

## A World Apart

The wind whispered softly and the leaves fluttered in response as she stepped out from behind the huge oak. Overhead, a jay emitted a raucous cry before launching into flight and she froze in place, fearful of discovery. Agra sniffed the air warily, detecting alien odors intermingled with the more familiar moist loam and pine scents.

She gripped the bark and inched her way around the old bole to peer cautiously at the human, who sat leaning against a maple whittling on a piece of wood before a small cook-fire. His skin was the reddish-brown color of the light wooden beads she bore around her neck as a constant reminder of the service to her goddess, and she looked from the beads to him and back again in amazement.

The old woman, who was called Orminam, Ormi for short, by her beloved daughter-students, had told her it would be so. She had sent Agra up and into this part of the forest, telling her that her time of blossoming was near and that it was on this day that she would glimpse her future moon-mate. She had only half-listened, being more anxious for a chance to roam free above and within the woodland than she believed or cared about any human male. Her sister-students had giggled and whispered, elbowing each other as Agra had set forth on her way. Now, seeing that he was indeed real, the giggle-warmth left her completely and she stood transfixed, eyeing him intently.

His hair was dark and it complimented his skin, which on closer inspection held the weathered lines of one who had walked the woodland many times. He wore dark brown leggings and a shirt that was so dark that it took Agra a few moments to discern that it was really green. His weathered boots were caked with mud that had settled into the deep cracks that develop over time. Beside him, resting against the bark was a jeweled scabbard that picked up the light from the cook-fire and swirled it forth in a myriad of brightly colored beams. She crept even closer, intent upon the deep red and blue gems.

He looked up and their eyes met, his widening in surprise as Agra froze. She then began backing away slowly before she turned and fled into the brush.

“No, wait, please...” he cried as he launched to his feet and tried to follow. He rounded the oak and she was gone, disappearing without a single hint and leaving behind only a brief impression as frail and seemingly insubstantial as a wisp of smoke.

Devin sat behind the desk in his study, gazing disconsolately out of the window upon the herb and flower gardens encircled by the rain-drenched stones of the inner bailey. The sky was a dismal grey, matching the grey stones of the courtyard, causing the flowers to appear as though trumpeting their brilliant colors.

“Well, ho, Devin. I had heard that you had returned,” a voice boomed as a young man entered.

He turned slowly to regard the young man, who said, “What’s wrong?”

“May I have the servants bring you anything, Quinn?” Devin asked.

“Some tea would be nice.”

Devin rose and stepped through the doors of his study. He returned quickly and reseated himself. After a period of uncomfortable silence, Quinn said, “The orchards are doing well this year.”

“Well, yes they are, thanks to Guera.

“Yes, lucky find, that one. He watches as if they were his own while you are out working for Krogen.”

“Yes. Working for the Krogen,” Devin replied distractedly.

There was a gentle knock on the door and a servant entered carrying a tea service with an array of fruits, cheeses and pastries, which he placed on the desk. Returning from his thoughts, Devin thanked the man, “That will be all.” As the servant quietly left, Devin turned in his chair and once again looked out the window. Quinn busied himself by helping himself to a cup of tea.

After finishing it and quite a few of the little pastries, Quinn cleared his throat. “What is troubling you?”

Devin continued to stare outside and replied, “I met someone.”

“Did you?” Quinn inquired with rising excitement. “That’s wonderful. Your mother will be so pleased.”

“Perhaps.”

“I’ll be happy as well should you finally wed and begin to produce heirs. You’re the last in the line.”

“Heirs?” Devin spat. “There is always you.”

“No, you know as well as I do that my claims are clouded by my illegitimate birth. Your mother’s kindness and your own acceptance of me enabled me to stay on. However, should you reach an untimely end...”

“Heirs,” Devin muttered. “Any woman would do if I only wanted a breeder, Quinn.” He fell silent again, although his eyes, now lit with irritation, seemed to bore through the young man.

Quinn thrummed on the desk with impatience. “Well, who is she?”

Devin lowered his eyes uncomfortably and his shoulders sagged as though, with that single question, Quinn had doused his ire and replaced it with shame. “I don’t know,” he replied bleakly.

“*What?*”

Devin turned around and stared at his half-brother. “She is someone I glimpsed within the forest.”

“*Glimpsed?*” Quinn asked in disbelief.

“Had you been there, you would understand. She has large pale blue eyes and skin that is so fine that it looks like the purest silk. She is tall and thin and moves with the grace of cat.”

