
The book cover features a central illustration of four characters. In the foreground, a woman with long brown hair and a determined expression wears dark, spiked gauntlets and holds a sword with a curved blade. Behind her, a young man with dark hair and a white tunic holds a staff topped with a glowing orb. To the left, a woman with dark hair and a tattoo on her shoulder looks on. In the background, a large, multi-towered castle with conical roofs sits on a grassy hill under a blue sky. A large, red, circular magical symbol with concentric rings and a central starburst is positioned behind the title.

DIADEM

Worlds of Magic

BOOK OF
WAR
JOHN PEEL



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PROLOGUE

Blink yawned, stretched, and then used his right hind foot to scratch just behind his red, furry ear. After a moment, the itch subsided and he felt comfortable enough to start a good, long nap, which he so richly deserved.

"You lazy creature," Shanara said, sweeping into the room with her usual hateful energy and liveliness. "You're not thinking of sleeping again, are you?"

"I'm tired," Blink protested. "I've had a very busy morning."

"You only ate breakfast."

"Like I said, I've had a very busy morning."

Shanara eyed him in her usual fashion—a long, hard look that promised lots and lots of work. "I just hope I never meet a lazier, greedier creature than you in my life," she muttered. "You'd try the patience of a saint."

"You're not a saint," Blink replied. "If anything, you're the exact opposite."

Shanara smiled sweetly, and tossed her long, blue hair over her shoulder. Like most humans, she was very vain about her appearance. Unlike most humans, her appearance changed whenever she wished it. Shanara was a very powerful magician, who specialized in illusions. She never let any other human being see her as she *really* was. In fact, even though Blink had been with her for several years, even he wasn't certain he knew what she really looked like. And he wondered if, after all these years of altering her own looks, whether Shanara knew what she was underneath all that illusion. Not that it really mattered; Blink could always tell what Shanara was. . .

She was the one who made him work while all he wanted to do was to sleep.

"What can be so important?" he asked her, plaintively. "There's no impending crisis that I know of."

"You don't know much, and that's a fact," Shanara scoffed.

"I know the values of beauty sleep," he said, hinting hard, but it had no effect on her. Some days she could be so cruel.

"This is for Score, Helaine, and Pixel," she informed him.

"I thought they were still resting," he complained.

"Those three?" Shanara laughed. "I sometimes think they don't know how to rest."

"I could teach them," Blink offered. "I'm an expert."

"That's true, but it's a useless talent." The magician looked around her laboratory. It was filled with potions, powders, jars, flasks, books, papers, strange apparatus, and dust. She wasn't a particularly tidy person. It was one of her virtues, Blink thought. He hated people who bustled around, cleaning up and disturbing him.

"Helaine may need to go back to Ordin," Shanara said. Blink looked at Shanara, even though he could barely keep his eyes open. "I thought she'd given up

that place for good," he said. "And I can't blame her. All that fighting! It sounds most exhausting."

"Breathing sounds exhausting to you," Shanara muttered. "She says she's given the place up, but I've seen her and heard her these past few days. She's starting to miss it."

"Then she's stupid."

"No. It's called *homesickness*." Shanara gave him an odd look. "Don't you ever miss your home?"

"Yes. It was such a peaceful place. Not like *here*."

For once, the magician looked worried. "Would you . . . like to go back?" she asked him. "Leave me, and go home?"

Blink was shocked. "Leave you?" he gasped. "I knew it! You're trying to get rid of me, aren't you? You're sick and tired of me! You want a new magical pet! Maybe one of those wretched unicorns?" He was starting to panic now. "You don't love me, do you?"

"Calm down," Shanara said. With uncanny accuracy, she zeroed in on *exactly* the right spot to scratch him, between his ears. "I *do* love you, you silly creature. I just thought you might be homesick, too."

"I *am* homesick," he informed her, feeling much more relieved. "I'm sick of home. That's why I left it

in the first place. Why would I want to go anywhere but here?"

"I thought I was working you to death?" Shanara said dryly.

"Ah, well, maybe that's a *bit* of an exaggeration . . ."

"So, you really don't mind helping me, then?" she asked him.

He'd been tricked again, he knew, into doing extra work. He sighed. "Let's get on with it," he grumbled. "It's my lot to suffer, I suppose."

"You poor thing, you," Shanara said sarcastically. Then she scratched him again, and all was right with the world. "Come on, then—to work."

He *hated* that word!

I

“There’s something wrong with Helaine.”

Score opened one eye and glanced across his room at Pixel, who was standing in his doorway. Score had been enjoying relaxing—away from danger, away from lessons, and away from anything resembling work. He was reclining on his bed, hands clasped behind his neck, and had been planning on maybe taking a nap. That was out of the ques-

tion now. Once Pixel got an idea into his head, he wouldn't stop until he'd whipped everyone into action.

Score studied Pixel carefully. The other boy looked almost human—if you ignored the blue skin and pointed ears—and very concerned. Score usually dismissed ninety percent of Pixel's worries. Having spent almost all of his life wired into a computer, without having met people—including his parents—in the flesh, he tended to be more than a little out of touch with reality. It wasn't his fault, really, and Score did feel sympathetic toward his friend. Mostly.

"Did you hear me?" Pixel repeated, moving further into the room of the castle that Score had claimed for himself. "I think there's something wrong with Helaine."

"I've been saying that since we met her," Score answered, realizing that Pixel was unlikely to go away and leave him in peace. "You know what I think it is? I think it's that somebody made her underwear out of the same steel mesh that she wears as armor. That would be enough to send anybody wrong."

"Can't you be serious for once?" Pixel demanded.

Score considered the question carefully. "No," he finally decided. "I can't. I think the Universe is quite

serious enough as it is, and it's my mission in life to bring a little levity into it."

"Please," Pixel begged.

"Oh, stop with the puppy-dog eyes," Score whined. "You know I can't resist them." He clambered to his feet and stretched. "Okay, I'll be serious—for exactly two minutes. After that, I go looney tunes."

Pixel, of course, didn't have a clue as to what Looney Tunes were, but he took advantage of Score's attention. "Haven't you noticed how moody she's been recently?"

Score thought about it for a minute. "Pixel, Helaine is the most serious-minded person I've ever met. And considering I've met you, we're talking *deeply* serious here. She wouldn't know what a joke was if it bit her on the backside. Her idea of fun is swinging that heavy sword of hers around for a couple of hours. Or chopping up a monster or two with it. Or just beating the tar out of anything that gets within twenty feet of her—which is why my room is forty feet from hers; I don't want to look like an easy target. Getting more than three words out of her that don't refer to violence in some form or another is a major accomplish-

ment, like winning the Nobel Prize. And you think she's been *moody* recently? How can you tell?"

"She hasn't done her sword practice for two days."

That stopped Score before he could come up with another joke. "Two days?" He shook his head. "She's sick, probably dying." He was still being a bit silly, but now he was starting to worry. That really wasn't like Helaine. She believed passionately in keeping in good fighting shape. Score really couldn't blame her, since violence did seem to intrude into their lives an awful lot. Being three of the most powerful magic-users in the Diadem did tend to make them tempting targets for a lot of would-be wizards. And their habit of helping people who needed it made them tasty targets for monsters of various kinds.

"At least you seem to understand the problem now," Pixel said, looking relieved.

"Have you—silly idea I know—actually thought of *talking* to her about it?" Score suggested.

Pixel blushed. "Well, actually . . ."

Score laughed. "You know, considering your skin is such a rich shade of blue, I'm astonished that you can blush so well." That made Pixel turn an even darker hue. "Oh, relax. I should have known you'd never get

up the courage to talk to her about anything important. You're really going to have to either get over this crush you have on her or else give her a deep, passionate kiss. And I'm going to have to stop teasing you about it, or you're going to explode, aren't you?"

Pixel was almost black, he was blushing so much. He really did have a bad crush on Helaine. It probably wasn't Helaine so much as simply the fact that she was the first girl he had ever *really* been close to. He'd had plenty of female friends in his virtual world back home, but it wasn't the same. Helaine was the first girl he'd ever managed to get physically close to, and he was infatuated with her. He was also terrified in case she ever found out.

Score couldn't understand it himself. He *liked* being alone. When you had a girlfriend, she tended to take charge and tell you what to do. And Score was determined that nobody was *ever* going to tell him what to do again. He'd had enough of that, growing up as the son of Bad Tony Caruso, the New York mobster. Bad Tony had made certain that Score—Matthew, his real name—had obeyed every single command his father had uttered. His way of raising Score had killed Score's mother, though Score had never quite found out the

truth about his mother's actual death—or life, for that matter. But now Score was free of his father, and he intended to stay free of anyone telling him what to do ever again.

And Helaine, especially, was very good at giving orders. Since she was a warrior, as well as the daughter of the Lord of Votrin, she was used to telling somebody to do something and having her command immediately obeyed. And that wasn't for Score, that was certain. She was a stuck-up brat with airs and graces, even if she was a terrific warrior and a good friend. And Score wasn't going to get involved with her in any way, shape, or form other than as a friend.

Score blinked, and tried to focus his thoughts. What was he thinking of? Pixel was the one with the crush on Helaine. He himself was *way* too smart to get romantic about any girl. Even one as capable as Helaine. She was just a friend.

Oh, right—Pixel thought she was being moody. Score thought about it for a couple of minutes. It was really hard to tell *what* Helaine was thinking. She had a kind of icy, professional mask that slid into place whenever she was with anyone except Flame, her unicorn friend. She did loosen up a bit sometimes, but it was

quite rare, and oddly upsetting to Score. Last night, in the banquet hall of the castle the three of them had taken over, she had sat in silence, eating sparingly and lost in her thoughts.

"Seems perfectly normal to me," Score observed.

"Something's upsetting her," Pixel insisted.

Score sighed. He could tell he wasn't going to get any peace until he proved that Pixel was over-reacting, as usual. "Okay, let's go find her. *I'll* ask her what's wrong. Unlike you, I can converse with her without getting all emotional." That made Pixel blush again. "Honestly, you'd be a lot better off just telling her how you feel."

"I *can't*," Pixel insisted. "Because I don't know how I feel. This is all very new to me, you know. People from my world aren't very open about their emotions."

"You should spend more time on Earth," Score advised him. "That would loosen the pair of you up. We may be a bit primitive there for your liking, but we do know how to enjoy ourselves. Most of us, anyway." For some reason, though, he had a sudden memory of their last trip to New York. Score had been dying, and Helaine and Pixel had helped save his life, and there had been one part of it, when he and Helaine had

been hiding from his father's thugs, where Helaine had been forced to kiss him, to hide Score's face from the hunters.

It affected him very oddly. It hadn't been a *real* kiss, of course. Helaine hadn't meant anything by it. It had just been a trick, to get them safely past a trap.

But it had felt kind of nice . . .

Score squelched that thought immediately. He didn't like where it was leading him. *You're independent*, he reminded himself. *You don't belong to anyone, and nobody belongs to you. Helaine's like Pixel, just a friend. You could leave them any time you felt like it. If you felt like it.*

The trouble was, he had a nasty suspicion that he couldn't . . .

He wasn't going there. He concentrated on the job at hand. They needed to find Helaine. Normally, that wouldn't be difficult. If the sun was up, she'd either be practicing her fighting, polishing her sword, or doing something in the armory. Maybe she'd be eating, or be off with Flame. But Flame wasn't around, so that was out. And if she was being moody, as Pixel thought, she wouldn't be fighting. That only left one likely place to look: her room.

When they had taken over this castle, on the planet Dondar, each of them had taken a room to be their own, for sleeping, or whenever they wanted some privacy. Pixel wasn't very good at remembering the *privacy* idea, but Score usually left anyone in their room alone. If they wanted to talk, they'd go to the main hall, or one of the other public rooms. In fact, Score had never even been to Pixel's room, and to Helaine's only once. Still, he supposed that Helaine would forgive them for knocking on her door. And if she didn't, it would simply prove that she was in her normal state of mind and not being moody.

Pixel hurried along behind him, muttering to himself. Since he was obviously just worrying and not trying to start a conversation, Score ignored him. Reaching Helaine's door, Score gave a good, hard knock. Since it was solid oak, he winced at the pain in his hand. He waited, but there was no reply.

"I guess she's not home," he decided. "Maybe she went for a walk?"

"She's in there," Pixel said with certainty. "She's just not answering the door." He moved past Score and pushed the door open.

“Hey!” Score exclaimed. “That’s her room. She might be naked, or something! Then what would you do? Oh, right, explode in embarrassment.” Pixel flushed at the thought; as usual, he’d forgotten the concepts of privacy.

Luckily for him, Helaine was fully dressed, and sitting in her window seat. Score remembered she’d chosen this room for her own because she liked the large window that overlooked the courtyard. There was a cushioned area in the sill, where she could sit and stare out, and that was exactly what she was doing now. She glanced around as they entered. “Oh, hi guys.”

“You’re right,” Score told Pixel. “She’s definitely not herself. She normally would have broken your arm for rushing in like that.” He moved over to the window and laid a hand over her forehead. “No sign of fever.”

Helaine scowled at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Well, Pixel thinks *you’re* the one with problems,” Score informed her. “I told him he was crazy, but, hey, who listens to *my* opinions?”

“Nobody who has a brain,” Helaine answered.

"She's getting better," Score decided. "Okay, so what is the problem? Most girls, I'd figure it was shopping withdrawal, but you've never been in a mall in your life, so that can't be it. Unicorn withdrawal?" He was only half joking here; Helaine really loved her unicorn friend, Flame. He supposed it was a girl thing; his own unicorn friend, Thunder, was a real pain most of the time.

"Why does there have to be something wrong with me just because I'm sitting here thinking?" Helaine asked. There was a slight touch of her usual testiness in her voice.

"Just because you *are* sitting there thinking," Score answered. "Usually you're off dicing and slicing monsters, or practicing for it. I believe Pixel has the copyright on sitting and thinking."

"What Score is *trying* to say," Pixel explained, "is that you seem to be . . . preoccupied. Like something is bothering you."

Helaine reached out and touched Pixel's cheek. She seemed to be totally unaware of the blush that gesture raised. "That's very sweet of you," she said. "Thank you for noticing." She glanced at Score. "You didn't notice, did you?"

"I've got better things to do with my time than try to keep track of your emotions," he replied, with as much dignity as he could. "Like re-labeling my video collection." He knew she wouldn't understand the joke. "So, okay, we've established that there's something bugging you. Are you going to share, or are you going to tell us it's none of our business?"

Helaine shrugged. "I guess it is kind of your business."

"I think we're making progress," Score said to Pixel. "At least she hasn't threatened us with physical violence for prying."

"I was thinking of home," she said softly.

"Ordin?" Score raised his eyebrows. "That medieval muddle? The cold, draughty castle, with hot and cold running blood? The place where they want to stick you in a dress and teach you to crochet? The one with the father who wants to marry you off to a world-class jerk? That Ordin?"

Helaine glared at him with some of her normal fire. "Trust you to think of all the bad things about it. Just because you hate your own home —"

"Hey!" Score said indignantly. "I love New York! It's just some of the people there I can't stand. The

ones I'm related to. And I thought the same sort of thing held true for you."

Pixel added, gently: "You've never really talked much about it. Do you have a lot of family there? Do you miss them?"

Helaine shrugged. "I've got parents, four sisters and six brothers and four half-sisters."

Score, an only child, whistled. "Are they all as crazy as you?"

"My sisters are all married. Of course, my father remarried after my mother died, and my half-sisters are all unmarried. My brothers . . . Well, some are nicer than others. They're good warriors."

"Well, that's nice to know," Score said sarcastically. "So, what, you want to go back and have a family reunion?"

"Not exactly." Helaine looked troubled. "If you remember, I was brought into the circuit of the worlds of the Diadem at a very tense time. My father wanted me to marry Dathan, the son of Lord Peverel, to cement an alliance between the two houses. The Border Lords were making inroads into our lands, and we needed to stand against them."

"I remember that you said this Dathan was a real jerk," Score pointed out.

Helaine shuddered at her memory of him. "He is terrible," she agreed. "And I ran away, rather than agree to the marriage. But the Border Lords sent assassins to kidnap or kill me, to prevent the wedding. It was in fleeing from them that I went through the portal to the Diadem."

"Narrow escape," Pixel commented. "So, what is the problem? Do you miss your family?"

Helaine blinked, and then shook her head. "My family is *here*," she said firmly. "The two of you. Flame and the unicorns. Even Shanara and Blink. Maybe even Oracle, annoying as he can be. I feel much closer to you than I ever did to my real family."

"Don't get all touchy-feely on me," Score begged. "I really hate those Disney moments."

"Relax," Helaine said. "I'm not going to kiss you, or cry, or anything."

"Saved," muttered Score.

Pixel frowned. "But you haven't told us what the problem is yet."

Helaine clambered to her feet, and started to pace. Score jumped into the window seat in her place. It

was quite warm; she must have been sitting here for ages.

"It doesn't matter what I think of my family," Helaine finally said. "They are still my family, and I am still a daughter of the House of Votrin."

"Oh, Jeez," Score complained, finally getting the drift. "This is going to be one of your crazy honor things, isn't it?"

"There is nothing crazy about honor," Helaine said stiffly. "Though I know you don't understand it. As a daughter of Votrin, it is my duty to serve the House of Votrin. And . . . I ran away."

"One of the few sensible things you've done in your life," Score agreed. "So don't start messing it up now, okay?"

"I have brought shame to my parents," Helaine said slowly. "And I may have imperiled my family. My father needed the alliance my marriage would have brought, in order to fight off the Border Lords. Since I fled, who knows what has happened to my father?"

"Who cares?" countered Score. "He was a right pig, and didn't give a hoot about you. He just saw you as a pawn in his games. And he was furious when he found out you'd been learning to fight behind his back, disguised as a boy. Or have you forgotten all of that?"

"I have forgotten nothing," Helaine answered stiffly. "Especially, I have not forgotten that I caused a serious problem for my father by running away. I *must* see what the consequences of my actions were. I have been thinking about it for days, but my mind is made up. I must return home to Ordin, to Castle Votrin, and see what I have done."

"I understand," Pixel said gently. "Of course, we'll come with you."

"Hey, what's with the *we* here?" Score demanded, jumping to his feet. He gestured around. "You've seen one castle, you've seen them all. And I get the impression that Daddy Votrin wouldn't exactly approve of me. I mean, I'm not into cleaving people in two with a battle-ax, so he'll probably think I'm sub-human. And I never know which fork to eat my salad with at dinner. I'm sure I'd call him *Your Sourness* instead of *Your Highness*. I don't know how to bow. I—"

"You're just making excuses," Pixel said.

"Yeah, well, so what?"

Helaine moved to the doorway. "You don't have to come if you don't want to," she told him. "I'm the one who has to make this trip, not you."

"Yeah, right, like you can manage anything right without me along," Score complained. "I can't let the two of you out of my sight. You'd probably start necking as soon as my back was turned." Pixel blushed fiercely.

Helaine looked puzzled. "You think there's something wrong with our necks?" she asked.

"Yeah, I have to keep saving them." Score sighed. "Well, if we've got to go, we'd better go see Shanara for some help. The things I do to help you."

"I didn't ask for help!" Helaine said fiercely.

"You never do," Score told her. She sounded like her old self again, and that made him happier. The world just didn't seem right unless he and she were fighting. Everything was back to normal.

Which, he reflected, probably meant that they were going to be fighting for their lives any time now . . .

2

Now that she'd made her decision, Helaine felt a lot better. She'd been feeling guilty for quite some time about abandoning her father, but with all of their adventures and dangers, she'd managed to hide it pretty well, even from herself. True, she and her father had never really been close, and he had tried to marry her off to a bumbling idiot, but that didn't matter. What mattered was loyalty—she'd been raised

from infancy to know that. She was a Votrin, and that was all that mattered.

She glanced at Score and Pixel, and almost smiled. They were loyal, too—but to her, and that made her feel very good. She'd never really had any friends back at her father's castle. The boys, of course, practiced fighting, not courting, and they wouldn't have been caught dead talking to a girl if they could help it. And the other girls all seemed to want to discuss nothing but dresses and getting married—neither of which had ever been of the slightest interest to Helaine. The closest person to a friend that she'd had was her father's loyal old warrior, Borigen. He had been the only person who knew Helaine's secret, and the one who had—reluctantly at first, then cheerfully—taught her everything she knew about fighting.

She felt another stab of guilt. How had her father punished the old soldier for what he'd done? Helaine knew, without a doubt, that Lord Votrin would have seen Borigen's actions as betrayal of trust. And that was another thing she had to make amends for.

"So," Score said abruptly, "does this trip mean we finally get to see you in a dress?"

“What?” The question broke through her introspection and caught her completely off guard. “What are you talking about?”

“A dress,” Score explained, in his usual annoying manner. “A bit of cloth with holes for your arms, head and legs. It goes over your skin instead of armor.”

“I know what a dress is,” she growled. “Why do you want to see me in one?”

“I don’t want to see you in one,” Score answered cheerily. “I think you look really cute in chain mail. Girls in uniform turn me on,” he confided to Pixel in a loud whisper. Pixel looked bothered by the comment, which didn’t worry Score in the slightest of course. “It’s just your father,” he added to Helaine.

“My father in a dress?” Helaine was having real problems understanding Score this morning. Was he being more tormenting than normal, or was she just slow this morning?

“Ugh!” Score grimaced. “That’s a horrible picture that’s going to ruin my day, I can tell. No, what I meant was that you fled your father because he didn’t want you to be a warrior. Isn’t it going to provoke him a bit if you turn up dressed like Xena, Warrior Princess?”

As usual, she didn’t know exactly what he was talking about, but she did get the point. “My father,” she

said coldly, "will have to tolerate my choices now. I no longer live under his roof."

"Attagirl," Score said approvingly. "And if he objects, you can just fry him with a bolt of flames, right?"

"I would not do that to my father."

"Hey, I would. To your father or my own. Okay," Score said brightly, "one insult to you, and I get to burn his pants, right?"

"You will be a guest in his house," Helaine said, her voice dripping ice, "and behave accordingly. According to *our* standards of behavior, not yours."

Score grinned even more maddeningly, and slapped the startled Pixel across the shoulders. "So, hey, I guess that means we get to sit around and discuss weapons, dismembering, and getting drunk while Helaine goes off to the women's quarters and gets out her knitting!"

Helaine stopped and whirled to face Score. "Are you deliberately trying to provoke me?" she demanded.

"Yes," he said.

Some days he *really* annoyed her, and this was clearly shaping up to be one of them. "Why?"

"It's for your own good," he replied. "If you go to see dear old daddy feeling guilty and determined to play the dutiful daughter, he's gonna walk all over you.

Let's face it, he's already got you conned with this *loyal to the House of Vøtrin* garbage."

"It is not garbage!" Helaine yelled.

"It is too garbage!" Score insisted. "Loyalty's a two-way street, kid. If he wants your loyalty, he has to give something in return. And from what you've told us, he's given you zip—except maybe an engagement ring from the biggest idiot in the universe. I want you good and mad when you meet him, so if he tries any more of his con games on you, you won't be suckered in."

Helaine stared at him, her emotions in complete confusion. "You think that by getting me mad, you're *helping* me?"

"Right."

She shook her head. "You're crazier than I thought," she informed him. "But your heart's in the right place—I think." Then she grinned. "I could always check it by a little surgery . . ." She tapped the hilt of the sword strapped to her waist.

"I think I'll pass," Score answered. But he looked awfully pleased with himself. Sometimes Helaine just wanted to smack him across the face so hard, to knock the grin right off it. Other times . . . She shuddered. She was a warrior, and thoughts of romance were not supposed to cross her mind.

Especially not thoughts of kissing Score again . . . If she was going to fall in love, she would most assuredly pick somebody much better than *him*. Somebody with more . . .

Thankfully, her train of thought was shattered by a voice that echoed inside her mind and heart.

Helaine!

"Flame!" she exclaimed. She could sense that her unicorn friend was close by, and she turned happily to Score and Pixel. "Flame's here."

"Not just Flame, either," Pixel added. "I can sense another unicorn."

"Just as long as it's not Thunder," Score said. "I don't think I could take his grumpy majesty today." Thunder was Flame's father, and the leader of the local unicorn herd. He tended to be a little grouchy, but he was their friend, despite Score's attempts to pretend otherwise.

"No, it's one we've not met before," Pixel said, taking Score seriously, as usual.

It's a friend of mine, Flame thought to Helaine.
We're here to go with you.

"Go with us?" Helaine was puzzled. "How did you know we were going anywhere?" As she spoke, she

was hurrying to the courtyard, where the unicorns were waiting.

"That would be my doing," said a fresh voice, male and cheerful.

"Just what we needed to make a bad day worse," Score complained. "Oracle . . ."

Helaine barely spared a glance for their odd companion. As was his habit, he'd simply materialized from thin air, and was striding along the castle passages with the trio. Oracle *meant* well, but he had an infuriating way of doing things behind their backs that tended to cause complications. Like telling a pair of unicorns to go with Helaine to Ordin . . . "Let's wait until we're all together before we discuss this," Helaine growled, mostly to stop Score from arguing with Oracle. She wasn't looking at him, but she knew that Score was glaring at her; he hated to be told what to do. But she wasn't going to stand around arguing. If Oracle was involved, then she suddenly had a strong suspicion that there was more going on than just a whim on her part to return home. Oracle was almost invariably the bringer of bad news. A moment later, she emerged, blinking slightly, into the bright sunshine in the castle's courtyard. Waiting, dancing on her

hooves slightly, was Flame. Sunlight bathed the beautiful creature—Helaine couldn't help admiring the purity of the white coat, and the glittering flecks of gold that bespangled her hide. Beside Flame was a male unicorn, with a smoky gray coat that deepened to black around the fetlocks and muzzle. Both, of course, had long, spiraling horns of mother-of-pearl that flashed like lightning when they caught the sun.

Helaine rushed over to Flame and hugged her. Flame nuzzled her neck. "It's so good to see you again," Helaine said. Unicorns were telepathic, and she could have just thought it, but it was more natural for Helaine to speak aloud.

I, too, am very glad. Flame indicated the other unicorn with her horn. *This is my friend, Smoke.*

Score gave one of his infuriatingly smug grins. "Whoa! Looks like your little girl is growing up, Helaine. She's got a boyfriend. Which is more than you have—maybe." Then he gave Pixel an odd look, which caused the other boy to turn away.

Helaine had no idea what that was all about, but she wasn't about to let Score embarrass Flame. "Keep your idiotic jokes to yourself," she snapped, and then turned to Oracle. "You—what is going on?"

“On?” Oracle tried to look innocent, which didn’t fool any of them for even a second. He shrugged his shoulders. “Why must something be going on?”

“Because you’re here,” Score interrupted. “And you’re the biggest streak of bad news any of us have ever seen. You *never* show up to say anything good is going to happen, so let’s have the bad news now. No wonder you always dress in black—you’re like our own personal rain-cloud, hovering over us.”

Oracle held his head high. “I wear black,” he said, “because it’s very fashionable. And it goes with anything.”

