

THE DEATH OF BRIGHT STREAM

Bright Stream shivered as she crouched beneath the overhanging rock. Even though Rainswept Flower and Dappled Pelt were pressed closely against her on either side, she felt cold to her bones. All day she and her friends had been trapped here, with savage eagles prepared to swoop down on any cat who ventured out. Claws of hunger tore at Bright Stream's belly, and she longed for the safety of their cave in the mountains.

Cloud Spots let out a mutter of impatience and crept forward one tail-length to peer out into the open. Bright Stream caught her breath, half-expecting vicious talons to fasten into his shoulders and drag him away.

"There are two more eagles out there," Cloud Spots reported as he drew swiftly back into shelter. "They're sitting on the top of this rock."

Screeches erupted all around Bright Stream, who closed her eyes and dug her claws into the earth, struggling to control her panic. Worse and worse! she thought. What are we going to do?

Time dragged on and the daylight began to fade. Then Gray Wing let out a hiss of mingled terror and fury, jumping back and shoving Turtle Tail behind him. One of the eagles had hopped to the ground and was stretching its neck under the rocky overhang, straining to reach the cats. Bright Stream pressed herself backward, shaking uncontrollably at the sight of its cruel hooked beak. She felt its malignant yellow gaze fixed on her. It's like it's looking for me!

After what seemed like season upon season, the eagle flapped away. Once it had withdrawn, Clear Sky leaped to his paws.

"We're not mice!" he exclaimed. "We will not be treated like prey! We need to show these eagles that cats are the hunters around here."

"And how are we going to do that?" Rainswept Flower demanded.

Clear Sky swept a resolute glance across his denmates. "By catching one of the eagles ourselves."

Bright Stream let out a gasp of shock, echoed by several others. Glancing around, Bright Stream could see her own fear reflected in the faces of most of the cats.

“That’s impossible.” Their leader, Shaded Moss, spoke with certainty. “There are four eagles out there!”

“And there are more of us in here,” Clear Sky retorted.

Bright Stream admired her mate’s courage, even though she didn’t agree with his plan. The eagles are so strong...so powerful!

Then Gray Wing rose to stand beside his brother. “Let’s at least hear what Clear Sky has to say,” he meowed.

All the cats looked toward Shaded Moss, who gave a curt nod.

Quickly Clear Sky outlined his plan. He and three other cats would attack one of the eagles, while Gray Wing would lead another three to draw the rest of the eagles away.

“It could work,” Gray Wing agreed.

“Or we could just wait until dark and sneak away,” Turtle Tail suggested.

Clear Sky spun around to face her, snarling in outrage. “And let the birds follow us tomorrow, and the next day, and the next? We have to take them on now, so that they leave us in peace.”

Bright Stream wasn’t so sure. Cats could die, she thought uneasily. Then she added to herself: But we could die if the eagles spot us trying to escape. They won’t leave us alone until we teach them a lesson.

“Clear Sky is right,” Tall Shadow declared.

Respect for the black she-cat helped to convince Bright Stream. If Tall Shadow thought the plan would work, then perhaps it really could. The other cats, too, began to murmur agreement, though they sounded less certain than Tall Shadow.

“Okay,” Clear Sky mewed briskly. “We must move fast, because it’ll be dark soon.”

Shaded Moss dipped his head; if he still had objections to the plan, he did not voice them. “Turtle Tail, Cloud Spots, and Bright Stream will go with Gray Wing to lure three of the birds away,” he ordered calmly.

Bright Stream’s belly lurched with fear as their leader spoke her name. How can I do this? Am I brave enough? But a moment later pride at being chosen drove out her fear. These cats are my friends...my family. I can do anything I have to, to help keep them safe.

But as Shaded Moss finished speaking, Bright Stream noticed that her mate’s whiskers were twitching in alarm. “I’m not sure Bright Stream is fast enough,” he meowed.

“She’s almost as fast as Gray Wing,” Shaded Moss retorted with a surprised glance at Clear Sky.

Bright Stream said nothing, but she understood exactly why her mate had protested. He’s worried about our kits. Warmth swept through her fur as she thought of the precious lives she carried. But they’re not slowing me down yet.

Rising to her paws, Bright Stream wriggled through the huddle of cats until she reached Clear Sky’s side. “I’ll be fine,” she mewed, trying to convey to her mate that she knew what was worrying him. “Gray Wing will take care of me,” she added, flicking her tail tip playfully over Clear Sky’s ear.

“And what about the rest of us?” Jagged Peak asked with an irritable twitch of his tail. “I’ve attacked an eagle before, you know. I’ve got experience!”

While Shaded Moss soothed the young kit, Bright Stream followed Gray Wing cautiously into the open, with Turtle Tail and Cloud Spots close behind. Pressing their bellies to the ground they crept among the rocks. Bright Stream’s pelt prickled with tension as she imagined the eagles’ yellow glare

following their every movement, but the gathering darkness helped to hide them until they were well away from the overhang.

“Now!” Gray Wing meowed.

