the Clan deputy, who happened to be her mate.

Berrynose looked grumpy, as if he had just been interrupted from basking. “Poppyfrost says you need to speak?” He grunted, blue eyes narrowing in irritation.

“We smelled dogs today!” Tinypaw mewed. “We were just working out what to do when the situation became real.”

Berrynose licked Tinypaw’s head, praising the young tom for reporting an enemy successfully. He then turned to Brambleheart. “Where are they? You were near the WindClan border, yes? Then they must be awfully close to camp.”

“No,” Brambleheart mewed. “They’re on the other side of the border.”

“Then why bother me?!” Berrynose snapped. “That’s WindClan’s problem.”

Poppyfrost shot her mate an angry look. “WindClan helped drive out badgers from our Camp the day I was born. Surely we can do the same. Think of the queens there!”

Some other warriors joined the commotion. Brambleheart swept her tail near the apprentices, protecting her fellow overwhelmed cats.

“We can’t afford to help WindClan,” Shellfur growled. “Not after what they did with Stoattail!”

“Those dogs must be StarClan’s punishment for their evil deeds,” Blossomfall agreed with her son.

“Do you not remember the Gathering after Stoattail and Rosecloud’s exile?” Dewnose yowled. “WindClan rejected them, too. They didn’t have anything to do with what happened. Shouldn’t we help them, at least as an act of recognition? To try to make amends?”

“Then they’ll think *we’re* spies!” Molewhisker hissed.

“Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!” Bramblestar’s yowls pierced the intensifying argument. ThunderClan silenced at once, listening for the leader’s guidance. “WindClan cats have given us pain with Stoattail. But not WindClan as a whole. Harestar and Crowfeather do not agree with what happened, and neither do the majority of their Clanmates. The last thing we want is for WindClan to hate us for not acting. ThunderClan and WindClan have had differences, but also a rich history of helping each other. We must do the same as our ancestors!”

Growls of disdain sounded around the clearing, but the yowls of agreement soon drowned them out.

“But we need something before we go,” Bramblestar announced. “We need four new warriors. Ashpaw, Tinypaw, Ratpaw, and Sorrelpaw, please stand forward.” The surprised apprentices pranced to the Highledge, quickly trying to clean themselves for the ceremony. “It was your bravery and wits that alerted us of the dogs, and showed us that you are ready to be full warriors. I, Bramblestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn. Ashpaw, Tinypaw, Ratpaw, and Sorrelpaw, do you

promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the Clans, even at the cost of your life?”

“I do,” the apprentices vowed.

Murmurs of confusion spread through the groups of warriors. “Why ‘Clans?’” was a common saying. Brambleheart gently explained that in this situation, it wasn’t just ThunderClan needing defending.

Bramblestar swished his tail to stop the chattering. “Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Ashpaw, from this moment forward you shall be known as Ashpelt. StarClan honors your perception and courage. Tinypaw, from this moment forward you shall be known as Tinystorm. StarClan honors your intuition and spirit. Ratpaw, from this moment forward you shall be known as Rattail. StarClan honors your wisdom and independence. And Sorrelpaw, from this moment forward you shall be known as Sorrelfoot. StarClan honors your kindness and dedication. We welcome you all as full warriors of ThunderClan!” Bramblestar took turns resting his muzzle on the new warrior’ heads, and they licked his shoulder in return. Poor Sorrelfoot was so small that she had to slightly stand up on her hind feet to reach the big leader’s shoulder.

“ASHPELT! TINYSTORM! RATTAIL! SORRELFOOT!” The Clan chanted. Sparkpelt, Dewnose, and Sorrelstripe rushed to lick their kits and congratulate them.

“While I would love to celebrate now, we need to assign patrols to aid WindClan,” Bramblestar yowled. “I will lead a patrol with Lionblaze, Blossomfall, Molewhisker, Plumstone, Hawkfeather, Brambleheart, Ashpelt, and Sorrelfoot.”

“I will lead one, too,” Berrynose continued. “I need Bumblestripe, Stormcloud, Dewnose, Twigbranch, Ravenwing, Tinystorm, and Rattail with me!”

“We will come, too,” Jayfeather spoke up. “Eagleheart and I need a warrior to guard us. Ivypool and Poppyfrost will be good choices.”

“The rest of us will guard the camp,” Shellfur announced, clearly a bit bitter from not being chosen for battle.

“Good,” Bramblestar called out, satisfied. “We will leave at once. ThunderClan will be strong!”

Chapter 6

Eagleheart set some herbs up. She and Jayfeather found a nook from an old rabbit hole that sheltered and hid them from the dogs. Blossomfall stood guard while Ivypool guided Kestrelflight and Whistlepaw to the setup.

Meanwhile, yowls and barks sounded as ThunderClan helped WindClan defend their camp from the dogs. Already, it was a bleak situation. The queens and elders had fled to the Horseplace for shelter from the dogs and potential elements. Bodies laid on the ground of slain warriors. Crouchfoot, Fernstripe, and Brindlewing had succumbed to fatal bite wounds from the pack.

As soon as the station had been set, warriors and apprentices came with injuries ranging from nasty scratches to heavy bites. Fortunately, thanks to the combined supplies from ThunderClan and WindClan, the wounds were treated with little to no complications. Some of the lesser wounded cats, despite warnings, headed back to battle once their wounds stopped bleeding.

“YOU’LL PAY FOR THIS!” Lionblaze shrieked. Eagleheart perked up nervously. What had happened? Eagleheart knew that her father could get heated in battle sometimes, but he never was vengeful, at least, not after her and her littermates were born.

“What’s happening?” Jayfeather asked, clearly thinking the same thing. Ivypool emerged from the hideout, scanned the area, and reported back.

“It’s Bramblestar,” the warrior mewed. “He’s losing a life!”

Eagleheart saw Jayfeather have a deep frown. Deep down, she knew what was happening. Part of a medicine cat’s connection with StarClan was the ability to detect how many lives a Clan leader had left. And a chill in her spine told her that Bramblestar was losing his second to last.

“This is horrid,” Kestrelflight fretted. “Harestar is on his last life as well. But he fights like LionClan, as well as Bramblestar.”

“This only means that everyone is equal in the battle,” Ivypool mewed. “And I saw Harestar fight in the Place of No Stars. He is one of the strongest cats I know.”

Blossomfall returned from retrieving Bramblestar’s body. It was still limp and lifeless. Poppyfrost helped to clean the remaining wounds and gave Eagleheart marigold for infection. The medicine cats sat around the leader, who started to twitch as he regained consciousness and life.

“Hello, Bramblestar,” Eagleheart murmured gently. “You’re with the medicine cats now. Your wounds are deep, but StarClan healed your worst one.”

“Thank you,” Bramblestar rasped, dipping his head. “I need to get back to the battle now.”

“There is no way you are leaving here,” Jayfeather snorted. “You’re on your last life and you must stay here.”

“I can’t do that!” Bramblestar retorted. “If leaders just sat around during their final life, the Clans would have fallen long ago. And besides, wouldn’t the dogs be confused?”

Eagleheart saw Jayfeather open his mouth before closing it. Bramblestar was the leader, as well as the medicine cat’s adopted father. And no matter how blunt Jayfeather could be, Bramblestar was all too used to it. Eagleheart was starting to have this sentiment as well, but she still took his advice and criticism to heart, as Jayfeather had much more experience in life and medicine.

Bramblestar ran back into the battle. As the leader predicted, the dogs were stunned by his revival. Eagleheart watched ThunderClan and WindClan warriors took advantage of this, lunging on the dogs and raking their backs. The dogs ran away, terrified and bewildered at the strength of the Clan cats.

“We won!” Berrynose caterwauled. “Our Clans are strong!”

“HOORAY!”

From a patch of tall grass emerged Harestar. He was limping from a bad leg wound, but still looked strong. “Thank you, ThunderClan. We couldn’t have done this without you. WindClan may need time to rebuild our strength and Camp, but nobody would have lived to do so if not for—” The leader paused, taking heavy breaths as his paws shook. Eagleheart ran to him, noticing now even

more wounds pulsing out blood. Harestar tried to speak, but instead collapsed, eyes turning glazed as his breathing became shallow.

“Harestar!” Eagleheart yowled. She turned to the circle of cats that was growing. Their eyes shone in fear. “He’s unresponsive,” Eagleheart announced. “I need cobwebs and marigold, NOW!”

Chapter 7

Ravenheart sighed. He was trying to take a nap, but the chattering warriors in the den were impossible to drown out. “Can you please be quiet?”

“Sorry,” Gullswoop said. “We’re just talking about what will happen with Tigerstar and Cloverfoot!”

The aftermath of the battle with the dogs was rough. Tigerstar had lost a life, and Cloverfoot had retired that morning. A deputy hadn’t been chosen yet, but moonhigh was soon approaching. According to the warrior code, a deputy must be chosen by then to avoid any tragedies. ShadowClan knew the repercussions all too well; not only did ancient ShadowClan cats establish the rule in the first place, but there were many succession crises in recent ShadowClan memory as well.

“I’d like to be a deputy one day,” Flowerstem mused, licking her paw. “Too bad I’ve never gotten an apprentice!”

“I’m sure you will get an apprentice,” Gullswoop reassured. “Your littermates did well, and you are a fine warrior. You’re gentle during battle training, too.”

“Says the cat who got scratched by Whorlpelt!” Spireclaw laughed. “Ever since that happened last moon, you’ve been so angry at cats being a little rough.”

“Whorlpelt’s claws are so sharp, they can still get you when sheathed,” Gullswoop protested. “I’ve seen cats take after him in that regard.”

“We’re getting off topic. Who should be the deputy?” Ravenheart sighed. He wasn’t one for gossip, but he knew that he could always tell his father any popular choices.

“I’m sure he wants a young cat. I mean, most cats here don’t remember a time without Darktail!” Grassheart pointed out.

“I couldn’t do it,” Gullswoop mewed. “I’d chatter the Clan’s secrets away at gatherings.”
Like she doesn’t do that already.

“You may be a good choice, Ravenheart,” Grassheart said. “You managed to help three loners settle into the Clan, and are a good thinker.”

“Yeah! Remember when Lightleap and Antfur were fighting over a bullfrog? You managed to help split it so they both got the parts they liked.” Flowerstem beamed.

“...it was just common sense,” Ravenheart muttered self-consciously, licking his white chest patch. “And wouldn’t that make me a mediator?”

“Yeah, but you’re also good at battle. You are an excellent strategist. Not to mention your friends in other Clans!” Gullswoop said. “Only a mouse-brain would look you over.”

“Only a mouse-brain would choose a deputy who doesn’t fit in!” Ravenheart hissed. “I’m barely respected as a warrior here, what would happen if I became the deputy? And besides, some cats wouldn’t like Tigerstar choosing his son.”

“What do you mean, Ravenheart?” Spireclaw asked. “You’re really cool, and we all see that. You went to the *city*! Your mother gave up her old life to have you here. You were a good playmate and a good cat to fight beside.” The black-and-white tom’s eyes narrowed. “Did someone tell you otherwise?”

“Nevermind,” Ravenheart sighed. “I guess Hollowspring is getting to me.”

* * * * *

Ravenheart gazed up at the Pinebranch, where Tigerstar had gathered the Clan to announce his decision of which cat would be appointed as the new Clan deputy.

“Cloverfoot has retired earlier today after providing our Clan with honor and wisdom,” Tigerstar called. “I have thought long and hard on who the new deputy should be, and have spoken with my most trusted warriors to make the choice. Whoever is chosen will have large pawsteps to fill, but with the support from the Clan, and Cloverfoot herself, I assure they will make their own mark. I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and

approve my choice.” Tigerstar gazed at all of his Clanmates, pride filling his eyes. And then his gaze locked at Ravenheart. “The new deputy of ShadowClan will be Ravenheart.”

Ravenheart’s eyes widened as he let out an audible gasp. Him? Deputy? When gossiping with his friends earlier that day, the prospect of him being deputy didn’t seem likely, at least not for several moons. But here he was, chosen to lead alongside his father.

“Why him?” Hollowspring sneered. “He isn’t Clanborn!”

“Of course Tigerstar chooses his *son*,” Berryheart growled. “Last time a leader did that, well, we didn’t have one!”

Ravenheart tried not to fidget his paws. He was a deputy now. Instead, he weaved his way to the front of the meeting, just under Tigerstar.