“I just wish it would go away,” Score muttered. “And you haven’t answered Helaine’s question.”

“Ah, well . . .” Oracle looked at them all and looked slightly apologetic. “As you know, I have the limited ability to look slightly into your futures—”

“And nothing better to do with your time than peek,” Score commented.

“—and you do lead such *adventurous* lives,” Oracle continued, ignoring him. “Which is why it seems as if I never bring anything but bad news.”

“So it is more bad news?” Pixel asked.

Oracle sighed. "I am afraid so," he admitted. "Helaine's worries about her father are completely justified. Castle Votrin is in serious trouble.

Helaine felt a stab of fear. "My father?" she cried, terrified.

"Is fine—for the moment," Oracle assured her. "But it isn't going to last. He is in grave danger, and this time I am not at all certain that even the three of you together can help him."

"We're the greatest magicians in all of the Diadem," Pixel said. He wasn't boasting, just telling the truth. Well, most of the truth—they had the *power* to be the greatest magicians, but they were all still in their early teens, which meant that they didn't have the skills yet to handle all of their abilities. That would have to come with time and practice.

"And that may not be enough," Oracle said sadly. "Don't forget, Ordin is one of the worlds on the Rim of the Diadem. You'll be so far from the center that your powers will be weakened." This was quite true—the worlds of the Diadem were like the layers of an onion, overlaid on one another. The central world, Jewel, was where the magic originated and was the strongest. As you moved away from Jewel, the magic

grew weaker. On the Rim, worlds like Earth and Ordin were quite weak in magic. Helaine and her friends would still have their powers, but in a much more fragile form than they would on Dondar.

“So, why did you tell Flame and Smoke to come with us?” asked Pixel. Helaine was content to let him do the questioning. He was the smartest of the three of them when it came to planning and thinking. She knew she was best at fighting, and Score was best at avoiding things. Like work.

“They are necessary,” Oracle said simply, spreading his hands. “I can’t say why, but if you do not take them, your chances of surviving this trip are virtually nil.”

Then we are more than prepared to go, Flame declared. *I will allow nothing to befall my bonded friend.*

“Thank you.” Helaine patted the unicorn’s neck affectionately. Then she looked at Oracle. “But they will be almost as conspicuous on my world as they would have been on Score’s Earth.”

“Perhaps,” Oracle agreed. “But on your world, they will be of help. On Earth, they would simply have caused more problems than they solved.”

"That sounds like a pretty good description of you, if you ask me," Score commented.

"I didn't ask you," Oracle answered. "And I am telling you this to help you out."

"You mean without your advice we can't visit Daddy Votrin without causing a family problem?" Score scoffed.

"No. I mean that if they are not along, the chances are extremely high that you will all die on this mission."

Helaine looked at him in startlement. "But . . . this is simply a trip to check up on my father. Nothing more."

Oracle shook his head. "That is what you *meant* it to be. But the fates don't always pay attention to what we mean. Your father is in very grave danger, and by going to him at this time you will all place yourselves into that same danger—and more."

"Maybe we should just stay home and send him a Hallmark card instead," Score joked. Helaine had no idea what a *Hallmark card* might be, but she caught the meaning.

"I cannot stay," she announced. "If my father is in danger, it is my duty to go to his aid. But there is no

need that any of you should risk your lives to accompany me."

"Of course there is," Pixel said firmly. "We're your friends. We cannot allow you to go into danger without being there by your side."

"We can't?" Score asked. "Speak for yourself, sunshine. When it comes to danger, I don't know anybody who's better at handling it than Helaine. And worse at handling it than me."

Helaine felt a pang of disappointment. "Then you will stay here?"

"Well, I'd love to," Score said. "But the fact is, I bore easily. And without you and Pixel around to make fun of, life would get really dull. So I guess I'm in."

Helaine had a strong suspicion that Score was not as cowardly as he claimed to be. But she couldn't understand why, if this was so, Score would be so proud of claiming his own cowardice. Then again, there was a lot about Score that she couldn't understand. But this was not the time to try and work it out.

"Then we all go," she said. "My father is in danger, and we will rescue him. Or die trying."

"I would really love a third option," Score said, sighing.

3

Pixel was starting to worry about their trip. He'd agreed to it initially simply to please Helaine. Plus, he was kind of interested in seeing her home. And studying the Middle Ages in person seemed kind of neat. He'd read plenty of stories about knights in armor, and of wars and such, but he'd never experienced anything like it himself. It all had sounded quite fascinating.

But now it was starting to look like this was actually more serious than

he'd imagined. If Oracle said there was a chance that they might get killed, and that Lord Votrin was in serious trouble, the trip was no longer a whim but a mission. He was in complete agreement with Helaine that it had to be done. They couldn't abandon her father, no matter what Score said. And he had a strong suspicion that Score was, as so often, just talking. That he didn't really mean anything that he said.

"Right," he decided. "It looks like it's time for us to get into action. We'll have to form a portal to Rawn." Rawn was where their friend Shanara lived. She was older than they were, and far more experienced in magic. Her specialty was illusion, but she was also extremely good at making portals.

"Maybe we should check with Shanara first?" Score suggested. "I mean, she might not be up to visitors. She could be in the shower or something."

"She's been expecting you for some time," Oracle replied.

Score glared at the man. "Does *everybody* in the Diadem know about our little trip? Even before we did?"

Oracle shrugged. "The three of you are very powerful magic-users," he replied. "Your actions cause patterns of fate that anyone with the right talent can read."

“Wonderful,” Score muttered. “We’ve been reduced to characters in a book . . .”

Pixel ignored him, knowing that Score was just letting off steam. “Join together,” he ordered. “We’ll need a very stable portal if we’re taking two unicorns with us.” Pixel could feel the increase in his own power as first Helaine and then Score focused their thoughts on creating the needed portal. He concentrated himself, and the power began to flow.

It was like a ball of light floating in the air a few feet ahead of them. Then it grew, writhing and flowing, into a large, door-shaped gap. Nothing was visible on the other side of this crack in space. Pixel took a deep breath and stepped through it. Helaine and Score were right behind him.

He emerged into another castle, but this was quite different from their own. This was Shanara’s home, and she had lived here for quite some time. It held a lot more furnishings, most of them very comfortable, in many different styles. The problem was that with Shanara’s illusions, it was impossible to know what in the castle was real and what wasn’t. Not, he supposed, that it really mattered. A heartbeat later, the two unicorns leaped through the portal behind them, and the

shimmering gap collapsed on itself, vanishing to nothingness. / /

“About time you got here,” Shanara said, sweeping into the room. “I’ve been expecting you for several hours.” She had long blue hair today, and a flowing yellow gown. She looked as beautiful as ever—and, of course, there was no way at all of knowing if this was what she really looked like.

“I hope you didn’t miss tea because of us,” Score shot back.

“I missed my sleep,” Blink complained, from his perch on Shanara’s shoulders. Blink was a red panda, and the laziest creature any of them had ever met. All he ever wanted to do was sleep or eat.

“I’m sure you’ll catch up later,” Pixel said. “You know why we’re here, I understand.”

“I do indeed, and you’re not a moment too soon. Come here.” Shanara lead the way to a large cauldron in the corner of the room. It was two-thirds filled with water. She muttered a few words under her breath, and then swept her hand across the surface of the water. It shimmered and glowed, and then formed a picture.

“Can you get ESPN?” Score asked.

"No," Shanara replied. "Just E.S.P. Shut up and watch."

The surface of the water showed an image of a wood. The picture moved, and they came through the trees to see a large, imposing castle in the background.

"Castle Votrin," Helaine said, and Pixel could hear the homesickness in her voice.

"Yes," Shanara agreed. "But look closer."

Pixel did so, and he shivered. In the meadow, stretching from the edge of the forest almost to the castle were tents. Thousands and thousands of tents. And, around the tents, moving about purposefully, were soldiers—almost without number.

"Those are not my father's men," Helaine said. Even Pixel could hear the worry in her voice.

"No," agreed Shanara. "They are the troops of the Border Lords, gathered about Castle Votrin. They have not yet started the siege, but it is only a matter of time."

Helaine nodded. "Then we should indeed go now. There is no time to lose."

"There are *lives* to lose," Score objected. "In case you've suddenly gone shortsighted, there are thousands of men there. How do you expect just the three

of us to sneak through? And, oh yeah, in case we're not conspicuous enough—we'll have two unicorns in tow!"

"We'll think of something," Helaine said. "You can still stay behind."

"*We'll think of something*," Score replied, mocking her. "If that's the extent of your planning, then you need me along worse than I thought. I think I'm the only one here with half a brain."

"That's true," Pixel agreed. "The rest of us have complete brains."

"Enough discussion," Shanara said. "I will prepare the portal. I can't make it close to the castle, I'm afraid. If people see you emerging from a portal, you are likely to get into a lot of trouble on such a primitive world."

"Hey, if it gets us past the soldiers, I'll take my chances," Score said quickly.

"No," Helaine decided. "Shanara is right. My people would take us for witches, and witches are frequently burnt at the stake. Besides, I would like to see what state of readiness this army is in."

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot you were a fan of running warfare," Score muttered. "Maybe you can pick up some pointers from these attackers."

Shanara ignored the bickering and cast her spell. Once again, a jagged gash in reality formed. Once more, the three friends stepped forward. The two unicorns moved to stand behind them. Then she looked at Pixel, and half-smiled. "It's time for your disguise again," she informed him.

Pixel could see nothing wrong with his fine blue skin and pointed ears, but he knew that other people would be startled to see them. Helaine's world, like Score's, had only mundane skin coloring—brown, white, black, and so forth. No good, rich greens or blues. It had to be very boring for them, and, for the moment, Pixel would have to be boring also. Shanara cast the spell she had used before to ready Pixel for his last journey to Earth. His skin suddenly became pale, and his ears lost their lovely tips. Thank goodness it was only an illusion!

"This is my world," Helaine said. "I will go first." She plunged into the gap, vanishing from Rawn. Score shrugged and plunged after her. Pixel took a deep breath and jumped next.

He emerged in a pine-scented forest. Rain had fallen not too long ago, stirring up the delightful scent,

but leaving muddy puddles all over the ground. From the look of the sun, it was about an hour to sunset.

"Welcome home," Score grumbled, looking at Helaine.

"It is good to be back," she said simply. "Even under such circumstances."

Pixel moved aside as Flame and Smoke plunged through the portal. Then the gateway between the worlds vanished, leaving them standing in the small clearing.

Before any of them could say or do anything, Smoke suddenly reared up, pawing the air. He gave a snicker of alarm, and then rushed off across the clearing and was lost to their sight in seconds.

Pixel stared at Flame. "What happened?" he asked.

I do not know, Flame answered, as confused as the humans. *He said something about *danger*, and then ran off.*

Score shrugged. "It looks like we brought along a cowardly unicorn," he observed.

Pixel wasn't so certain. But he had no real idea what he had witnessed. What was Smoke doing—and why?

4

Jenna breathed very slowly and stood absolutely still, her collecting bag pressed against her side. It wasn't too difficult for her to avoid the soldiers. They were large, muscular, loud, and laden down with their weapons and the spoils they collected as they ravaged the countryside. She was nimble, petite, and dark, able to slip silently into the shadows and hide until they had blundered past. As always, they

were laughing and joking, and boasting of the terrible things they had done to any peasants unlucky enough to get in their way, or too slow to get out of it.

Jenna hated them all, and hated the Lords who had begun all of this fighting. She wished there was something she could do about it, but she knew that this wasn't possible. She was just a teenage spell-weaver, orphaned and barely tolerated in her own village. She was poor, uneducated—except in spell crafting and healing—and without prospects. There were all kinds of stories about people like her who stumbled into becoming saviors of their countries, or who somehow were smart enough to win against all odds and marry into royalty. But that's all they were—stories. Jenna knew better than to believe that there was ever any more to them than pure wishful thinking. Her life was what it was, and would stay unchanged until she died. Unless she married—but that was unlikely. The local boys all avoided coming near her, afraid of her magical powers.

They didn't know and wouldn't care that most of her "magic" was actually simple botany. The plants that she was out gathering in the woods possessed chemicals within them that would help to cure many

ills. Lady's Breath, for example, that would cure headaches, and Hallow-All, for aches and pains. The villagers needed her for her skills, learned from her mother. But they didn't *like* her. She'd learned that from her mother, too.

That was fine; she didn't like them, either. But she had to live somewhere, and being all alone never really appealed to Jenna. She liked voices and laughter, and the sense of *belonging*—even if she didn't, really. She could at least pretend that the small village of King's Norton was her home. It was, at least, where she lived. *If you could call this living*, she admitted to herself.

Things had never been great. Lord Votrin, whose castle and armed men enabled him to rule this land, took taxes from the villagers. The villagers were left just enough for them to survive on, and to raise the crops for the following year—so that they could pay taxes on them, too. Jenna had long hated Lord Votrin for being so cold and greedy. What right did he have to *anything* that the people here raised? What did he do for them in return? Nothing.

But since the Border Lords and their armies had arrived, things had become far, far worse. At first Jenna

had been pleased that the army had come to tear down Castle Votrin and kill the evil Lord. She'd have been happy to join them herself and take some small revenge for the cruelty her people had endured. But the army hadn't immediately attacked the castle. Instead, they had camped out, and as they camped, they needed food and other supplies—which they promptly took by raiding the local villagers. And they didn't care at all about leaving the peasants enough to survive the winter on, or enough to raise crops the following year.

They didn't even care about leaving anybody they ran into alive.

Two weeks of this had created havoc and panic everywhere. People in King's Norton spoke of fleeing, but where could they go? These houses were their homes, this land where they and their fathers and their fathers' fathers had lived and raised crops. They didn't know anywhere else, and they didn't know anywhere that might be better than this. All they could do was to post lookouts, and to flee their homes before the soldiers arrived, and then, afterward, crawl back and hope that the raiders hadn't burned their houses simply for their amusement, and hope that there

would be some food, and fuel, and maybe even some livestock left alive. Each and every time, Jenna could see the spirit being sucked out of the people of the village. They were close to despair now, and desperate with fear for their futures.

She herself could see no way out of this. Villagers used to the way of the plow and the hoe couldn't fight off men with broadswords and spears, men trained to fight and maim and kill. All they could do was to hide from such men. Jenna wished she really *did* have the magical powers that her foolish neighbors credited her with. If she was a *real* witch, she'd kill all of the men who came to take what was not theirs. No, better still, she'd turn them into cattle or sheep, so they could do some good, instead of evil. But she didn't have that kind of power; she had only her healing and a few small tricks she could do.

The patrol was gone now, even the odd stragglers who always took more than they could really carry, and so lagged behind the others. Jenna tossed her dark hair, and slid between the shadows, heading home. Even if the soldiers looked directly at her, they would hardly have seen more than the vagueness of leaves blowing in the wind. Jenna was very good at not being

seen. When you were not loved, it helped to be practically invisible.

The trees thinned out as she approached the cultivated land about King's Norton. The small pathway she had been following—though not taking—widened into an almost respectable road. The branches over her head cleared, and she could see the blue of the sky, and the rising plumes of the inevitable fires that the soldiers had left in their wake. With a sinking heart, Jenna looked over the small village.

This time, they had fired the house of Harlow, the smith. The thatch of his roof was burning still, giving off thick clouds of black smoke. Harlow and several of the other men were trying to put the fire out, carrying buckets of water from the stream to throw onto the roof. Jenna could see that there was little chance that this would work, but it might prevent the fire from spreading to other houses. Her own small cottage on the outskirts of town hadn't been touched this time. The raiders had smashed their way through it last time, but they found little because she had little. They had no interest in her plants, of course, but had smashed many of the jars just in case she'd hidden anything valuable in them. As if she had anything of value!

As Jenna approached her cottage, a young girl, barely five years old, unwrapped herself from the long cloak she wore, and rushed to meet her. Jenna recognized her as Tera, one of Chief Jochan's youngest children. "Spell-weaver!" the young girl cried. "You must come with me! You must!"

"What is it?" Jenna asked. "What's wrong?"

"It's Markim," she answered, panic in her young voice. "He's been hurt."

Jenna nodded. Markim was Jochan's oldest son and heir. One day he would become Chief of King's Norton himself—if he lived long enough. There wasn't a lot of point in asking Tera what was wrong with her brother, but it wasn't hard to guess that it would have something to do with the soldiers, so it would mean a wound and a lot of lost blood, most likely. "I'll come," Jenna promised. "But I must get my medicines first, so I can help him. Come on." She pushed open her door. Tera hung back, looking really frightened. Jenna sighed to herself; she kept forgetting the stories about her in the village. One of them was that any child who entered the witch's house never came out—and ended up in a pie for Jenna's supper.

As if she'd eat anyone that scrawny!

“Stay here,” she said quickly, to avoid panicking Tera. “I’ll be back in a moment.” She slipped inside, and left her collecting bag beside the door. Then she grabbed the basket of medications that she kept ready for any emergencies, and hurried back outside to where the increasingly nervous Tera waited. “We can go now,” Jenna assured the child. Tera almost bolted in her haste to get away from the witch’s house.

It was a good job that Jenna was used to this sort of reaction. Otherwise she would be terribly hurt, as she had been in the past. They needed her skills, but they were terrified of her. Well, that was life.

Jenna hurried along, wondering what had happened to Markim, and how badly hurt he was. As she followed Tera, she saw the villagers picking up and trying to recover after the latest raid. Food stores had been ripped apart, and quite often when there was food left the soldiers couldn’t take, they had tried to ruin it for anyone else. A number of people were trying to recover and clean vegetables and fruits that had been thrown into the garbage, or stomped on. Without such food, they might well starve. It was a terrible sight, one that hurt Jenna through to her heart. A lot of people were just trying to get their homes back in

order—repairing smashed-in doors, shattered tools, ruined furniture, and slashed clothing.

They reached the Chief's house—largest in the village, and one of the worst damaged. The door had been battered in—even though it was never locked—and there were even holes in the walls. Part of the roof had burnt, but that had already been extinguished. The stench of soot hung about the home. Also the distinctive, unpleasant smell of human blood. That made Jenna very worried, even before she saw Markim.

He was laid in a makeshift bed on the floor of the main room, half-covered in a blood-soaked blanket. Somebody had tried to stop the bleeding, and done a reasonably good job of it. But there was no hiding the shock she felt when she saw the wound itself. There was no need to ask what had happened—it was quite obvious just from looking at the savage cut. Markim must have tried to stop one of the soldiers, and the attacker had simply slashed downward with a heavy sword. It had shattered Markim's shoulder bones and sliced deeply into his chest. The blood still flowing from the wound was almost pinkish in places, flecked with bubbles. The blow had cut as deeply as Markim's lungs.

Jenna looked in horror at Jochan, who stood beside his son, a terrible, bleak expression on his face. "This is beyond my help," she said softly. There was no need to let Markim hear this—if, indeed, he was still conscious after such a blow.

"He is my son," Jochan said stonily. "He will be Chief one day. You *will* save his life, witch." It was not a request, but a demand. There was no need for him to add a threat to it.

I can't! Jenna wanted to cry, but this was not what the Chief wanted to hear. "I will do all I can," she said, instead. "I will need hot water, and bowls to mix my powders in. But you must be prepared for his death. I may not be able to save him." And, even saying this, she knew she was being foolishly optimistic. *He will die*, a voice within her said with certainty.

Jochan gestured for Tera and one of her sisters to fetch what was needed, and Jenna settled down beside Markim and began to work.

The first thing to do was to try and stop the bleeding. The boy already looked pale from the blood loss, and he would certainly not survive much more of it. Once the bowls and water were brought to her, she mixed up a batch of thick, heavy paste, which she spooned into the cut using both hands, packing it

tightly. "That will seal off the bleeding," she said, gently, partly in case Markim was able to hear her, but mostly to inform the Chief what she was doing. Then she put some leaves into a smaller bowl, and poured warm water over it. She handed the bowl to Tera. "Stir this," she ordered the girl. "For two minutes. It's a soothing mixture, for him to drink. It will stop some of his pain."

"Some?" asked Jochan sharply.

"Even the gods couldn't stop all of it," Jenna replied. "But this will make it more bearable." Ignoring the Chief, she bent back to her work, looking at the edges of the paste she had applied. Very little blood was leaking through, which was a fairly good sign. Of course, it was possible that Markim simply didn't have very much blood left in him to leak out. She placed more healing herbs about the wound, hoping it would draw away the poisons, and then wrapped the shoulder carefully in strips she tore from a clean blanket. Then she took the tea from Tera and poured a little into Markim's white-lipped mouth. The boy gasped and choked, and was obviously having trouble swallowing. But some of it managed to go down his throat, and even a little would take away a great deal

of his pain. It might not make him live, but it would at least make his dying less agonizing.

For two hours, she worked with all of her skills and medicines, striving to save the boy's life. The terrible rattling sound of his breathing settled down to a slow, heavy pant, which sounded good. His pulse, though, was weak and far too fast. Nothing she could do seemed to help that. He had lost so much blood . . . Finally, as she was placing a poultice over the wound to try and draw out some of the poisons that would infect it, she realized she could no longer hear his feverish breathing. Quickly, she felt for a pulse, but found none.

Everything she had done had been for nothing. Markim had died anyway. All she had done was to make his death a little easier on the boy.

Jenna looked up at Jochan and shook her head. "It is as I feared," she said, a catch in her voice. "I could not save him."

"You did not *wish* to save him!" the Chief accused.

"Of course *I wished!*" Jenna exclaimed. "Do you think I've worked this hard for two hours just to let him die? But, no matter what I wished, he was too badly injured to be saved!"

"Then nobody will save you, either," Jochan said, his voice thick with anger. He grabbed a handful of her long hair, and wrapped it about his huge fist. She gasped with pain as he dragged her to her feet, and shoved her toward the broken door. "Witch!" he spat.

"I was good enough when you hoped to save your son," Jenna said, trying to see where she was going through a film of tears. She stumbled, and gasped again in pain as Jochan dragged her up by her hair.

"You killed him," the Chief growled.

"That wound killed him!" Jenna said frantically, trying to get sense into his head. "I did all I could."

"Liar!" They were in the street now, and Jochan released his hold on her hair. Then his heavy boot caught her in the stomach, and she fell, crying, to the dirt. Holding her stomach, trying to keep the pain down, she lay in the filth and looked up at Jochan.

"She killed my son," Jochan announced to the silent, scared villagers who gathered around. "I claim a life for a life!"

"No!" Jenna wheezed, trying to speak through her cloak of pain. It hurt to talk, but it would hurt far worse if she couldn't convince these people to let her live. "I did all I could."

“And I will do all I can,” Jochan stated. He bent and picked up a fist-sized rock. “Stone the witch! Kill her!” And he flung the rock with all of his force.

He was too angry to throw straight. It clipped her shoulder, very painfully, tearing blood free as it did so. He had aimed it for her head, and if it had connected it would have done a great deal more damage.

“Kill the witch!”

The cry was taken up by many of the villagers. They all moved to pick their own stones.

“You know me,” Jenna begged them. “I’ve helped all of you! You know I would not kill anyone!”

“Kill the witch,” Tera yelled, throwing a stone of her own. It rang off Jenna’s head, and dragged a scream from her. It left more blood in its wake.

Jenna tried to get to her feet, but she couldn’t. Then she used her hands to protect her face as best she could. More stones slammed into her, painfully and hard. These people knew her, but they had suffered too much without being able to do anything. They wanted to strike back and hurt someone, and she was their chosen target. People she had helped, spoken with every day, and thought liked her now had only bitterness, cruelty, and pain in their eyes as they

seized whatever came to hand and threw it at her, with all of their fear and terror behind their blows.

Jenna was lost in a world of pain. She could hardly even feel the individual blows. She cried out, no longer able to form words. There was nothing she could do. They were going to kill her.

NO!!!

The word was spoken *inside* her head, and with such anger that it made Jenna reel. She foolishly dropped her arms to see what was happening.

The people about her were starting to look around, startled. They had obviously heard the strange voice too. Then the anger drained from the faces, to be replaced with shock and fear. Jenna wiped the blood from her eyes, and blinked hard, trying to see straight.

A horse was charging down the main pathway toward her, and the voice seemed to be coming from it. That didn't make any sense to Jenna. What was a horse doing here? It didn't look like the plow horses any of the villagers owned. It was far too slender for that, more like a racing horse of some Lord. But why would a racing horse be interested in her?

The villagers backed away, obviously afraid of being gored by the horn the horse had.

Horn? Horses didn't have horns! Only cattle and deer had horns. Maybe she wasn't seeing straight? But then the gray horse drew up in front of her, rearing, and striking out with its hooves to keep the villagers back.

"She's called up one of her demon creatures to save her," one of the villagers said. "We must kill it too."

I am not as defenseless as Jenna, the horse said, somehow. **Anyone who tries to stop me will feel my anger.** Its horn flashed warningly. Nobody dared to move. The horse bent down to Jenna, and nudged her gently with his muzzle. **Can you climb up on my back?**

"I . . . I'll try, horse," Jenna answered.

Grab hold of my mane, he suggested. **You should be able to get up easier then. And I'm not a horse, I'm a unicorn.**

"Unicorn?" Jenna felt she must be dreaming. Maybe she had already died, and this was just some illusion. "There are no such things as unicorns," she said. "I don't believe in fairy stories."

You'd better believe in me, the unicorn replied, not at all offended. **Because if you don't, these people will finish what they started and kill you.**

She gripped his mane, and managed to stagger to her feet. Somehow, she threw one pain-racked leg over his back and sat astride him. She didn't dare release the grip she had on his mane, knowing she'd fall off if she did.

"Kill the witch," Jochan insisted, stepping forward, holding another rock.

The unicorn looked directly at him. *Try it,* he said softly, *and it won't be her that dies.* He lowered his horn to underline his threat. After a moment's tension, the Chief allowed the rock to fall. The unicorn snickered in derision. *You do not deserve her,* he told the silent villagers. *I will take her with me, to a place where she will be safe. And free from the likes of you.*

"Take her to her infernal master in Hell," Jochan grated.

No, the unicorn answered. *I am taking her to friends.*

Friends? Jenna thought bitterly. *I have no friends.*

*You *had* no friends,* the unicorn answered. *But soon you shall have them.*

Then he whirled around, and ran from the village, carrying her uneasily draped across his back.

5

Score was getting more and more unhappy by the minute. It wasn't Ordin himself that bothered him—in fact, he rather liked the planet. It was almost like being back on Earth again, only without huge cities and roads with cars whizzing down them. Here it was mostly forest and footpaths and fresh air. If he didn't know about the huge army camped somewhere just ahead of them, this might even have been a nice nature walk.

He couldn't help wondering about this, though. Most of the other planets in the Diadem that they had visited had been nothing like Earth—the trees, plants, and people had all been very different. But Ordin seemed to be so much like home, he could hardly imagine that this was purely coincidence. He made a mental note to ask Shanara about this when they got back. She knew so much more about the Diadem, of course, than they did.

