

Daughter of Tarragon

Chapter 2- Friends and Apparitions

Her legs never could carry her quite as fast as she wanted to go, especially when she knew she was late. It always happened that way. She would get far too carried away with trivial things, and completely forget about the things that were important. Was that normal?

“Rowena!” a harsh whisper stopped her in her tracks.

With practiced skill, she kept even the sharp skidding of her bare feet to a near silent move. She turned in one motion and focused her brown eyes on the source of the voice.

“Dolen!”

A male elf seemed to step out of the wooded backdrop as he moved to cross her path, looking as ethereal as one of his kind always did.

“Late again?” he asked, eyeing her for a moment before stopping.

She smiled and moved towards him, stopping a step from him and meeting his gaze. It had been weeks since she last saw him, and he looked just as he had when he left. Tall and lithe, he had brown hair that was high-lighted and low-lighted in a way that it blended in well with his surroundings. His clothing was similarly chosen to blend : all layers of brown and green. Overall, he seemed to make sure his appearance was almost dull, except for the bright green of his eyes. They seemed to glow of their own accord, as if fighting for the chance to prove his heritage. Rowena had always loved Dolen's eyes.

Bowing in proper manner, she greeted him as she was taught to. However, halfway through the bow, she gave up and stepped forward to wrap her arms around his neck.

“Have you no manners?” he asked breathlessly, hesitating a moment before pulling back.

When Rowena stepped back again, she grinned.

“Just happy that you've returned unharmed.”

Only his eyes lightened, showing that he wasn't as angry as his perpetual pout made him out to be. Nodding, he eyed her before moving forward, pulling his his pack tightly over his shoulder.

“The moon is rising. I fear we're both late,” he said in a soft tone.

She trotted a few steps to catch up, and thanked the fates that she had grown into her long legs. It was not often that a human reached an elf's height, and Rowena had grown into a fairly tall young woman. If one could get past her rounded, wide eyes, and the lack of pointed, elven ears, she could almost pass for one of her adopted kin.

Adopted was a good word for Rowena's status, for she was the one of very few humans to ever set foot in Tarragon Forest. As far as she knew, she was the only one of those few who had been invited to join a family and allowed to inhabit the forest permanently.

“Best to take the... *adornments* from your hair,” Dolen said, keeping his gaze ahead of him. “They will know you've been dawdling with the fairyfolk again.”

Making a face, she gave him a small noise of acknowledgment and did as he suggested. There was not much she could hide from Dolen. He made his life as an observer, keeping watch on the main perimeter of the forest. It was a lonely existence, but he seemed to bask in it.

She finished undoing the braids and pulling out the last of the tiny flowers, and tucked hair behind her ear. Their walk was mostly silent, but that was how the two spent most of their time. Dolen, while not often around, was one of the few elves who had learned to accept her. Although A'dair had received permission from Ta'llevny himself, there were many who objected to her very presence. Rowena had been through many trials and errors, but over the years, she had finally learned to cherish the few friends she had.

“Any news?” she asked in a softer voice, once the forest sounds started up again.

“Tracks from more human scouts, but they are a week or more old. I have yet to see one with my own eyes,” he answered, deftly moving under a low branch.

She was about to make a joking comment about her own heritage when she saw his head turn quickly to their left. Knowing his sharp hearing had picked up what hers could not, she followed his gaze while both continued walking.

Rowena let out a short breath when she saw what Dolen had apparently sensed. It seemed as if the trees were parting for a cloaked figure that moved parallel to them. From the height and motion, she could tell he was atop a horse, though to her neither were making a sound.

She recognized the nearly invisible manner in which they moved, and knew it was one of Ta'llevny's riders. Only a handful could admit to having the honor of such a job, and this was a pristine example. The group served as the forest leader's eyes and ears, as well as guards to the highly magical area where he kept his own home. They were rarely seen, but dangerous enough to make others tell tales of them. It was as if a character from one of Silna's stories was brought to life. Those same tales had given her nightmares of riders in dark flowing robes, coming to steal her from her bed because she was human.

“Faster,” Dolen broke her stare and caused her to stumble a bit. “If one of his riders is here, I fear we are late for an important gathering,” he said in another harsh whisper.

“He's just as late then,” she daringly replied, not bothering to cover her voice.

Their feet touched a harder surface as they came upon the meeting place. The great tree trunks and undergrowth had parted to reveal a stony clearing. It was decorated with smaller trees and bushes, which were arranged so that both night and day bloomers were pleasing to the eye. In addition to those, there were many stone statues of elven legends, including forest animals. Deer, rabbits, and owls looked at them from ghost eyes, all carved with an otherworldly talent. In the very center of the stone patio was a pond. It seemed to emanate light on its own, and every once in awhile the water's surface moved with the reflections of large colorful aquatic creatures. This was a place of refuge; a peaceful gathering place for a troubled mind and a quiet get-away for a lovers.