“I may be young, and I may not have spent too much time here as a kit,” Ravenheart began, trying to have a steady voice. “But I know that Tigerstar wouldn’t have chosen me if I wasn’t a good choice amongst him and the senior warriors. They believe in me, and StarClan does as well. Now, I have to believe in myself, and my Clan, and we will be strong.”

“RAVENHEART!” Littlepaw squealed. Willowlight, Darkpounce, and Shadowsight joined in. Soon, the whole Clan started cheering. Tigerstar leapt off the branch to lick his son, and Dovewing came to give him a nuzzle.

“What will you do first, oh great deputy?” Sunbeam asked jokingly.

“I don’t know about you, but I need a nap.”

Chapter 8

Brambleheart limped to her sister's side, cobwebs in her jaws. She had been beaten up by the dogs, and a bruise on her shoulder screamed with dull pain. She tried to ignore that, and a scratched hip. They couldn't be worse than what was happening to Harestar.

"Thanks," Eagleheart huffed, taking the cobwebs. "Help me. He's losing a lot of blood." Brambleheart copied the medicine cat's actions, using the adhesive property of the cobwebs to seal the wounds shut. But even then, blood still leaked out. More and more layers of cobweb were added until eventually, the supply ran out.

"What do we do now?" Brambleheart fretted. "He's still bleeding!"

"The wounds are too severe," Kestrelflight mewed sadly, paw on Harestar's flank. The leader's breathing was almost undetectable now, and after a few moments, the WindClan medicine cat lifted his paw. "He's gone. Harestar has lost his final life, and is going to StarClan."

The WindClan cats murmured, wailed, and yowled in grief. Their Clan was safe and free from the dogs, but at what cost? The camp was ranshaked, cats were dead or severely hurt, and now, their leader was gone.

Brambleheart scanned the wreckage. The dead were being piled up, so that the senior warriors could prepare and bury them, as was the custom when no elders remained in the Clan. Along with the four WindClan deaths were those of defeated dogs, and... *no!* Grief welled in Brambleheart's eyes as she saw that two ThunderClan warriors had fallen in battle. Stormcloud had suffered a broken neck, and Blossomfall had gotten a nasty belly wound that was left untreated. She had hid it so that Bramblestar could be cared for, and it bled out until she succumbed.

"Cats of WindClan and ThunderClan!" Crowfeather called. Brambleheart escaped her daze to see him and Bramblestar on the Tallrock. "We have fended off the dogs, and a patrol confirmed that they are no longer in Clan territory. But both Clans have suffered many casualties, and we hope StarClan will provide them peace. Our Clan will take time to rebuild, but we will be stronger, and will never forget the deeds of ThunderClan!"

"If I may," Bramblestar started. "Our Clan has several warriors to spare. We can always have some of them stay in the moor for half a moon or so to help rebuild."

"You don't have to," Crowfeather stammered. Brambleheart saw him look at the battered cats. "Well, if you are offering, I may as well," he sighed. "You know best, Bramblestar. Which cats should stay?"

"Lionblaze is strong, and can help rebuild," Bramblestar explained. "Eagleheart may stay for medicine, and Ravenwing can also provide aid."

Crowfeather dipped his head. "Thank you for helping. We will keep our guests safe. Now, I'm sure your Clanmates back home are anxious. Go home, and bury your dead."

After the meeting ended, Bramblestar and Berrynose flicked their tails to gather their Clan. Brambleheart was getting her scratch treated with newly-gathered cobwebs by Eagleheart.

"We will be apart for a while," Brambleheart whimpered. "It'll be very odd."

"We'll be fine," Eagleheart reassured. "We have the tunnels, worst case!"

"I don't want to think of those again," Brambleheart snorted. The two sisters nuzzled, and Brambleheart left to go home.

Upon arriving at Camp, cats were shocked at the sight of the dead. Thornclaw, Graystripe, Shellfur, and Plumstone gathered somberly around Blossomfall's corpse, and Sparkpelt was frozen with shock at the sight of Stormcloud's. Their bodies were decorated for their kin and close friends to sit a silent vigil, while Brambleheart went to visit Bristlefrost.

"You look like you fought like LionClan!" The queen laughed. "What happened?" Brambleheart explained everything, including how Eagleheart was staying behind to provide aid with Ravenwing and Lionblaze.

"The kits will be ready to be apprenticed when she comes back," Bristlefrost said. "That's good. I think Nightkit wants to be Eagleheart's. And Blossomfall, that's terrible! She helped out with the kits sometimes. At least she's with Stemleaf now."

Brambleheart nodded. She gave the kits affectionate licks while going to pay respect to the dead. She also wanted to know if Jayfeather needed any help given that he was the sole active medicine cat. To her surprise, though, Honeyfrost was also helping out, albeit very reluctantly.

“Hi,” Brambleheart trilled. “Do you need any help with the wounds?”

“We’re okay,” Honeyfrost started.

“Yes, more paws would be good,” Jayfeather interrupted, glaring at his former apprentice. “But you need to be patched up first. I smell blood.” It took that comment for Brambleheart to realize that she hadn’t gotten proper treatment for her wounds. Eagleheart had put a cobweb on it so that the wound wouldn’t worsen on the journey home, but she saved her more aggressive treatments for WindClan. Now, the single layer of cobweb was falling off, and the wound hadn’t fully closed. Pain shot up as Brambleheart’s body caught up with what she saw.

Brambleheart laid down on her good side so that Jayfeather got full view. Unfortunately, her bruised shoulder screamed at the pain. She was so sore, but lucky to be only that. A dog as large as the one she fought could have easily broken a bone.

“There,” Jayfeather said as he squeezed a poultice of marigold and comfrey into the scratch. Brambleheart failed to muffle a small yelp. “What a strong warrior you are,” the medicine cat joked dryly. He put the cobweb onto the scratch. “You’ll be fine. The scratch may be big but it’s not deep enough to scar. Just take it easy for the next few days. You can still patrol, but no hunting or

fighting until I say it's safe. We don't want it to get worse. Is there anything else bothering you before you can help us?"

"Yes," Brambleheart replied. "I also appear to have a bruise on my shoulder." She turned around to the other side, showing the bruised area. Jayfeather examined it, and asked Brambleheart a series of questions.

"Does it hurt when I press here?"

"Yeah."

"What about now?"

"Not really."

Jayfeather then gave Brambleheart some nettles for the bruise. "If it gets any worse," he informed, "tell me. I can give you medicine to ease the pain or swelling."

Brambleheart nodded. She got up and helped the medicine cat and elder help out the rest of the injured cats. A lot of wounds were similar to Brambleheart's own. She helped by passing over herbs and occasionally chewing up poultices while Jayfeather and Honeyfrost were busy assessing wounds. It took until moonhigh for each cat to be accounted for, and luckily, only a few cats needed to stay in the den— Bramblestar, to be monitored after losing a life; and Rattail for a badly wrenched leg. They were expected to live, though.

“Thanks for your help, Honeyfrost and Brambleheart,” Jayfeather meowed. “I got it from here. But I do want to see your bruise and scratch tomorrow, Brambleheart.” After mewing thanks for the medicine, Brambleheart went to eat a sparrow with Hawkfeather.

“Where were you?” Hawkfeather asked. “I thought you went to WindClan!” Brambleheart laughed. Hawkfeather was a mouse-brain, and he knew it. He was also one of the best fighters in the Clan, having fought well against the dogs without getting a single scratch.

“I was helping Jayfeather,” Brambleheart explained. “With Eagleheart gone, I thought it was the least I could do.”

“Are you becoming one too, then?” Hawkfeather joked.

“Well, all the time I’ve spent there, what with being a sickly kit, greencough, and visiting my sister, I may as well be one. I have the skillset!” Brambleheart snorted.

“Well, next time you are hurt and have to go there, you’d better learn how to speak with StarClan,” Hawkfeather remarked. “Sometimes I wish I could tell them to not make me bump into everything!”

“You already have a gift from StarClan for that,” Brambleheart responded sassily. “They’re called eyes!”

“Did Firestar tell you that?” Hawkfeather asked. Both cats started laughing, much to some of the older warriors’ amusement and contempt. They continued chatting and joking, basking in moonlight and the crisp air of late greenleaf, before Brambleheart went to her nest to sleep.

Chapter 9

“Your wound is healing very well,” Kestrelflight told Flutterpaw. “I do want you to stay here. It’s better safe than sorry.” The WindClan medicine cat turned to Eagleheart. “Any news on your end?”

“Lots of splinters from rebuilding Camp!” Eagleheart reported. “And so many herbs that I never learned of. Good thing we have an apprentice!”

“What herbs grow in the forest?” Whistlepaw asked curiously.

“Later,” Eagleheart mewed. “Can you please pass the sheep sorrel?” she asked Kestrelflight.

After nearly a whole day of healing wounds and accidents from reconstruction, Eagleheart was exhausted. But her work still didn’t end when the sun set. Kestrelflight was set to take Crowfeather to the Moonpool that night. They had waited a day to make sure that the new leader was fit to travel, and so that he could brief Breezepelt, the new deputy, on his vision for the new Camp. Meanwhile, Eagleheart and Whistlepaw were to tend to Larkwing, the heavily pregnant queen who could have her kits any moment, and Featherpelt, Whistlepaw’s mother who recently announced a new litter was on the way.

“Have you worked with kits before?” Eagleheart asked the apprentice.

“Not really. Flutterpaw and I are the youngest cats here!” Whistlepaw replied politely.

“Well, I know a thing or two about delivering litters,” Eagleheart said. “If anything happens, I can help you. Now, go and get some sleep. Kestrelflight and I agree that you did wonderfully today!” Whistlepaw held her tail high in pride and went near the medicine den to sleep.

Eagleheart found Lionblaze talking with Breezepelt. They looked tense, but not as much as when ThunderClan had first left.

“Hi, Eagleheart!” Breezepelt greeted. “Is everyone doing well?”

“Yep!” Eagleheart mewed. “Everyone got their herbs. Kestrelflight just left with Crowfeather a few moments ago, so I’m in charge.”

“Don’t worry,” Lionblaze assured Breezepelt. “She is a great healer.”

“Well, you’d better go find a place to sleep once the sun sets. It’ll be a warm night tonight, so we’ll be sleeping in the open.” Breezepelt meowed.

“The open?” Eagleheart repeated. “I’ve never slept in the open before.” Lionblaze nodded in agreement.

“Well, you two have WindClan in you,” Breezepelt joked. “It’ll come naturally once a few nights have passed. I can find you a place in the shade.”

“Thank you,” Lionblaze mewed curtly. He went to settle down and rest.

“Hay, Eagleheart,” Breezepelt said. “Heathertail and Appleshine are night-hunting. Want to go? The wind against your fur will feel very refreshing after today. I’m thinking of bringing Ravenwing along, too.”

“Okay,” Eagleheart trilled. “But Whistlepaw is resting. I’ll need to be back soon in case Larkwing’s kits come.”

“Of course,” Breezepelt replied.

Eagleheart padded to the assembling patrol. Ravenwing was happily chatting with Appleshine about rabbit hunting. ThunderClan cats would catch them occasionally, but hunting rabbits in the undergrowth was very different from hunting on the moor.

After leaving Camp, Eagleheart was very surprised at how many stars lit the sky. She only got hints of the sky in the dense forest, but this was absolutely stunning! *No wonder that WindClan cats say they’re the closest to StarClan!*

“Catch up!” Heathertail teased. Eagleheart ran as fast as she could. The air was very crisp so she wasn’t at that much risk of overheating. But still, her long, ThunderClan fur was heavy and set her behind. Only Brambleheart inherited the lithe, muscled legs of the WindClan runners.

Eagleheart had muscled legs too, but they were more for jumping and climbing, like Lionblaze's and her ThunderClan kin. Ravenwing, however, had shorter fur, letting him be able to maintain his stamina, although not running nearly as fast as Heathertail.

Appleshine giggled. "ThunderClan slowpokes!" she teased.

"Well, you don't seem too experienced at hunting in your little forest!" Ravenwing shot back.

"That's a good idea," Heathertail mused. "Eagleheart and Ravenwing, why don't you teach us more about forest hunting?"

"We promise not to steal prey," Breezepelt snorted.

"I'm not the best at hunting," Eagleheart admitted. "But I am one of ThunderClan's best trackers!"