But as they walked, they were getting closer to the Border Lords' army, and Score hated walking into trouble. He wished he could just turn around and leave. A few months back, he would have done just that, because then he hadn't needed anyone, and hadn't owed anyone anything. But his life wasn't as simple now. For the first time, he had friends, and he discovered that he couldn't abandon them—even when that was the smartest course of action. He *liked* Pixel and Helaine, for all of their weirdness. And they needed his help—Pixel was just so naive it was incredible he'd lived this long; and Helaine was so arrogant and hot tempered that she always managed to get herself into trouble. If it wasn't for his brains, the

three of them would have been dead several times over.

Smoke's coming back. Flame informed them suddenly. *And he's bringing someone with him.*

"Trust a unicorn to take in strays," Score muttered. *It followed me home, can I keep it?* "We don't need anybody else. Unless they've brought an army with them."

Just one person, Flame answered seriously. *And Smoke wouldn't have done that without a reason.*

"Yes, but what a unicorn considers a reason isn't the same as what I consider a reason," Score objected.

"You're not in charge here," Helaine snapped. "This is my world, and I'll lead."

"Yes, ma'am!" Score snapped off a smart salute, enjoying the scowl it produced on her face.

They heard hoofbeats at last, and then Smoke whirled into view. Clutching tightly to his back was a young girl—no, maybe a young woman, Score decided—who looked definitely ready to collapse.

"We'd better help," Pixel said, springing forward to meet Smoke as he came to a gentle halt. He winced as he saw the bloody streaks all over the girl. "What happened to her?"

Some humans were stoning her, Smoke replied.
I fought them off, and brought her here.

"I can see why," Pixel said. "She really needs our help."

Actually, Smoke answered, *I brought her here because you need *her* help.*

"We'll worry about that later," Pixel decided. He looked at the girl, who seemed to be on the verge of falling unconscious. "Can you get down?" he asked her gently.

The girl's eyes opened slightly, and slowly focused on Pixel. "I don't know," she answered. "I feel quite ill."

"I'm not surprised." Pixel touched her hand gently. "Let go of the mane, okay?" He looked around. "Score, give me a hand, will you?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm free for the day," Score agreed. He went over to the unicorn, and between the pair of them, they managed to get the girl off her steed, and laid her gently under a tree. Score was shocked at all of the cuts and blood on her. "I'd like to show whoever did this a thing or two," he growled. "Look at her."

"We have to help," Pixel said. "But we don't have the right medications here."

The girl opened her eyes, which were filled with pain. "I'm the spell-weaver," she said, her voice descending into gasps as she spoke. "Look for some small blue flowers. Tiny clusters at the head, and a yellow center. There should be plenty here. Gather a couple of handfuls."

"Alternative medicine," Score muttered. "She'll want a chiropractor next." The others didn't have a clue what he was talking about, of course. To Pixel, he added: "You stay with her, and see if you can help. Wash her wounds, for example. They need to be clean. Helaine and I will go picking flowers." He straightened up and looked at Helaine. She had an icy look on her face. "Okay, I know you said you were giving the orders, but don't be so grouchy, okay? You can lead the way if you like. These are your woods, after all."

Helaine didn't move and didn't say anything. Score sighed. "Okay, I'm sorry I tried to boss you around. We can kiss and make up later, okay? Right now, that girl needs some help, and she seems to think flowers will do the trick. Who am I to argue?"

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 didn'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 her 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 against 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.

6

Helaine could tell that Score was surprised and disappointed with her. Even though he always insisted he was a coward, he generally seemed to be there when there was a fight. But in this case, fighting wouldn't help her. "We need to find information," she muttered to him, so low that the soldiers couldn't hear her. "They will tell a captive things they would never tell a captor."

“Ah, the sneaky approach.” Score grinned. “But won’t they get suspicious if we surrender too easily?”

“What? A pair of girls, and two unarmed boys?” Helaine tried to look innocent.

“You’ve got a point.”

By this time, the patrol had surrounded the four of them. Pixel seemed to be content to go along with whatever Helaine had in mind. Jenna looked scared, furious and ready to hit someone. Helaine ignored the other girl—she was irrelevant anyway, whatever Score might think.

“Well,” the leader of the soldiers said, a wide grin on his ugly face. “And what do we have here, then? A girl playing soldier, and two boys playing dumb!”

“I’m not playing anything,” Score answered back. “I really am dumb.”

“Oh, a smart mouth, huh?”

Pixel snorted. “They got you in one, Score,” he commented.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” the soldier growled. He looked at his men. “Maybe we’d better rough them up, just for the practice.”

Helaine couldn’t allow that; the second the patrol tried to beat them up, they’d have to defend themselves, and that could get messy. “I wouldn’t do that, if

I were you," she said, hastily. "You'd be wasting a perfectly good ransom."

"Ransom?" As she had expected, the thought of money stopped the thugs in their tracks. "Are you saying that the four of you are valuable, then?"

"One of us is," Helaine replied.

The soldier circled her. "Well, it's not hard to see which one that might be. You've got the stench of a noble about you, alright, my girl. So, who are you—Lord Votrin's bed warmer?"

As if her father would have such a thing! "No," she said, coldly. "I'm his daughter."

That brought a snigger or two from the rest of the patrol. "As if he'd allow any child of his out of the castle," one of the men scoffed.

Pixel tried to look conspiratorial. "She was sneaking out for a . . . meeting," he said. "You know what I mean."

"With *you*?" The soldier laughed, and Pixel blushed.

"No," Helaine said, knowing this would never be believed. Pixel was sweet, but he would be terrible at playing her supposedly secret lover. "With *him*." She jerked her thumb at Score.

"Oh, slumming it, are we?" the soldier sneered.

"Hey, I'm as good a man as any," Score protested. "Well, as some, at any rate. Provided you leave out body builders, rocket scientists, and movie stars. And include lots of geeks."

The soldier glared at him. "You have a strange way of talking."

"I have an even stranger way of acting," Score assured the man.

"He makes me laugh," Helaine said quickly.

"And, trust me, she doesn't get much to laugh at in Castle Votrin," Score couldn't resist adding.

The patrol leader shook his head. "This is too much for me to sort out," he decided. He gestured at his men. "We'll take them to Lord Marduk—he'll know whether to hold them for ransom or just gut them. Bring them along."

"There's no need to bring the peasant," Helaine said. "She's of no use to anyone." Score gave her a filthy look for that, which she couldn't understand.

"Bring them *all*," the soldier stressed. "We'll let Marduk sort 'em out." He reached over and pulled Helaine's sword from its sheath, and stuck it through his own belt. "Just to remove temptation," he assured

her. "I know you couldn't possibly know how to use it, but it never hurts to play it safe."

Score managed to march next to her when the patrol set out again. Pixel and Jenna were behind them, out of earshot. Score glared at her again. "You say one more word against Jenna," he warned her softly, "and I'll do something to you that you *really* won't like."

Helaine raised an eyebrow. "What? Punch me?" She couldn't prevent a slight smile at the thought that he'd try and hit her.

"No. I was thinking of singing *Ninety-Nine Bottles Of Beer On The Wall*. Trust me, you *really* don't want that." He was quiet for a moment. "This Lord Marduk we're off to see—is that a good thing?"

Helaine shrugged. "He's one of the most influential of the Border Lords," she explained. "We should be able to find out what we need to know from him."

"And what's the bad news?" Score asked. "I just *know* there's got to be bad news. Our luck can't have changed all that much."

"His hobby is gouging out people's eyes and making them eat them."

"I'll bet he's the life of any birthday party," Score muttered. "I do assume it'll be okay with your majesty if we escape before he gets too friendly?"

"I was hoping we might be able to slay him in the process," Helaine admitted. "That would help my father a lot."

"It *might* just attract a bit of attention to us, as well." Score sighed. "I knew coming to this planet was a bad idea. You seem to have regressed several centuries in your behavior." He gave a sudden yelp, and staggered, as one of the soldiers cuffed him around the ears.

"That's enough talking," the man growled. "Save that loose tongue of yours for when you're in Marduk's presence."

Score glared at the man. "I'll remember you," he promised. But then he at least had the sense to shut up.

Helaine kept her eyes and ears alert as they entered the outskirts of the camp. Tents and camp fires stretched for miles. When she had been growing up here, these had been the fields about Castle Votrin where she had learned to ride a horse, and—in disguise—to fight. Sometimes there had been tournaments held here, with staged fights, and lots of games and jugglers and minstrels, and plenty of roasted food. Now it was mile after mile of tents and armed soldiers. Many lounged about, but some practiced fighting, or

were cleaning their weapons. There were thousands of men here, all with one eye on the distant sight of Castle Votrin. Helaine had imagined returning home many times, but never like this.

The Castle would be able to withstand a siege for several days, perhaps even weeks, but it could never hold out against all of these men. There was no chance of any messenger getting out of the castle and riding for help. Perhaps her father's friends didn't even know about any of this. She couldn't imagine that they would abandon him if they knew. Still, with an army this size camped here, perhaps the other Lords didn't want to get involved. She really didn't understand politics, and her father had always kept his plans very quiet. She had never dreamed that he had planned on marrying her off until he had told her about the deal he'd made.

It took quite a while for them to cross through the camp to the section headed by Lord Marduk. With every soldier they passed, every sword they saw that would be raised against her father, every horse or spear or pike, Helaine's spirits sagged. Her father might have as many as two hundred armed men in his castle—there were a hundred times as many outside,

ready to attack. He couldn't possibly stand a chance against them.

"That's it, girl," the patrol leader said softly to her. He had clearly seen her face. "Your father's doomed soon enough. You may have done yourself a favor, sneaking out of that castle. At least it won't come down around *your* ears." Then he grinned. "But I doubt you'll enjoy being alive very much, either. My Lord Marduk can be very . . . inventive with his enemies. Especially the pretty ones."

Helaine wished there was no need to play act; she wanted to hurt this man very badly, and she knew he deserved it. But for now, she had to keep her temper in check, and convince everyone that they had nothing to fear from their captives.

Eventually, they reached a tent larger than most. She recognized the flag flying in front of it as Marduk's banner, a yellow eagle on a green background. The patrol led the four of them to the main entrance.

"Is he in?" asked the patrol leader of one of the two guards on duty.

"The *Lord* is in," the man said, coldly. He looked at the four captives. "Though I doubt he'll be interested in the likes of *them*."

"Oh, he'll be interested, alright," the soldier answered back. "There might even be a few coins in this for me."

"They don't look very valuable to me," the guard commented. "Scrawny kids, and two of them barely more than girls."

Their captor laughed, and moved past the guards. Four of his patrol followed, pushing Helaine, Score, Pixel, and Jenna none too gently ahead of them. The soldier entered the tent, and then managed a fairly presentable bow. "My Lord," he said—and Helaine could hear the nervousness in his voice now, all of his bravado gone—"I bring you a gift."

Lord Marduk looked up at them from his chair. He was a huge man, more like a bear than a person, with a wild beard, long hair and deep, dark eyes. But his face had an expression of boredom on it. "They don't look very interesting to me," he growled.

"One of them claims to be Votrin's daughter," the patrol leader said, nervously. "I haven't been able to prove she's telling the truth, my Lord, but I knew *you* would be able to find out."

"I can indeed." Despite his size, Marduk rose smoothly and stalked across the tent to where the captives stood. Helaine took advantage of the few sec-

onds this took to look around. There were about a dozen other men in the tent with them—captains and other soldiers, all of them. There had been some sort of a conference going on, probably concerning the best way to take the castle with the minimum number of losses. In the background were tables loaded with cold meats, breads, and fruits—probably stolen from the local peasants.

Marduk stood in front of her, and for the first time Helaine wondered if her plan was really so brilliant. She was tall herself, and strong, but she looked like a hill next to a mountain compared with this Border Lord. His sharp eyes glared down at her. “Even in that ridiculous guise,” he said coldly, “I can discern the marks of breeding. You *may* indeed be one of Votrin’s brats. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Helaine swallowed. “I am indeed one of his daughters,” she said slowly. “I wanted to see the sort of man my father will shortly kill.”

“Kill?” Marduk threw back his head and roared with laughter. The other soldiers joined in. “We have him pinned inside his castle like a fox has a chicken cornered in her roost. It won’t be Votrin who’ll do any killing, my spitfire lady.”

"I wouldn't be so certain of that," Helaine answered. "He has help that you cannot imagine."

"He has no help!" Marduk roared. "I have made quite certain of that. None of the closer Lords will dare help him against an army this size. And none of the stronger Lords even know about our siege—nor will they until it is accomplished. Once we commit our men to the attack, your father's castle cannot stand against us for more than a short week."

Helaine had to agree with his estimation of the time—and even then he was probably being cautious. Five days would be a miracle; seven impossible. "You do not know what kind of help he has," she repeated. "He will not be as simple to defeat as you imagine."

"Then tell me what he has," Marduk said. "Or I shall have your tongue ripped from your head and fed to my dogs."

"You know," Score said lazily, "I'm really starting to dislike this guy. What's he got against his dogs?"

"Silence!" Marduk roared.

"I thought you wanted us to talk," Score muttered, shaking his head. "Now you tell me to shut up. Make up your mind."

The closest soldier whirled, and raised his hand to strike. "Obey my Lord!"

"Yeah, but *which* order?" Score asked. "And I *really* wouldn't try hitting me, if I were you. I hate violence—especially against me."

Marduk stared at Helaine. "Is your friend insane?" he asked her, his voice like ice. "Does he really wish me to have him executed on the spot?"

"Yes, he's insane," Helaine agreed. "That's the first sensible thing you've said today."

"That's right," Score grumbled. "Take his side, why don't you?"

The soldier beside him slammed out his hand, catching Score a hard blow on his cheek. Score yowled, stumbled, and went down on one knee.

"That's it," he growled. "I *told* you not to do that . . ." He reached into his pocket and grasped one of his gemstones. Each of them had four stones, which amplified their abilities to perform certain forms of magic. Out here on the Rim Worlds, they needed all the help they could get with their magic. Helaine couldn't see which gem Score was using, but it wasn't hard to guess that it was his emerald, which gave him the power of transforming things.

A pit suddenly opened in the ground underneath the startled soldier. With a cry, he fell into it. Score

then turned the air above him into molasses, and the thick, sticky liquid poured all over the man.

It was hard to tell who was the most astonished in the tent. Marduk leaped backward, making some kind of a hex sign to ward off evil. His fellow soldiers moved away as well. And, lastly, Jenna looked absolutely terrified. Of course, even though they had spoken about their magical abilities, the peasant had never seen them in action—until now.

“Well,” Helaine said, gripping her own sapphire, “I guess there’s no need for us to play dumb anymore.” The sapphire enhanced her powers of levitation. She reached out with her mind and grasped her sword, pulling it from the soldier who had taken it. He yelped, and tried to hold it back, which was foolish. It almost cut his fingers off, and it did slice through his belt. His trousers promptly fell down, and the man went down after them, tangled in them.

Pixel grinned. “I’ve been waiting for this . . .” he said.

7

Pixel focused his own powers through his topaz. This gave him control over the element of fire. Even though it was daylight outside, there were burning torches lit inside the tent, and he reached out to them. The soldiers were standing around, looking confused, but this wouldn't last long, and having a dozen trained fighting men after them might prove to be very dangerous indeed. Pixel drew the flames from the torches, and set the clothes of

four of the soldiers alight. The men screamed and flailed about.

Score, obviously, had decided to use his power over air, and was knocking more of the men out. Pixel wasn't sure whether he was just draining the air they breathed or turning it into knockout gas, but either way it was very effective. Helaine was clearly tempted to use her own sword and attack, but she restrained herself and used her gems instead. Some of the soldiers found themselves lifting off the ground, and they struggled without any effect to get their balance or draw their weapons.

But all of this activity still left Marduk and one other man untouched. Both were startled at what was happening, but they were soldiers, and their response was to attack. Pixel didn't dare stop his own attacks to deal with them, and Score was focused on his own magic. Jenna could hardly help here, as she was even more shocked than the soldiers, and had no fighting training at all. Helaine had no option but to throw the men she held up against the tent supports and then draw her sword after all.

"Witchcraft!" Marduk snarled. "You'll die for that!"

"You were planning on killing us anyway," Helaine answered, meeting his sword-blow and deflecting it. But the force of the blow left her reeling. She was certainly a skillful fighter, but Marduk had a huge weight advantage over her, and was also not as bothered about killing as she was. He attacked her again and again, beating Helaine backward as he did so.

Pixel whirled to face the final man, this time using his beryl, which gave him control over air. He thickened the air around the soldier's face, blinding him. The man stumbled, trying to grope for Pixel with his hands. Pixel sighed; it was almost too simple. He made the air solid about the man's hands and feet, trapping him quite neatly.

Helaine was still having trouble with Marduk, who had forced her back almost to the tent entrance. Pixel considered using his magic on the man, but he knew that Helaine wouldn't want him to join in her fight. Yet she seemed to be losing . . .

Score didn't have the same qualms that Pixel had, and he never really worried about upsetting Helaine. He had knocked out the remaining soldiers, and now he was watching the fight with a slight grin on his face. "Need any help?" he called.

"No!" Helaine yelled back, blocking another blow. The force of this sent her crashing to her knees.

"As if," Score said, and Pixel felt the magic flowing from his friend. He was using his chrysolite, which gave him power over water. He focused all of the water in the air in the tent and sent it crashing over Marduk. The soldier, ready to hack down at his foe, was startled to be suddenly drenched. It gave Helaine the second she needed to move out of the way of his blow.

"Stay out of this!" she yelled angrily at Score. "I'm doing fine!" She ducked under another blow.

"There are easier ways of getting your hair cut," Score informed her. "Or even of getting cut down to size." He winced as the two swords came together noisily again, and then glanced at Pixel. "I don't know about you, but this noise is giving me a headache."

"If you interfere again, Helaine's likely to give you a worse one," Pixel pointed out, realizing what Score was going to do.

"So, I'll stand it. She's a good fighter, Pix, but this guy's a killer. She's out of her league here."

Pixel was forced to agree with Score on this. Marduk had trained as a soldier since childhood, and he must have spent thirty years fighting. He was

stronger than Helaine, and knew more dirty tricks—and wasn't bothered about using them. He hacked again at his foe, and Pixel heard Helaine gasp in pain as Marduk's sword slashed across the top of her left arm, leaving a trail of bright blood.

"That's it," Score decided. "Enough stupid pride." He reached out with his power again. This time, the water in the air became a solid block of ice and slammed down hard over Marduk's head, stunning him. Score dived in and grabbed Helaine's hand. "We're out of here," he ordered. "Forget tall, dark, and nasty here."

"How dare you interfere?" Helaine demanded, anger all over her face.

"Get hissy with me later," Score told her. "Right now, we need to get into your father's castle. Are you strong enough to levitate the four of us over the walls?"

"Four?" Helaine asked, confused

"Jenna has to come with us," Pixel pointed out. "If we leave her here, she'll be killed."

Helaine looked as if she was going to object, but Jenna actually got in first. "I don't *want* to come with you!" she exclaimed, her voice shaking. "You're witches, all of you!"

Pixel rolled his eyes. "We don't have the time for this," he muttered. More soldiers were bound to be here any second; the noise of the fight had to have attracted attention. Knowing he'd pay for it later, he used his power over air to take it all from Jenna's lungs for a second, just enough to cause her to faint, but not enough to hurt her. He grabbed her as she started to fall, and held on tight. "Come on, Helaine."

"But she doesn't even want to come," Helaine objected.

"Tough," Score said, urgently. "She can sue us later. Right now, we *need* to get out of here. Understand?"

Helaine nodded. Score used his gem, and set the tent on fire as Helaine shot the three of them—and Jenna, who Pixel was carrying—through the air and toward Castle Votrin.

The move certainly caught all of the soldiers by surprise. Several recoiled, making warding signs against witchcraft. By the time anyone thought to get bows and arrows, they were already out of range and almost at the castle. But Helaine was straining, and looked almost ready to collapse.

"I can't keep this up," she said, gritting her teeth. "I don't have enough strength."

"If we knock on the door, will they let us in?" Score asked her. Helaine nodded. "Right. Let us down just over the moat, okay?"

Pixel looked down and saw that there was indeed a moat about the castle—a wide ditch filling with muddy-looking waters. He hoped there were no monsters or anything in there; he couldn't remember if Helaine had said what the wild life on her planet was like. They tumbled from the sky to the ground just on the far side of the moat.

Looking back the way they'd come, Pixel saw that a raiding party had started forward, consisting mostly of archers. It would only take them a couple of minutes before they arrived. Helaine was too exhausted to levitate them further, but Pixel still had an idea—one he'd used when he was on Earth. Using his power over air, he made the air solid enough to stand on, and formed it into steps leading up the side of the castle. The steps wouldn't last long, but they would hold up for long enough—he hoped.

"Move!" he said, pushing Helaine toward the steps. She looked a little worried, because the steps were quite transparent. "They'll hold you," he promised

her. Helaine nodded, and started up. It looked like she was climbing nothing.

There were gasps from the wall above them, and Helaine looked up. Men had gathered there, clearly thinking that this was the start of some kind of an attack. "It's all right!" Helaine called out. "I am Helaine Votrin, coming to my father's aid. There's just the three—*four* of us." By this time, she'd made it to the edge of the battlement, and several hands helped her over.

Pixel went up the steps last, struggling under the weight of Jenna's unconscious body. As he reached the top, he could feel the steps starting to dissolve. Before he could fall, though, hands helped pull both him and Jenna to safety. He fell to the cold stone, panting heavily. All of the magic use had quite exhausted him.

After a moment, he caught his breath and looked around. Helaine and Score were leaning against the wall beside him, and Jenna was slumped in a heap next to them. Several scared-looking soldiers stared down at them, obviously uncertain what they should do. Pixel was too exhausted to really care right now. He just leaned back and concentrated on breathing, and feeling some of his strength returning.

A moment later a tall, neatly-bearded man strode up the nearest set of steps, and moved to look down at them. There were touches of gray at his temples, but his steel-cold eyes showed strength, and his face was an unreadable mask. "That is indeed Helaine," he finally said. "I do not know her companions, but I have no doubt she'll have some explanation to offer. Probably as imaginative as ever. Allow them to get their breath back, and then bring them to me." He reached out with one foot and jabbed Jenna. "Clean her of her filth first, though." Shaking his head, he walked away.

Score managed a lopsided grin. "So, who's the beard?" he asked Helaine.

"My father," she managed to answer.

Score whistled. "Some homecoming. He didn't even say hello."

"I don't think he's exactly pleased to see me."

"No kidding, Sherlock." Score lay back against the wall, and then grinned at Pixel. "You think he'll feed us before he throws us out?"

"He won't throw you out," Helaine vowed. "The laws of hospitality would forbid it, even if he considered it. And if you annoy him, he could throw you in the dungeon." That thought seemed to amuse her.

Helaine turned and looked at Jenna, annoyed. "When she finally wakes up, she needs to clean herself up," she said. She seemed angry that she needed to be hospitable to a peasant. "She's a human being," Pixel said firmly. "And she seems to be quite nice, whatever you think." He bent over her, and saw that her eyes were flickering open. "And she's waking up, so try to be kind to her. I know you can do it if you want, Helaine."

Helaine didn't answer directly. Instead, she managed to stand up, and looked at the confused soldiers standing around. "My father gave you orders," she informed them. She singled one out. "You, go and get the servants to ready a bath for the peasant. She must be cleaned to meet with my father." The young man nodded quickly, and hurried off. Helaine turned to a second man. "My friends could use a little food and drink, to regain their strength," she added. "See that it is readied." He, in his turn, nodded and fled. Pixel suspected the men were glad to be away from these strangers. Helaine sighed, and looked down at Jenna, who was now wide awake. "Are you recovered enough to bathe yourself?" she asked the other girl. "My father—for reasons best known to him—wishes to see you, but wants you cleaned up first."

"I'll . . . I'll try." Jenna stood, but she was clearly unsteady on her feet and quite weak.

"I'll help," Pixel offered, and supported her. Jenna flashed him a thankful smile that made him shiver with pleasure and embarrassment.

"Come on." Helaine decided. She led the way to steps that led down the inside wall. Pixel helped Jenna to walk, and Score brought up the rear.

Pixel took a good look around for the first time since they had arrived. Castle Votrin looked quite a lot like he would have expected—they were on the encircling outer wall, which enclosed the buildings. It had been built upon a small hill, and the wall ran around the base of this. There was a second wall further in, and higher up, with its own gate. Pixel knew the wall they were on had to have a gate and drawbridge somewhere, but they had bypassed that to get in. Beyond the second wall was the castle proper, a huge, stone-built structure. There were stables also, for the horses, and other buildings scattered about the courtyard. There were soldiers lining the outside wall, most of them watching over the battlements for any sign of enemy action. In the castle itself were many

other people—some soldiers, some servants, and others he couldn't decide about.

The four of them went down the steps from the wall, into a small guard house. The soldiers pretty much ignored them, as Helaine led the way through the courtyard and through the gateway in the second wall. Once they were inside, she led them to the main castle.

They were met there by some servant, who appeared nervous and worried. "My Lady," he said, bowing slightly. "You're home again. We didn't expect . . ."

"I'm sure you didn't," Helaine answered curtly. "Where is this . . . girl to get clean?"

"This way," the man said, swallowing nervously. "But she's a . . ."

"I know what she is," Helaine growled. "Are there fresh clothes for her?"

"Yes, my Lady. And food for your friends."

"Good." Helaine glanced at Score and Pixel. "You'd better go with him," she decided. Reluctantly, she reached out a hand to Jenna. "I had better take her, I suppose."

"I don't need *your* help." Jenna clung to Pixel instead, which warmed his face and made him feel quite wanted.

"You can't have *his*," Helaine replied. "Unless you *do* want him to scrub your back?" She raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not that kind of a girl, whatever you may think of me," Jenna said. She released Pixel, which disappointed him a bit. "Go along," she said to him. "I am grateful to you. Even if you are a w . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say the word.

"I'm not," he informed her. "You'll be okay with Helaine. Her bark is worse than her bite."

Jenna looked almost amused. "I trust she isn't going to bite me in order to prove it." Then she turned to Helaine. "I am ready to go with you."

Helaine didn't reply. She just turned and walked off, following another servant. Jenna walked behind her.

Pixel turned to Score. "Do you think it's a good idea to leave those two together?" he asked.

"Not in the slightest," he replied cheerfully. "Want to take bets on who shows up with bite marks?" Though he was obviously joking, Pixel wasn't so sure there was a lot of humor to be found here. Jenna and Helaine quite clearly disliked one another intensely.

They were asking for trouble . . .

8

Jenna was very nervous as she was led to the bathing room. She had never been in a castle before, and didn't want to be in this one, now. But it seemed as if she had no choice in the matter. She couldn't go home again, that much was clear. And where else could she go?

Being in the company of witches almost terrified her—except for the fact that she felt that Pixel, at least, meant her no harm. Quite the contrary, he

seemed to feel protective of her, and that wasn't the way witches were supposed to behave. They were supposed to be depraved, evil creatures, without any human feelings whatsoever.

But Pixel said that *she* was one of them . . .