Now, however, the clearing was filled with just about every neighbor Rowena had known to live near her (and some she had never seen). Rowena felt a pull on her sleeve, and turned to see Silna. With a final nod in Dolen's direction, Rowena followed her childhood friend and adopted sister, taking her place amongst the back of a gathering of elves.

“You wonder why they all stare at you, you're practically glowing with fairy magic!” Silna whispered close to her ear.

It was a gesture she considered mannerly, and though she knew it was not normal conduct, the human girl appreciated it. She ducked, but did not have to go so far, as the two females were nearly the same height. The little girl Rowena had known had grown about as fast as she had, though by all tellings, Silna was still a child.

“And you were with him again? You'll start tales, Rowena.”

“I'll have you know I was only with the fairies for a short time! And he was as late as I...” Rowena whispered back, hurrying through the denial and nodding in the direction of the elder leaders. “Look!”

Silna's soft eyes followed, and widened at the sight of the dark-cloaked figure, who had apparently dismounted and was standing off to the side.

“It must be important,” she said in a distracted voice. The female's ocean blue eyes seemed trained on the newcomer. “I've never seen one of them in true form.”

The elves gathered in a large audience, all facing a handful of what one would assume to be elders (though besides their dress and demeanor, one would not be able to guess that they were centuries older than the rest). Soft light fell from the moon itself, as well as the trees that surrounded them. The fireflies had been gently compelled to stay put and light up in a specific area, creating a very ethereal atmosphere. Then again, Tarragon forest was essentially the very example of earthly elegance and peace.

Rowena felt as much as saw Silna's reaction when the newcomer pulled down his hood. The elf who seemed to have hidden himself within layers of forest colored cloth was now standing beside his equally cloaked horse. Once the cowl of his cloak had dropped, she knew why her friend was so enraptured. He was simply gorgeous. Of course, all elves were through Rowena's eyes, but she had learned to see beauty through their eyes and standards. By all, this one was a fine example. His hair was a rare color, nearly black as midnight, and down to his waist. In contrast, his eyes were clear blue and glowed as brightly as Dolen's did.

Rowena heard the call to order, and the voices of the elders begin speaking, but her mind had run away with her, just as Silna's had. She shifted her focus to the rider's horse, and tilted her head, wondering what thoughts she could pull from it's... his... mind.

Mind-speaking was a skill that she had apparently had all her life, that had manifested once Tarragon's magic had seeped into her. It was also the skill that had been her ticket to life within the elven culture. Most elves could mind-speak to animals, though only the more gifted ones could form sentences. Rowena had the ability to speak to them clearly. As a human, that was extremely rare.

“I fear your friend will miss an important meeting if her mind remains so occupied.”

Rowena would have jumped, had she not grown used to the rich sounding voices that came from horses. Of all creatures, only the horses and forest cats were that strong. Focusing her gaze, she realized that the deep brown eyes of the horse she was gazing at were now focused on her. She knew he was speaking of Silna's blatant stare, and elbowed her companion lightly.

“He is fascinating.” Silna said, using the language that Rowena had taught her years ago.

Once Rowena had picked up their elven tongue, Silna had requested to learn Rowena's human language. It had come in handy many times over the years, especially when one did not want a conversation overheard, much less understood.

“He is one of Ta'llevny's riders!” Rowena responded in kind. “And his horse has a strong mind. He sounds as clear as Spirit does to me!”

Several blue and gray toned eyes shifted in their direction, all glinting with annoyance. Not wanting to draw any more attention to themselves, both females lowered their voices to whispers.

“He says to pay attention. We'll miss something important,” Rowena whispered, lifting her gaze toward the horse.

“We have a human in our midst! Why not send her as a spy?” a deep voice cried out in elvish, making both females straighten up and listen.

“She will make no better a spy than any of us,” A'dair's voice called out in response, somewhere to the left of the elders.

Silna's brows drew down over her eyes, and Rowena took that as a warning. There had been many instances over the years where the elven female understood the slightest nuances in a being's voice or gestures. Her response to the subject did not bode well.

Rowena swallowed hard as she realized the conversation was heading in a tense direction. Once again, it was all about her. The outcast. Her eyes met Dolen's as they passed over the elder's, and she held his gaze for a moment before moving on.

“Rowena was raised amongst us, and knows only of our culture. She will not go unnoticed in a human community,” A'dair continued, and when Rowena focused on him, she noticed Spirit standing not far from him.

The white horse's ears were perked, and her head was held high in the air. Something told Rowena that Silna and Spirit were looking in a similar direction. It was tempting to interrupt, but her mind was on more persistent issues. Especially now that her name had been spoken.

