

# *Robin*

*by Emily Michel*

THE MAN SAT CROSS-LEGGED, staring into the fire. Bad move—too many things in the forest could sneak up on him. Including Robin.

She hovered in the branches of a birch tree two dozen paces away in her bird-size form, her wings whirring quietly, the noise blending in with the sound of the breeze blowing through the leaves.

“I know you’re there, little pixie,” the man said with a chuckle a few moments later. “You’re welcome at my fire.”

By Veitha’s hounds, how did he know? Each time she tried to observe from a distance, he managed to spot her. Or hear her. Sense her, somehow. But unlike the other five times, Robin chose to join him tonight.

She floated down from the tree, and by the time her feet touched the ground, she was full size. Still short by human standards, but she was one of the taller pixies she knew. Robin prowled like she owned the forest, hiding her racing heart and sweaty palms. Humans were her least favorite creatures in the Argent Forest. She’d rather face a pack of pissed off feral hogs than interact with most humans. Rane and her family were fine, and she’d had a crush on Captain Jadran since the first time she’d laid eyes on him—but he turned out to be already paired. Never hurt to admire, though.

The man looked up at her, a welcoming smile beckoning her closer. He kept his hands where she could see them, but his sword and dagger were within easy reach. Robin rested her hand against the pommel of her sword and stood a good three paces away, putting the fire between them. Better safe than dead. Or worse.

“How?” she asked.

“Can’t expect me to tell you my secrets without first exchanging names. I’m Benat.”

Still no movement, like he knew she was uneasy.

“Teruellan?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Robin tilted her head to the side. The treaty between Teruelle and Faerie wasn’t even three decades old. Much damage had been inflicted by both parties on each other, yet the treaty held and had been advantageous for both nations. The citizens, however, were slower to accept the new normal. Only since Prince Nevar’s arrival three years ago had things changed significantly. He had done much to ease his former countrymen into a true peace with fairy kind.

“No.” She meant it. Mostly.

“Then why haven’t you given me your name? Or sat down?”

Robin frowned at the man, who still had nothing but a pleasant smile on his bland face. Light brown skin glowed in the warm firelight, his black hair short and straight. A few days of scruff graced his jawline, and the crinkles around his eyes were deep. He was neither handsome nor ugly, but there was something...compelling in how he carried himself.

She crouched next to the fire, keeping it between them. “Robin.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I wondered when you would finally introduce yourself. Would you care for some food? I have a few things in my pack I’m willing to share.”

She shook her head, and bounced on the balls of her feet, ready to take off should the need arise.

Their larder was well-stocked, and she didn’t want to take anything from a stranger. Relative stranger. He’d been making excursions into the forest over the past couple of months, and had crossed Robin’s path several times. She followed him to ensure he wasn’t causing trouble. So far, he hadn’t.

Then she followed him to ensure nothing caused him trouble. He seemed to have a special sense telling him when dangerous creatures were close. He would turn away from a hobgoblin’s cave long before he risked the resident’s ire. Climb a tree to avoid the feral pigs. And he’d skirt a clearing housing the unpredictable unicorns.

“If you change your mind, let me know. I have plenty.”

He reached into his pack, keeping his hands clear of his weapons, and pulled out some jerky, an apple, and a flask.

“So, how?” Robin asked again.

Benat chuckled. “Not one to ease into conversations, are you?”

She shrugged but didn’t answer. Robin never understood the need to use more words than absolutely necessary. It was a waste of time and energy.

“I am...*was*... the king’s own tracker. I’m very good at what I do.”

“Was?”

“King Armel is getting older and doesn’t hunt as much as he used to. His son has his own favorite. I was let go.”

“Sorry.” Robin trailed her fingers in the dirt around the fire ring.

He shrugged. “These things happen. Since relations have improved so much between our two countries these past few years, I thought I’d take some time to learn the Argent, offer my special set of skills to a new noble family. At least learn enough to be a guard or a guide for the merchant caravans as they travel to Neraida and Lorea.”

Smart. “What have you learned?”

“Ooh, more than two words. I am honored.”

Heat bloomed on her cheeks at his teasing. She graced him with a fleeting smile.

“I have learned many things. The sounds of feral pigs rooting in the underbrush. The scent of rotten meat from the marracos. The little tufts of unicorn hair on the trees telling me where they forage. The whirr of tiny wings. And the way the entire forest hushes when the griffins fly.”

He had nearly magical hearing to hear her wings beating with the rest of the noises of the forest. Perhaps he had a drop or two of fairy blood in his ancestry.

“Those are useful.”

“Very. I’ve also tasted the clear waters of the Dinesse, and felt the summer rain on my skin. I have fallen in love with the Argent and cannot imagine moving back to a city.”

“There are dangers here.”

“I’m learning them but could use some help. I’d be willing to pay.”

Robin flinched back. “Do not insult me.”

“My sincerest apologies. Relationships in Teruelle are very...transactional. Few people do things out of the kindness of their hearts. I also know asking favors of fairies can be dangerous.”

“Not dangerous. Just...tricky. I cannot accept money for performing my duty.”

“Your duty?” He grew silent for a moment, fingers idly stroking the gray-speckled scruff on his face. “Oh, you must be one of the Seven Sisters that I’ve heard the villagers speak of.”

She nodded.

“I am truly grateful, then, for your protection whenever I have entered the forest.”

“Not protection. Making sure you behaved.”

Another laugh. She liked it. It was genuine and warm, and the easy familiarity reminded her of her sisters. Mother of All, she’d better not actually like this man. But she finally sat her ass on the ground, his manner and her intuition telling her she was safe.

He arched his brows, and a grin twitched up the corners of his mouth. “I must’ve passed the test to have you join me at the fire.”

“So far.”

“Well, how is this for you—I could use a friend. Interested?”

She looked him up and down. Nothing she’d observed had raised a red flag. Benat knew what he was doing, had great instincts, and was willing to learn. And as his friend, she could make sure he obeyed the unwritten laws of the Argent as well as keep him out of trouble.

“Yes, I will be your friend.”

“Excellent!” He popped open the flask and took a long draw before holding it out. “In Teruelle, new friends will share a drink together. Would you care for some wine?”

Robin rose and walked the few steps to him, her wings twitching a little against her back. She took the flask and sat down just a couple of arm lengths away. She sipped the excellent Teruellan red wine.

“For friendship,” she said, handing the flask back.

He tipped it toward her, but didn’t drink. After putting the cork back in, he chewed his jerky thoughtfully. When the silence stretched out, he spoke.

“Will you stay here tonight?”

“No, my sisters expect me home. I will find you at midday.”

“Not if I find you first.”

She smiled again and rose. In a blink, she shrunk down to her handspan height. “Fare thee well, friend Benat.”

“Farewell, friend Robin.”

Robin floated up into the night sky and darted away. Now that she knew how he kept finding her, she flew far enough away so he could not hear her wings. She waited until the smell of the fire faded and most of the forest quieted. Picking up a small pebble, she whispered a spell.

As furtively as a lynx, she crept up on the campsite and dropped the pebble in his pack. Benat stirred briefly but didn't wake. She'd be able to find him anywhere in the forest, and more importantly, if he found trouble, it would let her know. What else were friends for?

Robin flew off into the night, allowing the trees to swallow her up.