Too much had happened to Jenna in too short a time for her to take it all in. She didn't have any option but to trust somebody, and Pixel was the only one she felt comfortable with. Score—well, he clearly didn't mean her any harm, but she was very wary of his attitude. He seemed to see everything as a joke, and she couldn't see anything even remotely amusing in her situation. As for Helaine—well, the other girl clearly despised her, which was fine with Jenna—she despised Helaine right back.

And, of course, they were now stuck in each other's company.

They entered a small chamber that seemed to be mostly taken up with two large metal tubs. Both were steaming slightly, and there were large towels placed beside them. There were no servants in sight, though, which puzzled Jenna. She hadn't expected any to wait on her—even servants drew the line at associating with peasants—but she'd never heard of a noble bathing without aid.

"Isn't anyone going to help you?" Jenna asked, breaking the long silence.

"I'm not exactly . . . welcome here right now, I don't think," Helaine admitted grudgingly. "I left under fairly bad circumstances." Jenna didn't know what she meant, and had no interest in finding out. Helaine glowered at her. "You do know how to bathe?"

"I'm not a savage," Jenna snapped. "I do bathe at home. Though not usually in warm water."

"Use the soap," Helaine ordered. "From the smell of you, you'd better use it well." She started to remove her own tunic and then winced with pain.

Jenna had almost forgotten that the other girl had been injured in the tent fight. "You're hurt," she said. The healer in her wouldn't allow her to ignore the pain of even a noble.

"I've been hurt worse," Helaine replied. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Jenna replied, crossly. "Let me have a look at it."

Reluctantly, Helaine allowed her to check on her shoulder. Jenna studied the wound. The sword had slashed across the upper arm, not too deeply, but leav-

ing a lot of bleeding. The wound had opened up again as Helaine had undressed. While Jenna could believe that Helaine had been hurt worse than this, it couldn't be easy bearing it. "Stand still," she ordered. "If you're right about my having magic healing powers, I should be able to fix this."

Helaine tried to pull free. "I don't want you to fix it," she growled.

"Afraid you'll owe me something?" Jenna asked. "That you'll have to admit that a *peasant* can do something for you? Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. But I can't see even a noble suffer." She concentrated, and, rather to her own surprise, she felt some sort of power welling up within her. Perhaps she *was* a witch, after all . . . Concentrating, she felt the power flowing where she lay her hands on Helaine's wound. There was a soft glow, and she could *feel* that the wound was closing up, that the blood vessel was repairing itself, and that the muscle was becoming whole again. It left her tired, but when she moved her hands, the slash in Helaine's shoulder was gone, and there was just dried blood crusting over it.

Helaine tested her shoulder slowly, and then almost smiled. "It feels a lot better," she said.

"It should do," Jenna replied. "I healed it."

"Yes," Helaine agreed softly. "You did." Then she snapped out of it. "But you'd better get bathed now. My father does not like to be kept waiting."

"Especially by a peasant?" Jenna didn't wait for a reply. She slipped out of her clothes, and into the warmth of the waiting water. She concentrated on getting clean for the next ten minutes, including washing her hair, and then she dried herself off.

There were two piles of clothing in the room, obviously one for each of them. She just looked at the expensive red dress for a moment. How could she possibly wear such a fine thing? It was far above her station!

"It won't bite," Helaine growled, glaring down at the clothes left for her. "I'd feel better in battle gear." She looked longingly at the clothes she'd discarded. "But it would annoy my father if I wore it."

"And he's mad enough at you already?" Jenna guessed.

"Yes," Helaine answered. With a sigh, she started donning the feminine clothing. Jenna realized she had no option, and quickly slipped on the clothing left for her. The new dress flowed beautifully, making her feel very self-conscious. This dress cost more than most

people in her village could make in a year! It felt wrong to be wearing it—but, at the same time, very nice indeed. She glanced at Helaine.

She was wearing a similar dress, but one that was mostly green. She looked very annoyed, which rather ruined the effect. Then she gave another deep sigh. “I guess there’s no point in putting it off any longer. Come on.”

“Are you sure I should come with you?” Jenna asked. “You don’t really want me there, and I’m sure your father doesn’t. Maybe I should go to the kitchen or something?”

“If it was up to me, I’d agree,” Helaine answered. “But if you do that, Score and Pixel might think I’ve killed you or something.”

“You care what they think of you?” Jenna asked curiously. She’d never expected a noble to care about anyone but themselves.

“They’re my friends,” Helaine said, blushing slightly. “Of course I care what they think of me.”

“I wouldn’t have expected it,” Jenna admitted. “Well, I suppose I’d better come with you, so they can see I’m fine. Then I’ll cut out.”

"I doubt they'll let you," Helaine answered. "They have . . . strange ideas sometimes. Most times, actually. You get used to them."

"I'm not sure I *want* to get used to them," Jenna confessed. "I'm still not sure I want to associate with witches."

Helaine led the way to the door, and then down the corridor, talking as she went. "We're not witches. Get that silly idea out of your head. We're magic-users. It's a talent we were born with, and it's one we've developed so that we can survive. And helping other people who don't have such powers. Score and Pixel are right—you *do* have the power of healing, and it's very strong. You might even be as powerful a magic-user as we are."

"So, what if I am?" Jenna asked, still not ready to accept the thought. "It doesn't mean I want to join you."

"What you *want* isn't important. The fact is, if you're a magic-user, then you might be a target. There are others who seek power, and they can get it if they kill a magic-user and drain their powers. If people find out you have such powers, you could be attacked any time. You'd be safer staying close to us."

"Honestly, I don't think I could stomach staying too close to you," Jenna admitted.

"Trust me, I'd be more than happy if I never saw you again." Helaine scowled. "But Score and Pixel probably wouldn't feel that way. They're funny like that."

"I rather like them," Jenna confessed. "Especially Pixel. He seems like a person I could trust."

"That figures; he's very naive." Helaine stopped in front of a set of large doors. Two men at arms were standing beside them. "This is my father's main hall," she explained. "He'll be waiting for us inside."

Jenna's stomach clenched tightly, and she was almost sick. Going into the Lord's hall was something no peasant she knew had ever done. The Lord *never* associated with peasants. It couldn't bode well for her, and she wished she could get out of this somehow. But she knew that she couldn't, so she gritted her teeth and followed Helaine inside.

The hall wasn't quite as large as she'd imagined, and it was quite dark. The only windows were small slits, high in the walls. Torches were set in sconces all about the room, and there was a roaring fire in the great fireplace opposite the door. There were two tables, and

several chairs scattered about the room. The walls were hung with heavy, dark tapestries, showing images of knights fighting dragons and other mythological scenes.

Lord Votrin stood close to the fire, keeping warm. The stone walls were cold, and Jenna could feel a chill creeping into her body. With the Lord were two other men. There were no women at all, and the only other people in the room were two servants, standing beside the door, and Score and Pixel, looking a little more refreshed, and standing on the opposite side of the fireplace from the other three men. There was a tension in the air, and Jenna realized that nobody had been speaking before they entered. Lord Votrin probably didn't know whether Score and Pixel were nobles or peasants.

He looked relieved when they entered. "Ah, Helaine," he called, his face set as if carved from wood. "Come here." He ignored Jenna entirely, but she followed Votrin's daughter across to the fire. She didn't want to be close to the Lord, but she was in need of warmth. "I trust you have come back to seek my forgiveness?"

Helaine regarded him impassively. "No, actually, I hadn't. I came back because I wondered what had happened to you since I . . . left."

"You mean, since you disobeyed me terribly and abandoned me," Lord Votrin growled.

"What did you expect?" Helaine answered. "You wanted to marry me off to an idiot, just to cement some alliance. You didn't care what I thought!"

"What you think is irrelevant," her father said firmly. "I make the decisions for this family, and that was a good decision." He gestured toward the walls. "You've seen what has come from your disobedience." Helaine flushed, knowing he meant the surrounding army. Jenna could hardly believe that Lord Votrin would treat his daughter so badly. Neither, it seemed, could Score.

"Well, I always knew *my* family was dysfunctional," he remarked. "I didn't know we had that in common, Helaine."

"I was not talking to *you*," Lord Votrin said pointedly.

"You weren't talking to your daughter, either," Score said pleasantly. "Yelling at her, yes. And, oh, yes, isn't this the girl who, when you last heard of her, was being attacked by *assassins* in this castle? Couldn't

you bring yourself to ask her if she's okay? Or maybe give her a hug or a peck on the cheek? Or tell her you missed her, and you were worried about her?"

"She disobeyed me," Lord Votrin replied. "Anything beyond that, she brought upon her own head. She is not my daughter again until she agrees to do as she is commanded."

"Well, you don't get my vote as Father of the Year," Score told him. "Jackass of the Century, though, you've got a good shot at that."

One of the men beside him stepped forward, his hand on his sword hilt. "You will remember who you are addressing!" he snapped.

"I *know* who I'm addressing," Score growled. "One of the biggest idiots it's ever been my misfortune to run across."

"Score, please!" Helaine begged. "You're not helping matters!"

Score glared at the other man. "Come on—he's rude, nasty, and is trying to boss you around. It's about time he discovered that's my job."

The armed man took a pace forward. Helaine moved to stand in front of him. "Dafyd, that's just his way. Don't let it annoy you." Then she looked at Score. "I don't want you hurting my brother."

"He's your brother?" Score rolled his eyes. "Boy, am I glad I'm an only child."

Dafyd glared angrily at Helaine. "How can he hurt me?" he sneered. "He isn't even wearing a sword."

"Can I show him?" Score asked hopefully.

"No." Helaine turned back to her father. "This is not exactly the homecoming I'd hoped for."

"What did you expect?" Lord Votrin asked her. "Because of your failure to do as you were told, the alliance I sought has collapsed. The local Lords have gone home, and most do not even know I am under attack. The Border Lords are making their play, aiming to take over all of Votrin territory before anyone can act. Perhaps Lord Peverel would have been here and helping me if you had married his son as I commanded."

"I know what my actions have caused," Helaine answered. "And I am prepared to make amends for my actions. I cannot abandon you in your hour of need."

Dafyd snorted. "What do you aim to do?" he scoffed. "Don men's clothing again and pretend to fight against the foe?"

Score stepped forward. "I'd be willing to bet she could knock you on your backside any day she wanted," he said. "She may be a royal pain, but she's the best fighter I've ever seen."

"Barbarian!" Dafyd spat. "To allow a woman to fight like a man. It's disgusting."

"She's saved my life more than once," Score answered. "As far as I'm concerned, she can do whatever she likes, and I'll back her up, gladly."

Pixel looked uncomfortable. "I really don't think you're helping matters, Score," he said. He turned to Lord Votrin. "Your daughter is our friend, sir, and we will help her to help you as much as we can."

"What can the two of you do?" Lord Votrin asked. "You're both too scrawny to be fighters, and even if you were great warriors, two more on my walls won't hold off the attackers for very long."

"We're not soldiers, true enough," Pixel agreed. "But we have other, more valuable skills."

"At this moment," Dafyd replied, "we don't need other skills. We need swords, thousands of them."

"Pardon me," Pixel said gently, "but you honestly don't know what you really need. The three—four," he added hastily, glancing at Jenna and blushing, "of us can do more than a small army could, once we know what needs doing."

Lord Votrin growled, and turned to Helaine. "You chose a poor time to leave, daughter," he said. "And

an even poorer one to return. And, it seems, you associate with a very poor group of friends. A peasant and two outspoken and foolish young men. If these are the people you give your friendship to, then I truly despair of you."

Score looked at Helaine. "I know he's your father, but can I just whomp him once? He really needs some of that arrogance knocked out of him, the old windbag."

Jenna felt a lot closer to Score when he said that. She had always despised the nobles for the treatment of the common people; now she was amazed to discover that they treated their own just as badly. She almost felt sorry for Helaine, who was clearly trying to get along with her father and brother, and failing miserably.

Lord Votrin glared at Score. "You are a guest in my home," he said coldly, "and for that I make some allowances. And you're the friend of my foolish daughter, so I make more. But there is a limit to my benevolence."

"And you reached it years ago," Score snapped back. "Helaine came back to try and help you, and all you can do is to insult her, and ignore her. Weren't

you even *worried* about what had happened to her? For all you knew, she was dead."

"It might have been better if she was," her father answered. "Look at the situation she has caused me."

Jenna had been silent so far, because she was out of her depth here, and a very unwelcome guest. But Lord Votrin's arrogance and blindness was too much for her to take. "I don't see that *she* caused anything," Jenna said hotly. "You Lords have always bickered and warred with one another, without a thought for the poor people who get killed or whose lives and families you ruin with your actions. If there wasn't this fight today, there would be another tomorrow. You are so selfish and stupid in your ways!"

Dafyd gripped his sword, his face red with fury. "Peasant!" he yelled. "How *dare* you speak like that to your betters?" He moved to draw his weapon.

Pixel moved swiftly, his hand gripping a crystal. Dafyd's sword glowed red as he heated it with his magic. The soldier screamed, and sent his sword clattering across the floor. He held his burnt hand tenderly and glared savagely at Pixel.

"Don't you *ever* speak to her like that again," Pixel said. His voice was low and soft, but there was an

anger and a tone of danger in it that made even Dafyd go quiet. "She is quite as good as you—and her manners are far better. And she happens to be right. This fight is not Helaine's fault, but Helaine is trying to help. Which seems to be more than you are willing to do."

"Way to go, Pix," Score said approvingly. To Dafyd, he added: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. And, boy, are you a problem." He turned to Helaine. "You know, considering the fact that you're related to these idiots, I'm surprised you turned out as well as you did. Arrogant, bossy, and with a real short fuse, but *way* better than these clowns. Are you sure you even want to bother helping them?"

"They are my family," Helaine said. "I *have* to help them."

Score sighed. "Then I guess we do, too. Then he looked at Jenna. "How about you? Are you with us on this? Honestly, I wouldn't blame you if you want out, considering how nasty they've been to you so far."

Jenna was confused. "You're *asking* me? Not *ordering* me?"

"I'm not real good at giving orders," Score told her. "And I'm even worse at taking them. If you're with us,

it's because you *want* to be. Personally, I'd like you with us. And I think if Pixel wasn't so shy he'd be drooling all over you." That made Pixel blush again. "And Helaine's really not so bad once you get to know her. After she's beaten you up once or twice, she generally warms up to you."

Jenna *thought* Score was joking about this, but she didn't know any of them well enough yet to be sure. But he had been kind to her, and Pixel had jumped in to defend her against a noble without even thinking. As for Helaine . . . well, she supposed she could put her animosity on hold for now. "If you really think I can help, of course I'll stay."

"Attagirl," Score said, enthusiastically. "And, of course, it's going to really steam up Lord Votrin. That makes it just perfect."

Lord Votrin had been watching and listening, slowly growing more and more annoyed. "If you think I'm going to ask you disrespectful children for help, you're insane as well as rude."

"Relax," Score told him. "We're not doing anything to help *you*. As far as I'm concerned, I'd be happy to join the army outside the walls. We're doing this because we're Helaine's friends, and she's going to need help, and she's deluded enough to want to help you."

"Thanks," Helaine said. "I think."

"Any time," Score assured her. He turned to Pixel. "Okay, brain boy, what are we going to need?"

Pixel considered. "Rooms for the night, to start with," he said. "I'm going to need to study the situation." He turned to Lord Votrin. "Do you have any history books around?"

"I'm sure there are some for the children's lessons," the Lord replied. "How can they help you?"

"I like to know something about the situation before I formulate plans to solve the problems," Pixel explained. "If you could get me as many as possible, that would be great."

Lord Votrin sighed. "Very well. I'll have two rooms prepared for you." He had an almost malicious smile on his face when he looked at Helaine. "Since this *peasant* is your friend, you can share with her."

Helaine glared at Score. "Remind me to thank you," she said, through clenched teeth. "When we have room for me to beat you up properly."

"You're welcome," Score replied, grinning.

Jenna wasn't sure she'd ever understand her new companions.

9

Score was soon bored with sharing a room with Pixel. Lord Votrin had kept his word and sent all of the history books he could find for Pixel to study. This was a grand total of six, which struck Score as pretty pathetic. What struck him as even more pathetic was the eagerness with which Pixel set to reading them all. Score had no objections to a good book, but he preferred something with a story, not factual books. He peeked in one of the

books, and discovered a whole list of somebody's ancestors. Boring! So he left Pixel to it, and went next door to the girls' room.

Jenna answered the door when he knocked, and invited him in. There was no sign of Helaine. "You two quarrel already?" Score asked Jenna.

"We . . . do not get along very well," Jenna confessed. "But she has gone off to brood, I think. Something is troubling her a great deal."

"Yeah, she's a deep one," Score answered. "Look, I know you hate all nobles on principal, but you're really misjudging Helaine. Normally, she's one of the nicest folk you'd ever want to meet."

Jenna raised an eyebrow. "Except that she, like all of her class, despises the common people. They feel they are better than us, and can do with us whatever they want. I only wish you could see what they do."

"I can," Score told her. He pulled his jasper from his gem pouch and held it up. "With this, it gives me the power of sight."

"I don't understand," Jenna admitted.

"The three of us have certain . . . magical abilities," Score explained. "They're enhanced when we can focus our strength through gemstones." He grinned.

“Hey, I’ll bet the same would go for you, too! Maybe we can raid the treasury here later. Anyway, I know you’re scared about being branded a witch, but this is nothing like that. It’s just natural talents we have, and that you seem to share also. The jasper gives me the power to see things over a great distance. I’ve not used it much, so I probably won’t be too good at it, but let’s have a go, shall we?”

Jenna looked a little worried still, but she finally nodded. “If there is no traffic with the forces of evil, then I shall accept your powers,” she said.

“Trust me, forces of evil and me, we’re not on good terms.” Score sat on one of the two beds in the room, and patted the cover next to him. “Sit yourself down here, and let’s see what I can whip up.” Jenna sat nervously next to him. “Don’t be so worried—I told you, no evil forces involved.”

“It’s not that,” Jenna said, blushing in a way that reminded Score of Pixel. “It’s just that the two of us are alone in here, and being so close on a bed with a boy . . . It’s just not done.”

“Break a few rules,” Score advised her. “I promise I’ll behave myself perfectly. Well, except for the occa-

sional rude remark or stupid joke. That's as close to perfect as I get."

Even Jenna couldn't help smiling at that. "You do make me feel comfortable with you," she said.

"That's me—Score the comforter." He focused on the jasper as Jenna settled down beside him. She was rather distracting—there was no doubt that she was very pretty, and she had a pleasing personality. But Score told himself that he wasn't interested in any of that. He hardly knew the girl, and he liked being a loner. Right, he had to remember that.

The air a few feet from the bed started to pucker, and light began weaving. "Okay," he told Jenna. "You think of somewhere I should be looking, and I'll try and pick up on that."

"Can you do that?" she asked, blushing again. "Read my thoughts, I mean?"

"Hey, I try not to read anything—books, magazines, thoughts." He grinned reassuringly. "It's just that you know where to look, and I don't. I'm providing the power for this image, but you're going to provide the control, that's all."

"Okay," she agreed dubiously. But Score could feel through the power flowing in him that she was focusing

her thoughts. A moment later, the image in the air cleared, and came into sharp relief.

They were looking at some kind of a peasant village, Score could see. There were something like fifty houses, set on a couple of streets. Beyond the houses were fields of crops. "My home," Jenna said. "King's Norton. At least, it used to be my home." She gestured at the image. "The big house in the center there belongs to Jochan, the head man."

"These places look like they're handyman specials," Score commented. Many had doors that didn't hang right, most had holes in the roof or walls. Fences were broken. He moved the view around, and he could see that the gardens had been destroyed, and the fields had few crops. "And they're not going to last the winter well without more food."

"It's the soldiers," Jenna explained. "They camp outside the castle here, and raid the countryside, taking whatever they wish, and destroying whatever is left. It is what always happens when the Lords fall out."

Score felt a cold anger growing inside him. "This happens a lot?"

"At least once or twice in each generation," she explained. "The Lords have never been able to get along very well. But it isn't much better when there is peace. Then the Lords tax us, taking as much of our crops as they can without actually starving us to death. They need us to do the work they can't."

"Let me get this straight," Score said. "The Lords do nothing for you except steal from you, and then you get trampled when they fight one another?"

"That's about it," Jenna agreed.

"I can see why you hate the nobles, then." Score caused his image to vanish. It was starting to really disturb him. He stood up and started to pace the room. "I think it's high time some changes were made here."

"Changes?" Jenna looked confused.

"Nobody has the right to treat you and the other peasants like dirt," Score informed her. "And I for one am not going to help Lord Votrin to keep this rotten system in place."

"You're being foolish," Jenna chided him. "There is nothing that one person can do—even if that one person can do magic."

"Don't underestimate what one person can do," Score told her. "And it's not just one—you're with me on this, aren't you? And I know Pixel will be. And I'm sure we can talk Helaine around."

Jenna gave him a curious look. "You really like Helaine, don't you? Even though she is a noble."

"You can't judge her by the accident of her birth," Score complained.

"It's not her birth, it's her upbringing," Jenna answered. "She has been taught since she was a baby that peasants don't matter. That we're less than human. That it's okay to trample all over us. She can't help how she feels."

"Helaine is better than that," Score said firmly. "Okay, she's having a few problems with the issue, but she'll come around. I know she will."

Jenna cocked her head to one side. "Are you in love with her?"

Score felt himself blushing like Pixel. "No!" he exclaimed. "She's just one of my best friends, that's all. Nothing else. I'm a loner, and I have no interest in any kind of a girlfriend. Besides, she thinks I'm a wimp because I'm not off slaughtering something or someone before breakfast every day."

"Now who's misjudging her?" Jenna asked. "Why don't you just ask her if she's interested in you?"

Score didn't like the way this conversation was going. "I'm not interested," he repeated. "Anyway, Pixel's the one in love with her. Well, actually, I think Pixel's just in love with the idea of being in love. He's led a very sheltered life, and he's not too good at relating with other people. Computers and books, yes, girls, no."

"He seems very sweet to me," Jenna said.

"Oh, he's very sweet alright," Score agreed. "He's also a space cadet." He could see she didn't quite understand. "Look," he said, wishing to change the subject away from feelings, "let's go see if we can raid the treasury here and find you a few gems. Maybe they'll help you with your powers. You saw that there's nothing too witchy about them, didn't you?"

"I guess," Jenna agreed, though obviously still concerned. "But do you think Lord Votrin will just hand over some very expensive jewels to a peasant?"

"I wasn't actually thinking of asking him," Score admitted.

"If I am found with gems," Jenna said simply, "I would be executed for theft. I have very few rights, remember?"

"I'd forgotten that part," Score admitted. "Okay, let's go and see the Lord. Maybe I'll be struck with inspiration. Or, more likely, the pointy end of a sword. . ."

He had memorized that rough layout of the castle as they'd walked it, so it wasn't too difficult to trace their way back to the Lord's great hall. There were two soldiers still on guard. Score didn't know if they were the same ones or different ones, and he didn't much care. "We're here to see the boss," he told them, and moved to push past them.

They held out their spears to block the way. "We must find out if he wishes to be seen," one guard replied.

Score rolled his eyes. "Then go ask."

The man opened the door, and vanished inside. A moment later, he reappeared, and held the door ajar. Score led Jenna inside. The soldier closed the door behind them.

Lord Votrin was still in the room, this time with a large goblet of red wine from which he was sipping. At his feet was a young woman, playing a musical instrument that looked like a mutated guitar. The Lord

glanced at Score, and ignored Jenna. He indicated the girl with his free hand.

"My daughter, Soshanna," he said, briefly.

Score smiled at the girl. She was about ten, and as blonde as Helaine was dark. But there was the same family strength in her features. "Nice to meet you," Score said. "So, can you play any U2?"

Soshanna looked confused. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I do not understand you."

"Don't worry, that's a common complaint," Score told her. Then he turned to her father. "Look, chief, we're in need of a couple of gemstones, and I wondered if you could spare me a few."

"You wish payment from me?" Lord Votrin growled. "For what services rendered?"

"Not payment." Score shook his head. "Your other daughter, Pixel, and myself use gemstones to focus our magic through. Jenna here has strong magic of her own, and she doesn't have her own gems. Something to do with the fact that you steal every penny she makes, I think. It's hard for her to buy jewelry with a zero allowance. So I figure you'd better just give her some so she can help us help you better. Not that she

really has any reason to help you at all, but she's nice enough to go along with us on this."

"You have a strange manner of asking for favors," Lord Votrin replied.

"Yeah, Pixel is always telling me I need to improve my people skills. So, are you going to help out, or do we all just take a walk and leave you to solve your own problems?"

"Do you seriously think you can help us?"

"Oh, yeah," Score assured him. "More than you can ever imagine. And the more power we have, the more we can do, and the quicker it'll be finished."

"You want me to give a peasant jewels worth a fortune?" Lord Votrin asked coldly.

"Wow, you're starting to catch on." Score grinned. "Let's face it, if we *can't* help you, then this castle is going to be overrun, you guys will be killed and Soshanna there will probably be taken off as spoils of war." That made the girl blush. "And the invaders will take all of your jewels, so you won't have any use for them. And if we *can* help, those jewels might just save your life if you give them up. To me, giving them to a peasant is hardly your worst option here."

Lord Votrin considered the point. "You have a very crude way of speaking," he finally decided. "But there

is some truth in what you say. How many gems will she require?"

"I don't know," Score admitted. "I've got four myself. She shouldn't need more. But they have to call to her, so she may need less."

"Come, then." The Lord led the way to a doorway at the rear of the hall. He opened it into a smaller room. This was filled with caskets and boxes and trunks. He went to one of these and threw open the lid. Even in the dim light, Score could see hundreds of jewels sparkling. "Select," Lord Votrin said.

"You're on, kid," Score said, giving Jenna a gentle push. "See if any of those jewels in there speak to you. If they're the right ones, you'll know it."

Jenna was obviously unsure, but she did as he suggested. She knelt on the bare stone floor in front of the trunk and stared within. After a moment, her fingers seemed to be moving of their own accord. She sifted through the collection, her face rapt with a strange emotion. Finally, she stopped. There were four gems in her hands. "These," she said firmly. "You were right, Score—they did somehow speak to me."

"Yeah, sometimes I am right," Score informed her. "It shakes people up when that happens. Well, we'd better have you start playing with them, and see what

powers they may give you. Should be kind of fun, I think."

Lord Votrin closed the chest. "I trust you won't be asking for anything more?" he asked dryly.

"Trust away," Score answered. "I make no promises."

"You're a very annoying young man," Helaine's father stated.

Score grinned. "Considering how little time you've known me," he said, "it's amazing how well you've gotten to know me."

10

Helaine spent a very restless night. She had been dreading the meeting with her family, and it had gone pretty much as she had expected—badly. Her father was his usual withdrawn, scheming self. Her brother, Dafyd, the hot-headed, short-sighted idiot she'd always remembered. The rest were much the same as they had ever been. If only her mother was still alive, things may have been different.