Bright Stream’s heart began thumping faster and faster as she sprang to her paws with her denmates and let out a loud caterwaul. For the first time she got a clear view of the four eagles, black shadows in the dusk, perched on the crags above. Her belly lurched as all four heads swiveled toward her and her friends.

This is it...

Two of the eagles took off, awkwardly flapping their wings as they mounted into the sky. Bright Stream had never been so frightened in her life as they began to swoop down.

It’s like we’re prey, she thought, digging her claws into the snow-covered ground.

“Cloud Spots! Turtle Tail!” Gray Wing yowled. “Run to the next boulder! Lure the birds toward you!”

The two cats darted away, pelting across the snow. Bright Stream and Gray Wing huddled into the shelter of a rock as the eagles passed over their heads. Bright Stream peered after them in the twilight, but she had lost sight of her denmates and couldn’t tell what had happened to them. Since she couldn’t hear any screeches of pain or terror, she had to assume that for the moment they were okay.

But two eagles were still perched on the crag. Clear Sky’s plan won’t work unless we can lure them down, Bright Stream thought. And it has to work, or we’ll all be killed.

Summoning all her courage, she turned to Gray Wing. “I’ll attract the others,” she whispered.

Not giving him the chance to object, Bright Stream slipped into the open and began to limp unsteadily in a circle, pretending that she had hurt one of her forepaws. "Come on," she muttered. "I'm easy prey!"

Just as she had hoped, the two remaining eagles heaved themselves into the air and flapped toward her. Instantly Bright Stream darted back to Gray Wing's side in the shelter of the rock.

"That was risky!" Gray Wing hissed, his eyes sparking with annoyance.

Bright Stream knew that he was only angry because he was afraid for her.

"It worked, didn't it?" she retorted, giving him a friendly nudge.

One of the eagles alighted on top of the rock while the other settled onto the ground, peering at the two cats with outstretched neck. Bright Stream pressed herself backward, her fear mounting again as she wondered if the bird would be able to reach them.

Movement caught her eye and she spotted Clear Sky leading the way out from beneath the overhang. He and his group of cats crept stealthily toward the rock, ready to surround the eagle perching there.

But we have to get rid of the one on the ground, Bright Stream thought worriedly.

At the same moment Gray Wing flicked his tail toward a nearby bush. Clearly he was thinking the same thing she was. Bright Stream nodded. "I'm ready."

Side by side she and Gray Wing sprang out into the open. Bright Stream caught a glimpse of the eagle's glittering gaze as they passed less than a paw's width in front of its beak. Then they were away, racing for the safety of the bush. Bright Stream heard the eagle let out a furious screech. She knew it must be following them, but she didn't dare look back, expecting at any moment to feel those hooked talons fastening in her back.

Bright Stream had almost reached the bush when she heard a gasp of pain from Gray Wing and realized he wasn't beside her anymore. Whirling around, she saw him lagging behind, struggling

across the ground with blood trickling from one forepaw. The eagle was poised above him, ready to strike.

Bright Stream hurtled back toward Gray Wing and supported him with her shoulder as he hobbled along. When they reached the bush she shoved him into a narrow gap beneath the thorny branches.

Gray Wing scabbled frantically to pull himself into shelter. Bright Stream thrust herself into the gap behind him, but at the same moment blinding pain sliced through her and she realized that she was sliding backward.

Terror coursed through Bright Stream as she glanced back to see the eagle hovering above her, its talons sunk deep into her haunches. She dug her claws into the ground in a futile effort to cling there, to stop the eagle from carrying her away.

“Gray Wing! Help me!” she shrieked.

Above Bright Stream the eagle flapped its wings, rising into the sky with a triumphant screech. She dangled from its cruel talons, thrashing her legs uselessly.

Her head swimming with pain and fear, she saw Gray Wing erupt from the bush and leap into the air after her. His outstretched paw brushed her tail, but already she was out of his reach.

Gray Wing raced along the ground below her, keeping pace with the eagle. “Fight back!” he yowled. “Get free somehow!”

Bright Stream did her best, writhing in the eagle’s grip, twisting her neck in an attempt to sink her teeth into its leg. But she could feel the talons sinking deeper and deeper into her flesh, and see its yellow eyes fixed on her, gloating in her pain. Its dark wings stretched over her and the air reeked with its foul scent.

Bright Stream’s strength began to ebb away like the last light in the darkening sky. She caught a glimpse of her other denmates below, Clear Sky and his group of cats pulling down the eagle from the rock. They looked so tiny, so far away.

Meanwhile the two remaining birds circled around and rejoined her captor. They flew out over the cliff edge, and Bright Stream could see the dizzying depths of the valley below.

A roaring darkness surged over her as her struggles faded. Oh, my precious kits! she thought. I'm sorry I couldn't keep you safe. She had a brief, bright vision of herself and Clear Sky, safe in some sunlit clearing, playing with their kits and telling them stories about the mountains. But that will never happen.

"Don't forget me, Clear Sky," she murmured with the last of her strength. "I love you. I will love you forever!"

Then the darkness overwhelmed her and she knew nothing more.