

A FOREST DIVIDED

ORIGINAL CHAPTER 15

Author's note from Kate Cary: I have promised, and here it is. Here is the original chapter 15 from A Forest Divided. I wrote the chapter from Tall Shadow's point of view. But the editorial team changed it afterwards to Thunder's point of view. Please forgive any errors. This is a first draft taken from my original manuscript.

Tall Shadow gazed at the prey pile. The two mice and scrawny blackbird which Mud Paws and Mouse Ear had brought back from their hunting trip would not feed them all. She glanced toward the sky. The sun was sinking past the tips of the pines. There was still time to send out another patrol.

"Jagged Peak." She called across the clearing toward the large den woven from the brambles at the far end.

Holly popped her head from the entrance. "He left the camp with the kits," she called back. "He's teaching them hunting skills."

Tall Shadow crossed the clearing toward the bristly she-cat. Holly slid out to meet her.

"Are you still working on your den?" Tall Shadow gazed approvingly at the high, arched roof.

"I'm just tucking stray tendrils away. They keep catching the kits' pelts." Holly sat down and licked a paw. "

Tall Shadow could smell blood on it. "It must be prickly work."

"My scratches will heal," Holly told her matter-of-factly. "But the den will stay strong for many seasons."

Tall Shadow dipped her head to peer into the shadowy interior. She could just make out the nests lined along the back wall. "Once you've finished here, perhaps you could help build another." She nodded toward Mud Paws and Mouse Ear as they rested at the edge of the clearing, tired after their long hunt. "I'd feel better if we all had shelter before the next snow."

"Of course." Holly scanned the wall of the camp. There was already another den sticking out like a rooks' nest. Closely woven, the bramble stems formed excellent shelters. Pebble Heart had been working on his for a quarter moon, and it was almost as large as Holly's. Now he was busy hollowing earth from inside until it seemed more like a cocoon than a den.

He padded out as Holly watched and nodded to her. "I wish there was heather here." He shook mud from his paws. "It would make a great lining."

Tall Shadow flicked her tail. "Next time the prey pile is full, I'll send a patrol to the moor to fetch some."

"You'll need plenty." Holly glanced past Pebble Heart at his den. "There's enough room inside there for a badger."

"I want room for extra nests," Pebble Heart explained. "If cats get sick, they'll need somewhere to rest where I can keep an eye on

them.”

Tall Shadow sat down, pleasure warming her pelt. They were making their new camp into a home. Sheltered among the pines, it felt safer and cosier than the hollow on the moor. She didn't miss the open sky or brisk winds. And the muffled sounds of the forest—the chattering of birds and creaking of pines—soothed her.

Her only worry now was Gray Wing. He'd been gone for days. Was he still angry about their quarrel, or had something happened to him? Perhaps she should send out a search party. Would he accuse her of treating him like a stray kit?

The brambles rattled at the camp entrance and she jerked herself from her thoughts. *Gray Wing?* Jagged Peak and the kits? She stiffened with surprise as she recognised Thunder's orange and white pelt. He nosed his way into camp.

She hurried forward to greet him, her nose twitching as unfamiliar scents touched her nose. Two strange cats followed Thunder into camp. River Ripple padded behind.

As she stared, puzzled, at the strangers, Mud Paws and Mouse Ear got to their paws, pelts twitching uneasily.

The visitors were thin, their pelts ragged. They gazed at her with eyes dull with tiredness and hunger. Why had Thunder brought them here? Didn't Clear Sky want them?

She heard paws scuff the needles and felt Holly at her side. “Who is this?”

One of the strangers stepped forward and met Tall Shadow's

gaze. Her speckled pelt looked oddly familiar, though she was thin and it clung to her bones. Tall Shadow's paws pricked nervously. *Why is she looking at me like that?* The stray was staring expectantly, as though they'd met before. Tall Shadow's heart quickened. Those mottle markings! The eyes set wide around a slender muzzle. Old memories stirred. Tall Shadow opened her mouth and tasted for scents beyond the stink of hunger and travel. A faint tang of rock and ice touched her tongue.

Could this be a Tribe cat?

Tall Shadow froze.

"Don't you know me?" The she-cat's mew was thick with emotion.

Tall Shadow leaned forward and sniffed, excitement rushing through her as she recognised a scent she'd not smelled for moons. "Quiet Rain? Is that you?" Her pelt bristled as though lightning fizzed in the air. Joy rose in her chest.

Holly shifted beside her. "You *know* this cat?"