But she wasn't, they weren't, and there was no point in dwelling on it. Yet she couldn't help herself.

In the morning, she washed her face, trying hard not to have too much to do with Jenna. The other girl was bright and cheerful, and constantly staring at four gems Score had somehow pried out of Helaine's father. That was no mean feat in itself, but Score was sometimes very capable, when he set his mind to doing something. Naturally, he and Lord Votrin didn't get along very well. Helaine's father liked to win every argument, and Score never had learned when to give in graciously.

Come to think of it, neither had she. In a mood of defiance, she dressed in her combat gear instead of a dress. It was certain to annoy her father and brothers, but she simply didn't care. Well, no, she *did* care, but it was time they saw her doing what she wanted, instead of what was expected of her. She couldn't be a quiet stay-at-home like her sisters—it simply wasn't part of her nature. When she had strapped on her sword, she scowled at Jenna.

"Aren't you finished yet?" she complained. "My father won't wait breakfast for you."

"I'm ready," Jenna replied, slipping the gemstones into a pouch about her waist and tightening the strings. "To be honest, I'm amazed he even allows me to eat anywhere but the kitchen."

"So am I," Helaine said. "He must be mellowing with age." She led the way down to the small hall where family breakfasts were held. Score and Pixel were already there, as were her father, Dafyd, and two more of her brothers. All four of her family members scowled at Jenna, but made no comment. Jenna somehow managed to pretend that she didn't know they all wished her dead.

Pixel had a book with him, and an excited look on his face. Helaine knew him well enough to recognize that he'd found something he thought significant. She couldn't resist a slight smile; Pixel was so endearing sometimes, and so like a small child. He gestured for her to join him. Helaine couldn't help but notice that her family was at one table and their guests at another. Her father was clearly trying to discover where her loyalties lay—with her family or with her friends.

She took a seat between Score and Pixel. Score grinned at her.

"I hope you're wearing earplugs," he said. "Pix's got a theory he's determined to share."

"I recognized the symptoms," Helaine answered, helping herself to breakfast: sausages, eggs, and griddle cakes, with syrup. A good start to what could be a very bad day.

"I spent most of the night doing research," Pixel explained eagerly. "I discovered some interesting facts that shed a lot of light on this conflict, and I need to go over a few things with your father to make certain I'm getting it right."

Helaine glanced at the other table. "After breakfast, then," she decided. "Father never lets discussions mix with meals. Eat now, explain later." Pixel looked a little disappointed, but did as he was bidden. Once everyone had eaten, Lord Votrin rose to his feet.

"Now is the time for discussion," he proclaimed. "Let us go to my hall."

"Why can't we talk here?" muttered Score, but he sighed and went along with the procession as it moved into Lord Votrin's hall. Once he was seated, Helaine's father gestured to Pixel.

The youngster moved forward eagerly. "This dispute with the Border Lords—it's over the proper succession to the throne, isn't it? Ultimately, I mean?"

"Everyone knows that," Dafyd complained. "The old king died without an heir, and there are two candidates for the throne, both cousins of his by marriage. One is of the House Rakyr, whom we and most of the Lords support. The other is of the House Tovin. That's the candidate the Border Lords support."

"And the Border Lords are laying siege to Castle Votrin to try and expand their area of influence and increase their voting stock," Pixel guessed.

"As well as to pay me back for keeping them in line for several decades," Lord Votrin said dryly.

"What I don't get," Score broke in, "is why they haven't stormed the castle yet."

Helaine sighed. "Of course you wouldn't," she pointed out. "You're not a soldier. But taking a castle is far from a simple task, and it does tend to ruin the castle for future use if it has big holes in the walls where an invading army has stormed it."

"Quite," her father agreed. "So they're hoping instead to intimidate me into surrendering the castle without a fight."

"We will *never* give in to that scum," Dafyd vowed, angrily.

Score shook his head. "Wow, death before dishonor and all that. Astonishing. And the fact that surrendering the castle could save a lot of lives doesn't seem to get through those thick skulls of yours? Especially if you can't possibly hold it anyway?"

Dafyd sneered at him. "I wouldn't expect you to understand about honor."

"You're dead right I wouldn't," Score agreed. Helaine was amazed to see anger in his eyes. "To tell you the truth, I don't understand much at all about this planet of yours. And what I *do* understand, I don't like. Like how you constantly use and abuse the peasants, making their lives a living hell. I'm going to tell you something here and now—I aim to end this stupid war of yours. Not to help *you*. I apologize to Helaine, but you're a rotten bunch of family, and you're not even worthy to lick her boots—after she's walked through a swamp in them. No, I'm going to stop this war to help the peasants. Because they're the ones who are suffering."

Dafyd looked confused. "How are *they* suffering? They are not under siege."

Jenna's face flushed with anger. "They are suffering," she replied coldly, "because both armies raid them for supplies, and sometimes simply for sport. Our homes are being burned, our crops ravaged, our livestock slaughtered, and our families killed. And you don't even know about it, because you don't care!"

"Attagirl," Score said approvingly. Helaine felt a sudden pang of jealousy—Score seemed to have grown awfully close to this peasant girl in a very short time. "And that's why we're going to solve your problem."

"And how do you aim to do that?" Lord Votrin asked. "Oh, if talking could win a war, you'd have brought peace to the Universe by now, no doubt. But talk will not get you anywhere."

"No, but brains will," Score answered. "And Pixel's got brains to spare. And I just know he's got a great plan. Right, Pix?"

"Right," Pixel agreed. "What is needed here is a king that both sides can accept, and who can order the Border Lords to break off the siege."

"That would be an amazing person to find," Lord Votrin said. "Who did you have in mind for the position?"

“King Caligan’s heir,” Pixel answered.

Helaine stared at him in shock. Then she looked at her father and brothers. They didn’t seem to know how to take this idea, but finally Dafyd did the obvious—he laughed.

“Everybody knows he never had an heir,” he finally managed to say, between choking on laughter. “And *that’s* your plan? Find a non-existent fairy tale?”

Pixel looked crestfallen, but determined. “In all of the stories, it is said that his wife was expecting their first child when he was killed and she vanished,” Pixel said stubbornly. “The throne then went to his brother, who had killed him, with the aid of the forces of darkness. All of your kings since then are descended from his brother. Logically, if I can find King Caligan’s legitimate heir, then everyone on this world should agree to follow him.”

Helaine felt sorry for Pixel. She gently touched his arm. “That won’t work,” she said. “Let’s assume, just for a moment, that Caligan’s wife *did* somehow survive the attack—and there’s no proof that she did—and that she did, somehow, have her child. This was over five hundred years ago. The child and his—or her—

descendants would be dead also. How could you ever hope to locate an heir in all our world?"

"Using his Scepter," Pixel answered. He seemed braced for more ridicule, so he didn't flush quite as strongly when it came from the Vottrins.

"Wonderful," Dafyd said, laughing so hard he had to wipe his eyes. "You propose to find a non-existent heir with a mythical scepter. Have you ever thought of applying for the job as a court jester?"

"The legends all say that Caligan had a magical Scepter," Pixel said. "The Scepter vanished, because it can only be wielded by the rightful king. And Caligan's brother was not the rightful king, so he couldn't use it. So, I propose to find the Scepter and use that to find the rightful king."

Lord Vottrin shook his head in amazement. "You know, I think the boy is *serious*."

"I *am* serious," Pixel insisted.

"But nobody even knows where Caligan died," Lord Vottrin said. "His brother had the castle razed to the ground, and its location has been lost."

"The legends suggest that it was in the area known as Bracklin Forest," Pixel answered. "I propose that we go there and search. My friends and I are attuned to

magic, and that Scepter is magical. We should be able to locate it."

"And *that's* your plan?" asked Lord Votrin. He looked at Pixel, then at Score. "*That's* how you're going to save this castle and stop the war? By going in search of a baby's bedtime story?"

Pixel's face had a stubborn look on it. "I'm open to any better suggestions," he snapped.

"I have one," Helaine said. "We do things my way."

Score raised an eyebrow. "And what way would that be, your majesty?" he asked sarcastically. "We pop over the walls and slaughter the whole attacking army by ourselves?"

"That would be difficult to accomplish," Helaine said. "I have a better plan."

"Are we allowed to know what it is?" her father asked.

Helaine didn't consider telling anyone for a moment. "No," she answered. "It must remain my secret for the moment. But I *do* have a plan, and it *will* work."

Dafyd threw his hands into the air. "Wonderful! So, we either listen to an outsider idiot who wants to hunt down a non-existent king, or else our cross-dressing

sister who fancies herself a warrior and has a plan she won't reveal. What a choice!"

"You've got another choice," Score said, softly and dangerously. "You can start learning what life is like as a frog." He held up his emerald in his clenched fist. "I'm just *this* close to granting it to you. I don't care how crazy their plans may sound, neither of them are nuts. So be polite, and treat them with respect, or else you're going to have to start learning to croak frog." Dafyd paled, and backed away.

Helaine was warmed by Score's faith in her. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"You're welcome," Score answered, just as softly. "Are you crazy? Why not tell me your plan?"

"Because you won't like it."

He raised his eyebrows. "I don't like most of your plans. That doesn't stop me from backing you in them."

"I know, and I'm grateful." Helaine was being perfectly truthful here; she valued Score as a friend more than anyone else she knew, even Pixel. "But trust me on this—you wouldn't like my plan if you heard it."

"Okay." Score looked from her to Pixel. "Two plans, so I guess we split up. That gives us twice the chance

of succeeding." He chewed at his lip nervously. "I'd go with you, Pix, because you need the most help. But that would leave Jenna with Helaine, and I can't see how those two could get along on a quest without killing one another. So I guess it means you and Jenna, and I'll go with Helaine."

Pixel blushed, and looked at the other girl. "That's fine with me," he said, almost eagerly. Helaine wasn't too surprised—Pixel seemed to be quite taken with the peasant girl. Helaine had to admit that the girl was pretty, for a commoner, and she did have a temperament that a man might like. She knew her own personality could be a bit caustic at times.

"And me," agreed Jenna. She looked happily at Pixel, who blushed even more.

"Well, at least we'll get the peasant out of the castle," Dafyd muttered. When Pixel glared at him, he retreated behind his brothers.

Score grinned at Helaine. "I guess that means you're stuck with me. Serves you right."

"I think I can stand it," she replied. "As long as you try to behave yourself."

Score looked amazed. "When have I *ever* behaved myself?" he asked, only half-jokingly. Then he turned

to her father. "I guess the best time for us to leave would be when it gets dark. Do you think you can stand us for another day?"

"It appears that I have no choice," Lord Votrin replied.

Helaine cleared her throat. "If the Border Lords want to discuss surrendering the castle to them," she suggested, "I should listen to them."

Her father's face went black with anger. "You expect me to consider surrender?"

"No," she answered. "I wish you to *talk* about it."

"Clever girl," Score said approvingly. "What she means, your high-and-snootiness, is that you should keep them talking. Make them think you *might* surrender without a fight. The longer you can keep them talking, the better the chance that one of us will come through."

Trust Score to have caught onto her plan! He did seem quite perceptive. Which was why she wouldn't even give him a hint of what her long-term aim was here. Helaine knew he would fight against it if he knew what it was. "He's right," she said. "Keep them occupied. Buy us time to help you."

Lord Votrin thought about it for a moment, and finally nodded. "It is not ethical, but it is better than facing a siege. I have to confess that I do not have a great deal of faith in your friend's plan, Helaine. And since you won't even tell me what yours is, I can have no faith in it at all."

"Some father you are," Score said bitterly. "If you can't have faith in her plan, can't you have faith in *her*?"

Lord Votrin gazed evenly at Score. "Helaine has long been a bitter disappointment to me. She is argumentative, and thinks she is the equal of a man. She disguised herself to take fighting lessons—fighting lessons!—and then she fled my castle rather than do her duty. How can you expect me to have any faith in her?"

Score glared angrily at him. "You don't know your daughter at all, do you? She took fighting lessons, yes—and was *better* than any man in this castle." He stared at Helaine's brothers. "Not one of you would stand a chance against her with a sword. Not any two, probably. And she argued with you because you're pig-headed and wrong. And your idea of what her duty is doesn't take into account her personality or needs."

You know, you're lucky she even *wants* to help you out. Well, I don't care about any of you—I have faith in her, even not knowing her plan, and I'll back her up to the hilt."

"Thank you, Score," Helaine said, genuinely touched by his faith in her.

"And if you mess up," he added, "I'm going to beat the living daylights out of you."

She smiled. "I'm far better at fighting than you are," she pointed out.

"It doesn't matter," he replied. "I aim to cheat."

Helaine didn't care what he *said*—she knew that this was just his way of trying to pretend he didn't care about her. She knew what was in his heart, and that was what counted. "That figures," she said. But for the first time since she had returned to her home, she felt happy.

11

Pixel was considerably less certain that his own plan would work than he had tried to make out. He realized that nobody had ever found Caligan's lost castle—but he tried to convince himself that it was simply because nobody had ever really looked. The legends said that the place stank of magic, which kept any of the rather superstitious locals away, but should make it comparatively easy for him to find.

If, of course, there was anything more to it than simply a legend.

But it felt right to him, and he knew better than to simply dismiss his hunches outright. His deepest, strongest magical talent was for piecing things together that weren't entirely logical, and he was almost certain that this was another example of his powers. But there was always that last, niggling doubt . . .

Jenna didn't seem to have any doubts of her own. She stayed close by his side and seemed to be quite happy. And, to be honest, it felt good having her there. She had a faint smell of spices and herbs about her that was just wonderful, and he felt comfortable just being with her, without any need to talk. And she seemed to be getting comfortable with the idea that she could do magic. In fact, it was thanks to her that they were moving silently through the attacking army's camp. One of the gems she had selected was obsidian, and it gave her the ability to cast invisibility about herself. It didn't extend far, but as long as Pixel stayed within a few feet of her, the cloak of unseeing covered him as well. It was lucky that Score and Helaine had gone off in another direction together, because Jenna would never have had the strength to cast the spell over all four of them.

The soldiers seemed to be relaxed in the camp, laughing and joking with one another. Bunches of them had raided the local villages again, and Pixel could feel the anger building up inside of Jenna. He touched her shoulder, silently, willing her to say nothing. Thankfully, she understood him, and nodded her response. It was lucky, Pixel reflected, that they could still see one another, even if nobody could see them.

Then they were through the camp, and into the woods beyond. As soon as Pixel felt comparatively safe, he told Jenna to stop with the spell. She didn't argue, since she was quite obviously exhausted from casting it. There was a film of sweat on her forehead, and her footsteps were faltering.

"Magic takes a lot of energy," she muttered. "Can we rest a while?"

Pixel glanced around. "I believe so. We're the only ones here."

Huh! came a familiar thought-voice in his head.
Humans have such limited senses.

"Smoke!" Jenna exclaimed, smiling happily. She seemed to forget that she was tired as the unicorn appeared from among the trees and she ran to him to hug his neck tightly. "You waited for me!"

Of course I did, he replied, rubbing his nose against her cheek. *You and I are bonded now. We are friends forever.*

"I'm so pleased," Jenna answered. "I was half-afraid I'd never see you again."

Humans! snorted Smoke again. *You don't know how loyal unicorns are, and that's a fact. Well, you'll learn.* He looked at her sympathetically. *You seem weak, and we must leave here before the patrols come around again. I'm not going to make a habit of it, but I'll allow you to ride me for the time being.*

"Thank you," she replied gratefully. She clutched his mane, and Pixel helped her up onto the unicorn's back. Smoke trotted at an easy pace beside him as Pixel set off again.

"It's this direction," Pixel explained. "I estimate it's no more than a day or two's journey, especially with your help, Smoke."

What are you searching for? the unicorn asked, curiously.

"Can't you read the answer in my mind?" asked Jenna.

I don't read your mind, I hear your thoughts, Smoke explained. *And then only when you're directing them at me. It's simply like speech, without the

bothersome need to say the words aloud. And, if I wanted, I could make only you hear my reply, instead of letting that boy in on them also.*

"Oh." So Jenna explained what they were after, with Pixel adding only a few comments from time to time.

So, Smoke summed up, *you're off hunting for a Scepter that may never have existed in a castle nobody's ever seen that was owned by a king who might have had children that nobody knows about. Well, you two can certainly pick a quest, can't you?*

"I know it sounds a little . . . silly," Pixel admitted.

"But I believe in him!" Jenna said fiercely.

Well, that's good enough for me, Smoke decided. *Anyway, this planet is quite nice for galloping, and the grass is sweet. I've nothing better to do with my time. And anything that stops humans fighting one another is worth attempting, anyway.*

"You're right there." Pixel couldn't help liking the unicorn.

They traveled on through the night, Smoke mostly lost in his own thoughts. After a while, Jenna felt strong enough to climb down and walk again. Smoke didn't say anything, but even Pixel could tell he was glad not to be acting like a horse any longer. Jenna

managed to keep up well, and her spirits seemed to have risen.

"I'm starting to understand that this business of doing magic isn't necessarily evil," she told Pixel.

"Right," he agreed. "It all depends on what you do with it. Magic *can* be used for evil—we've run into plenty of magicians who want to rule everybody, or else just to do nasty things because they like to. But we have a good friend, Shanara, who uses her magic for kindly things. And Score, Helaine, and I always try to do the right thing."

"Oh, you could never do anything else," Jenna said warmly, and Pixel felt himself blush.

"That's not quite true," he replied, feeling that he had to be honest. "You see, only a few years ago, the Diadem was run by the Three Who Rule. They were attacked and defeated by Sarman, but they managed to hide themselves, by being reborn—as Score, Helaine, and myself. They were cold and cruel and arrogant, and couldn't even get along with one another, though they needed each other. Well, we *are* those three people somehow, and there is inside us the potential to become like that."

"I can't believe you could ever become cold and heartless," Jenna said firmly.

"Thank you," Pixel replied, very touched by her faith in him. "I don't think I can, either. But I did, once, so perhaps I can again. I have to confess that the idea gives me nightmares—and I'm not simply saying that to sound dramatic. I really do wake up some nights, shaking. I *never* want to become that man. What scares me is that maybe, even though magic isn't evil in itself, it can *make* you evil, in wanting to have more power."

Stuff of nonsense, Smoke broke in. *Do you want more power?*

"Well, no," Pixel confessed. "I have enough trouble controlling the power that I have right now."

"Then there's your answer," Jenna said firmly. "You don't seek control, you don't want more power, and you could never become distant and imperious. You're not a noble. Helaine, on the other hand . . ."

"Helaine is even more terrified of becoming evil than I am," Pixel assured her. "She just seems to be having problems with understanding that the peasants here are people, too. It's not easy to change the way of thinking you've been brought up with. It will take her time."

"Maybe." But Jenna didn't sound too convinced.

"I think you should stop the discussion,* Smoke said suddenly. "I am sensing other humans in these woods. There are quite a few of them.*"

"A patrol?" asked Pixel, worried.

"I do not think so,* the unicorn replied. "They do not move with the self-assurance and skill of soldiers.*"

"Who else would be out here in any numbers?" Pixel wondered. He glanced at Jenna. "Any ideas? This is your home, after all."

"Perhaps peasants," she suggested. "After all, the soldiers have stolen a lot of food from them. They may be hunting for more, or fleeing their village for somewhere safer."

"*With all of the noise they're making, they'll never catch any animals,* Smoke said derisively.

"I can't hear anything at all," Pixel said.

"*As I've remarked before,* Smoke told him, "you humans have such limited senses. They will be cutting across our path in a few minutes. You must decide what our response will be.*"

Jenna looked at Pixel nervously. "Do you think we should hide until we know who they are, and what they want?" she asked.

"I don't know," Pixel said, trying to decide. "We could always use our magic to defend ourselves if we need to. But, as you know, it can get pretty tiring, and we may need to conserve our strength. But if we hide, we won't know who they are, or what they're after."

Is that a bad thing? Smoke asked. *Let them go past us, and we needn't do a thing.*

"But if Jenna's right and they're peasants who are seeking food, then they might need our help," Pixel explained. "If they do, we can't just let them go on and not do something."

"And you're worried about becoming cold and heartless," Jenna scoffed. "You've the most generous heart of anyone I've ever met." Then she leaned over and kissed him quickly on the cheek. "For luck," she said. "We'll wait and see if they need help."

Pixel's cheek burned where she'd kissed it. He felt absolutely wonderful, and could still almost feel the nearness of her, and the lovely scent of her. "Right," he agreed, pleased with his decision. "We'll wait."

Smoke sighed. *This could be a bad move,* he said. *I think I'll just hide, anyway. People here aren't used to seeing unicorns.* He slid off into the shadows in the night.

A few moments later Pixel could hear the sounds of movement at last. The night was quite dark, and the trees little more than blacker shapes, so it took a while for him to make out the movement. The only thing that helped was that several of the figures were carrying some sort of lanterns. These were shielded, and cast a very limited glow, obviously so that patrols of soldiers wouldn't see the light and investigate.

Jenna let out a sharp breath. "I recognize some of those men," she said softly. "They're from King's Norton, my home village. I wonder what they're doing this far away from home?"

"We could always ask them," Pixel suggested.

"Right," she agreed. "I know they were unpleasant to me before, but I've known these people all of my life. They were just scared, that's all. And if they need help, I'd like to do what I can."

Pixel wasn't so sure, but this was her decision, since she knew these people. He stayed with her as she stepped forward and called a greeting to the group. There were about twenty of them, all men, and several of them looked very startled when they heard her.

"The witch!" one man hissed, and opened the cover over his lantern wider, casting a brighter glow

over the clearing. Pixel saw that he had a scythe with him, and that most of the other men had sticks or farming tools to use as weapons. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Jenna didn't seem to feel the same way. "Why are you so far from home, and at night?" she asked. "Are you hunting food?"

"No," another of the men answered. "We're hunting evil. And it looks like we've found it."

Pixel hated it when he was right like that. "Guys," he said, "you're not behaving very sensibly."

"We know now why our village is always being attacked," the first man said. "It is because we harbored a witch all those years. Now we're paying for our sins. And the only way to make things right again is to destroy the evil."

"Kill the witch!" the second man agreed, raising his pitchfork. The rest of the men joined in the chorus, working up their courage.

"I'm *not* a witch," Jenna said strongly. "When have I ever done anyone evil? You, Robar—I cured you of the sleeping disease last year. And you, Marin, I healed when you gashed your leg. Are they the works of a witch?"

"You only did good to fool us," Marin answered. "So we wouldn't see the evil you were really doing, and burn you for it."

"How can you all be so stupid?" Pixel demanded. "Jenna helped you, not hurt you."

"It's her fault that evil came to King's Norton," Robar insisted. "And the only way to send it from us is to destroy her and pray for forgiveness."

"Hurting me won't stop the soldiers," Jenna pointed out. "They will keep coming and raiding unless someone rids our land of them. And that is what we are trying to do."

"So you say," scoffed a third man. "You'll say anything to fend off the fate you deserve." He raised a wood cutter's axe, and waved it in the air. "Let's get them, boys!"

Anger flared up in Pixel, and he didn't pause to think. These men were crazy, and scared, and would kill him and Jenna through their foolish beliefs. "If you're afraid of magic now," he growled, "wait until I'm through with you." He felt in his pouch for his topaz, and could feel the power of fire coursing through him.

He reached out to the flames in the lanterns, and made them grow huge. The attacking villagers screamed as their lanterns suddenly exploded into balls of fire. The men carrying them threw them as far away as they could, and the night and the trees were suddenly ablaze. Pixel reached out to the flames, whirling them through the air and firing them like spears at the men. He was careful that none of the fire got too close to them—he wanted to scare them, not kill them.

Several of the men were ready to flee, but there were a few braver than the others, Robar and Marin among them. They seemed to realize that the fire wasn't lethal, and they yelled, brandishing their weapons, and charged forward. Pixel reached for his beryl, and the control over air that it gave him. He reached out, starting a raging wind moving, blasting at the attackers. Twigs, branches, and stones all flew through the air, slamming into the men, and leaving them dazed and bruised.

"Is this what you're afraid of?" Pixel yelled, too angry to think clearly. "This is magic, and you're helpless against it! Flee, all of you, while you still can!"

Marin and Robar looked as if they wished to continue, but the fight had been beaten out of the other men. They stumbled away, not looking back, clearly heading for home once again. The final two villagers, realizing that they were on their own facing two "witches," decided that they were outnumbered.

"Don't you ever come back!" Robar yelled over his shoulder as he fled. "If you do, we'll kill you!"

"You've not been too successful at it so far!" Pixel called back to them.

"They mean me," Jenna said quietly. "That I should never go home again." She sounded so lost and sad that Pixel's anger abruptly vanished. He reached out to hug her.

"It's not all bad," he told her, gently. "You can stay with us, you know."

"I know," she replied. "And I suppose I've accepted that King's Norton can no longer be my home. But it's so hard . . . It's all the life I've ever known until now."

"Then you're in for some fun, because your life is definitely going to get better," Pixel promised her. "Wait till you get off this planet."

"Off?" Jenna looked confused. "What do you mean?"

He'd forgotten that Jenna really knew so little about the Universe. "Ordin is just one world among many on the Diadem," he explained. "We can go to any of them we choose, and if you're with us, then so can you. There are many places that are absolutely delightful, and there are so many wonders to see, I can't begin to describe them all."

"It sounds marvelous," Jenna admitted. "And you'll really take me with you?"

"If you want to go," Pixel promised. "Wait till you see the castle where we live." Then he added hastily, so she wouldn't get the wrong idea: "But there are no peasants exploited, I promise!"

"I'm sure you would never do anything like that," Jenna said. "You're the kindest, bravest person I have ever met." She pecked him on the cheek.

Oh, for goodness sakes! Smoke snorted. *Haven't you anything better to do with your time?*

"Not that I can think of," Pixel answered, staring into Jenna's face. She seemed to be quite content to simply look back at him.

Then allow me to make a suggestion, Smoke replied. *Putting out the fire.*

"Fire?" Then Pixel blinked and looked around.

The trees all around were burning brightly. Wood crackled and collapsed in showers of smoke, and the grass was ablaze. Fortunately, the remnants of the wind Pixel had kicked up were wafting the flames away from the two of them, but they were on the verge of starting a major forest fire.

Guiltily, Pixel pulled free of the joint embrace, and reached out with his magic. He dampened down the flames, making certain that he caught every last one. The fire seemed to shrivel up, and then died away. Abruptly the night was dark once again, and now a little chilly.

It might be a good idea to get out of here, Smoke pointed out. *The soldiers are bound to have spotted that blaze from miles away, and are certain to investigate. I think it would be better if we weren't here when they arrived.*

"Makes perfect sense to me," Pixel said. He grabbed Jenna's hand. "Let's go."

Smoke snorted again, and then led the way off through the night, over the flame-scorched earth. The stench of smoke filled the air, and heat radiated from the ground. But Pixel didn't care. All he cared about was holding on tight to Jenna's hand. Nothing else mattered at this moment.