"You must get that from WindClan," Heathertail responded. "Do you smell anything right now?"

"I think I smell a rabbit," Eagleheart trilled.

Eagleheart watched as Ravenwing shot towards the rabbit as fast as he could. The black-and-white tom chased after it, but the rabbit hid in a clump of tall grass. Luckily, Ravenwing was a ThunderClan cat, and was able to catch the rabbit in the dense grass.

“Wow!” Appleshine beamed. “You make hunting in the tall grass look easy!”

“It isn’t for you?” Ravenwing asked, tilting his head.

“Hard to run, and hard to see,” Breezepelt grunted.

“Try that with a bunch of roots and dried leaves underpaw!” Eagleheart trilled.

The patrol chattered some more, and returned to the WindClan Camp. Eagleheart was concerned that the patrol would get lost- there were so many identical looking rolling hills, and any scent trails were disturbed by the wind. By the time Eagleheart quietly padded towards the medicine den, she realized that Kestrelflight had returned, and ran to see how he was doing.

“Thank you for your work,” Kestrelflight mewed. “And I’m glad you got to explore the territory. Perhaps we can gather herbs tomorrow.”

“That’s a good idea,” Eagleheart mewed. “If we find extra WindClan herbs, perhaps I could bring them to ThunderClan. We don’t get moor herbs, and we’re getting low from our last exchange.”

“Of course!” Kestrelflight said. Eagleheart smiled. As much as she missed ThunderClan and Brambleheart, she was happy here. WindClan was very welcoming, and having Lionblaze and Ravenwing helped as well. As Eagleheart curled next to Ravenwing in the guest area, she stifled a purr, excited to see which adventures she would go on with him tomorrow.

Chapter 10

A few days had passed since Ravenheart accepted the position of Clan deputy. It was very hard adjusting to all of the new responsibilities. Luckily, both Tigerstar and Cloverfoot were helping him out, giving tips on patrol organization and leadership skills.

In between sessions of helping Clanmates, Ravenheart went to visit his mother in the nursery. Firkit and Moonkit had just opened their eyes, and were starting to squirm more in their nests. Soon enough they would learn to walk, then run, and then they would play all around Camp.

Ravenheart was leaving from one of the visits when he heard the rustling of warriors returning from a border patrol. It was the sunhigh patrol, which was unusual for ShadowClan, but adding it to the schedule temporarily did help the Clan's peace of mind when it came to intruding animals.

"Anything to report?" Ravenheart asked.

"Nothing," Gullswoop confirmed. "Though I did see a pretty fat sparrow near the SkyClan border. Too bad it was on their side!"

Antfur narrowed his eyes. "I did go near the scene of the battle. The scent of the dogs is stale, same with you. But near a tree, I picked up another scent. It didn't smell of any Clan."

"I told you," Gullswoop hissed. "It was probably some kittypet hiding from the dogs. The poor thing must have been running for their life! But that scent is stale as well, so there is nothing to worry about."

Ravenheart dipped his head to his Clanmates. It was still so strange giving orders to cats that were older than him. "Thanks for the report. Go get some rest and food, and I will talk to Tigerstar about the situation."

The patrol scattered, and Ravenheart entered his father's den. He was there, grooming himself and getting pine needles out of his thick fur. Ravenheart waited patiently for Tigerstar to finish, and then announced the patrol's return.

"Ravenheart, I appreciate the effort, but you don't need to announce *every* patrol. No news is good news sometimes," Tigerstar grumbled.

Ravenheart stomped his foot. "This *is* important. At least, Antfur thinks it is. He, Gullswoop, and Sparrowtail were revisiting the scene of the dog incident, and Antfur picked up the scent of a Clanless cat coming from a nearby tree. Gullswoop thinks it was a kittypet, but something seems off."

Tigerstar swooped to look at Ravenheart. "Gullswoop is probably correct. If you were to get caught in a stampede of dogs without any training, you'd probably hide at the first chance you get!"

“But why would a kittypet hide in that specific tree?” Ravenheart asked. “There are other places to hide. The kittypet could have gone back inside its Twoleg nest. You know Antfur and I remember how Twolegplaces work.”

“But the scent is gone, right? Nothing to worry about even if it is a rogue,” Tigerstar growled. “I don’t want to scare my Clan anymore.”

Ravenheart flattened his ears. “This is my Clan, too! The whole reason the Sunhigh patrols are even happening is because our Clanmates want answers. This development could at least provide something. I want to lead a patrol to track the scent, to see where it came from. If the mystery cat isn’t a kittypet, we need to alert SkyClan and ThunderClan immediately.”

“I can’t argue with you,” Tigerstar sighed. “But if this turns out to be a waste of time, blood, or resources, I am not the cat to blame.”

* * * * *

Ravenheart, Sunbeam, and Spireclaw set off to investigate the scent. They had arrived at the scene where blood still stained the sunburnt grass. As Ravenheart scented what was left of the battle’s remnants, memories of it flashed in his mind. The sudden arrival... the flurry of claws... the caterwaul that ended the battle as soon as it had begun. Wait- a caterwaul? Ravenheart assumed it was the dog, but could they even make that noise?

“I found the tree!” Sunbeam announced, trembling slightly.

“What’s wrong?” Spireclaw asked. “You look horrified.”

Sunbeam whimpered. “In the battle, I saw a pair of eyes. I thought it was another dog, or a patrol, so I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Why tell us now?” Spireclaw asked. “It probably wasn’t the patrol, they came the same direction we did.”

Ravenheart’s eyes widened as Sunbeam said what he had deduced. “The pair of eyes was in this tree.”

“Sunbeam?” Ravenheart asked. “Remember when the dogs left? By then, the pair of eyes was gone, yes?” Sunbeam nodded. “The caterwaul that sent the dogs away, now that I think about it-it couldn’t have been a dog.”

Spireclaw’s fur stood up. “So you’re saying there is a cat leading these dogs?”

“They could have been telling the dogs to retreat! If it was a kittypet,” Sunbeam mewed.

Ravenheart went to the tree to figure out more about the mystery cat. If it was a kittypet, he would know. Ravenheart still remembered the distinctive scent of Twolegs, and how it always stuck onto cats they would pet. But to his surprise, there was no trace of Twoleg scent at all, besides the hint of Twoleg that appeared in nearby dog scent.

“This isn’t a kittypet’s scent,” Ravenheart murmured to his friends. “This is a rogue.”

Chapter II

Brambleheart yawned. Her injuries from the battle were feeling much better, and she left her den. Brambleheart saw her Clanmates watch the elders bring Blossomfall and Stormcloud's bodies out for burial. Grief made Brambleheart feel dizzy. In most circumstances, she would be sitting vigil with her Clan, but Bramblestar had ordered any injured cats to rest, including the overworked Brambleheart.

"Good morning, Brambleheart!" Hawkfeather greeted.

"Care to finally join us?" Shellfur growled passive-aggressively.

Plumstone glared at her littermate. "You know she fought in the battle *and* helped out the medicine cats. Bramblestar ordered cats like her to rest." She turned to Brambleheart. "You are looking better. Would you and Hawkfeather care to join us?"

Brambleheart and Hawkfeather joined their peers as they watched the procession. A hint of sadness shone in Brambleheart's eyes as she realized how truly alone Plumstone and Shellfur must be feeling. Brambleheart had been raised alongside them, and remembered the heavy losses they had to endure. As kits, Briarlight died due to a sickness that Plumkit also had. Briarlight had been very

close with the kits, and despite her parents' reassurances, Plumkit felt as though she had killed her beloved Clanmate by being ill. As a slightly older apprentice, their grandmother Millie also died due to old age. And in the past three seasons alone, Plumstone and Shellfur lost Eaglewing, Stemleaf, and now, Blossomfall. Shellfur had always been a bully, but Brambleheart couldn't blame him for his behaviour as of late. *Plumstone and Shellfur only have each other, Thornclaw, and Graystripe. A far cry from just three seasons ago.*

Plumstone let out a sob as Thornclaw and Graystripe lowered Blossomfall's body into a grave near where Briarlight and Millie had been buried. Shellfur gazed with an undetectable emotion in his green eyes. Meanwhile, Sparkpelt, Sorrelfoot, and Rattail watched with wide eyes as Stormcloud was buried by Mousewhisker and Birchfall.

After a few words from Bramblestar, the Clan somberly went back to its normal duties. Brambleheart wished to help out, but wasn't allowed to exert herself even though she felt better. She was, however, allowed to go on walks, which Hawkfeather promised he'd join her on. Brambleheart asked Bristlefrost if she'd like to join. Squirrelflight was more than happy to look after the kits, but despite the support, Bristlefrost politely declined.

As Brambleheart took her time walking with Hawkfeather, she couldn't help but glance towards WindClan territory. How were Eagleheart, Lionblaze, and Ravenwing doing? Was WindClan recovering well? Had Larkwing's kits arrived?

"I'm sure everyone is fine," Hawkfeather mewed, surprisingly genuine. "Your father is one of the strongest cats in all the Clans. Ravenwing is resourceful and kind, and if Eagleheart is anything like you, she is doing everything she can to help."

“Anything like... me?” Brambleheart asked.

Hawkfeather purred, touching noses with Brambleheart. “Of course! You are one of the kindest and most dedicated warriors I know. That worry you have for Eagleheart? For WindClan? It’s because you care!”

Brambleheart looked down at her chest fur. “Sometimes I think I care too much.”

“If Firestar didn’t care like he did, we probably wouldn’t exist!” Hawkfeather pointed out, lifting Brambleheart’s head with his tail. “Caring when it seems like nobody else does is a good trait for a good warrior.”

“But what if your caring gets in the way of being a good warrior?” Brambleheart asked. “I want cats to be happy, to be free to be themselves. But it’s hard, Hawkfeather. Going against your kin, sometimes even your Clan.” Brambleheart thought of Stoattail, Ashpelt, and Cloudkit. Getting past her own littermate and having to convince her leader to even consider the case took a large toll. So did trying to be nice and become friends with a cat you found creepy because it seemed like the right thing to do. And convincing the Clan to take in a kit shouldn’t have been that hard.

“Maybe you need to be a different warrior,” Hawkfeather said matter-of-factly.

Brambleheart shook her head. “That’s what I’ve tried to be,” she meowed. “To be a different warrior is to turn your back to the rules that make warriors who we are.” She paused. “I hate to say it, but have you ever thought that some rules are better gone, or changed?”

Hawkfeather's eyes shone with mischief, and Brambleheart let out a dramatic sigh. "Is this the same Brambleheart that used to tattle that our mossball was made of bracken? Who refused to eat until she caught prey, even when it was dusk?" His expression became more serious. "Rules come and go. A lot of the older warriors remember when Bramblestar got a law added to the warrior code. If leaders can vote to add new to the code, surely they can vote to remove a bad one?"

"Too bad I'll never be a leader," Brambleheart laughed. "Can you imagine me on the Highledge? Trying to be tough around enemies and disobeying Clanmates? Yowling at a Gathering until I lose my voice?"

"You have a strong voice," Hawkfeather joked.

Brambleheart gave a playful bat to her friend. "There he is; classic Hawkfeather."

"You want more?" Hawkfeather joked. He batted Brambleheart right back. Brambleheart and Hawkfeather continued play-fighting until the sound of a patrol made them stop. They didn't want another warrior watching them play like kits!

Upon returning to camp, Brambleheart went to the medicine den, where Jayfeather cleared her to continue her regular duties. She grabbed a thrush from the fresh-kill-pile, and brought it to Bristlefrost. Together, they shared the prey with the kits, and Brambleheart told the gossipy Bristlefrost everything that she had noticed about their Clanmates.

Chapter 12

“Eagleheart!”

Eagleheart woke up to Whistlepaw prodding her. She opened her eyes to see the apprentice with wide, nervous eyes. “Is everything okay?”

Whistlepaw shook her head. “Larkwing is having her kits, and Kestrelflight isn’t back yet. I need help!”

Eagleheart stood up and ran to the nursery. Larkwing was there, with her sister Featherpelt comforting her. Featherpelt had already had the litter that Whistlepaw was a part of, but this was Larkwing’s first.

“I’m here to help,” Eagleheart told the queens. “I hear this is new for Whistlepaw, so I’ll take the lead. Whistlepaw, can you get some herbs for strength and disinfection?”