Quiet Rain purred, her chest crackling. "She knows me well." She lifted her muzzle as Tall Shadow bounded forward and weaved around her. Her gaze flicked to the second cat. How had she not recognised his thin dark frame and steady green gaze? "You must be Moon Shadow's kit!" He looked so like his father. Her heart ached to see him, both with grief as she remembered the loss of her littermate and with delight as she gazed at his son.

He nodded solemnly and Tall Shadow froze. Did he know his

father was dead?

Thunder stepped closer, as though reading her thoughts, and leaned close to her ear. "They know about Moon Shadow and Bright Stream, but that's all I've told them of their old tribemates."

"Where's Gray Wing?" Quiet Rain glanced around the camp, her eyes glistening with hope.

Tall Shadow hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Quiet Rain jerked round to stare accusingly at River Ripple. "Is that why you kept prattling like a magpie all the way here? Are you hiding more sorrow from us?"

River Ripple gazed steadily back at her but said nothing.

Tall Shadow gripped the earth with her claws. What should she do? Quiet Rain looked in no fit state to hear more bad news. "Gray Wing isn't here at the moment." She glanced hopefully at Thunder. "Have you seen him?"

Thunder looked confused. "Why would I? He lives here now."

Holly's ears twitched. "He left a few days ago. We've not seen him since."

"He's *missing*!" Quiet Rain blinked at Thunder. "You said he'd be here!" She scanned the clearing again, "Are Clear Sky and Jagged Peak *missing* too?"

Sun Shadow growled. "What are you hiding from us?"

Tall Shadow itched with frustration. She should tell them all that had happened since they'd left the mountains. She stared

desperately at her old mountain friends. Sun Shadow was trembling, his bony flanks quivering. Quiet Water swayed on her paws. *They're not strong enough to hear it yet.*

Paws pattered toward them. "I smell infection." Pebble Heart was hurrying across the clearing. He stopped beside Quiet Rain and began sniffing at her pelt.

She flinched away. "Who's this?"

"Pebble Heart," Tall Shadow told her. "He has the power to heal."

"I have herbs which might help," Pebble Heart mumbled modestly. He sniffed Quiet Rain's pelt once more, stopping as he reached the blackened wound on her hind leg. "Is this your only injury?" he asked.

Quiet Rain snorted. "The only one worth mentioning."

"It needs a poultice," Pebble Heart told her. "I'll make you one. Please rest, while I do. And eat. You will need strength to fight this infection. It's gone deep." He nodded toward the prey pile, then hurried toward his den.

Quiet Rain watched him go. "At least there's one cat who's honest."

"We are all honest!" Tall Shadow bristled. How dare she? *This is my home and you are my guests.* She met Quiet Rain's gaze fiercely. "Pebble Heart is right. You need to rest. There is much to tell, but I'm not telling you anything while you look like you may at any moment."

A purr sputtered in Quiet Rain's throat. "You have Moon Shadow's temper."

"And I see where Clear Sky got his spirit." Tall Shadow headed for Pebble Heart's den. "Follow me."

Quiet Rain wrinkled her nose as she approached. "It smells of sap!"

Tall Shadow halted beside the den entrance. "Pebble Heart is mixing herbs to treat your wound."

As she spoke, Pebble Heart slid out, a leaf folded in his jaws. He dropped it beside Quiet Rain. "Lie down, please."

She glanced at him warily, but followed his order and careful lowered herself onto the ground.

Tall Shadow could see relief soften the old cat's face as she rested.

Pebble Heart unfolded the leaf with his paw, then lapped up some of the green pulp inside and began to wash it into Quiet Rain's wound.

She winced, but made no sound.

"Will it heal?" Sun Shadow leaned forward.

"In time," Pebble Heart murmured between licks.

Tall Shadow signaled to Mud Paws and Mouse Ear with a flick of her tail. "We'll need more prey."

Mouse Ear nodded. "We'll hunt."

"I found a stash of beech nuts while we were out this morning," Mud Paws meowed. "Where there are nuts, there are squirrels."

The two toms crossed the clearing. Brushing past River Ripple and Thunder, they headed out of camp.

Tall Shadow followed and stopped at Thunder's side. "Thank you for bringing them."

"She wanted to see you and Gray Wing," Thunder shrugged.

Tall Shadow felt the familiar tug of worry. "If you see any sign of Gray Wing, tell him to come home."

"Sure." Thunder dipped his head.

River Ripple shifted his paws impatiently. "I must get back to the island. The others will wonder where I am."

The others. At his words, Tall Shadow remembered the parting at the hollow. "Did you let Dappled Pelt and Shattered Ice join your group?"