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A few hours later, Jenna was relieved when Pixel said they could rest the remainder of the night. Her feet were starting to ache, despite the fact that she was used to walking for hours in the woods to gather her herbs and flowers for potions. Still, it had been pleasant enough walking hand in hand with Pixel. He was like nobody she had ever met before, and she couldn't help feeling a strong attraction to him. He was so kind and considerate, and fierce-

ly protective of her. Not that she needed his protection—but it was nice that he offered it.

He was also shy and quiet, and seemed reluctant to talk about what he was feeling. As they settled down under cloaks to try and get some rest, he smiled at her in that gentle way of his. “Good night,” he called softly.

“Good night.”

I do hope this isn’t going to go on forever, Smoke complained. *I may be able to sleep standing up, but not with human emotions flying all around me. Get to sleep—if anyone comes near us, I’ll be able to tell, even sleeping. There’s no need to worry.*

“I wasn’t worried,” Jenna replied honestly.

Go to sleep, Smoke said sternly.

With a slight chuckle, Jenna settled down. She’d spent nights in the woods before, and had no problem drifting off to sleep—very aware of how close Pixel was to her. Between him and Smoke, she felt very much at peace for the first time in her life.

It was morning when a mental touch from Smoke brought her awake. Stretching, she glanced around the forest and saw Pixel, yawning, about ten feet from her. “Good morning,” she called.

"Good morning," he agreed happily. He looked around, but there was no sign of any unicorn. "Where's Smoke?"

"Off getting his breakfast," she answered. "Maybe we had better do the same."

"Sounds good to me," he agreed. "What's on the menu?"

"Whatever we can find," she answered. "There's plenty to eat in the woods." Her knowledge of every growing thing in the area helped them to find nuts, berries and roots to eat as they continued on their way. They found a stream without much searching, and had fresh, cold water to drink and wash in. Then they moved on together. Jenna deliberately walked quite close to Pixel. He looked a little nervous when she did so. "Is there something wrong?" she asked him, puzzled.

"Wrong?" He shook his head quickly. "No, it's just that . . . Well, I have to be honest. I don't really look exactly the way you see me, you know. It's a magical spell to make me look more normal."

Jenna scowled. "Do you mean that you're really some sort of a hideous monster, and you only look

human because of magic?" She didn't really think that this was so, but she had to ask.

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Pixel hastily assured her. "I'm mostly like the way you see me now, normally, only . . . Well, my ears are pointed, not round, and my skin is blue. I don't know how you feel about that."

Jenna considered the matter. "Is it a nice shade of blue?" she asked.

"Well, I'm kind of prejudiced, but I rather like it."

She shrugged. "Then I suppose I shall, too."

"You're not bothered by this?" he asked, almost too eagerly.

"Should I be?" she answered. "It doesn't sound all that important to me what color your skin is. Does the fact that mine is light brown bother you?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then there's no problem, is there?" She was curious, though. "Can I see you as you really are?"

"Not right now," he admitted. "Our friend Shanara put the illusion spell on me, and I'm not powerful enough to remove it. And I couldn't replace it if I did."

Jenna shrugged again. "Then it's something I shall have to look forward to," she replied. Reaching out,

she grasped his hand. "Now will you stop being so foolish and walk with me?"

Walking along, holding his hand, certainly was a most pleasant way to spend the day. Jenna was happy enough, and almost wished they didn't have an urgent quest to fulfill. She was enjoying herself, and Pixel certainly seemed to be just as happy. But they were on a mission, and it was almost nightfall before Pixel called a complete halt for the day.

"We've made good time," he informed her. "We'll be at the castle ruins early in the morning, so let's get a good night's rest. That way, we'll be prepared for anything."

"What do you think we'll find?" she asked.

"I don't have a clue," he confessed. "I'm hoping that the answer we need to stop this war will be there, but that might be nothing more than wishful thinking."

"It's more than that, and you know it," Smoke commented. He'd caught up with them again as they were preparing to rest. "Your magical ability is the power to deduce the unseen, and this is what you've done. What you seek has to be there."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Pixel said. "I just wish I was as certain as you are."

Jenna stroked his hand. "I'm sure you're right, too. But I know I'm prejudiced in your favor." Changing the subject slightly, she commented: "I wonder how Score and Helaine are doing?"

"I don't know," Pixel admitted. "But I'm not too worried about them. They can both handle themselves. If they were in trouble, Helaine has the power of communication, and she'd call to us for help."

"To *you*, maybe," Jenna said. "But I doubt she'd ever call to *me*."

"She's a great girl, really," Pixel assured her. "I know you both have issues, but I'm sure you'll become friends, sooner or later."

"It might become uncomfortable for you if we didn't," Jenna said sadly. "It might be easier on you if we were not close. That way, you wouldn't have to chose between me and Helaine."

"There's no need for a choice," Pixel said firmly. "I know the two of you will learn to like one another."

"Pixel," she said with affection, "you can be so naive. We both have a lot of years of hatred behind ourselves. It will not be simple for either of us to overcome it."

"Try, for my sake," he asked her.

She smiled. "For your sake, I promise to do my very best." She reached over and kissed him.

This is getting very nauseating, Smoke observed. *This business of pressing lips together is quite disgusting. Unicorns would never do such a thing.*

"Then you're the ones missing out," Pixel said. "Trust me, it's most pleasant—provided it's with the right person."

Sleep! Smoke insisted. With a laugh, Jenna lay back, and fell swiftly asleep.

Pixel's estimate proved to be quite correct. Early the following morning, they set off once more. Smoke stayed with them this time as they traveled the forest. After barely an hour, Pixel held up a hand.

"I can feel the magic," he said. "Jenna, stretch out and see if you can."

Jenna wasn't sure she knew what he was talking about, but she nodded and tried to focus her mind. If he could feel it, then *she* should be able to . . . Ah! There was a definite tug of power on her spirit, coming from the north. "That way," she said, surprised, pointing.

"I knew you'd get it," Pixel said approvingly. "It's only about ten minutes or so away, I'd say. Let's go."

In a matter of minutes, the forest thinned out, and there was a large clearing surrounding what was obviously a man-shaped hill. It was overgrown with small bushes and trees, but it was quite clear that something had stood there at one time. Jenna could almost make out a filled-in moat. There were no signs of stones or anything, however.

There's the stench of strong magic about this place, Smoke complained. *I don't like it much.*

"Then wait here," Pixel suggested. "The two of us can investigate it."

What kind of a unicorn would I be to allow my human to go where I would not venture? Smoke asked, snorting. But it was clear to Jenna that he didn't like having to stay with them. She stroked his neck, comforting him, glad that he would stay beside her. And he was right—there was the feel of something very wrong here.

It was a short walk to the edge of the hill, and Pixel stopped there, disturbed. "I can feel the power in this place," he said softly. "Twisted magic, placed here by something evil."

"Then maybe this isn't the place to look for answers," Jenna commented. "Perhaps it's a trap?"

"It's a trap of some kind," Pixel agreed. "One to take the unwary. But we're quite aware of it, so it shouldn't be as dangerous for us."

I admire your optimism, Smoke said sourly. *But danger is danger, even if you know it's coming at you. And you don't yet know what form it will take.*

"True," Pixel agreed. He was obviously reaching out with his power, trying to discover what lay sleeping here, ready to waken. "Jenna, do any of your gems help you here? I can't get a grip on anything."

Jenna still wasn't too sure of her own powers. Her carnelian wouldn't help here, as there was nothing and no one yet to heal. Nor was her obsidian-induced power of invisibility going to help—yet. That still left her two crystals. One was citrine, the other aquamarine. But holding them did nothing that she could tell. She shook her head. "Nothing," she admitted sadly.

"Then we'll just have to go ahead and see what happens," Pixel decided. "Courage!"

Jenna nodded. She would feel brave enough as long as he and Smoke were with her. She had never ventured into a lair of magic before, but she was determined not to allow her fear to stop her. And she *was*

afraid—of the unknown, of the stink of evil magic. “I do hope you’re right, and what we seek really is here.”

“So do I,” Pixel confessed. “But this magic is guarding *something*, or else why would it be here?” He stepped forward, and Jenna followed as he climbed the small hill to where the castle once stood. Smoke trailed behind them, clearly reluctantly, but he wouldn’t abandon her.

When they reached the top, Jenna could see that something had leveled the castle completely. It was as if some incredibly huge blade had sliced the castle off its foundations, and whisked the stones away. There were walls left, skeletons that should have held rooms and turrets, but which surrounded only shrubs, weeds, and wreckage. The stench of decay and despair was everywhere. Even Pixel was disturbed, as he looked about.

“There are two distinct layers of magic,” he decided. “The uppermost is the evil layer. Below that lies . . . something else. Deeper, older, but slumbering somehow.” He made an impatient face. “I wish I were better at magic! I *know* there’s something about this place, but I just can’t make out what it is.”

She touched his shoulder gently. "You're doing fine," she reassured him. "You can't expect to solve ancient mysteries overnight, you know."

He managed a weak smile. "I can try. Anyway, the main magic here is some sort of a *go-away* spell. It keeps out most people, and they wouldn't even know it was working on them. It's very clever, and it's why Caligan's castle has been lost for so long while the ruins are in quite plain sight."

"It isn't working on us, though," Jenna pointed out.

"Not directly, no," Pixel agreed. "Because we have magic of our own. It can't make us believe there's nothing here because we know that there is."

*You said *not directly*,* Smoke commented. *Is there an indirect way it can work on you?*

"Oh, yes," Pixel said softly. "The *go-away* spell is only the surface layer of the magic here. Once we step inside the boundaries of the castle, the next layer will be triggered."

"And what is the next layer?" Jenna asked nervously.

"We'll know when we trigger it," Pixel replied. "Ready?"

"Not really," Jenna admitted. "But let's do it while I still have some courage left in me." She took Pixel's

hand, knowing he wouldn't allow anything to happen to her—if he could stop it. Pixel smiled encouragingly, and stepped forward. Then he stopped.

“Can you hear something?” he asked her.

Jenna concentrated, and became aware of a low humming sound. “Yes,” she said. “What can it be?” She looked around the ruins, but saw nothing unusual. She let go of Pixel's hand, and groped in her pouch for a gem. Her fingers closed comfortably around the obsidian. Invisibility might be a very good idea in a moment . . .

Then she saw movement. Something was in the air, buzzing. At first glance, she thought it was a bee—except it was the size of a small bird.

Then she realized that it *was* a bee—only it was the size of a pigeon . . .

There were more behind it, pouring from the ground. “We must have disturbed a nest,” she said, alarmed.

“Not us,” Pixel said, grimly. “The magic.”

There were about a dozen bees now, and there was no doubt about it—they were growing larger by the second. The lead bee was the size of a lap dog now. She could see its black and yellow stripes clearly, and

the beating wings holding it in the air. And the stinger looked immense . . .

"Pixel," she said softly, trying not to attract the monster, "a stinger that size could carry enough venom to be lethal."

"A stinger that size could kill us just by stabbing us," Pixel pointed out. "And it's still growing . . ."

The twelve bees were now the size of ponies, and they had clearly spotted the intruders. Jenna decided not to waste any more time. Clutching her gem tightly, she cast a cloak of invisibility over the three of them.

The bees came on anyway, buzzing ferociously, and climbing, obviously with the intent to attack.

"That won't work, I'm afraid," Pixel told her. "They can see infrared."

"What's that?" Jenna asked.

"Beyond the range of light humans can see," Pixel explained. "And we're only invisible to normal sight. They can see the heat from our bodies."

Jenna stopped wasting her strength on a spell that wasn't working. They became visible again, and she clutched around for another gemstone.

Pixel, meanwhile, wasn't hanging around. He had his beryl in his hand, giving him power over air. Once again, he was able to call up a heavy wind, which caught the bees in its strength, and tossed them aside. But keeping the wind up was taking a lot of energy out of the boy, and Jenna could sense his strength ebbing. The bees were making some headway against the wind, and were starting to close in again. She shuddered at the sight of those stingers. Pixel was right—they would be like sword blows if the bees managed to sting them. She couldn't allow them to get close enough. But how could she stop them?

Her fingers closed around her citrine, and then she knew. It was the power of persuasion—the ability to convince. Grimly, she smiled, and focused her powers on the bees. *We're not your enemies*, she told them. *It's the other bees who are the invaders . . .* She wasn't sure the message was getting through—huge as they were, the bees still had very tiny minds. Still, she focused all of her strength and thoughts on that one message.

The bees drew closer and closer as Pixel's strength gave out. Then the wind died out completely, and he fell to his knees, exhausted. "I just need a minute," he muttered.

They might not have that minute. The bees, freed from the wind, dived down at them like hawks on mice. *We're not your enemies*, she called out, desperately.

Then, seconds before the stings would have ripped into them, there was confusion in the air. The bees turned on one another, grappling, and stinging one another. There was a mad flurry of insect bodies in the air, and then the bees started to drop. Great gashes marked their bodies, and the dead and dying bees fell to the earth with loud crashes. Finally, only one was left alive, and it was wounded.

It was also aiming straight for Jenna, where she stood guard over Pixel. She tried to think of some other message to send to it, and was afraid she'd be too late. Then she had it. *We're over there, ten feet away*, she sent, with the last of her own strength. At the very last second, the bee diverted to one side and slammed into the ground ten feet away from where she stood, swaying. The force of the impact killed it immediately.

She almost fell then, but Smoke moved to support her. **That was well done.**

“Very well done,” Pixel agreed, and Jenna blushed at the praise. Pixel staggered to his feet. “But that’s just the first stage of the defense. It’s going to get worse the farther in we go.”

Jenna shuddered at that thought. The first attack had drained them both, leaving them weak and exhausted. What would the next one do?

13

“**Y**ou know something?”

Score called out to Helaine as they marched through the woods. “I’m getting really fed up with this view of your back.”

“Then walk faster,” Helaine replied curtly.

Score sighed, and then glanced at Flame. The unicorn had joined them again after he and Helaine had evaded the patrols in the woods. Helaine

seemed to be in a really bad mood—even for her—and it was one not even the presence of her bonded unicorn could raise. “How much persuading would it take,” Score asked, “to have you jab her in the backside just once with your horn?”

More than you could manage, Flame answered. *But I agree with your underlying concern—Helaine is not her normal self.*

“Well, she’s never actually a bundle of laughs,” Score replied. “But she’s usually better than this. There’s only one thing preventing me from putting her over my knee and spanking some sense into her.”

What’s that?

“The fact that she’d cream me afterward. I don’t suffer pain very well.” He glared at Helaine’s back again. “Maybe we could tie her legs together so she’d have to hop—that would slow her down.”

She has a sword, Flame pointed out.

“Yeah, and I’d rather it stayed in her scabbard.” Score shook his head. “I guess we’ll just have to wait for her to come out of this mood on her own. It couldn’t last the rest of her life—could it?” Naturally, Flame couldn’t answer this.

“Danger,” Helaine said abruptly, drawing her sword and crouching in a fighting stance. Score reached for

his jasper, and touched it. This gave him the power of sight.

"Four men," he said quietly, as he drew close beside her. "Poorly armed, but with nasty dispositions." Helaine had the ability to sense when trouble was coming, but not the ability to see what it was. "Not soldiers."

Helaine nodded. "Scavengers, then," she guessed. "Opportunistic thieves, taking advantage of the chaos that the war is causing."

"That would be my guess, too," Score agreed.

I'll wait till this is over, Flame said, slipping away into the trees. *If you need me, I'll be back.*

A moment later, the four men burst out of the woods, two in front and two behind them. They were just as Score had seen them, dressed in faded clothes, but with determined expressions on their faces. Each of the men held drawn swords, but they were not in the best of condition. Clearly these men didn't know how to look after a good weapon. But they were used to mugging helpless victims, and didn't need to have first-class swords. Only this time they had made a mistake—only they didn't realize it yet.

The one who was obviously their leader grinned. "Well," he drawled, "what do we have here? An un-

armed boy and a girl with delusions? It seems almost unsporting to rob them."

"Just try it," Helaine replied, waiting. The men were obviously stupid, because Score could clearly hear the edge of anger in her voice. She glanced at him. "These are *mine*," she hissed softly, so only he could hear her.

"Be my guest," Score replied. "But wouldn't magic be simpler?"

"I don't need magic for *these*." She gave a tight, dangerous smile aimed at the leader of the muggers. "Afraid of a girl with a sword?" she mocked.

"Get them." As he spoke, the leader moved forward, sword at the ready—or so he thought.

Helaine didn't wait for them to come to her. She flashed forward, and her sword danced out. The leader's blade caught hers, and she flicked his sword away. Almost carelessly, she backhanded him in the head with her hilt. The man crumpled, his sword falling from nerveless fingers. The other three attackers had barely even moved. Helaine whirled, to face the second man. He tried to hack out at her, but he had all the fighting technique of a dying fish. Helaine countered the blow almost contemptuously, and then

slashed downward with her blade. The man screamed, dropped his sword, and clutched at his bleeding arm.

The other two attackers slowed. They had started to dash forward when their leader had given them the word, but now they appeared to lose steam. Score stood by, watching, as they looked at one another. Then, foolishly, they yelled, raised their swords, and charged together.

Helaine stepped to one side, and let them attack. She parried one blow, and slipped under the man's guard. Once again, she used the hilt of her sword, this time to slam it into the man's chin. Score was sure he heard teeth breaking as the man crumpled under the blow.

The fourth man had lost all enthusiasm for the fight. He stared at his fallen comrades, and then tried to turn to flee. But Helaine wasn't finished yet, and her hand darted out. Her sword shimmered, and the man screamed as the point left a long cut across his back. He fell forward, dropping his sword, and then yelled: "Mercy!"

Helaine moved around to face him. "You offered us no mercy when you thought us helpless," she growled. "Why should I offer you any now?" The man was speechless as she raised her sword.

Score stepped forward. "That's enough," he said sharply. "You've beaten them, and they know it. They'll carry scars from this for a long time. Now knock it off."

"I didn't see you fighting," Helaine replied. "You have no say in this." But her sword remained raised, and didn't fall.

"What's wrong with you?" Score demanded. "I've seen you in moods before, but not like this. Are you really planning on killing that poor jerk? Are you?"

Helaine stared down at the kneeling man in front of her. Her muscles clenched, and Score could see the strain on her face. He hoped he wasn't pushing her too hard. The man's life was hanging by the very slender thread of Helaine's good sense—and right now Score wasn't certain she had any.

Then she allowed her arms to drop to her sides. "No." She slapped the man with the side of her sword. "Help your friends when they recover. And I trust this will teach you to get an honest job. Next time I shall not be so merciful." She wiped the blood from her sword off on the shaking man's tunic, and then sheathed her weapon. She looked at Score. "Let's get out of here."

They walked down the trail they were following. A moment later, Flame emerged from the trees to join them again. The unicorn didn't say anything, but settled in beside Helaine, who was still looking grim and tense.

"What was all that about?" Score finally asked her, unable to stay silent any longer.

"Teaching them a lesson." Helaine didn't look at him as she replied.

"No, it wasn't," Score said flatly. "What is *wrong* with you? You almost killed that man back there."

"But I didn't."

Score had taken his fill of this. He grabbed her arm and whirled her around to face him. "I'm sick of this," he told her. "What is wrong with you? You're usually about as funny as a warthog convention, but this is ridiculous. What is eating you so badly that you're acting so nasty?"

"That's my business, not yours," Helaine answered. "You may be my friend, but that doesn't give you the right to know my thoughts."

"Forget your thoughts—I'm sure I wouldn't like them if I could read them. But I want to know what's

bugging you. I don't like this mood you're in, and it doesn't bode well for our mission."

Helaine took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She definitely looked like she was counting to ten before replying. "My . . . plan . . . is not one I like. But it is the only solution to the problem of ending this war. It has left me rather tense. And I do not wish to discuss it further. Is that quite clear?"

"Clear as mud," Score snapped. "Look, I've gone along with you so far on faith, because there's nobody in this or any other world I trust as much as you. But you're *really* pushing that trust to the breaking point."

Abruptly, Helaine's scowl softened, and she reached out a hand to touch his arm. "Score, you have no idea how much what you just said means to me. Nobody has ever trusted me the way you do, and I appreciate it. But I cannot tell you my plan yet. You'll know it as soon as we reach Castle Peverel, I promise."

Score considered. Helaine didn't seem likely to change her decision, no matter how he tried to convince her. "Just assure me of one thing, then," he begged. "Your plan doesn't involve slicing off anybody's head, or anything like that."

For some reason, that made Helaine laugh. It wasn't a very amused laugh, and there was more than a tinge of bitterness to it. But it was a laugh. "I only wish it did," she replied. "But my plan doesn't involve weapons of any kind."

Realizing that this was as much as he'd get out of her, Score gave in with as much good grace as he could muster. "Okay. But I reserve the right to tell you if I think your plan stinks."

"From you," Helaine answered, "I would expect no less."

An hour or so later, they stopped for the night, and got what sleep they could. They went on their way the following morning, and after a short while, they came across farmlands.

"The boundaries of Peverel land," Helaine said. "If we're lucky, we may be able to pick up transport." She led the way to the local village. The peasants at work there stopped to watch as the two of them passed through. Flame, as usual, had skirted the village, not wishing to cause comment by being seen.

The peasants looked a lot like Jenna, with rough, serviceable clothing, calloused hands from field work, and tired expressions on their faces. Several of them

looked away or down from Helaine as she passed, obviously realizing she was a noble. Score felt very uncomfortable. They didn't look away from him, but seemed to be puzzled. It was clear from his behavior that he was neither peasant nor noble and that left them confused, since they knew of nothing else.

Helaine approached a man who was better dressed than most, and Score guessed he was the villagers' leader. "We need to borrow horses," she said, in a voice that was used to being obeyed. "We must see the Lord Peverel immediately. I will see that they are returned by tomorrow, with appropriate payment."

The man nodded, almost bowing. "As you say, my lady." He straightened, and gestured to one of the other villagers. The man ran off. Helaine ignored everyone, her eyes fixed on the horizon, as she waited.

Score looked around the small clearing. People had stopped to look at them, obviously uncomfortable. Women looked as though they wanted to hurry away, and men leaned on fences about the vegetable patches, or on farm implements. They obviously wanted to get along with their lives, but couldn't with a noble present. There were a few dirty, ill-dressed children around, including toddlers. One of these was maybe

three years old, with straggly, dirty blonde hair and a cute face. Score grinned and then winked at her. The child's mother looked shocked, and hid the poor girl in the folds of her tattered dress.

"Don't do that," Helaine said in a low voice. "She's afraid you want to take her child away."

Score was astonished. "Do you people do that sort of thing?" he asked.

"Where do you think we get castle servants from?"

He hadn't thought about it, but it made a kind of cruel sense. The nobles here treated the peasants as *property*, to be used, not as *people* to be dealt with. It made him angry again, and more determined than ever that something had to be done to change the way things were.

The man who had rushed off came back, leading two horses. The saddles they wore were old and faded, but looked serviceable. Score winced; horses were definitely not his favorite means of transport. But his feet were aching from all the walking, so he supposed it was time to make his behind sore instead. Helaine, naturally, vaulted into her saddle as if she'd been born there. Well, she'd been riding since she was almost a baby. Score clambered into his saddle with consider-

ably more difficulty. Then he followed her lead, and set his horse after hers as she left the village. Naturally, she didn't say anything to the peasants.

A mile or so out of town, Flame joined them. The horses shied a bit, wary of this strange creature, but then they accepted the unicorn. Travel went a lot faster now, even if Score knew he'd have trouble sitting down that night. He spent most of his concentration just to stay in the saddle.

They stopped for a break about noon to allow the horses to rest and to get grass and water. Helaine had brought along a bag of dried meat, and Score shared some of the tough food with her. Once again, she didn't seem to be interested in talking, so after a few attempts Score gave up trying to make conversation.

They reached Castle Peverel in the afternoon. To Score's untrained eye, it looked almost identical to Castle Votrin, and he said so.

"They were both built at the same time," Helaine explained. "Part of the King's defense against the Border Lords. There are three other castles like these, one north of Votrin, and two south of Peverel. The Lords hold them to guard against invasion."

"We're not that far from your home," Score said, as they rode toward the looming castle. "I'm surprised that Peverel doesn't know about the siege."

"So am I," Helaine agreed. "But he may be being willfully ignorant."

"Not a nice guy, huh?" Score asked.

"You had better hope that he is," Helaine told him. "Because his help may be all that will save my family's life."

"Then put on your best manners and ask nicely," Score suggested. "And forget all mention of threats of violence, okay?"

Helaine didn't reply, and he didn't know whether this was a good sign or not.

They rode up to the castle. The drawbridge was down, but there was a handful of guards at the gate, watching them warily. Helaine reined in and glared haughtily down at them.

"I am Helaine, daughter of Lord Votrin, and I am here to speak with Lord Peverel," she announced.

The head guard moved forward. Score noticed with relief that his sword stayed sheathed. "Yes, my lady. We were not expecting you."

"No, I see that. But I am here nonetheless. And I wish to see your Lord."

"Of course," the guard agreed. He gestured to the gate. "If you will go in, I will send a messenger ahead, to notify my Lord."

"Of course." Helaine rode through the gateway, so Score followed. Flame, as usual, was hiding as close by as she dared to get and still remain undetected.

Inside, the castle was very similar to that of Lord Votrin. Helaine rode to where there was a large stable, and slid from the saddle. She gave the reins to a stable boy. Score copied her, with a lot less grace and a very sore backside. Helaine gave instructions for the horses to be returned to the village she'd borrowed them from, and asked that a small sum of money be sent with them. By the time she was done, a servant approached the two of them from the main castle.

"If you will accompany me, my Lady," he said formally, bowing. The man looked at Score, seemed to be uncertain what to make of him, and then obviously decided to bow and scrape only to Helaine. Score couldn't help grinning.

They were led into the castle, down a stone-lined corridor, and into another of the meeting halls. It was

almost identical to Lord Votrin's; only the patterns on the hanging tapestries were different. There was a large table, with some decent-looking food on it. Score licked his lips, hoping that this was part of the local hospitality. Seated to one side in a large, high-backed wooden chair, was an aging man, with thinning white hair and a white beard. He was dressed in rich robes, and it was quite clear who he had to be. Beside him in a smaller chair was a younger man, perhaps twenty, in even richer clothing that included a large, floppy hat in a deep blue brocade. Score thought he looked quite ridiculous.

Helaine moved quickly in front of the two men, and then went down onto one knee. "My Lord," she said formally, bowing low. Score realized that he was expected to do the same, so he remained standing instead. Several of the soldiers present looked as if they intended to do something about it, but Lord Peverel made a slight gesture with his right hand, and they stayed where they were. Peverel looked down at Helaine.

"It's more usual for a woman to curtsy," he commented. "And to wear a dress when she comes to see me."

"I know that, my Lord," Helaine replied, straightening up now that he had deigned to notice her. "But these are not normal times. My father's castle is under siege by the Border Lords."

"So I am given to understand," Lord Peverel replied. "I wish that I might be able to help, but the alliance between our houses was never formalized—as I am certain you will recall."