“What I need right now is a poppy seed,” Larkwing joked. Despite the pain the queen must be in, it was a good sign that she was still able to find light of the situation. As long as Larkwing remained in good spirits, Eagleheart was sure that everything would go smoothly.

“We don’t give poppy seeds to nursing queens, sorry,” Eagleheart explained. “It could affect the kits.” Whistlepaw nodded, and so did Larkwing.

Soon, Whistlepaw returned with the correct herbs. Eagleheart thanked the bright apprentice, and gave them to Larkwing. The queen looked at Eagleheart, nervous. “I keep on having spasms, but nothing is happening. Are the kits okay?”

“Spasms mean your body is getting ready for the kits to come,” Eagleheart meowed. “It’s nothing to worry about for now. Just focus on breathing, and when your spasms get strong, I want you to push.”

The spasms progressed quickly; Larkwing’s birthing would be easy compared to most. Eagleheart felt the queen’s belly. There were at least two kits ready to arrive into the world. Helping kits be born was one of Eagleheart’s favourite things to do as a medicine cat. It was an honor to be the first cat to lay eyes on a new life, and to welcome it into the beautiful world. It was an even bigger honor to be welcoming another Clan’s kits. *Will ThunderClan’s kits have to meet these kits in battle?*

Soon, it was time for Larkwing to push. Whistlepaw fetched a stick from the medicine den. Because WindClan had so few trees immediately close to their camp, the medicine cats had to keep a few for pain management and splints. Larkwing clamped her jaws on the stick, and soon, a kit was born. It was white and fluffy like a little patch of snow.

“It’s a tom,” Eagleheart said. The kit let out a strong mew and batted Eagleheart’s paw when trying to stretch and wiggle. *This one is going to be a nuisance once he learns to play!* Larkwing nipped the kitting sac and licked her son warm.

Soon, the second kit was born. “A she-kit!” This kit was a beautiful pale grey, and gave a much quieter mew. Larkwing took care of the she-kit while Eagleheart brought the tom to nurse.

“Are there any more?” Larkwing asked.

Eagleheart felt the queen’s flank, careful not to disturb any soreness. “Nope! Just the two.” She looked down at the kits who were purring, kneading, and nursing. “Welcome to WindClan, beautiful kits.”

Larkwing looked at Eagleheart gratefully. “I’d never thought my litter would be delivered by a ThunderClan cat,” she mewed. “That’ll be a great story once they start asking about the day they were born. If you visit again for exchanging medicine, or for aid, or when the kits attend their first Gathering, I’ll make sure they know you were the cat who brought them here.”

Featherpelt looked excitedly at Larkwing. “Do you have any names?”

“The white kit is Snowkit,” Larkwing meowed. “I’m sure you can guess why. And the she-kit, I want to name Echokit. Her quiet mew so soon after Snowkit’s loud one sounded like a little echo!”

“Those are beautiful names,” Eagleheart purred. “I’ll let Kestrelflight give you a check once he returns.”

“Speaking of...” Featherpelt said. Eagleheart peered outside of the den to see Kestrelflight return with Crowfeather. *He must be Crowstar now.* Eagleheart padded outside to greet the medicine cat and the new leader.

WindClan cats were beginning to gather to hear Crowstar’s words. He leapt onto the Tallrock and swept his tail to silence his Clanmates. “I have received my nine lives and leader name. I am now called Crowstar.” Eagleheart respectfully joined the WindClan cats to cheer Crowstar’s name. “I see great progress has been made rebuilding our camp, and healing our injured cats. If it wasn’t for ThunderClan’s help, we’d be dead, and thanks to the cats visiting us, our ravaged Clan is finally healing.”

Eagleheart stood up and gave the Clan the news of the new life. “Crowstar, while you were gone, Larkwing had her kits: a she-kit named Echokit and a tom named Snowkit. I couldn’t have done it without Whistlepaw. She is very swift and thankfully knows where everything is.”

Crowstar smiled. “With so much lost, it seems like nothing will be the same. But life still goes on. These kits will still grow up in the same WindClan that we have. And so will their own kits one day. Eagleheart, Lionblaze, Ravenwing, despite me intending for you to stay here longer, I think we can manage from here. WindClan will never forget your help, and I would do anything to repay.”

“All we ask is to pay it forward,” Eagleheart smiled. “Whether it’s a Clan in need, or even a cat or two.”

Leaftail hissed. “So are we going to be touching noses with ThunderClan from now on? That should be expected, considering you were mates with a ThunderClan cat!” The comment caused Lionblaze to bristle, but after Heathertail gave him a sympathetic look and told him not to attack, he calmed down.

Crowstar’s eyes narrowed. “That is very disrespectful, Leaftail. No, we aren’t going to ‘touch noses’, whatever that means. I mean that we should try to amend our differences.” Crowstar lashed his tail. “No more questions. I will bring our guests home in the morning.”

* * * * *

Eagleheart was sharing a rabbit with Ravenwing. It was dawn, and Crowstar was going to bring the guests home once the sun fully rose. Lionblaze was still asleep, but Crowstar insisted that the awake cats ate before the trek home.

Ravenwing looked up at Eagleheart, gentleness radiating from his gaze. “I’m glad I was chosen to stay here,” the black-and-white tom mewed. “I got to spend so much more time with you! It was like we were apprentices again.”

Eagleheart purred. “In another life, maybe I could have been a warrior beside you like we wished. It would have been an honour to hunt with you.”

“Who’s to say we can’t spend more time together?” Ravenwing asked. “Eagleheart, I miss you. I miss frolicking in the forest at sunhigh when our mentors were napping. I miss imagining ourselves as patrol leaders. I miss being silly. But now I’m a warrior, and you’re a medicine cat. It’s a shame our paths don’t cross often.”

“Ravenwing,” Eagleheart whispered. “I miss you too. I didn’t know it at the time, but I really liked you. And to be honest, I still kind of do.”

Ravenwing licked his paw. “But you’re a medicine cat!”

“I’m Leafpool’s kin,” Eagleheart reminded. “I know exactly what not to do. We can be together, the Clan already knows we’re close friends.”

Ravenwing nodded. They nuzzled each other, and went on to finish the rabbit, leaving a bit for Lionblaze who eventually awoke. By the time Lionblaze finished, it was time to leave.

Eagleheart and Ravenwing stuck to the back of the group, while Crowfeather and Lionblaze took the lead. It was a foggy day, showing that leaf-fall was very close upon the Lake. As Eagleheart scented her surroundings, she noticed a strange glow. It appeared to be two sets of eyes. One seemed yellow; the other blue.

“Ravenwing, do you see that?” Eagleheart asked. Her new mate looked at the glowing shapes.

“They’re probably just fireflies,” Ravenwing chocked up.

“Fireflies aren’t around this time of day,” Eagleheart reminded him. “And it’s chilly; I’m pretty sure they’re gone until next newleaf anyways.”

The eyes disappeared, and Eagleheart decided to let go of her paranoia. She was going home with her father and her new mate, and she wanted to keep that happy thought in her mind.

Chapter 13

“A rogue on our territory?” Tigerstar roared. “And Sunbeam didn’t report it?”

Ravenheart dipped his head in apology. “She assumed it was a lost kittypet. And quite frankly, we had bigger things to worry about.”

“You’re lucky the border patrols didn’t scent anything fresh,” Tigerstar growled. “The rogue has probably moved on. Next time, be more upfront about what you or your Clanmates see.”

But I wasn’t even deputy then! And besides, Sunbeam never told anyone. How would I have known? As much as Ravenheart loved his father, sometimes he wanted to claw his ears off.

“Okay, Tigerstar,” he said, leaving the den.

Ravenheart padded to the clearing to soak in some sun. Leaf-fall was only a few days away, and the air was starting to become very crisp. Although Ravenheart preferred cooler weather, he couldn’t say no to a bit of sun. It would help take his mind off of things.

Flaxfoot, a warrior that Ravenheart grew up with, joined him. He hadn't talked with the brown tom for a while, and figured that he must want to catch up. "I heard you and Tigerstar in the den. You did the right thing, you know."

"Thanks," Ravenheart mewed. "Would you like to go hunting?"

Flaxfoot smiled. "I thought you'd never ask. I was one of the cats not assigned to a patrol, and I'm going a bit stir crazy."

That evening, Ravenheart joined Flaxfoot outside of camp. He had also invited Conefoot. The three cats went on a part of their territory's small thunderpath near the Twolegplace to hunt any prey. Twolegs often threw away scraps that all sorts of creatures would eat. Although ShadowClan cats refused to eat scraps or stray too far into Twolegplace, there was no denying that the scraps were a steady resource to hunt prey near.

Not long after the patrol arrived, Conefoot had already caught a few mice and Flaxfoot nearly caught a hedgehog. Ravenheart saw some lizards basking in the warm amber lights on the Twolegs' illuminating trees, but they scuttled away once the patrol arrived.

Ravenheart was mainly looking out for rogues or kittypets while his patrol members hunted. There was no real patrol leader as this was an informal night hunt, but threats still loomed. A silhouette of a cat caused Ravenheart's fur to bristle, but the cat then showed itself as an orange kittypet.

“Are you Clan cats?” the kittypet asked. “I know about Clan cats! I lived in a Clan camp when this place set on fire!”

Ravenheart vaguely remembered the fire. It had happened when he was a kit and still on his father’s patrol home. This particular Twolegplace was badly charred. Although the Twolegs seemed to have rebuilt, some of the ashen debris still lay among the scraps, providing places for the prey to hide.

“We’re ShadowClan,” Ravenheart replied. “We mean no harm, we are still on our territory’s border.”

The orange kittypet flicked his ears. “Do you know Tigerheart? I met him a while back. He rode on the Thundersnake!”

Ravenheart narrowed his eyes. *Is this Fuzzball?* If it wasn’t for this daft kittypet, Tigerstar may never have reunited with Dovewing or been around to see Ravenheart or his littermates. Despite not knowing this cat beyond stories, Ravenheart still felt a twinge of closeness and gratitude towards him. “I’m his son, Ravenheart,” he said. “I recently became ShadowClan’s deputy under him. He’s named Tigerstar now.”

The orange tom introduced himself as Fuzzball, and asked to bring his friends over. Ravenheart agreed so long as the meeting was quick. Conefoot and Flaxfoot were confused about the situation, but remembered Fuzzball’s name and had mentioned to Ravenheart that he stayed in ThunderClan for a time as well.

Fuzzball returned with three more cats with him. The first, a black-and-white tom, was named Ajax. The second, a soft gray she-cat, was named Velvet. The third, a black tom, was named Loki. All three new cats seemed excited to see Clan cats for what Ravenheart assumed was the first time in a long while.

Ravenheart noticed that Ajax seemed to have a healing wound on his flank. He asked the kittypet if something had happened, concerned for his well being.

“There were a bunch of dogs loose,” Ajax explained. “We can usually get along with dogs, and we even knew a few. But it was as if there was a huge pack of them! Something or someone must have riled them up. It was like a stampede, and they knocked over every cat who was in their way! Luckily the Housefolk were able to bring them home. Our dog friends are alright now.”

Dog friends? No wonder Hollowspring thinks the Twolegplace is odd. “The dogs passed by our territory, but from a completely different direction than your Twolegplace,” Ravenheart mewed. “We think a cat did this.”

Velvet shifted her paws. “No kittypet I know would put so many dogs in harm’s way!”

“It wasn’t a kittypet,” Flaxfoot mewed.

Ravenheart nodded. “I scented a rogue. It was very faint due to the storm, and I couldn’t track it much further. But dog stampedes aren’t common. I assume they found the dogs here.”

“Did you see any strange cats?” Conefoot asked.

Loki looked down nervously. "I did smell a stranger a while back. The scent was there for about half a moon before the dogs escaped. It was a she-cat and she smelled of the woods. Not like a Clan cat, but she could have lived like one. I almost got a good look at her, but it was dark. I could only see her eyes- bright, piercing, yellow eyes." Ravenheart gasped. Those eyes sounded like the same ones from the dog battle. But he shuddered when Loki added another detail. "She wasn't alone. There was also a tom with her that I saw more of.. I knew this one was black-and-white. I figured both cats must be here for help because he looked hurt. I didn't say anything to them because of that. They disappeared when the dogs left. Since they didn't have a home, I thought they ran away, or had gone to the vet."