"Of course." River Ripple purred. "They were welcome and have settled in well. Though I was surprised to see them. Night and Dew have been teaching Dappled Pelt to swim."

Tall Shadow saw Thunder shudder.

"She caught her first fish yesterday," River Ripple went on. "She might have been born in the mountains, but she moves like an otter in the water."

"Did you say Dappled Pelt?" Quiet Rain called across the

clearing.

“She and Shattered Ice live with River Ripple now,” Tall Shadow called back.

“Mountain cats living beside *water*?” Quiet Rain blinked as Pebble Heart worked on her wound.

“Don’t forget, we were raised behind a waterfall.” Tall Shadow felt a pang at the far distant memory. So much had happened since. Had they changed? “Perhaps Dappled Pelt missed the sound of it lulling her to sleep.” Would Quiet Rain ever understand the choices they’d made since arriving in their new home? Her heart felt suddenly heavy. Not all the choices had been good. How would she explain the battle with Clear Sky and his rogues? Grief tightened her throat as she pictured the grave beside four trees where so many of her friends now lay.

River Ripple turned. “I must go.”

“Me too.” Thunder glanced at Tall Shadow. “Can you take care of them? Have you enough prey?”

“We’ll find enough,” Tall Shadow promised. They were learning fast the best places to hunt among the pines. And in the quietness of the forest, prey was easy to hear. It was scarce but they were all good hunters.

River Ripple headed for the entrance and ducked out of the camp.

As Thunder turned to follow, Quiet Rain called once more across the clearing. “Don’t go, Thunder! Tell me more about your

father. Has he found a new mate?"

Tall Shadow saw the young tom's gaze sharpen. "Stay," she whispered. "Just long enough to reassure her he is well."

Thunder held her gaze uncertainly and Tall Shadow wondered what was troubling him. Before she could ask, the bramble wall shuddered as Jagged Peak padded in.

"You're back!" Holly hurried to greet him.

Quiet Rain pushed herself to her paws, nudging Pebble Heart away. "My son!"

Jagged Peak paused, eyes wide. "Quiet Rain?" Joy lit up his gaze and he hurried to greet her, his hind leg dragging a little in his rush.

Quiet Rain's gaze flicked instantly to his injured leg. "What happened?" she gasped.

"An old injury." Jagged Peak halted. "I fell from a tree. It's not important."

"You're *lame*!" Quiet Rain stared at him, disappointment clouding her gaze.

Jagged Peak stiffened, the fur ripping along his spine.

Holly growled. "He limps, that's all," she told Quiet Rain sharply. "He can hunt and think as well as any cat and—"

Excited mewls cut her off. Dew Nose raced into camp, dragging a vole, while Storm Pelt and Eagle Feather crowded around her.

"It's my turn to carry it!" Eagle Feather complained.

Jagged Peak turned on them sternly. "Behave yourselves! My mother is visiting from the mountains."

Dew Nose dropped the vole and stared at the ragged she-cat. "*That's* your mother?"

Storm Pelt raced to Holly's side and sheltered under her belly. "What's she doing here? She smells funny."

Eagle Feather padded toward Quiet Rain, his nose twitching. "Why are you here?"

Quiet Rain bristled. "Is this how you raise your young in this land of soft earth?" She glared at Jagged Peak. "I would never have allowed such rudeness."

Holly's eyes flashed with rage. "Perhaps that's why your sons left."

Quiet Rain glared back. "How dare you?"

Jagged Peak stepped between them. "My kits are lively," he told her. "But they have good hearts and will make fine hunters."

Quiet Rain ignored him and turned to Thunder. "I want to see my other sons," she meowed. "Where is Clear Sky?"

Thunder dropped his gaze. "He's in the forest."

"Where we found you?" Quiet Rain's eyes widened. "Why did you bring us all the way here?"

"I will take you to him when you're better," he mumbled.

"And what about Gray Wing?" Quiet Rain jerked her gaze to Tall Shadow.

“I told you,” Tall Shadow meowed irritably. “We haven’t seen him for days.”

“If Gray Wing is missing,” she growled. “You must find him. I came here to see my kin and I will not leave until I do.”

Tall Shadow stared at the she-cat. *How dare she come into my camp and start giving orders!* And yet, the mountain cat had travelled far. She was tired and hungry, and her wound looked painful. She swallowed her anger. Quiet Rain deserved kindness and respect. There was still so much grief for the old cat to face. The least they could do was bring her sons to her. Tall Shadow turned to Thunder. “Find Gray Wing, please.”