

Finally, Helaine spoke. “She’s a peasant.”

“So what?” Score asked. “She seems like a pleasant peasant.”

“I don’t have anything to do with peasants.”

Score blinked, and looked at her in amazement. “This is some sort of a class problem you’re having here? It’s not me you’re mad at, but her?”

“Score, understand. My father is Lord Votrin. He rules this land, and he owns the peasants. They stay to themselves, and do whatever they are told. We stay to ourselves, and have nothing to do with them. I cannot help the girl.”

Score couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He stared at Helaine in astonishment. “You know, since we’ve met, you’ve managed to irritate me more than anybody else I’ve ever met. But I’ve never disliked you for it. Until now.” He pointed to the girl. “She needs help, and I don’t care who she is. And I don’t want to hear any more prejudice from you, okay?”

“You don’t understand,” Helaine said. “I’m noble. I can’t get involved with a peasant.”

“Yeah, they might throw you out of the country club for slumming.” Score was getting good and mad now. “Listen, Miss High and Mighty, back in New York, people looked down on me, because of who I was. The son of a gangster. They didn’t want to know me, and they mocked me behind my back.” He shrugged. “I don’t care.” That wasn’t strictly true, but he wouldn’t ever admit it to Helaine. “You know, on my world, I’m a peasant. So, if you’re turning your back on her, you’d better turn your back on me, too. And then one day you’re going to wake up and discover you’ve turned into Eremin after all.” That was a low blow, and he knew it, but he was too mad to care.

He, Helaine and Pixel had discovered a while back that they were the younger versions of the Triad who had once ruled the Diadem with extreme cruelty and selfishness. They had managed to defeat those older selves, but there was always the chance that they might slip and someday turn into the Triad if they weren’t careful. Eremin had been a cold, heartless woman, and Helaine had been terrified at the idea that she might someday become her. It had made Helaine start to mellow a little, to try and be less arrogant and self-centered. But it wasn’t always easy for her.

Helaine flinched visibly at this cutting remark. “It’s not that easy, Score,” she said, her voice scarcely louder than a whisper. “All my life I’ve been taught to avoid peasants. That they were inferior, and we should have nothing to do with them. They’re only there to be used, and worked.”

“And you can’t see what garbage that kind of an attitude is?” Score asked her. “Helaine, you’re better than that. You’ve got a warm heart hidden somewhere under that chain-mail exterior of yours. Forget those dumb prejudices you were raised with. She’s a girl in trouble, and we can help her. So we’ve got to help her, whatever you think.”

Helaine was fighting a very hard inner battle, but finally she nodded. “If even you think I can do it,” she said quietly, “then I guess I can. But it won’t be easy.”

“Who wants easy?” Score asked, relieved. “If we wanted an easy life, we wouldn’t get into so much trouble.”

Together, they went searching. Hardly surprisingly, Helaine was the one who found the patch of flowers. They both gathered as many as they could carry, and then hurried back to where the unicorns and Pixel waited. Pixel had used some water from the pack he carried to clean off what blood he could, but the wounds were still weeping. The girl was somehow still conscious, though.

“Crush the flowers,” she directed. “And then use a little water to make them into a paste. Put it onto my wounds. The medicine will help me to recover.”

They did as she directed. Helaine mixed the paste, but Score noticed that she wouldn’t actually touch the girl. Well, he’d pushed her enough for one day. He and Pixel applied the paste to the stranger’s wounds. Then they sat back and looked at her.

“How long will this take to work?” Score wondered aloud.

The girl managed a weak smile. “Not very long. This is quite powerful magic.”

“Right.” He couldn’t help smiling - she was even more naive than Pixel. Those wounds would take days - maybe weeks - to heal, and that was assuming they didn’t become infected.

Suddenly, he felt an odd rippling sensation that passed through his body. His fingertips tingled, and his hair almost stood on end. Startled, he glanced at Pixel, and saw the shock in his

friend's eyes. He looked up at Helaine, who was standing some ten feet away. She was clearly feeling this too. "What's going on?" he demanded.

\*Magic,\* Flame answered. The two unicorns were standing back, so their horns wouldn't interfere with the magic.

Magic? Score looked down at the young woman. It had to be here somehow. She was doing something... He could see her pale skin starting to look more healthy already, and the blood had stopped running. The paste he and Pixel had applied to her body was starting to dry out and flake off. Underneath, there was absolutely no sign of any wounds at all.

"That's impossible," Pixel said, astonished.

"That's magic," Score said, starting to understand.

A moment later, the tingle went away, and the girl sat up. She seemed to be a lot stronger now, and almost cheerful. She was actually rather pretty, with long, flowing black hair, and a dusky shade to her skin, and bright, happy eyes. "I told you that the flowers would heal me," she said.

"It... wasn't the flowers," Pixel said, his voice light and amazed. "It was you."

The girl frowned. "I don't understand."

"Nor do I," Pixel admitted. "But the power that cured you wasn't in those flowers. It was in you." He looked at Score. "She must be another magic-user, like us!"

It made sense to Score. "Looks like it," he agreed.

The girl shook her head. "No!" she exclaimed, trying to back away from them. "I'm not a witch! I'm not!"

Pixel bent closer to her. "Of course not. You're a magic-user, like us. It's nothing like being a witch. Oh, well, actually, maybe it's something like being a witch, but it's not really..."

"You're doing great," Score muttered. "You're confusing me, never mind her."

Helaine snorted. "She's a peasant. She can't possibly understand what you're talking about. Peasants are too stupid."

That brought the girl out of her panic. She looked at Helaine, and an expression of pure loathing crossed her face. "You're nobles," she spat, struggling to get to her feet. "I should have

known better than accept help from you!”