Ravenheart dipped his head. "Thank you, that was really helpful." He offered to groom Ajax's wound, and the kittypet accepted the request. Fuzzball offered to continue the care, letting Ravenheart and Ajax know of his experience in the ThunderClan medicine den.

The moon was rising, and Ravenheart didn't want to be gone long enough to be deemed missing, so after saying farewell to his new friends, he led the patrol home, where he was greeted by Dovewing.

"Where have you been?" Ravenheart's mother fretted. "You smell of Twolegs! Have you been..."

Flaxfoot shook his head. "Conefoot suggested hunting at the edge of our territory near the Twolegplace! There's a lot of prey there that we barely scratched the surface of. We bumped into some kittypets, that's all."

“One of them was wounded, so I helped him clean it up,” Ravenheart explained. “They know Tigerstar from when he went to find you in the City.”

Dovewing smiled. “How are they doing?”

“Well, Ajax was hurt escaping from the dogs,” Ravenheart explained. “They came from that Twolegplace. And another kittypet, Loki, gave me some important information. I need to speak with Tigerstar, *now*.”

Chapter 14

“Help me!”

Brambleheart turned around, trying to locate the cat screaming for help. She saw who it was—Fernstripe of WindClan—and immediately ran to support the warrior. As Brambleheart ran, her paws became heavier and heavier, and the ground between her and Fernstripe grew wider and wider. Brambleheart watched in slow motion as a large dog tossed her aside, causing her to land poorly on her side.

Too much in shock to get up fast enough, Brambleheart watched in complete helplessness as the dog lunged at Fernstripe, biting deep into the she-cat’s throat before thrashing her back and forth like she was a piece of prey. The dog dropped Fernstripe when it got bored, but by the time Brambleheart ran to the gray tabby, she was already dead.

Brambleheart woke up. It had been a few nights since the dog attack, and every night she had the same dream. No matter how fast she ran, the dog always killed Fernstripe, and Brambleheart had to watch. Why couldn’t I have done better?

“Are you okay?” Hawkfeather asked groggily. He slept in a nest not far from Brambleheart, and always noticed her jolting awake. “It’s morning, let’s get some fresh air.”

As Brambleheart walked out of the den, she noticed Poppyfrost and Ashpelt giving her concerned looks. *Am I that bedraggled?* She gave herself a quick groom to smoothen her fur before awaiting Berrynose's patrol assignments for the day. Before the deputy could announce anything, a rustle came from the camp entrance.

"Greetings, ThunderClan," Crowfeather—who must be Crowstar now—announced. "Your Clanmates have helped us so much that we have decided that they can return early. Thanks to Eagleheart, Ravenwing, and Lionblaze, our camp is safe again, and we have new kits who can play without fear. We still have a long road ahead, but we are grateful for how much you have helped us."

Behind the WindClan leader, Brambleheart saw Eagleheart, who bounded towards her. Lionblaze trotted in as well, with Ravenwing settling in next to Hawkfeather. Crowstar then went into Bramblestar's den for what was probably important leader business, leaving the ThunderClan cats to welcome their Clanmates home.

Brambleheart and Eagleheart nuzzled each other, with the usually shy Ravenwing chatting up a storm with Hawkfeather. Lionblaze waited outside the leader's den, meanwhile. Ravenwing guided Hawkfeather to a sunning patch, leaving Brambleheart and Eagleheart alone. Brambleheart couldn't help but notice a shaken look in her sister's green eyes.

"Is everything okay?" Brambleheart asked. "You look nervous. Did something happen?" Eagleheart shook her head. Brambleheart narrowed her eyes, knowing her sister was hiding something. "Tell me the truth."

Eagleheart sighed. "I saw something... odd this morning. We were walking back, and the moor was foggy. But then, I saw four glowing things. They looked like two sets of eyes. One of them looked yellow, and one of them looked blue. Though the colors may have been tricks of the light, I know what I saw were eyes."

Brambleheart winced at Eagleheart's defensiveness. "Woah! I believe you. Are you sure it wasn't the dawn patrol?"

Eagleheart shook her head. "We were the first cats to leave." She gave Brambleheart a look that the brown tabby couldn't read. "I have to go to Jayfeather's den. I'll see you later."

"Wait!" Brambleheart called, chasing after her sister. "I need to tell you something, too."

Eagleheart sighed. "What?"

"Something happened in the battle," Brambleheart started, anxiety clouding her blue eyes. "I think I killed Fernstripe. Or led to her death. Eagleheart, I could have saved her! I have a recurring dream. It's like my head won't stop showing me what I did."

Eagleheart bowed her head. "Did you lay a claw on Fernstripe?" Brambleheart shook her head. "Then you didn't do anything wrong. It's okay to feel guilty, but just know you didn't do anything wrong. If you have trouble sleeping, I'll give you a poppy seed." The orange cat padded into the medicine den.

What is going on with her? Brambleheart shook out the thought, going into the nursery. Bristlefrost's kits were to become apprentices later that day, and they could use a visit before the ceremony.

"It's Brambleheart!" Cloudkit dashed to her. Brambleheart's eyes shone with pride. The orange-and-white tom was just a tiny scrap when she rescued him. Now he was bigger than his adopted siblings, and was eagerly showing 'battle moves' for when he became an apprentice.

Weedkit and Milkkit were squirming as Bristlefrost tried to wash them, while Nightkit was fidgeting near Squirrelflight.

"Thank StarClan," Bristlefrost sighed. "I could use an extra cat!"

Brambleheart took Cloudkit and Nightkit to finish grooming while Squirrelflight helped with Milkkit. Nightkit was already clean, but Cloudkit needed some touching up.

"I already had a clean!" Cloudkit whined. "Besides, I'm six moons old. I can clean myself!"

Brambleheart let out a purr. "My mother still groomed me sometimes when I was an apprentice. I'm sure she would now, even. Now, how about I show you some hunting and battle moves?" Cloudkit let out a squeak of delight at the offer and scurried in a wider area. Brambleheart lowered into a hunter's crouch, tail held flat, instructing the kit to do the same. Cloudkit did well for the most part, but struggled to keep his long tail still. "Good job!"

Upon hearing the praise, Cloudkit started to wiggle, and pounced onto Brambleheart. The large kit nearly knocked her over before she found her balance. “I totally got you!” Cloudkit squealed.

“You’ll be a fine apprentice. Any cat would be lucky to be your mentor. Now, let’s get you clean.” Brambleheart scooped up the kit as best she could, getting the muck out of his white fur and making sure it was smooth and sleek.

“Brambleheart?” Nightkit mewed.

“What is it?” Brambleheart asked the kit.

Nightkit stared at Brambleheart with wide eyes. “Will you and Hawkfeather have kits one day? You’d be a good mother. You clean kits well.”

Brambleheart was taken aback by the comment. She and Hawkfeather were merely good friends. Why did Nightkit assume they were together? Brambleheart tried to find the right words to tell the small kit before Bristlefrost summoned them back into the nursery. Brambleheart felt tired from trouble sleeping the previous night, so she decided to take a quick nap.

“Help me!”

Not this again!

Brambleheart saw Fernstripe, begging for help. This time, Brambleheart knew it was a dream. This time, she didn't bother to walk to the warrior. She just waited for the dog to get her, like it did every time this moment happened.

But this time was different. The dog never came. In fact, nothing happened. The same moment of Fernstripe begging for help, Breezepelt slashing a dog's nose, Lionblaze letting out a huge screech, repeated again and again. What is happening?

In the infinite whirlwind of a single moment, Brambleheart looked around. Maybe there was something she could do to change the outcome. As Brambleheart focused on her surroundings, something caught her eyes.

Above a camp wall, obscured by the flurry of battle, Brambleheart saw a pair of piercing yellow eyes. As Brambleheart focused on the eyes, she was startled by Fernstripe, who sat beside her, looking straight at them with mortal fear in every strand of fur.

Chapter 15

Eagleheart watched Bramblestar speak from the Highledge. He had called a Clan meeting, and ThunderClan was eagerly gathered to listen to the leader's words.

"It is time for four new apprentices to be made today," Bramblestar announced. "These cats are the future of our Clan, and are taking their next steps on the path to serve their Clan. Weedkit, Milkkit, Nightkit, and Cloudkit, please step forward." The four kits walked to the base of the Highledge, with Cloudkit bouncing like an excited rabbit and Nightkit slowly and gingerly watching his steps. "Weedkit, from this moment on until you earn your warrior name, you shall be known as Weedpaw. Tinystorm, you are a fine young warrior. Please pass on your wisdom onto Weedpaw."

The clan cheered, and Weedpaw's eyes shone as he met with Tinystorm. "I'll make sure you become an honored warrior," Tinystorm promised. Eagleheart's mind flashed back to when Tinystorm was a small kit, collapsing after too much activity. With a treatment plan with the medicine cats he was able to thrive as an apprentice, and now he was a mentor himself.

"Milkkit, from this moment until you earn your warrior name you shall be known as Milkpaw," Bramblestar meowed. "Plumstone, you are ready for an apprentice. Pass on your kindness and ferocity onto young Milkpaw."

Milkpaw seemed taken aback by the Clan's yowls of praise, but gingerly touched noses with Plumstone. "We'll make a great team," the tortoiseshell promised.

Bramblestar turned his gaze onto the last two kits. "Cloudkit, you have had quite the journey here. We found you as a small, sick, weak kit. Now you are bigger than your new littermates, and definitely the most eager to learn. From this moment on until you earn your warrior name, you shall be known as Cloudpaw. Ashpelt, you were an eager apprentice not long ago. Teach Cloudpaw everything you know, and pass on your bravery."

Cloudpaw practically floated into the air as he bounced to his new mentor, only stopping when Eagleheart figured he realized that he wasn't a hyper kit anymore. Ashpelt put his tail around Cloudpaw, promising to teach the orange-and-white cat how to use his energy to protect the Clan.

Bramblestar cleared his throat. "Lastly, we have Nightkit. This young kit has taken a keen interest in medicine, and it is only proper that we honor his passion. Nightkit, from this moment until you earn your Clan name, you shall be known as Nightpaw. Eagleheart, you have done a great job fostering this kit's growing skill and passion for healing. Pass on your devotion and undying loyalty to Nightpaw."

Eagleheart padded up to Nightpaw, feeling as if this were a dream. Of course she had known that Nightpaw would be her apprentice, but it felt so surreal. It only felt like yesterday when Eagleheart was struggling to hunt in the crisp leaf-fall air. Now it was leaf-fall again, and she was a successful medicine cat with the responsibility and honor of training the next generation.

“We’ll have fun still, right?” Nightpaw asked.

Eagleheart purred. “Of course we will.”

* * * * *

After finishing the tour of the territory with Nightpaw, Eagleheart decided to let the apprentice settle into his new den. She went to the fresh-kill pile, hoping to share some prey with Brambleheart. As Eagleheart pondered what she would pick out, she was interrupted by Plumstone.

“Have you seen Shellfur?” Plumstone asked. “I told him I’d go on a stroll with him once I was done with Milkpaw, but he seems to be out. Did he join a patrol?”

Eagleheart shook her head. Shellfur had seemed to be away often even before Eagleheart stayed in WindClan. “He’s probably off doing whatever it is he does,” Eagleheart reassured. “I’d be happy to walk with you. Can Brambleheart come as well?”

Plumstone let out a happy trill. “Of course!”

Eagleheart wrapped her tail around her paws, mentally picking out a sparrow to share with Brambleheart. As soon as her sister returned from a border patrol, Eagleheart greeted her.

“Hello,” Brambleheart mewed. “How’s Nightpaw?”

Eagleheart blinked slowly. "He's a wonderful apprentice. I see now why you were so happy becoming Ashpelt's mentor. It really is magical watching a young cat learn." She took a breath. "Brambleheart, Plumstone would like to go on a stroll with us. She wanted to go with Shellfur but he's busy."

"That furball!" Brambleheart whispered. Eagleheart laughed. Shellfur has been close with Rosecloud and was often a bully and member of her mean cliques. "Sure, I'll come," Brambleheart agreed. "But I want to speak with you in private."

On the stroll, the three she-cats took in the crisp leaf-fall breeze and sunned themselves on warm rocks in open meadows. They chatted about the goings-ons in ThunderClan and WindClan.

"What's it like sleeping in the open?" Plumstone asked.

Brambleheart gave an exaggerated shudder. "Must be freezing. My paws would go numb!"