"Yes, my Lord," Helaine agreed. "It was because I vanished instead of wedding your son." Her eyes strayed to the young man on the other seat, and Score realized that this had to be the infamous Dathan the idiot.

"Quite so." Lord Peverel looked at her, still faintly disapproving. "So, may I ask why you are here?"

"I am here to correct my mistake," Helaine answered. She carefully didn't look at Score. "I am here to marry your son, and cement our alliance."

Score was stunned. He stared at Helaine's back. "*That's your plan?*" he asked incredulously. Then he shook his head. "I have *really* got to stop trusting you."

14

Helaine winced at Score's accusation. Did he think she was doing this because she wanted to? But it was up to her to set things straight, and this was the only way to do it. She had known all along that Score would object—which is why she hadn't mentioned her plan to him. "I know what I'm doing," she growled.

"Oh, really?" Score gave her a dark look. "I know *exactly* what you're

doing—you're caving in to that nasty father of yours, that's what!"

"Ahem . . ." Lord Peverel cleared his throat, and brought their attention back to him. "Do you intend to stand there all day and argue with one another?"

"No," Helaine replied.

"Yes," Score said. "It's kind of a hobby with us. She says something stupid, and I jump down her throat for it. Butt out, okay?"

"It is *not* okay," Lord Peverel answered. "This is my castle, and you are—I suppose—my guests here. And now this young . . ." His voice trailed off as he examined Helaine. She felt herself flushing uncomfortably as he clearly didn't care for what he could see. "Lady," he finally said, having apparently made up his mind, "says she wishes to marry my son. I do think that gives me the right to say something. Don't you?"

Score seemed about to argue the point when the guards all made slight but obvious moves toward their weapons. Score threw up his hands in disgust. "Fine, go ahead."

Helaine had avoided looking at Dathan, who seemed to alternate between looking bored and looking amused. Instead she focused on his father. "I wish

to fulfill the arrangement made between my father and yourself, and marry your son to seal our alliance," she repeated. She didn't dare look at Score as she said this; she knew what his face must look like.

"I see," said Lord Peverel. "And this is, I assume, so that I will send my men to raise the siege of Castle Votrin?"

"Correct," Helaine agreed.

Score obviously couldn't take any more. "Listen," he said, glaring at Lord Peverel, "if you know about the siege, why aren't you out there right now, helping to fight these Border Lords? I assume they're not exactly friends of yours."

"They are not," Peverel agreed. "But I cannot act without a firm understanding of what the consequences of my action will be."

"Duh," Score growled. "You'd be saving Lord Votrin, right?"

"And, no doubt, many of my soldiers would lose their lives in the saving of Castle Votrin," Lord Peverel pointed out. "I would require to be recompensed for their loss. I could not commit them to the fight otherwise."

"This is about *money*?" Score cried. "Not about people? Not about right and wrong? Not about friendship? It's about money?"

"Score," Helaine informed him, "you do not understand our society—"

"You're right, I don't," he agreed, turning on her. "And I don't think I want to." He whirled back around, and she saw he had his emerald in his hand. "Fine, you want money? Here you go!" Helaine felt the magic flow from him, and abruptly every piece of food on the table had been transformed into gold. Helaine winced.

Lord Peverel seemed unmoved by the magic, but his son and several of the guards jumped. The old man sighed and shook his head. "I am not a child to be impressed by trickery," he said. "No doubt that will all vanish as soon as the two of you do. As I said, I cannot act without a clear understanding of what the consequences will be." Abruptly, he smiled at Helaine. "Of course, if you were my daughter-in-law, the consequences would be quite clear. And, I must confess, my son *does* need a bride. He does not seem to have been too successful thus far in procuring one for himself, and you *are* of noble birth."

"He hasn't found himself a girl," Score growled, "because he's a drooling idiot." Helaine had to admit that Score was quite correct—Dathan didn't seem to have the slightest interest in what was going on; he was lost in a world of his own. The fact that his future—and her's—was being discussed didn't seem to bother him at all. Helaine couldn't bring herself to look in his direction.

"There is some truth in what you say," Peverel agreed, without any emotion. "But he is my son, and I will do the best I can for him."

"Have you considered a leash and a dog kennel?" Score suggested.

Lord Peverel glared at him. "Have a care," he warned. "I will not take these insults of yours indefinitely." He looked to Helaine again. "I confess, your offer has a certain appeal to it."

"Not for me," Score said coldly. He turned to Helaine. "Do you *want* to marry this pet monkey?" he asked her.

How could he even *think* it? Helaine sighed. "I have no choice."

"There's always a choice."

Lord Peverel leaned forward. "Why do you care what she does?" he asked. "Do you wish to marry her yourself?"

Score blushed brighter than even Pixel could. "No way! But she's my friend, and I don't want her to ruin her life."

"It's my life, to do with as I choose," Helaine complained.

"Well, I'm not going to let you throw it away on a jerk like this just for the sake of a father who hardly even likes you," Score told her.

Helaine looked at him uncertainly. Was he making so much fuss because he *did* care for her? But this was no time to ask him such a question, especially since she was determined to go through with the marriage, whatever he said. If he *did* care for her, she didn't want to know. It would poison any kind of a relationship she might be able to have with Dathan.

Dathan . . . She gave him a sideward glance. He still seemed to be uninterested, sitting sloppily in his chair, and staring into nothingness. The thought of being his wife repelled her, but she had her duty, and she would endure anything. She had no other option. "I have proposed marriage to Dathan," she said, through

clenched teeth. "And I will go through with it to secure help for my father."

"Agreed," Lord Peverel said abruptly. "You are now engaged to my son, and I will send aid to your father immediately."

"No!" Score said loudly. He stepped forward, and moved to stand in front of Dathan. "Okay, monkey-boy, I challenge your right to this marriage." Then he reached out and slapped Dathan hard across the face.

There was a second of absolute silence. Shocked faces stared at Score. Even knowing him as she did, Helaine could hardly believe that Score had acted so horribly. And then there was a rustle of movement as hands went to swords. Even Dathan seemed to have been snapped out of his far-off musing. His eyes blinked and he stared at Score. His hand went up to touch his face.

"You *hit* me," he accused.

"Right," Score agreed, crossing his arms. "So, what are you going to do about it? Challenge me to a duel?"

"Yes," Dathan answered, eyes sparkling. "Yes, I challenge you to a duel!"

Helaine couldn't believe the smug look on Score's face. "No!" she yelled. "He doesn't understand our customs. He doesn't know what he's doing."

"Sure I do," Score contradicted her. "I think I've figured out this screwy planet by now. Fighting duels is an accepted way of solving problems, isn't it? So I'm going to get you out of this lousy deal by fighting for you."

"It's not the way you seem to think," Helaine tried to warn him. "And I don't need anyone to fight for me, anyway."

"Come on," Score said softly, gesturing at Dathan. "He's a real wimp. I know I'm not very good with a sword, but even I could beat him."

"You could," Helaine growled. "If that's who you were going to fight."

Finally, something seemed to get through to Score. "Huh?" He was starting to look worried.

Dathan clapped his hands happily. "I do so love a good fight! Marak!"

Marak moved forward at the command. Helaine studied him, and felt very bad about the whole thing. The man was over six feet tall, well muscled, and quite clearly a trained killer. Probably the captain of the guard.

"Here's my champion," Dathan said cheerfully.

"Champion?" echoed Score weakly.

"A noble is allowed to nominate a champion to fight in his stead," Helaine explained. "Nobles don't generally like to soil their hands with blood. Marak is Dathan's champion—and *that's* who you'll have to fight."

"Uh-oh . . ." Score knew he'd never stand a chance in this fight, and Helaine agreed. Without using magic—which would be cheating—Score would be dead in thirty seconds. She turned to Lord Peverel.

"My Lord, this companion of mine isn't very well acquainted with our ways. He didn't know what he was doing. I ask you to stop this, now."

Peverel looked bored. "He insulted my son, in my castle, in front of my men. I cannot forgive him for that. He will have to go through with the fight to the death he provoked. Don't worry, it won't affect the wedding. We can hold it immediately after the funeral."

Trust Score to mess things up completely! Just when she had it all worked out so well, too. But she wasn't going to allow him to die pointlessly. She turned to him. "You have the same right, you know."

"Huh?" This was clearly not his brightest day.

"You too can send in a champion to fight for you," Helaine prompted him.

"I don't have a champion," he replied, looking rather sickly.

"Of course you do," she said, groaning inwardly. *Why couldn't he understand?*

Light finally dawned in his eyes. "You?"

"Me."

Score shook his head. "He'll kill you. I got into this, I'll face up to it."

"Don't be such a martyr," she growled. "At least I can fight, which is more than you can. And if I fight, it won't be to the death—Peverel needs me to marry his son, after all. So do *something* right for once, and tell them I'm your champion."

She could see him struggle with the problem for a minute, and then he gave a curt nod. "Your Immensity," he said, fairly solemnly, "I invoke my own right to a champion. I name Helaine Votrin."

That provoked another round of stunned silence. Finally, Lord Peverel sat forward. "You nominate a *girl* to fight for you?"

"Sure." Score almost managed a grin. "Why? Is Marak scared to face her?"

The fighter scowled. "I'm scared of no one," he growled. "But there is no honor in fighting a female."

Helaine shook her head. "The champions have been named," she said clearly. "If, of course, Dathan wishes to withdraw his right to combat . . ."

"No!" Dathan looked quite sulky. "I want to see blood," he said. "I want somebody hurt. You're not going to ruin my fun."

Peverel sighed. "So be it," he decided. He said, in a voice that was supposed to sound soft but didn't, to Marak: "Don't injure her too greatly. I wouldn't want her to have to be carried down the aisle on her wedding day."

"I understand, your Lordship," Marak answered. Then he drew his sword and moved to the center of the room. "When you are ready," he called to Helaine.

"I'm sorry about this," Score apologized.

"You should be," she growled back. "And you'll pay for it later." She drew her own sword, and went to meet Marak. This was going to be very tough indeed. She was one of the best fighters her age at Castle Votrin—and probably here, too—but Marak was twice her age, and almost twice her size. He'd probably been fighting longer than she'd been alive. He had skills and strengths she hadn't developed. This was not going to be as easy as the fight in the woods the

previous night. But she did have one advantage—Marak didn't take her seriously. If she could strike fast and hard, she might be able to beat him before he knew the fight had begun.

She lunged forward, whirling her sword to attack and struck hard. Marak stepped backward, and managed to bring his own blade up to intercept. Sparks flew as the swords rang together, and there was a sudden awareness in Marak's eyes that he'd underestimated her. She pulled free, and backhanded a second blow at him. He blocked it, and moved more warily.

Helaine didn't dare hold back. She moved in for another blow. As he moved to block, she whirled around, and put all of her strength into a straight slash. The move caught Marak by surprise, and he barely reacted in time. The edge of her blade caught him across the ribs, and left torn cloth and a streak of blood as she moved off.

"Way to go!" Score yelled excitedly. "You've got him!" As usual, Score didn't know what he was talking about.

The pain and the humiliation of being struck had angered Marak, and made him realize he'd been foolish. Now he moved forward, hacking and slashing.

Helaine parried his blows, but his superior strength was telling. Each blow on her sword rang through her arms, and drained her strength and endurance. She fell back, unable to move in to strike. Marak pressed on, slashing and striking. Somehow she managed to intercept the thrusts, but she was fading fast. As she had expected, she didn't stand a chance against a swordmaster like this.

Then one of his lunges broke through her guard. There was a sudden sharp pain, and her left arm went numb. Her sword clattered to the ground. She was defenseless against Marak's next blow.

He whipped his sword around, and toward her head. Helaine felt death brushing against her, but she was determined not to flinch. At the last second, Marak twisted his blade. The flat of it caught the side of her head, stunning her and knocking her to the floor.

Marak strode to where Dathan was sitting, drooling in anticipation. "The fight is yours, my Lord," he said loudly.

Helaine struggled to get to her feet. She wasn't surprised to find Score there, holding her and helping her. "I'm so sorry," he told her. "It's all my fault."

"Wait till my head gets back to normal," she vowed. "I'm going to get my own back."

"You deserve to," Score said. He must be feeling guilty!

Lord Peverel clambered unsteadily to his feet, and crossed the floor to stand before her. Helaine struggled to rise, but her head still hurt, and she couldn't manage, even with Score's help. The old man glared down at her. "You have lost," he said coldly. "Now you will behave like the lady you are supposed to be. You will marry my son. And I will *never* allow you to wield a weapon again."

That was the bitterest blow of them all. It was bad enough to be forced to wed a fool like Dathan—Helaine cringed at the thought of being touched by the oaf—but to be denied the use of her sword as well . . . !

She might as well be dead. Her heart would certainly die quickly, and her spirit soon after. To be a dull, ordinary wife to a wretched husband like that! If only . . . But she censored those thoughts, and turned her back on Score. She had no choice but to fulfill her deal, and bring her father the aid that he needed.

"No!"

Helaine had rather thought it was Score complaining. Then, confused, she realized that she was wrong. It was Dathan.

The idiot stepped forward. "Father!" he protested. "How can you even *think* I'd agree to marry any girl who would make such a disgraceful spectacle of herself such as she did? She's not a wife, she's a *savage*. There's no way I am ever going to marry *her*." Then he turned and stormed out of the room.

Lord Peverel stared after his son in shock, and then down at Helaine. "It would appear," he finally managed to say, "that your offer of marriage has been turned down. Well, I can't say I really blame Dathan—I, too, have never seen a woman behave as badly as this in all of my life."

Helaine felt a sharper pain stab her through than she had felt from the fight. "Your Lord!" she cried. "My father . . ."

"I made my offer in good faith," Peverel said. "And I shall keep it. I will send my men to aid your father. But there will be no further talk of my son marrying you."

"Lord Votrin has other daughters," Score said, his eyes gleaming wickedly. "Perhaps one of the more sedate ones might be better . . .?"

"We shall see." Peverel swept from the room, and most of his men went with him.

Marak stepped forward. He had a handful of cloth over his wound. "You fought well," he said quietly. "Few men could have done better."

"But I still lost," Helaine complained.

"That was inevitable," Marak informed her. "But I, for one, salute your courage. And I shall see that our men raise the siege of your father's castle. I promise you that." Then he marched from the room.

Helaine realized that she was lying in Score's lap, looking up at his grinning face. "What do you find so amusing?" she asked him.

"The look on Dathan's face," Score confessed. "Priceless! He was absolutely terrified of you. I think he was looking forward to his wedding night, and seeing that you'd beat him up rather than love him . . ."

Helaine started to see the humor also. "It would have been preferable," she agreed. "I am glad I am not in his arms. I prefer to be in yours."

"Watch it," Score answered. "I could still drop you."

"I did not say I *enjoyed* being in yours," Helaine clarified. "Merely that you are better than him."

"Oh." That seemed to have mollified Score. "Heck, *anybody* is better than Dathan."

"My point exactly."

"Good." He looked relieved. "Just as long as you're not starting to get mushy about me, or anything."

"And why should I do that?" she asked him, as seriously as she could manage.

"Who can say?" he replied. "Now, shut up and rest. Get your strength back."

Helaine settled back, reasonably happy. She was almost enjoying herself.

"There's only one thing troubling me," Score added. When Helaine gave him a quizzical look, he explained: "Now that Peverel is sending his men in, there's going to be a rather nasty battle. A lot of people are going to die. Maybe it will help your father, but I wish there were some other way to settle this problem."

Helaine couldn't have agreed more.

15

Pixel led the way downward, into the ruins of the foundations of Caligan's lost castle. Because it had been overgrown for so long, there were lots of shrubs, weeds, and bushes about. Also plenty of crumbled walls, so there were loose rocks and shifting soil beneath their feet. It made the descent very hard going. Still, it did have its compensations—Pixel had to hold onto Jenna's hand an awful lot.

He was growing quite fond of the young woman. She was brave, independent, and intelligent, and possessed quite remarkable powers. And she was a lot tougher than he'd expected. She'd lost her home, her village and everything she once knew, and a lot of what she had once believed to be true she now knew was nothing of the kind. Despite all of that, she was holding up very well.

Plus, she seemed to quite like him, which was very nice indeed.

Then his mind moved on to more practical things like keeping his balance.

Are you sure we're going the right way? Smoke asked, worried. *Unicorns don't like enclosed spaces.*

"You could always wait behind for us," Jenna said.

No, Smoke answered. *I know I'll be needed before the day is out. I have a definite feeling that there's something I must do.*

"That's what I like best about unicorns," Oracle's voice drifted across the ruins. "They're so vague."

"They remind you of you?" Pixel asked, as his odd friend wandered closer. Oracle wasn't exactly real, so it didn't bother Pixel to see him walk *through* the bushes instead of around them. But he heard Jenna's

voice catch. Pixel reached out to reassure her. "It's okay, Oracle is a friend. He's just a little strange, that's all. And, generally, the bearer of bad news."

Oracle tried to look hurt by this remark. "Is it my fault that bad things seem to happen a lot around you?" he asked. "Anyway, this time I'm here with good news." Then he did a sweeping bow to Jenna. "Ah, I see that they've found you, young lady. I do hope it's not too hard on your nerves to adjust to their vagrant lifestyle?"

Jenna cocked her head and looked at him suspiciously. "You know about me?"

"I know about a lot of things," Oracle replied immodestly. "But I can't always reveal everything I know."

"Can't or won't," Pixel muttered. "He's very fond of cryptic warnings of doom."

"As I said, this time I'm here with good news," Oracle pointed out. "I thought you might be interested to know that Helaine and Score seem to have solved the problem of getting aid to Castle Votrin. Helaine managed to . . . persuade Lord Peverel to send his soldiers in."

Jenna's face hardened. "Then there will be more fighting? More villages raided? More innocents killed?"

"Alas, war does tend to have that effect on places, yes," Oracle admitted. "If things go on this way, there will be a lot of deaths."

"But they *needn't* go that way?" asked Pixel, hopefully.

Oracle shook his head. "You two are definitely on the right track," he told them. "The answer to what is needed is within these ruins. Of course," he added, almost casually, "so is grave danger. I've suggested to Shanara that she and Blink stay alert. Blink didn't take the suggestion too kindly, but I suspect Shanara might be able to keep him awake. She's ready to cast portals when needed—as soon as Helaine calls upon her, in fact."

"Helaine isn't here," Pixel pointed out.

"Then I'd suggest that the two of you act very cautiously," Oracle said. "The magic here is very old and very strong. It's seeped into the ground, and the stones. Not good." He smiled cheerfully at this piece of news. "Well, I must be going—things to do, places to see, and all that. Catch you later." He waved and promptly vanished.

"Do you have many more friends like that?" Jenna asked.

"Not like that," Pixel replied. "He's in a class of his own." He paused a moment. "Jenna, when this is over, what do you want to do? I mean, I'd really like it if you could come with us, but there's no pressure."

"I can't really go back to King's Norton," she answered sadly. "And there's nowhere else here that's home to me. Besides, from what I hear, you could really use a good spellcaster and healer. So I guess you're probably going to be stuck with me."

"Oh good," Pixel said, feeling a lot happier. Then Oracle's warning came back to him. "We'd better press on, though, I guess."

They moved further into the ruins, Pixel following the strongest line of magic. These must have been cellars or dungeons under the castle, because there were no windows in the walls. The doors had once been made of wood, but had long since rotted away. Many of the walls were only half their original height or less, having crumbled over the years.

"What's this?" Jenna asked, stopping beside a hole in the ground. It was about six feet wide, and extremely deep, leading off at a steep slant. There was a

mound of soil, flattened down, around the top of the hole.

"I don't know," Pixel admitted, examining it. The edges were scuffed, as if people or animals had been going in and out of the hole regularly. "It's too large for animals. Maybe goblins? But Helaine has never mentioned anything about goblins on this planet . . ."

"There are lots of old stories about magical creatures that live underground," Jenna told him. "But that's all they are—stories." She looked around. "There's another of these holes over there. Do you think that they're tunnels someone has dug? Maybe old escape passages, leading out of the castle?"

"I don't know," Pixel confessed. "There's something vaguely familiar about them, but I can't imagine what."

"Should we investigate?" asked Jenna. She sounded nervous.

"I don't think so," Pixel decided. "What we're looking for is more likely to be hidden in the ruins than in the tunnels."

Jenna managed a weak smile. "It would help, of course, if we knew what we were looking for."

"We'll know when we find it. Come on." Pixel led the way deeper into the old passages. They passed two more of the deep shafts. They bothered Pixel, but he wasn't at all sure why. But there was something at the back of his mind that said they looked somehow familiar. It refused to come to the surface, though.

The stench of magic was now almost overwhelming. Someone with evil intent had cast a very powerful guarding spell on this place. It amazed Pixel, because magic on the Rim Worlds was normally quite mild. Whoever had done this had *really* wanted to keep this place hidden. But who? And why?

"Listen," Jenna said suddenly, grabbing Pixel's arm. "Did you hear something moving?"

Pixel paused and listened. "Yes," he said softly. There was a sort of a scuffling noise in the bushes. "Rats, maybe?"

"They'd have to be big rats," Jenna answered. "Maybe like big bees? Could they have made those holes?"

It was a nasty thought. Pixel reached for his topaz, preparing to start throwing fire if it should become necessary. "Can you detect anything?" he asked Smoke.

There is something out there, Smoke confirmed. *But it is drenched in magic. Even the power of my horn can't cut through it. Perhaps we should retreat?*

"Whatever is out there has cut off our retreat," Pixel pointed out. "We should find somewhere that we can defend." He started to look around and then froze.

Forms were scuttling out of the ruins ahead of them. They were dark and indistinct, definitely some kind of animals, and about the size of ponies. He turned to look back, and saw that more were moving behind them, cutting them off.

"Heads up!" he cried. "Here they come!"

Jenna gasped, and gripped her obsidian. "I'll make us invisible," she said.

"No use," Pixel informed her. "They know we're here—and they're not hunting by sight, but by scent." He had finally seen one of their stalkers clearly. Then several others skittered into place, and stood, antennae quivering in their direction.

They were ants—but immense ones, a good five feet long, and three or four feet tall. Their black bodies glistened in the sunlight, their mandibles opened and closed alarmingly. The evil magic here must have

permeated the ground, creating these monsters from normal insects. *These* were what had made those pits! They were entrances to an immense ants' nest!

Jenna gasped in horror, and moved closer to Pixel. But she wasn't about to scream and give up. Instead, she pulled out her citrine. "I'll make them see each other as the enemy," she said. "Then they'll attack one another."

"It won't work," Pixel told her. "Ants don't see one another, they *smell* one another. Unless you know how to change the way they smell, they won't believe you. And you can't hide our scent, either, so whatever you do, they'll know where we are." Even as he spoke, he started to form fire, trying to create a barrier around them to keep the ants at bay. The problem was that it was slow going.

Several ants scuttled forward, rushing them. A couple even jumped the flame barrier he had begun without any apparent problem. Smoke snorted, and dashed forward, using his horn to lance into the creatures. His head tossed, and one dead ant went flying. But for every one he killed, three more attacked.

Pixel changed his tactic, and started tossing fireballs instead, selecting his targets. Any ants he hit

burst into flames and died, silently writhing. But there were simply too many of them to win a battle that way.

None of Jenna's gemstones seemed to be of use here, and she didn't carry any weapons at all. She snatched up a broken branch, wielding it like a club, but that was completely useless. One of the ants gripped the end in its mandibles and then ripped it from her grasp. Pixel vaguely recalled that ants are very strong, able to carry ten times their own weight. Then he fired off another fireball, toasting the ant that had attacked Jenna.

Something slammed into his back, knocking him down to the ground and dazing him. He vaguely heard Jenna scream, and then he felt ants all over him. He had a second's terror that he was about to be ripped apart and eaten by the monsters, but then realized that he had only been subdued. One of the ants was standing on his back, holding him down. Two others grabbed his wrists in their mandibles, with surprising gentleness. Then he felt his feet gripped, and he was lifted from the ground, still face down. The ants started to move off.

His wind was back. "Jenna?" he called in panic.

"I'm here." He could hear her voice fairly close by. "They've captured me, too. What do you think they're doing?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Why would they take us captive? They're not smart enough to want to talk to us." He had a very bad feeling about this. "And what about Smoke?"

They have me also, the unicorn replied. *But they seem to be having trouble deciding how to carry me. I think I'm larger prey than they are used to.*

"Prey?" Jenna asked, anxiously. "Is that what you think we are?"

There was no use in trying to hide the truth from her. "What else can we be?" Pixel said. "They can't have any use for us except as food."

They had reached one of the tunnel mouths now, and the lead ants plunged in without pausing. Pixel's stomach rose as he was pulled into the hole and downward. In seconds, there was no light at all. The ants didn't need it themselves in here, so it was absolutely black. It was a horrible sensation, being carried along, face-down, through the tunnels, in pure darkness. Pixel couldn't focus his thoughts on any magic.

The trip wasn't a long one. He had no idea whether he was moving up, down, or straight. There was no way to tell, but after about four minutes, the mandibles holding him suddenly let him go, and he fell on his face into the filth. Something cracked and broke beneath him, and he was winded for a moment. There were more sounds of movement, and then a short silence.

"Pixel?" he heard Jenna cry out, anxiously. She sounded close by.

"I'm here," he said, trying to sound reassuring. It was very hard to do so, since he was terrified himself. "Hang on—I'm going to make some light." He cast a small spell, and a ball of flame sprang into being a couple of feet over his head. It took his eyes time to adjust, but he saw Jenna close by, and grabbed her and hugged her tightly. "Are you all right?"

"No—I'm scared stiff," she admitted. "But the ants didn't hurt me, if that's what you mean. Where are we? And why did they bring us here?"

"I don't know." Pixel looked around. His eyes were starting to adjust, and he was starting to make things out. They seemed to be in a large cave, maybe twenty feet long and wide, and the same high. He looked back the way that they had come, and saw that the

entrance hole had been plugged up with stones. They obviously weren't supposed to get out of here—but why were they here in the first place?

Smoke was getting to his feet just beyond Jenna. The ants had managed to carry him, after all. He shivered, shaking his head, and whinnying nervously. *I don't like this at all,* he confessed. *I sense . . . life.*

Pixel was looking out further, his eyes having adjusted. There seemed to be piles of large, white pill-shaped objects lying around the room. There were also piles of smaller, white objects around. He bent to examine one of them, and then shuddered. He looked up and saw Jenna's questioning look.

"Some sort of animal bone," he said.

"We're in a larder," Jenna said softly, as she realized what he already had. "And we're part of the supplies."

"Yes," Pixel said. He looked at the pill-shaped objects. Several of them were rocking slightly, and had started to crack. "Those are giant ant eggs. The ants will start emerging any second, and they're going to be hungry. Very hungry . . ."

He reached out and pulled Jenna close to him. He needed the comfort as much as she did.

How would they get out of this one?

16

Jenna couldn't help shaking as she clutched tightly to Pixel. "What can we do?" she asked.

"I've still got some strength left," he told her. He was clearly trying to sound brave to cheer her up, but she could feel him shaking, too. "I can flame some of them."