“Let me guess,” Quinn said. “She appeared as if she had come from an oak tree.”

“How did...”

“She is Adyrania.”

“She is *what?*”

“They are beloved of the Goddess M’nara.”

“Tell me more.”

“Not much is known. They are very shy and have only seldom been seen by humans. Those that have been spotted have been found beside oak trees, the most sacred of M’nara’s offspring. They do not eat meat and will be highly offended if you kill an animal within their forest.”

“Perhaps that is why she fled. When I first saw her, I had a rabbit stew simmering for my evening meal.”

“Or,” Quinn began with lingering emphasis, “she fled because she is not human. I think you should confine yourself to the females of our species.”

“I think this conversation is over.”

Eight days had passed and, although it pained him, Devin had avoided that area, finding other parts of the wood to survey for Krogen. When the regent has pressed for able men, Devin had leapt at the opportunity, finding great pleasure in the solitude afforded. It kept him well away from his mother and her endless parade of what she considered suitable mates.

Breathing in the scent of pine and humming quietly as he walked slowly along, Devin found himself once again upon the familiar path. Try as he might, his thoughts kept returning to her and he found his mood improving with each step forward. He had spent nearly an hour looking for the oak tree and, having satisfied himself that he had found it, he settled in across from it. He built the branches that he had collected into a small tent and lit a cook fire. Rummaging through his packs, he produced a stew pot, water skin and vegetables. Soon his meatless stew was simmering and he eased back against the trunk of the maple and began to whittle, glancing around every few minutes and listening. However, all he could hear was a gentle rustle of the leaves and an occasional birdsong. The shadows of the trees began to lengthen and, despite his eagerness, he drifted off to sleep.

Agra crept out from hiding and stood a safe distance away, clutching the small sack that she had brought with her. Ormi had provided her with the special roots, which would ease the transition and also ensure Agra’s success. Knowing this did not quell her uncertainties, although in the faint light of the late afternoon, the man did not appear as fearsome as he had when she first spotted him.

Her sister-students had crowded around her when she returned to them that day and had listened keenly, emitting nervous giggles and a few startled gasps as she related how he had looked at her. Ormi, who had been silent and kept her distance, had moved in closer, shooing the others off to their places.

“He is as I told you he would be,” the old woman remarked as she guided Agra to the tunnel that would lead her to her quarters. The young woman had turned and peered into her teacher-mother’s eyes, the words dying in her throat. They continued on in a silence that was only broken when they reached Agra’s mat. “You will do what must be done,” Ormi said with finality. Agra crept within and, although she did not look back, she listened carefully to the waning echoes of feet scraping against stone as the old woman shuffled off. For the first time in her life, Agra had slept a dreamless sleep.

The man shifted his position and moaned softly. She tensed and considered fleeing, but the words of her teacher-mother reverberated and played in syncopated counter-rhythm to the doubt that coursed within her. *You will do what must be done.* Agra drew a deep breath and stepped boldly forward.

He awoke with a start and after a moment or two, his eyes focused. Smiling, he said fondly, “It is *you*.” She laughed and her laughter was like the tinkling of tiny, silver bells.

He grinned broadly. “You are very beautiful,” he said, holding out his hand as if he could reach forward and touch her cheek. She flinched and he dropped his hand quickly. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

She nodded in reply and moved toward the stewpot, sniffing the air to determine its contents. Agra knelt beside it, opened her sack and produced a large mushroom, several acorns, some roots that he did not recognize, and a flint knife. She opened the acorns with a practiced ease that delighted him.

Remaining in place against the bole, he picked up his whittling and feigned interest as he surreptitiously stole glances. Her hair possessed so little color that it appeared almost white and, as the shadows deepened, it shimmered as though it were pure silver, cascading down her back and falling off at the swell of her hips.

Slowly cutting the roots and mushroom, she carefully deposited the slices into the steaming kettle using her knife to stir each newly added ingredient into the stew.

Her arms were thin, as was she, making her appear frail and he suppressed an urge to rise and gather her protectively into his arms. Her long, elegant fingers moved deftly as she carved each root and he wondered dreamily how they might feel upon his chest. He sighed and she turned to regard him with a smile.

“What is your name?”

“Agra. And you, what are you called?” she asked.

“Devin.”

They sat quietly finishing their meal as the last rays of the sun dwindled and the sky deepened into a rich blue. The air around them came alive with the hum of newly awakened insects and toads as the first of the stars appeared overhead. Reaching for a stick, Devin stirred new life from the embers that would soon yield to coming darkness. Setting aside his empty bowl, he watched her in the faint light as she nibbled upon the meal. She ate with a practiced gentility as though born within the court and this pleased him immensely.