“Don’t worry,” Helaine said coldly. “I didn’t offer it.”

“And you’d better not start calling me a noble,” Score warned the girl. “I get insulted very easily.”

Smoke moved forward. \*These people are your friends,\* he assured the girl.

She looked at him in wonder. “I thought I’d imagined that horn,” she said, almost in a whisper. “I never imagined anything quite like you could ever possibly really exist.”

\*I do,\* Smoke assured her. \*And you have felt my mind. You know you can trust me. These people will not harm you. They mean you well.\*

“Don’t include me in that,” Helaine warned.

Score grinned. “Cat fight!” He said, cheerfully. “This could get interesting. Helaine’s got the skill, but I’d say the new girl has the edge in venom. What do you think, Pixel?”

“I think you should knock off making a joke out of this situation,” Pixel replied. “We’ve got enough problems without your adding to them.” He turned to the girl. “I’m called Pixel. The comedian here is Score. And that’s Helaine.”

“Helaine Votrin,” added the warrior carefully.

The girl glared at her. “I could have guessed that,” she snapped. “You have all of the arrogance of a Votrin.”

“And the right to punish insolence,” Helaine snarled, her hand moving toward her sword.

“Whoa!” Score said hastily, grabbing Helaine’s hand firmly. “Remember Eremin?”

With a shudder, Helaine fought her own emotions, trying to calm down. Finally, Score felt the tension leave her hand, and she nodded, once. It was as close to an apology as she was likely to give, but it was enough for Score. He turned to the other girl. “Okay, you,” he said, “we’ll have less of that chip on your shoulder. Helaine’s one of the good guys, whatever you may think of the nobility here, and you’d better be nice to her.” The girl swallowed, and finally nodded. “Great. Now, what’s your name? We can’t keep calling you Hey, you.”

“My name is Jenna,” she answered.

“Pretty name,” Pixel remarked, and then blushed. Score rolled his eyes. Pixel was a real

sucker for a pretty face. And Jenna certainly had one of those.

“Okay,” Score said. “We all know one another, and you two girls aren’t actively trying to kill one another, so things are going relatively well.”

Pixel looked at Jenna curiously. “Why did the idea of using magic make you so frightened?”

Jenna shivered, and looked around at each of them in turn. “Witchery is forbidden,” she said nervously. “I’m not a witch. I use plants and medicines for my cures. I’m a spell-weaver at worst.”

Pixel’s eyes flashed with understanding. “Those wounds of yours - they were because people thought you were a witch?”

Jenna nodded. “Witches must be killed,” she said. She nodded at Helaine. “She knows that.”

“Nice world you have here,” Score remarked. “Is that the law around these parts?” he asked Helaine.

She nodded. “It is not often enforced, except when people get scared enough. Or angry enough to accuse someone of being a witch.”

Score sighed. “So you mean the first time we use magic, we’d better watch out for flying rocks or villagers with stakes and lots of kindling?” he asked.

Jenna stared at them. “You mean that you really are witches?” she asked. There was a note of fear in her voice.

“No,” Pixel said hastily. “We’re magic-users. It’s not the same thing. Well, it’s similar, but not with the same intention. Or. At least -“

“At least you’d better stop trying to explain,” Score suggested. “You’re only confusing everybody.” He turned to Jenna. “All of us have certain powers,” he told her. “It’s not through a deal with evil or anything, just something we were all born with. It looks like you have the power of healing. You’ve managed to convince yourself that it was your medicines and potions doing the work, but it was actually your own magic. And that’s cool. Don’t let it bother your pretty head; it’s perfectly natural.”

“Pretty head?” Helaine asked, coldly.

“Hey, it just slipped out, okay?” Score answered. “Remind me to compliment you sometime, so I don’t play favorites, okay?”

“If I have to remind you, it’s hardly a compliment,” Helaine objected.

“Look,” Pixel said, breaking in before the argument got worse. “Jenna has the power of healing. I don’t know about the two of you, but I can see that this might well come in handy. I vote that we let her join us, at least for now.”

Helaine shook her head. “I don’t want anything to do with her.”

“That figures,” Score muttered. “Personally, the amount of times we get into trouble and wounded, I’m all for having a healer along with us. So that’s two to one, you’re outvoted.”

Jenna looked confused. “I don’t understand,” she said. “She’s a Votrin. Doesn’t she tell you what to do? Isn’t she in charge?”

“No,” Score answered. “She just thinks she is. We’re equals. And, despite what it sometimes sounds like, we’re actually very good friends. Helaine can be a barrel of laughs when she wants to be. Well, maybe not a barrel - more like a cup. A small cup.”

Flame snorted. \*Anyway, both Smoke and I want Jenna along; we like the way her mind feels.\*

Smoke nodded. \*And I have chosen her as my human.\*

“Chosen me?” Jenna sounded astonished. She gave his neck a hug. “Oh, thank you!”

Flame suddenly looked startled. \*There are armed men approaching!\* she exclaimed. \*They must be from the soldiers’ camp ahead!\*

“Get out of here!” Helaine ordered. “You can’t allow them to see you. Wait for us here, and we’ll be back as soon as we can.” The unicorns whirled, and vanished swiftly into the forest.

“We’d better hide, too,” Pixel said, starting for the trees.

Helaine grabbed his arm. “No,” she said. “I’ve got a plan.”

Score wasn’t sure this was a wise move, but when it came to fighting, nobody he knew could defeat Helaine. So, much as he felt like running, he managed to keep his feet still.

Seven soldiers came around a bend in the pathway, and caught sight of them. Their hands

went straight for their weapons.

Helaine did the last thing that Score would have expected. She threw up her hands. “We surrender!” she cried.

Score looked at her in amazement. “That’s your plan?” he asked.