Laughing, Eagleheart let out a *mrow* of amusement. "It's not that bad," she assured. "They sleep in a sheltered part of camp, and if it's too cold or the weather is bad, they sleep inside."

"How is Appleshine doing?" Brambleheart asked. Appleshine was a very good friend of Brambleheart and Eagleheart. They often hung out during Gatherings.

"She's doing well. She is absolutely ecstatic about Larkwing's new kits!" Eagleheart squeaked. "The apprentices there are well-behaved, and Whiskernose tells stories I never heard before! WindClan isn't too different from us."

Eagleheart proceeded to tell the story of Rabbittail to Brambleheart and Plumstone. Whiskernose let out a few details that were sensitive to WindClan's privacy, but Eagleheart had learned that Rabbittail was a warrior skilled in using tunnels. He was remembered for being resourceful and loyal; one of WindClan's earliest legendary warriors. Eagleheart explained that in exchange, she had told Whiskernose and the apprentices the story of how Thunderstar had begun the tradition of Clan vigils.

The sunning was interrupted when Ashpelt and Cloudpaw rustled through the trees.

"You're still out?" Brambleheart asked Ashpelt. "Did you show Cloudpaw every last tree or something?"

"No," Ashpelt mewed. "We were practicing tracking. Cloudpaw wanted to know every scent he smelled."

Eagleheart smiled. That was her favorite part of leaving camp early on in her training. She loved learning new smells and what they had meant. Despite now using her skills for identifying herbs, Eagleheart was still one of the best trackers in ThunderClan.

Plumstone let out a yawn. "I'm getting tired. I'm going back to camp. You can continue your sunning. I think Thornclaw needs me, anyway." The tortoiseshell dipped her head farewell and left.

Eagleheart turned to Ashpelt, asking a question to the gray tom. "Have you seen Shellfur by any chance?"

“I scented him!” Cloudpaw squealed. “He’s near the moor.”

“Thank you, Cloudpaw,” Eagleheart purred, touching noses with the young tom. “You’ll make a wonderful warrior. Let’s go find him, and remind him about Plumstone.”

Chapter 16

Four days had passed since Ravenheart had spoken to the kittypets. In that time, Littlepaw had received his warrior name, Littlefox. Tigerstar believed the claim, but refused to do anything. It was now the night of the Gathering- Ravenheart's first as Clan deputy. He would be sitting with Crowfeather, Berrynose, Sagenose, and Minnowtail- all warriors much older and experienced than himself. Ravenheart worried that he'd feel like a kit surrounded by warriors.

As Ravenheart crossed the tree bridge behind his father, he couldn't help but continue to feel as if he shouldn't be deputy. So many of his Clanmates were much better suited to the position, and Tigerstar never listened to him anyways when problems showed up. But his Clan made it all the way across, and Ravenheart sat with the other deputies.

Berrynose had given Ravenheart an odd look, but Minnowtail slapped her tail onto him. Soon, SkyClan and WindClan arrived, with Sagenose giving a warm greeting. But Ravenheart noticed he wasn't the only new deputy- as Crowfeather leapt onto the great branches, Breezepelt had taken his father's former place.

"Breezepelt, is everything okay?" Ravenheart asked. He had never been close to the WindClan warrior, but was concerned that Harestar wasn't available.

Breezepelt dipped his head. "Very reassuring I am not the only new cat here. Harestar died. Crowstar is the leader now, and I am the deputy."

Ravenheart murmured condolences along with the other deputies Breezepelt and Harestar grew up together. When Breezepelt in return asked about Cloverfoot, Ravenheart explained her retirement and how he was deputy now.

Sunbeam guided Brambleheart, Eagleheart, and Appleshine to Ravenheart. He felt bad not sitting with his friends, but this was his spot now. As they exchanged greetings, Bramblestar swept his tail for the Gathering to begin.

"Prey is running well in ThunderClan," Bramblestar announced. "The air is getting crisp, but we are still thriving. We recently scented dogs but they went to the moor. We helped WindClan drive out these dogs, but lost Blossomfall and Stormcloud in the process." The Clans dipped their heads at the news. "But ThunderClan lives on! We have four new warriors: Ashpelt, Tinystorm, Rattail, and Sorrelfoot; and four new apprentices: Cloudpaw, Nightpaw, Milkpaw, and Weedpaw!"

"ASHPELT! TINYSTORM! RATTAIL! SORRELFoot! CLOUDPAW! NIGHTPAW! MILKPAW! WEEDPAW!" Ravenheart noticed that along with himself, other cats had to catch their breaths chanting the new names.

"Thank you, Bramblestar. We are glad to hear that life goes on," Crowstar meowed. "Before I begin, I once more would like to thank ThunderClan for helping us. We lost a lot of life in the battle, and while our Clan will continue to mourn the losses of Harestar, Crouchfoot, Brindlewing,

and Fernstripe; we will never forget the aid you provided for us. We could have lost everything. But prey still runs well, and StarClan has blessed Larkwing with two kits: Snowkit and Echokit!”

Ravenheart’s eyes widened in shock. Those must have been the same dogs he had fought. ShadowClan was lucky, but WindClan and ThunderClan weren’t as much. If Tigerstar wasn’t going to talk about the mystery rogue, Ravenheart would tell the Clans himself.

Mistystar started her report for RiverClan. “Leechpaw and Fogpaw have received their warrior names: Leechwhisker and Fognose! We also have three new apprentices: Frostpaw, Graypaw, and Mistpaw!” The Clans cheered for the new warriors and apprentices. “The Twolegs have left for the season, and our territory is calm again. We anticipate a hard yet prosperous leaf-bare.”

Hawkstar cleared his throat before beginning his speech. “SkyClan is thriving. We had caught the scent of the dogs as well, but they did not attack us. A badger has made a den in our territory near the border with ThunderClan and ShadowClan, but we will drive it out. We also have three apprentices: Oakpaw, Specklepaw, and Whitepaw!”

“OAKPAW! SPECKLEPAW! WHITEPAW!”

Tigerstar yowled for his turn, silencing the gathered cats. “ShadowClan has a new deputy: Ravenheart. Cloverfoot has retired to the elders’ den, and we have a new warrior: Littlefox!” The Clans cheered for Ravenheart and Littlefox. “Dovewing has had my second litter of kits: two she-kits named Moonkit and Firkit. They are healthy and strong, and love to play with the warriors’ tails. Prey is running well, and we have expanded our border patrols.”

“The dog started out in your territory?” Crowstar hissed. “And you didn’t warn us?”

Tigerstar shook his head. “The dogs had scattered, and the rain covered their scent. We didn’t know where they went.”

Ravenheart’s ears flattened, their tufts tickling his bristling neck fur as he spoke. “There is another fact that I feel obligated to share with everyone about the dogs. Sunbeam reported the sight of a pair of eyes. There was a caterwaul. After some investigation, I have deduced that a rogue must be behind the dog attack. Whether the rogue was targeting the Clans, or it was a series of freak accidents, we don’t know.”

“I saw a pair of eyes, too.” Brambleheart reported. “I was trying to save Fernstripe. I didn’t notice the eyes then, but I kept on having dreams about failing to save her. Only when I stopped and examined the dream scenes, I remembered the eyes.”

“Ravenwing and I also saw two pairs of eyes,” Eagleheart mewed. “Though we thought they were fireflies or a trick of the fog.”

Breezepelt hissed. “The dogs are long gone now! Their scents have left and haven’t appeared since. Why do we need to worry?”

Sagenose growled. “Because, if a rogue or two has the power to kill six Clan cats, then what will they do next?”

Tigerstar swished his tail. "Look up!" Ravenheart saw the bright full moon start to become obscured by wisps of clouds. If the clouds were to cover the moon any more, then StarClan would be showing its discontent, and the Gathering would end. Tigerstar spoke again. "Obviously, fighting and putting the blame on others won't solve anything. We will continue to investigate the mysterious cats. We will share our findings at Gatherings. Now before we disappoint StarClan any more, the gathering is dismissed!"

Chapter 17

Brambleheart was putting some new bracken into her nest. A moon had passed since the dog attack and subsequent Gathering. So far, things were quiet, but ThunderClan was on guard. Brambleheart had returned from a border patrol which didn't scent any strange cats. There were signs of SkyClan activity, however Brambleheart had remembered that Sandynose had told the dawn patrol that they were going to drive out the badger. Upon reporting the news to Bramblestar, the leader had assumed that there was accidental trespassing during the chaos.

Finished with her work, Brambleheart padded outside of the den. It was a beautiful leaf-fall day. The leaves were bright colours but haven't yet fallen, the air was crisp but not cold, and the sun often poked out of the clouds.

Ashpelt greeted Brambleheart, his mouth full of bracken himself. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" the gray warrior trilled.

Brambleheart nodded. "Leaf-fall is my favourite season," she replied. "What's with the bracken? Isn't that an apprentice task?"

“I’d say the same for your bracken,” Ashpelt remarked. Brambleheart looked down at her fuzzy pelt. Her fluffy tail was covered in pieces of bedding. “Cloudpaw gathered this for me. He wasn’t able to return, though. Nightpaw was off gathering herbs and Cloudpaw wanted to be his escort.”

“Weedpaw gave some of his leftovers to me,” Brambleheart mewed. “This must be Nightpaw’s first independent herb gathering. Eagleheart must be worried. Shouldn’t I make sure a fully-trained warrior is with them?”

Ashpelt smirked. “You’ve seen the way Cloudpaw can fight! Besides, the badger is gone now; Bramblestar said so.”

“I guess...” Brambleheart mewed. Her stomach rumbled, though she wasn’t hungry. “I think I’m feeling a bit ill, that’s all. Probably nerves.”

Ashpelt put his tail onto Brambleheart’s shoulder. “I hope you feel better soon,” he said. “If you need anything, let me know!”

Brambleheart let out a purr. Her apprentice had grown into a kind and loyal warrior. It was any mentor’s dream. Seeing Cloudpaw’s progress in only a moon, Brambleheart knew that Ashpelt would soon feel the same way.

After a few moments in the sunshine, Brambleheart felt better. *It’s probably just stress.* She no longer had any dreams about Fernstripe’s death, but dread over the mysterious rogues often

stabbed into her heart. Brambleheart did see Shellfur leave camp. *He doesn't have a patrol. Where is he going?*

Brambleheart decided to follow the tortoiseshell tom. She tracked him going north, towards the border. *What is happening?* This wasn't a Clan border. It was beyond Clan territory as a whole; a lawless, unstable land that didn't have the order of a warrior code or the blessing of StarClan.

"Shellfur!" Brambleheart shouted. "Where are you going? You're straying beyond the border!"

Shellfur jolted back. "Why are you here?" he hissed.

"Because I'm worried," Brambleheart mewed. "For the past two moons Plumstone has noticed you going all about on your own. Even more so now that Blossomfall died. Shellfur, I know we've had our troubles in the past, but if you need a cat to talk to, you can talk to me!"

Shellfur unsheathed his claws. "You... you took everything from me! You got my two best friends, Stoattail and Rosecloud exiled."

Brambleheart flattened her ears. "Stoattail was a WindClan spy! And Rosecloud caused harm to her own apprentice. I didn't do anything, they got punished for their own actions."

Shellfur began pacing. "Next, you convince our leader to get into WindClan's business. That got my mother killed!" Before Brambleheart could reply, Shellfur snarled. "And during said battle, I hear that you let Fernstripe die."

Brambleheart unsheathed her own claws, neck bristling. “You weren’t even there! I did my best, but the dogs got to her first. I had nightmares for days after. If I could have saved her, I would have— why do you care so much for Fernstripe?”

Shellfur’s puffed up tail drooped. “Because I loved her. I was meeting her here. But she’s dead, and now I can’t. Now I come here to think. To remember. You know what it’s like to lose someone you care for so deeply? To lose a part of yourself?”

Brambleheart shook her head. But thoughts of the cats she loved raced through her mind. Her sister Eagleheart, best friends Bristlefrost and Ravenheart, and Hawkfeather, too. However much of a furball that gray tom could be, he was always there for Brambleheart. At that thought, Brambleheart’s stomach squirmed.

“You still have Plumstone,” Brambleheart reminded Shellfur. “She’s grieving, too. And with her first apprentice, she could use some help. When I trained Ashpaw, my conversations with Eagleheart kept me from being overwhelmed. And Thornclaw needs you, too. He lost his mate. He’ll understand.”