“She still knows of their language! She will need only to hear of their plans and report them back to us,” another voice, this one very close to them, said.

Silna and Rowena exchanged satirical glances, knowing they had been overheard.

“We'll not send spies this early on,” one of the elders, Aizel (who happened to be A'dair's father), said clearly.

Another elder leaned in to speak in soft tones to Ta'llevny's representative. The two exchanged a few words before the elder nodded and stood back to speak.

“Ta'llevny has taken notice of these human trackers, and will be watching from his own post. He has set his riders on the task of reporting activity beneath the canopy to him. It is in my opinion that we merely assign more perimeter watchers, and keep in contact with our forest companions on the matter,” he finished, and when there was no objection, nodded his head.

“This gathering is at it's end. I will ask that any watchers stay behind for assignments, and the rest of you keep your mind's eye open wide.”

With his last few words he focused his gray gaze on Rowena, and she felt her own eyes go wide. They often looked on her as an eyesore, but the look Aizel had given her was purposeful. She, for once, had a task.

“That you do, child. And tell your white mistress that my name is Whisper,” said the horse's voice in her mind again. *“If your elven sister is as curious, the one I carry is called Tey'ven.”*

Rowena nodded and suddenly grinned at the horse. Part of her was annoyed that she had again forgotten to close her thoughts up, but she did enjoy the sound of the wise male in her mind. She turned her body towards Silna and continued to smile, her eyebrows dropping in a knowing fashion.

“Don't give me that look,” Silna said, narrowing her eyes and sidestepping past Rowena.

She knew she had been caught with her tongue hanging out. For Silna, that was rare. The ever-hardened warrior was not one to be caught off guard.

Rowena let out a short laugh and trotted after Silna, avoiding the retreating bodies of her neighbors. As they both approached A'dair, Rowena tugged on her friend's hair lightly, and spoke again in her human language.

“His name is Tey'ven.” she said, gaining a double take from her slightly taller friend.

“I wish you both would stop with the secrets,” A'dair cut in. “At least around me.”

“It's no secret, father! We were just inquiring about Ta'llevny's rider!” Rowena said, still smiling from ear to ear.

Smiling was one of few habits that set her apart from them. The elves smiled, but rarely. Their eyes conveyed emotions more often than not. At the moment, Silna's looked ready to pop out of her head.

“Tey'ven,” A'dair mused. “He the newest of Ta'llevny's riders.” he continued matter-of-factly.

All three watched as said elf effortlessly mounted Whisper, and pulled his cowl up. The darkness seemed to swallow them both as they made their way back out of the area.

“Do not strain your eyes searching for him though.” A'dair said in a softer tone, turning as back towards their home. Rowena turned her head to watch him go, but Silna stayed where she was. “An honorable being, yes, but a ghost to the rest of us.”

Rowena let out a soft breath, watching the fireflies lift from their leaves and float off deeper into the trees. Their surroundings slowly darkened, and very few remained in the small clearing where the meeting had taken place. If it was one thing she wished she could share with the elves, it was their eyesight.

“His horse's name is Whisper,” Rowena said at a length, and Silna shook her head and turned quickly.

“I'm to train at sunrise. We should get back,” she said.

The two moved to follow that path that Rowena had memorized over the years. Rowena cursed in her own language, and craned her neck as if trying to see further in the dark. At Silna's questioning look, she shrugged and tugged her wavy dark hair behind her ears.

“I forgot to say goodbye to Dolen.”

Silna scoffed. "What did I tell you! You'll start tales," she said, lifting her arms animatedly "Have you heard, that human girl and the mute hermit!"

"Oh stop! He speaks. They know he speaks!"

"They are gossipers," Silna admitted, taking her sister's side in the end. "The lot of them. They've nothing worthwhile to do but grow the plants and gather the food."

"I'd say that's worthwhile," Rowena replied, unconsciously wrapping her arms around herself and shivering. Chilly night winds were a reminder that fall was on its way out, and winter would be fast approaching.

"We'll both have more worthwhile tasks this season," Silna said as they reached the large tree that had accommodated their family for years.

It would not be long before both Silna and Rowena would be expected to find their own places to reside, but for the time, they all felt more secure in such close quarters.

Once the two had washed, changed, and had a short meal, the subject of Ta'llevny's rider came about once more. Silna was reclined against her bedding, polishing the sword she would need to use the next day, and Rowena was stretched to her full capacity, enjoying the sounds of the forest that her human ears could pick up.

"Whisper and Tey'ven," Silna said softly, and Rowena's head turned over towards her.

"Father said they're ghosts," she said in a soft tone.

Silna stopped polishing and focused her eyes out through their window. Even in the darkness, her eyes had a light of their own.

"They looked quite alive to me."