Although she felt his eyes upon her as she ate, each swallow carried the precious medicine and she drifted upon its narcotic effect. Shadows and shapes blurred and softened within the dreamy haze and she felt a subtle tingling that began in the pit of her stomach and coursed within to the very tips of her fingers.

Setting aside her bowl, Agra inched closer to him and nestled within the crook of his arm. He reached around her and brought her even closer, resting his cheek against her hair and breathing in its fragrance; earthy and mingled with the scent of spices.

Agra twisted slightly and reached out tentatively to trace her fingers along the curves of his jaw. Her touch was as he imagined and, as he felt a stirring within, he

sighed. Devin shifted to look at her eyes and, touching her cheek gently, he drew her slowly into a lingering kiss. Her breathing became shallow and a soft moan escaped her lips as they parted.

Devin felt an aching need swell within him. "In all my life I have never believed that one such as you could exist. I have been so alone," he whispered as he pulled her forward and kissed her with greater passion.

She yielded easily, allowing herself to be carried upon the waves that ebbed and flowed within her and marveling that, although her body tingled with numbness, Agra felt each brush with him as though each fiber yearned for his touch. His kisses were more insistent and his hands seemed suddenly to be everywhere at once, awakening a deep hunger within her that longed to be sated. She pressed her body tightly against his and Devin moaned in need, feeling an unbearable tightening that threatened his control. He took her by the shoulders and eased them apart, breathing slowly to regain control. Above them, the full moon bathed the grove in soft light as he stared into eyes that looked gentle and inviting. Lips parted slightly, she seemed to be awaiting him and he closed his eyes against his crushing desire.

"I thank whatever Gods brought you to me," he said softly as he opened his eyes and looked at her longingly. "I want you as I have never wanted another before you. Always. I want you always."

Agra placed a finger on his lips to silence him and then leaned in to kiss him tenderly. Feeling along the muscles of his arms and heaving chest, reawakening his urgency, she struggled against unfamiliar buttons and hesitated, unsure how to remove the garment.

With something sounding like a snarl, he quickly removed his shirt and felt his stomach muscles tense as her fingers played along his bare chest. Unable to bear it any longer, he grabbed for his bedroll and, setting it out upon the ground, he then struggled out of his breeches and tugged at her dress. Agra came to her feet with ease and slowly slipped the garment over her head, allowing it to drop carelessly to the forest floor.

She stood before him bathed in moonbeams and he let his eyes play over her gentle curves, noting her long, lithe legs. "My love," he crooned as he enfolded her within his arms and eased her slowly down upon the waiting pallet. Devin held her against him and, willing himself to be patient, he felt along her spine and felt her shiver in response.

Agra felt the odd tingling sensation return with a renewed urgency as his hands explored her body. She tugged at his shoulders, trying to pull him closer, but he was much too strong. Her hips, seemingly of their own volition, shifted and moved, reacting to the warmth that grew within her and she cried out in need.

Devin covered her cries with a kiss as he relented and, giving in to his own great desire, brought his body closer and melded with her as one.

He awoke to find her standing in the middle of the clearing. In the fey light of the predawn, her skin held a rosy glow and she, if it were possible in his eyes, was even more beautiful.

"I have to go," she said softly.

"What?" he asked, blinking to clear the sleep from his eyes.

“The sun rises and it is time for me to return,” she said simply.

“No, Agra, please, stay with me.”

“You have given me the most precious of gifts and for that, I truly thank you.”

“Gift?” he asked with a puzzled frown.

“The life that you have sown, I will nurture and always I will remember you and your kindness.”

“Life?” he whispered in confusion and then with dawning comprehension, repeated, “Life. All you wanted from me was a child?” His voice held a bitter edge and he clamped his lips tightly to hold back the anger that threatened to spew forth.

“I am sorry. You are a good man.” she entreated, her eyes filling with tears. “It is time for me to go.”

“Please,” he softly implored.

She turned, walked to the oak and around it, and then disappeared from sight.

Devin slowly gathered up his belongings and, looking around one final time, he spied the empty acorn husks lying forgotten on the ground. He bent down to retrieve one and regarded it. Turning it about within his fingers, he focused on its emptiness and his eyes began to water. Clearing his throat, he grabbed his pack and, clutching the acorn husk within his fist, set out for home.