Shellfur’s fur flattened, ears perked back up, and claws sheathed. “You’re right, Brambleheart. Let’s go back to camp. Thanks.”

Brambleheart led the tortoiseshell warrior home to camp, where Eagleheart was sunning. Brambleheart ran to her sister, telling her the update on Nightpaw’s mission.

“Eagleheart, you sent Nightpaw to gather herbs, yes?” Brambleheart mewed.

Eagleheart nodded. “I asked him to find a warrior. Do you know who went with him?”

“Cloudpaw did,” Brambleheart explained. “I told Ashpelt that it wasn’t the best idea…”

“It’ll be fine,” Eagleheart purred. “I do have something to tell you.”

Brambleheart tipped her head. Was it about Nightpaw? He was doing so well in his training. “What is it?” she said anxiously.

“You know how Ravenwing and I have always been close,” Eagleheart began. “We got even closer in WindClan, and we decided to be mates.” Eagleheart’s green eyes began glowing with guilt. “I thought things would go back to normal once we returned home. But they haven’t. We are official now.”

But that’s against the medicine cat code! “Does anyone else know?” Brambleheart asked. “This is serious. We don’t want things to get bad like they did with Leafpool.”

Eagleheart sighed. “I have things under control. We’re keeping things under wraps, don’t worry. Only you know so far, besides Ravenwing and I, of course.”

Brambleheart’s mind and heart felt a surge of relief. Eagleheart was a wise cat; she would figure out what to do. But Brambleheart’s belly still squirmed. “Eagleheart?” Brambleheart asked.

“Are you ill?” Brambleheart couldn’t see what her face looked like, but with Eagleheart’s question, she realized that she must look weak or scared.

“My belly has been squirming,” Brambleheart mewed. “It isn’t crow-food. I’ve been sharing my prey with Hawkfeather and he’s fine. I was on patrol, and I felt weak, and—”

Eagleheart interrupted Brambleheart by placing a paw on the brown tabby’s flank. Brambleheart let out a hiss— they were tender, and she was taken by surprise at the response. “Brambleheart, you’re not ill. All that time you’ve spent with Hawkfeather must mean something— it looks like you are expecting kits!”

Chapter 18

“Kits?” Brambleheart echoed. “No, this can’t be... I’m not ready to be a mother.”

Eagleheart smiled at her sister. “You’ll do fine. You’re great with kits, and you care deeply for others.” Brambleheart paused a bit, then dashed over to tell Hawkfeather.

The rest of the afternoon was spent sorting herbs with Jayfeather. Sometimes, Eagleheart would wonder where Nightpaw was, but she would shrug it off. It was his first time gathering herbs without her. He probably was still unaware of all the best locations.

When Eagleheart finished, she went to the fresh-kill-pile to get a vole for Jayfeather. *Nightpaw should be back soon. It’s the half moon, and it’ll be his second one since being confirmed as a medicine cat apprentice!*

The sun set, and there was still no sign of Nightpaw or Cloudpaw. Were they lost? Eagleheart’s heart ached at the thought of two young cats being lost and afraid in the chilly dark. She knew that she couldn’t go to the Moonpool if her apprentice was missing.

Jayfeather had thanked Eagleheart for the vole, but moved onto the meeting. "I can't go to the Moonpool tonight," Jayfeather grunted.

"Why?" Eagleheart asked.

"I wrenched my paw this morning when I was on a stroll with Lionblaze," Jayfeather said. "It'll be fine in a few days, but I don't want to take any risks. Especially when I can't see anything that can hurt my paw more."

Eagleheart sighed. "I can't go either. Nightpaw is still gone, and I need to make sure he comes back okay. What if he's hurt?"

Jayfeather closed his eyes. "I'll stay right here. Honeyfrost can help me if anything happens. I need you to go to the Moonpool. The other medicine cats need to know if any rogue activity has happened in ThunderClan."

Eagleheart nodded, thanked Jayfeather, and left the den. Outside, she could see Brambleheart and Hawkfeather sharing tongues and talking about their new family. Near them was Ravenwing.

"Ravenwing, have you seen Nightpaw anywhere?" Eagleheart asked her mate.

The black-and-white tom shook his head. "No, though I did track his and Cloudpaw's scents while I was hunting. They were going near SkyClan territory."

Eagleheart started panting. “That’s where the badger was, Ravenwing. What if it had gotten to them? What if Nightpaw is?”

Ravenwing licked Eagleheart’s ear. “I’ll ask Bramblestar to send a search patrol. You don’t need to worry at all. Just focus on going to the Moonpool. I’m sure StarClan has some of the best messages to share with you.”

Eagleheart left camp and trotted to the Moonpool. It was a chilly night, and she knew that any cat, even WindClan cats, would rather be snug in their nests than outside. The days were getting shorter, too. Maybe Nightpaw and Cloudpaw misjudged how much daylight they had. After all, they weren’t ShadowClan cats, so it would take much longer to go home in the dark.

The forest turned into fields, and then into stone as Eagleheart leaped off a rocky ledge to meet the rest of the medicine cats. Eagleheart trilled a greeting, and the medicine cats exchanged happy and then concerned looks.

“Where are Jayfeather and Nightpaw?” Whistlepaw asked.

“Jayfeather hurt his paw earlier, and he’s taking it easy,” Eagleheart said.

Alderheart nodded in agreement. “It’s better safe than sorry.”

Eagleheart continued. “Nightpaw is resting. He had a long day collecting herbs, and I don’t want to overwork him.” The medicine cats murmured their sympathies.

Fidgetflake twitched his tail. "Any news?"

"Havenpelt had her kits the other day," Willowshine mewed. "Their names are Mintkit and Eelkit, and they are strong and healthy."

"So did Featherpelt," Kestrelflight announced. "Whistlepaw, why don't you tell the other medicine cats about your new siblings?"

Whistlepaw excitedly talked about her three new sisters: Sleekkit, a black she-kit; Mothkit, a pale golden she-kit, and Foxkit, a ginger-and-brown she-kit that looked like a fox.

"Cinnamontail's kits are due in about half a moon or so," Shadowsight commented. "Are there any new kits coming in the other Clans?"

Eagleheart contemplated telling the medicine cats about Brambleheart's kits. She decided not to, as Brambleheart seemed to want to keep her news under wraps for the time being. With that awkward silence, Puddleshine announced that it was time to meet with StarClan.

Eagleheart lapped the chilly water, closed her eyes, and began to dream about StarClan.

Chapter 10

As the half-moon shone through the starry sky, Ravenheart wondered what his ancestors thought of him, especially Tawnypelt. Tigerstar's mother had died due to the Great Freeze when Ravenheart was just a young warrior. She had been a deputy too when Ravenheart was a kit, but stepped down. Would she want him to do the same? Ravenheart shook his head. He was much better at his job now, and he didn't wish for a new cat to feel the burden he did.

Ravenheart padded to the nursery to visit Dovewing. With Cinnamontail being so close to having her own kits, the brown tabby queen couldn't do much to help out without overworking herself.

Firkit and Moonkit were prancing around the nursery, despite it obviously being past their bedtime.

"Ravenheart," Firkit whined. "Dovewing says we have to go to sleep, but everyone else is up early."

Moonkit nodded thoughtfully. "If we are ShadowClan cats, and ShadowClan stays up at night, we should too!"

Ravenheart suppressed a chuckle. "You're ShadowClan, all right, but you're still only kits. Kits need an early bedtime. Do you want me to get our father involved? He *is* the Clan leader. His word is law." The last two sentences were meant to be silly, but Ravenheart wanted to be a good example.

"Moonkit!" Firkit squeaked. "When Cinammontail's kits are born, we'll be the oldest kits in the nursery. We can make ourselves leader and deputy. I'll be Firststar, just like Tigerstar!"

"And I'll be Moonheart. Just like Ravenheart!" Moonkit squealed. "He's the best deputy in all the Clans. I'll make Cinammontail's kits go on patrols to make sure the filthy warriors don't make us go to bed."

Firkit jumped. "The elders can be our Clanmates, too. I'll make them give us badger rides all night!"

"Now, now," Cinammontail murmured tiredly. "My kits will be very small, you know. You can't start bossing them around when they can't even see who is doing that. And little kits sleep a lot. You're still pretty little, last time I checked."

Ravenheart nodded. "A good deputy gets enough sleep at night."

Moonkit sighed dramatically. *Where did she learn to do that? Probably me.* "FINE. I'll go to sleep. But tomorrow I will be deputy, you hear me, Ravenheart?"

As the kits fell asleep nearly instantly, Dovewing gave Ravenheart an exhausted look. “I know you’re still insecure about being deputy, but if you can round up kits like that, you’re a better choice than half of the deputies I’ve met.”

Ravenheart smiled. His mother knew how to make him feel better about anything. He left the den, and went to visit Tigerstar to see if there was anything he had to do next. But Tigerstar called a Clan meeting.

“Cats of ShadowClan,” Tigerstar yowled. “It has been over a moon and a half since the dogs came. We need not worry any more about our territory being raided by rogues. To show you this, we are doing the first ever leaf-fall hunt!”

Slatefur narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure? We were about to go to sleep. The evening patrol has just come back!”

“All I’m asking is for each ShadowClan cat to catch one piece of prey. If you catch one, tell me, and you can go home. If not, you are doing apprentice duties for a quarter-moon.”

This caused Whorlpelt to hiss. “This is a ruse because we don’t have any apprentices!”

Tigerstar shook his head. “I promise, this isn’t a plot. I had this idea for a few days now!”

Ravenheart stepped forward, not wanting to see his Clan fight. “Listen to Tigerstar,” he screeched. “We are doing the hunt. However, Slatefur has a point. I believe that all cats who caught

prey in the afternoon or evening patrols should be exempt, just this one time. If we do this next leaf-fall, then we will organize better.”

“Very well,” Tigerstar sighed. “Let the hunt begin!”

As ShadowClan spread out, Ravenheart turned to his father. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

Tigerstar purred. “I wanted it to be my idea and mine only. Our Clan needs more morale. This will help. Now, I need you to watch everyone and make sure no cat is able to lie to me about catching prey.”

Ravenheart dipped his head and left camp. He decided to watch the cats going south towards RiverClan, and later go towards ThunderClan and SkyClan, where he knew he could get a good and obscured view of any deceitful cats.

Chapter 20

“ThunderClan!” Bramblestar screamed as he rushed out of his den. “Two of our apprentices, Nightpaw and Cloudpaw, are missing, and we need to find them.”

Brambleheart saw Bristlefrost’s cheerful expression drop into a deep panic. “How long have they been gone?” the gray cat panted.

Ravenwing padded toward his sister, murmuring comforting words. Brambleheart couldn’t believe it. She had been concerned about the apprentices being alone, and now they were missing. She felt as if it were her responsibility to find the missing cats.

“I’ll find them. I have a feeling where they went,” Brambleheart volunteered.

“A feeling won’t help!” Bristlefrost cried.

“I know that they went towards the SkyClan border,” Ravenwing said calmly.
“Brambleheart must have heard me saying that.”

Hawkfeather looked at Brambleheart with fear. "What about the kits?" Hawkfeather whispered.

"They'll be fine," Brambleheart hissed. "We have no time. I'm going, *now*."

Brambleheart ran out of camp and towards the west. Heart pounding, she contemplated stopping to catch her breath, but she didn't. Nightpaw and Cloudpaw needed her. As Brambleheart made her way to the border, she could smell the scent of death. The badger had been here, and the blood of Sandynose was on its nasty claws.

Following the scent trails of both the apprentices and the badger, Brambleheart walked for what felt like moons. At last, she stopped, shocked at what she found. The apprentices' fresh scent filled Brambleheart's nostrils, along with the fresh scent of a badger... and blood.

Brambleheart ran until she found two limp shapes. As she lowered her muzzle, she heard Cloudpaw's faint voice.

"Nightpaw, wake up!" Cloudpaw mewed weakly. "Nightpaw! I'm hurt.."

Brambleheart looked at Cloudpaw. "I'm here, Cloudpaw. You're going to be fine. I just need help."

She was spooked by the growl of a badger, and turned to look at it. The badger looked Brambleheart in the eyes, its own beady eyes glaring with hostility. Brambleheart froze at the sight.

The badger growled and bared its sharp and yellow teeth. It lifted its massive paw, still stained with the blood of Cloudpaw and Nightpaw, and slashed it towards Brambleheart.