"I'm no help," Jenna said, bitterly. "My magical powers are useless in this situation."

"That's unfortunate," he added. "Right now, though, I'll admit that Helaine or Score would be handy to have around. Only we've no way of getting in touch with them."

Speak for yourselves, Smoke snorted. Then, in what had to be the equivalent of a unicorn scream, he called out: *FLAME! WE NEED HELP!*

Jenna's head rang from the force of the howl. She could only hope that the message had somehow made it to the other unicorn—and that Smoke could get in contact with Score and Helaine. Meanwhile . . .

The hatching sounds were louder now, and some of the eggs had already broken open. Ants—smaller than the adults, but still the size of large dogs—were crawling out, getting used to movement, and stretching to exercise themselves. Antennae were already waving, as the creatures started sensing their surroundings. It wouldn't be very long before they realized that there was food nearby.

Pixel freed himself from Jenna's grip. "You and Smoke stay by the entrance," he told her. "I'll move off, and try and draw them after me. That way, you'll have longer to try and get out."

"I'll only have longer if they manage to kill you," Jenna answered. "And I'm not going to allow that to

happen.” She reached out and picked up one of the discarded, stripped bones. “If I can’t do magic, I’ll do what damage I can otherwise. But I’m staying with you.”

And we’ll see how ants can face up to a unicorn’s horn, Smoke added. *We stand or fall together.*

“All right,” Pixel agreed, which was wise, since this was an argument he couldn’t possibly win. Jenna stood beside him, her makeshift club raised and ready.

There were dozens of the ants out of their eggs now, and they were starting to move toward their “food.” Pixel concentrated, and sent a fireball spinning into their midst. There was a horrible crackling noise, and several of the ants writhed and died in the fire.

But more came on. And, considering they were only just used to standing on their feet, they could move surprisingly fast. Jenna whipped her weapon around, slamming one of them back, its head crushed. A couple of others stopped to devour it—they clearly didn’t care where their food came from. But there were more of them, and the others came on.

Pixel threw fire, Smoke gored and slashed with his horn, and Jenna whirled her bone around, hitting whatever she could. But it seemed that, no matter how many died, there were still more.

One got through her guard and snapped at her ankle. There was a painful sting as its mandibles locked, and then she slammed her bone down on the repulsive creature's head. It died, and released her, but there was a fire in that ankle. It was clear that they couldn't hold out much longer.

And then there was a flash in the air in the middle of the chamber. A glowing rip in space seemed to form, which caught the ants by surprise. And the next second, three people hurled through the gap, which closed behind them. Jenna was too busy fighting to spare much time looking, but obviously two of the three were Score and Helaine. She didn't have any idea who the third person was.

But the extra help turned the tide of the battle. Helaine's broadsword swung in huge swaths of destruction as she hacked ant after ant to bits. Score, on the other hand, was relying on magic, and using his amethyst to affect the size of the ants—he was shrinking them down to their proper size, which eliminated them effectively from the fight. The third person was a woman, with flowing hair the color of polished gold. She was striking out with small fireballs of her own. There was the stench of roasting ants in the hatching chamber.

Then Pixel collapsed, exhausted. Smoke moved to defend him, but it was clear that he was completely drained from his spell-casting. Jenna stood in front of him, determined that no ants would pass her. But her arms were very tired from all of the fighting, and she knew she'd collapse any moment also.

Helaine was fresh, however, and cutting herself a path through the attacking ants to reach Pixel. Score was casting magic, but it was clear that the effort was draining his own strength. Even the beautiful woman seemed to be losing strength quickly.

"The magic down here is dampening ours," Score said, gasping.

"Then stop using magic and just use strength," Helaine advised him.

"I doubt I can punch these ants unconscious," he complained. "What I need is a weapon." He looked around, and then grinned. From the refuse on the floor, he pulled what looked like a long stick with a knob on the end. "Just what the doctor ordered!" He started swinging with this, helping Helaine to clear a pathway.

Jenna's strength was almost gone when they reached her. Helaine and Score stood in front of

them, holding off the still-swarming ants. The woman stopped fighting, and concentrated. Jenna could see that she was very tired, but there was a grim determination in her eyes that promised she would not give up.

Then that rip in the air formed again, large enough for a person. "Everybody through this," the woman ordered. "Unicorns first."

Smoke obeyed, jumping into the gash and vanishing. Jenna stooped, and used the last of her strength to hail Pixel to his feet. Then she half-jumped, half-fell through the gap.

There was a moment when her brain seemed to be spinning inside her skull, and then she collapsed forward, onto a stone floor, and dropped Pixel as she did. Strong arms reached for her and pulled her up. She couldn't focus her eyes immediately, but she felt something pressed to her lips.

"Drink," somebody ordered, and then she did so. It was some sort of herbal tea, and the warmth and taste gave her some energy back. A couple of moments later, her head settled down, and she could start making sense of what was happening.

Score, Helaine and the beautiful woman were here also. Pixel was sitting on a chair, sipping more of the tea. Smoke was nuzzling with Flame. Around them all stood a strange assortment of soldiers and nobles. They were in the hall of a castle, but clearly not Castle Votrin.

“What happened?” Pixel asked.

Score grinned. “You’re safe in Castle Peverel,” he answered. “We didn’t know you were in trouble till Flame burst in with a message, saying you needed help.” He laughed. “I can tell you, a unicorn in this room caused a lot of confusion.”

The woman spoke up. “Then Helaine contacted me, and I set up the escape portal for us.” She looked at Jenna, and her face softened. “I forgot, you do not know me. I am Shanara.”

“Pixel spoke about you,” Jenna said. “You’re their sorceress friend.”

“Yes. I thought I’d better come with them, and that you might need some help.” She grinned. “Besides, I haven’t been in a good fight since these three took me on.”

"Thank you all," Jenna said. "We would have been dead and devoured by now if you hadn't helped." Thankfully, her ankle was already feeling much better.

"All in a day's work," Score said, modestly. Then he looked at the staff he'd been using as a weapon. "Yuck! This thing's filthy."

"What is it?" Pixel asked curiously.

"Just something I picked up to fight the ants off with," Score replied. "And that I aim to get rid of as soon as possible."

"No." Pixel was suddenly excited. "Score, clean it off."

Score scowled. "Hey, I know it smells, and it's filthy, but it was all I could find."

"No, you don't understand!" Pixel had his strength back, and clambered to his feet. "Clean it off, now!"

Score quite clearly did not understand. But he shrugged, and used his chrysolite to produce water, and he washed off the staff. As he did so, everyone stared at the emerging shape in shock.

It was a staff of some kind, made of iron, with silver and gold inlays. It stood six feet tall, straight and beautiful, with a golden orb on the top. The chase work of silver and gold on the body was intricately

carved, and quite exquisite. There was also a name in gold on the staff: CALIGAN.

"The Scepter of Caligan," Helaine said, barely breathing. "It really does exist . . ."

Immediately, Lord Peverel fell to his knees, and made a gesture for his men to do the same. "The Scepter!" he said in awe. "And it is held and used by the one man who can—the true heir of King Caligan."

Score blinked and looked around the room as all of the soldiers and courtiers kneeled. "Me?" he asked in a squeaky voice. "But all I did was to pick it up and squash ants with it."

"Only the true heir of Caligan can wield the Scepter," Pixel said, rather ostentatiously. "You wielded it, so clearly you're the true heir."

"Quit fooling, Pix," Score complained. "I can't be."

"Nobody could agree with that more than me," Helaine said dryly. "But it would appear that you *are*, whatever any of us think about it."

"I'm obviously missing out on something here," Shanara said softly to Pixel. "What's going on?"

"Follow my lead," Pixel whispered back. "Then we'll explain." He raised his voice and addressed Lord

Peverel. "He has the Scepter, and has used it in battle. There is no doubt, then, that he is Caligan's true heir?"

"None," the old noble agreed readily. "I had never imagined there was any truth to the stories, but it is abundantly clear that they were true all along." He was still on his knees, and he drew his sword, placing it at Score's feet. "I swear allegiance and loyalty to the true King of Ordin!"

There was the sound of many swords being drawn, and then every soldier in the room repeated the words of their Lord. None of them dared to look Score in the face—which was a good thing, because he was standing openmouthed and looking very foolish.

"Nobly done!" Pixel said in a loud voice. "Now, we are tired from the battle, and require rooms to cleanse ourselves and dress. Then King Score will let you all know his will."

"Pixel," Score began.

"For once in your life, Score—don't argue!" Pixel hissed. Score clamped his mouth shut, and Pixel moved to the closest of the soldiers. "Go and prepare rooms for us to bathe in," he ordered. "And fresh clothing."

"At once, my Lord," the man agreed. He leaped to his feet, and backed away from Score. At the door, he bowed, and then left.

Jenna was quite overwhelmed by the flurry of activity. She, Helaine, and Shanara were led off to a richly decorated room, where there was a large metal tub, filled with fragrant, hot water. There were piles of clothing close by, and the three of them washed and changed into fresh clothing. Jenna had never worn anything so rich in all her life, and the fine cloth felt strange on her skin. There was fruit to eat, and fresh, steaming bread, and more herbal tea to drink. She discovered that she was ravenous, and helped herself. Helaine did also. Shanara picked at some fruit.

"When do I get some explanations?" Shanara asked.

"As soon as I do," Helaine answered. She filled the sorceress in on the legend of the lost King Caligan. "It has long been said that whoever uses the Scepter in battle is the true King of Ordin."

"I'm starting to understand," Shanara said.

"I wish I did," Helaine complained. "I mean, if it were anyone but Score, I could understand it. Even Dathan, idiot that he is. But Score's from Earth, not

Ordin, and, honestly, he's the least kingly person that I know. With the possible exception of you," she added, looking at Jenna.

Jenna wasn't offended. She had no desire to be suddenly discovered to be a lost princess in disguise, as happened in so many silly fairy tales. "Pixel seems to know what is going on," Jenna said. "I'm sure he'll explain."

"He'd better," Helaine said grimly.

The two boys joined them a few minutes later. Score was still eating a huge sandwich and carrying the Scepter. "Can't I put this down?" he complained.

"No, you can't," Pixel said sternly. "That's the only hope we have to stop this war, and you're the only one who can use it."

"But it's all a mistake!" Score whined. "I'm not really the King's heir!"

"Maybe it is a mistake," Pixel agreed. "But it doesn't matter. That Scepter makes you the King, and it ends all these silly disputes. Everybody will listen to you, even the Border Lords. Whether you like it or not, as of now, you're King of Ordin."

Helaine stuck her hand over Score's mouth to stop further protests. "Much as I dislike the idea," she said,

“Pixel’s right. If you claim to be King, then everyone will be forced to agree. They will disarm, and the war will stop. You’ll be saving hundreds—if not thousands—of lives. And you will free my father’s castle.”

Score fought to get his mouth free. “And you don’t have to marry that moron Dathan?”

“Of course not.” Her mouth twitched. “He won’t have me, anyway. He thinks I’d make a lousy wife.”

“Maybe he’s not such an idiot after all,” Score muttered. Then he sighed. “Okay, I’ll be King—for now. But as soon as this war is called off, I’m abdicating.”

Jenna was puzzled. “But you are the King. Surely you would not wish to give that up?”

“As fast as I can,” Score told her. “Look, a King has responsibilities and duties—and I’m the least responsible and dutiful person in the worlds. I’m sure Helaine will tell you that.”

“In a heartbeat,” Helaine agreed.

“You could be rich and powerful as King,” Jenna pointed out. “Anything you wanted would be granted to you. Any of the nobles on this planet would wish to be in your place.”

“And if you abdicate, there will be further war,” Helaine added.

"This isn't my problem!" Score protested. "I only agreed to be King for a day, to stop the war. There's no way I'm staying here the rest of my life, ruling a medieval madhouse! I want to go back home, where I can laze around, or pick my nose when I want to. I don't want to have to have a Royal Nose Picker!"

Jenna looked at Helaine. "Is he always like this?" she asked.

"Only on his good days," Helaine answered. "He's actually on his best behavior right now. If you decide to go along with us, you'll get to see his worse side."

Jenna looked at Helaine, worried. "Do you want me to come along?"

"Honestly?" Helaine sighed. "I am trying to overcome my own nature. I do not *want* you, yet you are a good and valuable ally. And, besides, the two boys will out vote me anyway. They both seem to find you fascinating. And attractive."

Jenna smiled. "Was that a yes or a no?" she asked. "For my own part, I still have problems with you. You are a noble, the embodiment of everything I have always despised. Yet you are also courageous and true, and Pixel seems to be very fond of you. I'm willing to admit that I may have been wrong."

"And so am I," Helaine said, a trifle reluctantly. Then she held out her hand. "But perhaps we can both learn?"

"Perhaps," Jenna agreed, shaking the offered hand.

"Now that *that's* settled," Score complained, "can we solve my problem?"

Pixel chuckled. "I guess that it's up to me to settle things, as usual," he said. "What we shall have to do is to get Lord Peverel to arrange a truce. Then we'll have a meeting with every one of the Lords we can arrange—including the Border Lords. And then . . ."

Jenna was amazed as she listened. Pixel seemed to have a lot of this worked out already. He was clearly a very intelligent and compassionate person. Score broke in from time to time with ideas and suggestions—and sometimes demands—of his own. Helaine was mostly quiet, but she looked almost contented. Shanara stayed completely out of things, but there was an amused tug to the sides of her pretty mouth. Jenna was starting to see that she had joined a very unique group indeed.

Her life was going to get very interesting . . .

17

Score was almost
S
enjoying himself.

If the whole thing wasn't being taken so seriously, he'd have laughed. He was seated on a huge chair that was obviously considered a throne, and surrounded by more nobles and soldiers than he could even count. They were outside Castle Votrin, in the open air, and the place was packed and almost silent. Lords Votrin and Peverel stood to his left, along with a couple of other

Lords whose names he couldn't remember. On his right stood the various Border Lords who, until a short while ago, had been laying siege to Castle Votrin. As Pixel had expected, the siege was now over, and the peace talks had begun.

He was dressed in what passed for finery on this planet, including a long, fur-lined cloak that was too hot on a day like this. Directly next to him on either side stood Flame and Smoke. Pixel had decided that it would be even more impressive if he was flanked by unicorns and, from the stunned expressions on most people's faces, he'd been absolutely right. Helaine, Pixel, Jenna, and Shanara were standing behind the throne. Blink was wrapped about Shanara's shoulders, and was softly snoring away. Typical—not even this ceremony could keep the lazy thing awake!

Score had spent a couple of hours being tutored in how to speak aristocratically by Helaine, but he discovered he couldn't remember most of what she'd told him, so he decided to wing it anyway. Well, it would be a lot more natural that way. "My Lords, Ladies, Captains, and soldiers," he called out, speaking loudly and clearly. "You have gathered here this day to settle disputes that have lasted for centuries. That's quite

long enough, and we'll have no more of it." That wasn't *quite* how Helaine had told him to phrase it, but it was close enough. "You Lords are going to have to get along now, without all of this killing, looting, and so on. You'll have to find some other sport as an outlet. Maybe ice hockey."

"Anyway, as you can all see, I have the Scepter of Caligan, which marks me as High King of Ordin. If anyone has any dispute with that, speak now or forever hold your peace." That last bit was from all the weddings he'd seen in the movies and on TV, but it did sound about right. He looked around the field, but nobody spoke. "Good. Right, now, let's get on with things."

"First of all, I can't stay here and rule you." That brought some sighs and mutterings, and several of the Lords looked at their neighbors, puzzled. "Look," he carried on, "I'd love to stay here and sit on my backside and be waited on all day, trust me. But it's simply not possible. Ordin isn't the only world in the Universe, you know, and I've got duties elsewhere. I hope it will comfort you to know your King is off on other worlds, making sure things are going properly there, too."

Lord Peverel looked very apologetic, and stepped forward. "But . . . if you are not here, your Majesty, then who is to rule us?"

"You are," Score said. "Well, not you personally, but you collectively. All of you are."

That certainly caused a lot of comment. Score held up the Scepter, and it all died away. "I'll tell you how it will be. There are going to be two sets of people ruling this planet. There will be ten people elected by and from the nobles. They don't have to be Lords—in fact, they could be Ladies, or just plain sons or daughters. But they must be nobles, and they must be voted on by *all* the nobles, regular and Border Lords alike. That's the first set.

"The second ten are to be peasants. And they'll be elected by the peasants."

Lord Votrin looked fit to burst. "*Peasants?*" he howled. "They are to share in the rule?"

"Absolutely," Score said firmly. "They live here, and they have families and responsibilities. Now they are to have a say in how things are ruled. An *equal* say. Each of the twenty people on my council will have exactly an equal vote. So, if any of you Lords try to pass a law that will hurt the peasants, then they can vote

against it, and it won't happen. What this basically means is that you're going to have to learn to get along with each other."

"Surely you cannot mean this?" one of the Border Lords begged. "To be answerable to *peasants* . . ."

"Get used to it," Score told him. "Because that's the way it's going to be. Where I come from, there's a really famous document that was drawn up a couple of hundred years ago. I learned this bit in school, and I never thought I'd find a use for it, but—hey, what do you know?" He had to think for a minute, and then he quoted: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." He smiled cheerfully. "It goes on quite a bit after that, but that's the important part for you to remember."

"What it means is that *everybody* gets treated the same, noble and peasant alike. And if you try and mess that up, I guarantee you I'll be back and I'll kick some butt. Don't forget, I'm the rightful King here,

and this council will just be to help me run things smoothly. If you can't do it right, then I'll start over again with something else. And I'll see to a few executions while I'm working that something else out. Do you understand me?" He looked around the collected nobles. There was some hesitation, but finally they all nodded their agreement.

"Good. Now, the siege is over, you Border Lords get ready to go back to your own lands, and stop raiding the local villages. If I hear of anybody doing that, it'll be chopping block time, okay?" That didn't sound too popular, but at this point nobody was about to argue with him. "Right, let's get to work, everybody. I'm a busy guy, and can't stand around here all day talking. Soldiers, start striking tents and packing for the trip home. Lords, to the castle, and we'll start getting the elections under way."

Suddenly there was a great deal of movement. Score, smiling happily, clambered to his feet and joined his friends to reenter the castle. "Well, that went pretty decently, I think."

"You forgot almost everything I told you about etiquette," Helaine complained, but she didn't sound too annoyed.

“Hey, I didn’t belch in public, or use the salad fork to eat meat, so don’t let it worry you,” Score suggested.

Jenna smiled at him, and he liked the way she looked. “Thank you for helping to solve the problem of the nobles mistreating the peasants.”

“Hey, I didn’t do much,” Score protested. “It’ll be up to them to work together to improve things. You know, the first few meetings, the nobles are going to suggest laws, the peasants are going to oppose them, and then nothing will happen. But, eventually, they’ll get tired of that and actually start working together. At least, that’s the idea. We may have to drop in from time to time and check how things are going, of course, but I think we can stand that.”

“It could be fun,” Pixel agreed. He reached out and took Jenna’s hand. Score noticed that Jenna didn’t seem to mind. Well, it seemed like Pixel could be pretty smooth when he wanted.

Inside the castle, Lord Votrin had ordered up a feast. He hadn’t intended to invite the Border Lords at first, all things considered, but Score had insisted. Lord Votrin had decided to go along with Score’s wishes. Score had the place at the head of the table, naturally. Lord Votrin was at his right hand, since it

was his castle, after all, and Helaine at his left. Pixel, Jenna, and Shanara were next on the left. With the scent of food in the air, Blink had woken up at last, and was peering eagerly around for his share of the feast. The other Lords sat to Lord Votrin's right. At the next table, looking annoyed, sat Dafyd and Helaine's other siblings. Score was enjoying seeing Helaine get treated as if she was her father's favorite, and hoped she was having as much fun.

Then the food was brought out, and Blink wasn't the only one impressed. Now that the siege had been lifted, Lord Peverel had brought in fresh supplies, and the kitchens had done them all proud. There were roasts of all sorts of meats and birds, and dishes of fish. There were crusty, steaming pies, and platters of vegetables. There was wine for those old enough, and hot fruit punch for the rest. And there seemed to be no end to it all.

Everyone started to eat, and Score was feeling rather smug. Everything, it seemed, had turned out fine.

Lord Votrin leaned forward and cleared his throat. "I understand from Lord Peverel that the wedding between his son and my daughter has been . . . canceled."

"Only with the one daughter," Score replied cheerfully. "Helaine. I gather you've got a few others lying around spare and unmarried. If there's one of them who's a bit . . . quieter than Helaine, Dathan would probably be more willing."

"That can most likely be arranged, your Majesty," Lord Votrin said agreeably. "It seems as though I owe you an apology. I really did not believe you could solve my problems, and yet you have."

"Not by myself," Score pointed out. "I think that there's somebody here at this table you owe a much bigger apology to."

Lord Votrin nodded. "Indeed there is," he agreed, looking slightly ashamed. He turned to his daughter. "Helaine, I have gravely misjudged you. You are a credit to House Votrin in general, and a source of great pride to me in particular."

That was worth hearing, because Helaine blushed far brighter than Pixel had ever done. She looked so happy that Score decided everything they'd been through was worth it just for this moment. It was the one thing that Helaine had always wanted—her father's approval.

"And there will be no more of this nonsense about her not being able to fight because she's a girl?" Score added, pushing his luck a bit.

"None at all, I promise," Lord Votrin agreed readily. "She has shown that she is every inch a Votrin, and the delight of this House."

Score enjoyed the delighted expression on Helaine's face as much as the dark scowl on Dafyd's. Clearly it would take more than this to bring her brother around. Well, Score didn't care about that. "Then I certainly take back what I said about you earlier," Score told her father. "You're not such an idiot, after all."

"Splendid," Lord Votrin said, smiling widely. "Then you are going to announce your engagement?"

Score almost choked on his fruit punch. "What?" he finally managed to gasp. To his annoyance, Helaine was there, dabbing at his face with a napkin. And she had a huge grin on her face.

"Our engagement," she said, trying to sound innocent.

"*What* engagement?" Score asked, half-embarrassed, half-annoyed.

Lord Votrin looked puzzled. "Why . . . I thought it was understood," he said. "That you objected to her marrying Dathan because you wished to marry her yourself. To have my daughter marry the King—now *that's* a match worth having."

Score's mouth moved, but he couldn't make any sounds come out of it. What made it worse was the blank expression on Helaine's face, and the laughter behind her eyes. He was so mad at her that he was tempted to agree to the marriage just to bring her back to reality. "Ah, no, I was simply trying to stop her from doing something foolish," Score said, attempting to explain.

"Then you do not care for her?" Lord Votrin asked, confused.

"Well, yes," Score had to admit. "Just not . . . well, we're friends. Comrades in arms. Buddies. We don't kiss or anything . . ."

Helaine raised an eyebrow. The rat was enjoying this! "Dear me, have you forgotten about that time on Earth?" she asked demurely.

"That was just a trick," Score snapped. "It wasn't for real."

Lord Votrin leaned forward, conspiratorially. "I understand, your Majesty. Helaine can be a little . . . difficult at times. But she does have several half-sisters, all of whom are *much* more feminine and desirable as wives . . ."

This was getting worse and worse, and Helaine wasn't helping one little bit! "I'm a bit young to think of getting married yet," Score protested. "But when I *do* think about it, I promise I'll bear your daughters in mind."

Helaine's lips were twitching. "Then there's hope for me yet, your Majesty?" she asked.

"Trust me," Score growled, "you're absolutely hopeless." He'd make sure she paid for this later, somehow. She was getting far too much enjoyment out of embarrassing him like this. He turned to Shanara. "Maybe we should think about going back?"

Shanara was no help either. "Oh, Blink would *never* agree to leave a feast. Certainly not while there was still so much left to eat."

"Absolutely not," Blink said from the plate on which he was sitting, eating anything within reach.

This was going to be a long day . . . Score groaned, and reached for some more food himself.

Eventually, though, the feast ran down. The various Lords were deep in discussion with one another, and it looked like the first round of voting for the council would begin soon. "Time to go," Pixel said softly to Score.

Score gave him a filthy look. "You weren't any help earlier," he complained. "I thought you wanted to romance Helaine. Then would have been the perfect time to say it."

Pixel blushed. "Ah, well, actually . . ." he said, mumbling.

"Yeah, I know," Score answered. "I saw you with Jenna. I don't know—you never even got up the courage to tell Helaine you fancied her, and you've already thrown her over in favor of another girl. Are you fickle, or what?"

"It just sort of happened," Pixel protested. "And, somehow, I don't feel embarrassed around Jenna like I do around Helaine."

"Maybe you two are meant for each other, then," Score suggested. "Well, let's get the girls and go home." He looked around. "We don't want to disturb the negotiations, so why don't we sneak away into the

next room and have Shanara form the portal from there."

"Right." Pixel collected Helaine, Jenna, and Shanara. Blink was curled up again, fast asleep, but in the sorceress' arms this time. His stomach was too bloated for him to fit around her neck. Helaine sent a message to the unicorns—who had their own food, since they didn't eat human food—to join them to return home. None of the Lords seemed to notice them slipping away.

The next room was a smaller one, and a lot cozier. There were still the usual tapestries on the walls, of course, and the heavy wooden furniture. "Time to go," Shanara said, and conjured up the portal for them. The two unicorns went first, then Shanara and Blink. Pixel and Jenna went next, leaving Helaine with Score as last.

Helaine was still smiling. "Sorry about that," she apologized. "I'm afraid I couldn't help myself. You looked so funny when you had to fight off my father."

"I was tempted to not bother," Score growled. "Then you might have wished you'd accepted Dathan instead."

"I doubt it," Helaine said. "Even *you* are better than him."

"Thanks for nothing. Well, we'd better go before the portal collapses." He was about to step into the portal when one of the tapestries caught his eye. It showed a regal-looking man and his very pregnant wife. Score stared at it in shock. "Who is that?" he asked Helaine.

"Through," Helaine said, pushing him. They went through the portal, which closed behind them. They were standing in Shanara's laboratory now. Helaine gave him an odd look. "That picture? It's supposed to be of King Caligan and his wife. The Queen who vanished. Why?"

Score felt a sudden chill. "Because I recognized her, that's why," he said, softly.

"How could you?" Helaine asked. "She must have died centuries ago."

"I don't think so," Score said, his voice tight. "That was a picture of my mother . . ."

Helaine stared at him in shock. "Then perhaps you really *are* the rightful King of Ordin . . ."

The Story Continues in
THE BOOK OF OCEANS!



BOOK SEVEN

Determined to set things right after her hasty departure from her coldhearted father's rule and a proposed marriage to a man she couldn't stand, Helaine heads back to her family's castle on Ordin. Although they don't understand her decision, Pixel and Score go with Helaine to her former home—a medieval planet of high-brow nobles, desperate peasants, and endless battles over land.

With the help of two loyal unicorns and Jenna, a young healer who has been cast out of her village, the magical trio battles evil creatures, pillaging soldiers, and even Helaine's own family as they try to prevent a bloody war and solve a legendary 500-year-old mystery.

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