Brambleheart dodged the blow and managed to jump on top of the huge badger's back. She started biting it on its neck, making the badger roar in agony and knock Brambleheart off of it. After gathering her senses for a moment, Brambleheart then scratched the badger's muzzle.

All of a sudden, the badger pinned Brambleheart onto the ground near a tree. Before she could even try to escape, Brambleheart yowled in pain as the badger's long claws raked her face, piercing her right eye. The badger let go, and Brambleheart slumped to the ground in pain as it aimed for her throat.

Brambleheart accepted her fate but the badger was slow in its final move, probably from the number of wounds it had gained from warriors that day. She used the last of her strength to slit the badger's throat before it could get to her. She saw the badger roar in pain and run away before she collapsed and everything went dark.

Turn the page for a Bonus Scene!

Chapter 1

Rootspring yawned. He had been chosen for the patrol that was to drive a badger off of SkyClan territory. With him were Violetshine, Bellaleaf, and Sandynose. The badger had been on SkyClan's land for a little over a moon, and despite the Clan's efforts, it didn't seem to get the message to leave.

The past few moons for Rootspring had been strange. He had a normal apprenticeship, yes, and made some friends as well, such as Leechwhisker from RiverClan. But he had struggled a lot with his identity as well. Rootspring was the son of Tree, a very unorthodox Clan cat. This caused Kitescratch and Turtlecrawl to tease him, and Rootspring felt ashamed to be kin with the Clan mediator for a bit. He even came close to drowning during one of his first days out of camp!

Things changed when Bristlefrost saved him on that fateful day. She had been rewarded with becoming a warrior early. Rootspring was so thankful for Bristlefrost that he wanted to do anything to repay her. He even had a little crush on her. But Bristlefrost was still a few moons older than him, and she became mates with Stemleaf. Rootspring was still happy and maintained a close friendship with Bristlefrost. Her kits had become apprentices recently, and Rootspring couldn't be happier for his friend.

But another issue plagued him. As Rootspring had tried to distance himself from Tree, he had learned that he shared his father's powers of seeing and summoning ghosts. It had all started during the Great Freeze, when Rootspring saw the spirits of cats who had frozen to death. The Moonpool was frozen, and it took a few days for the ghosts to reach StarClan.

After the spirits ascended, things were quiet. There wasn't any chance for Rootspring to talk to fallen Clan cats before they could go to StarClan, and there weren't many Clanless cats who died on Clan land. He got the chance to hone in his powers with the few spirits that he could meet. For the most part, he could continue his warrior duties as normal.

"Are you coming?" Violetshine asked. Rootspring nodded at his mother and caught up to the rest of the patrol.

Sandynose grunted towards the front. "Remember our plan," he reminded the patrol. "Rootspring will provoke the badger out of the bush it's making its sett in. He will chase it towards us, and we will attack it."

Rootspring nodded. He was the youngest and fastest of the patrol. As the patrol entered the badger's territory, Rootspring detected the nasty scent of the beast. He gave a low growl to signal to his Clanmates the detected scent. Sandynose led Violetshine and Bellaleaf towards an aspen tree while Rootspring searched for the badger's den.

The scent intensified at Rootspring gingerly padded towards a large thistle. It was large enough to house a family of badgers. The badger he was scenting was a female. Perhaps it was settling down to look for a mate to have kits with in this very den. Rootspring moved towards the

exit. He was going to provoke the badger, and he didn't want to be cornered by it in its own home. Rootspring faced the patrol and let out a yowl.

Almost instantly, Rootspring could feel the nasty breath of the badger as it began to rouse. Rootspring kicked some dirt in its face to provoke it even more and to get a head start. Then, he ran. He ran outside of the den with the badger in hot pursuit. Scenting his Clanmates, Rootspring ran towards the aspen tree near which they were waiting.

The badger let out a roar and almost slashed Rootspring's hind leg, but it missed. It was too close for Rootspring's liking, and he could sense the concern of his Clanmates. Rootspring ran in a circle to stall the beast, and continued running towards his patrol.

This feels like a nightmare, Rootspring thought. Even though he knew he was running as fast as he could, he felt as if time was slowing down. His Clanmates seemed to get farther away instead of closer, which was nonsense as they were standing completely still. His paws felt heavy, as if they were made of stone. But he still ran.

All in all, it took only a few moments to reach the patrol, but to Rootspring, it felt like moons. He finally made it, and let out a screech for his Clanmates to attack. Rootspring turned around, squared up in front of the badger, and panicked. *This badger is bigger than I thought it was!*

Chapter 2

“Attack!”

Rootspring felt a rush of relief as Sandynose called for the full patrol to launch themselves onto the badger. It worked, and the badger was nearly completely pinned. Rootspring aimed for the back of the badger’s neck, biting it with his sharp teeth in an attempt to make it bleed. A badger was hard to kill, but it was possible to drive it away from marked territory. Rootspring could taste the metallic blood of the badger, and bit harder. The badger let out a scream and attempted to shake Rootspring off of it.

To keep on, Rootspring dug all four sets of claws into the badger’s pelt. He saw Bellaleaf doing the same with her front claws on the badger’s hind legs. Violetshine secured the front paws while Sandynose started slashing the badger’s face.

Unfortunately, the badger fought harder, and once again tried to wriggle. This time, it was stronger and more desperate, and Rootspring went flying off of the badger. He landed onto the ground, slightly stunned.

A moment later, Rootspring managed to get up. He saw the carnage that the fight had become. Violetshine and Bellaleaf were struggling to get the badger under control as it targeted Sandynose. The brown tom tried to evade the badger's slashing, darting to and fro.

Unfortunately, Sandynose's efforts weren't enough. As Rootspring tried to help Violetshine and Bellaleaf ward off the badger, it raked a claw across Sandynose's face and throat. The warrior collapsed, and the badger let out a roar, turning to the rest of the cats.

Bellaleaf yowled in fear. "We must retreat! Four of us wasn't enough. We need to get more help!"

"But what about Sandynose?" Violetshine fretted. "We can't just leave him here." Sandynose was miraculously still alive, but even a newborn kit could tell that nothing could save the tom. The badger's claws had slit right over his nose and mouth, dislocating the jaw and splitting the bottom lip. Sandynose's neck was slashed open alongside the lips in the same wound, and was bleeding heavily. Rootspring could see the gurgling blood as Sandynose struggled to breathe. The blood was pulsing out, but the pulses were getting weaker until they stopped altogether.

"He's gone," Bellaleaf murmured. "We can retrieve his body later."

"But we can't let the badger roam freely!" Rootspring hissed. "We're close to the border with ThunderClan. If any cats there die, the blood will be on our paws!"

Bellaleaf shook her head. "It's not worth it," she hissed. "If we don't leave, it won't just be Sandynose who will wake up in StarClan. She signaled her tail to run, and Violetshine followed.

Rootspring wanted to as well, but knew that Sandynose needed to return home, alive or dead. Dewspring and Reedclaw needed to be able to properly mourn their father, especially since their mother Plumwillow had also died recently during the Great Freeze, and brother Finleap was lost to greencough in ThunderClan..

As the badger turned around to clean its wounds, Rootspring snuck over to Sandynose's body, dragging it away. The badger seemed to notice Rootspring, who tried to go faster despite the struggle of managing Sandynose's dead weight. The badger seemed to realize that Rootspring wasn't attacking it and left him alone. Before reuniting with Violetshine and Bellaleaf, the last Rootspring saw of the badger was it travelling south towards the lakeshore. *It's not going towards ThunderClan. Maybe it'll actually leave now.*

"Rootspring!" Violetshine's voice pierced Rootspring's ears. His heart stopped as he realized that his mother didn't know where he was. "Oh, Bellaleaf," she fretted. "Do you think the badger got to him, too?"

"I'm right here!" Rootspring said. He emerged from the woods into a small open space where Violetshine and Bellaleaf were looking for him. "Violetshine was right, we couldn't just leave Sandynose. Who knows what could have happened to his body?"

Violetshine sighed in relief. "Oh, Rootspring! I thought I lost you."

Rootspring nuzzled his mother. "I'm okay. And no, the badger didn't follow me. I saw it go towards the lakeshore. We'll be fine. Let's go to camp, sit vigil for Sandynose, and figure out what to do later."

Bellaleaf and Violetshine carried Sandynose the rest of the way home. Rootspring took the rear, being wary of any foreign scent. But the scent he did catch wasn't one of a badger. It was more musky, the distinct scent he would detect whenever he saw a ghost.

Rootspring looked back, and sure enough, there was one. But it wasn't Sandynose. It was a cat Rootspring had never seen before.

Chapter 3

“Cats of SkyClan, we heavily mourn the loss of Sandynose,” Hawkstar mewed somberly. “He will be remembered as a fine warrior, mentor, and father who gave his life protecting the Clan he loved most.”

Dewspring and Reedclaw gave one last lick on Sandynose’s ear before Macgyver and Fallowfern carried him to a grave that Frecklewish had dug near a juniper tree. Rootspring and his Clanmates gave murmurs of farewells and respect, and then the elders covered the grave with the pile of dirt before padding it down. Frecklewish laid a sunflower into the grave. Rootspring had picked it out: it was the perfect time of year and much like a sunflower, Sandynose couldn’t get enough of warm sunlight. There was a moment of silence, and then the Clan dispersed to tend to their duties.

The thought of the ghost couldn’t leave Rootspring’s mind. Who was this ghost? *They must have died recently*, Rootspring thought. But if the ghost was a Clan cat, why didn’t Rootspring recognize them?

Rootspring decided to investigate. Maybe they saw Sandynose ascend to StarClan. It would bring comfort to Dewspring and Reedclaw to know that their father's spirit was safe. But as Rootspring exited the camp, he was greeted by his sister Needleclaw.

"Where are you going, Rootspring?" Needleclaw asked. "Hawkstar said that no warriors can go outside of the camp alone."

Rootspring nodded. "Then come with me."

Needleclaw opened her mouth in shock. Was Rootspring too direct? But to Rootspring's surprise, Needleclaw relaxed. "Okay. Is this about ghosts? Is it Sandynose?"

"Yes to the ghosts, kind of to Sandynose," Rootspring mewed. "I saw a strange ghost. They seemed to want to talk. If I bring the ghost here, we can talk safely."

"Okay!" Needleclaw agreed. Rootspring was grateful to have Needleclaw as his sister. Despite their differences, they were inseparable throughout kithood and apprenticeship, and still remained close as warriors. They had earned their names after their mentors. Who had a similar bond. Rootspring felt a twinge of pain. *I need to spend time with Dewspring. I can't imagine what he and Reedclaw are feeling.*

Rootspring and Needleclaw didn't have to go too far before the ghost showed himself. The ghost was a black-and-white tom, and must have followed the SkyClan patrol. Rootspring flicked his ear, telling Needleclaw that the ghost was near.

“Hello,” Rootspring mewed to the ghost. “My name is Rootspring, and this is my sister, Needleclaw. I can talk to ghosts. Do you need help?”

The ghost nodded. “My name is Webster. I used to be a kittypet ‘round here. But then some dogs killed me.”

“Dogs?” Rootspring echoed. “We had some troubles with dogs. We think some kittypet or rogue set them off. Did you see anything?”

Webster nodded. “I was trampled, you see. I was minding my own business when the stampede came. Big dogs, small dogs, all the dogs you can picture. By the time they left, I was a ghost. But I did see two cats looking over my body. They threw it into a creek!”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Rootspring said. “Did you get their names? They killed a few Clan cats as well.”

“Yes, I know one of ‘em.” Webster mewed. “The red one. She was Rosecloud.”

Rootspring gasped. The ThunderClan warrior had been exiled not long ago for abusing an apprentice. Now she was trying to kill the Clans with dogs! If she was willing to use such brutality, what would she do next? “Thank you,” Rootspring mewed to Webster.

“No problem,” Webster shrugged. “I’m happy to help. And for what it’s worth, I saw the badger fight. I’m sorry for your loss. That cat— Sandynose, was he?— seemed to mean a lot to you. I did see him, but then he disappeared.”

“That means he is in StarClan,” Rootspring explained. “Thank you for everything, Webster. I’ve got to get home and tell the Clan that Sandynose is safe in the stars. And as for Rosecloud, I’ll make sure the leaders know.”