

Fiona NicOmlie combed the last tangle out of Bonker's mane and patted his glistening coat. The huge gelding turned his head and lipped at Fiona's pouch. "You great mooch!" She rubbed his face fondly. "Well, all right, but it's only because you'll miss me so much..." She rummaged for a piece of carrot and fed it to him, smiling as he crunched loudly and nodded his head.

She rubbed the itchy place under his chin. "You'll behave for the Captain, won't you?"

In answer, he scratched his face against her shoulder, nearly knocking the slender girl off her feet.

Fiona chuckled and closed the stall door behind her.

A ruckus down the stable corridor caught her attention.

"Hold!"

"Get out of there!"

The resounding *wham* of hoof against wood. It was Star. Fiona jogged down to her stall.

The young mare was in a tizzy, panicking at the crowd in her stall. Lord Calum, the duke's cousin, was trying to approach her and two grooms were trying to haul him out.

"Unhand me!" the young nobleman wrestled out of their grip, which frightened the horse further.

"Milord, milord!" Fiona called softly from the doorway.

It was enough to break Calum's concentration; he looked up to see who addressed him and the tension left his body when he spotted Fiona. Drawing himself up, he replied, "I've told you, young Fiona, you needn't address me thus."

Startled and relieved by Calum's sudden change in demeanor, the grooms backed away to the wall of the stall.

"I thank you," Fiona replied, taking a step away from the stall, "and as I have in the past, I ask your leave to observe the proper forms."

Calum moved to her. "Indeed, good stablelass, you are right and proper. There will come a time later when my true styles are known, and in that time you will call me different."

"Thank you, milord," Fiona nodded respectfully and continued walking slowly down the row of stalls. "Is Star well?"

Calum answered, "Fit as a fiddle and brushed to a shine! She's ready for our glorious adventure." He looked down at the vial in his hand. "But I must anoint her -" He turned back toward Star.

"What is that?" Fiona's voice stopped him.

With glowing eyes, Calum turned back and held up the small bottle. "This is water from the holy well of Saint Dandrea," he whispered. "You know Star's special lineage?" he asked eagerly.

Fiona nodded. "You've regaled me with the tale many times."

"Well, then, as the only descendant of the mighty Gold Comet, it's only fitting that she embark on this great adventure with me - and I must anoint her brow with holy water -" Calum turned and started back toward Star.

"But milord!" Fiona trotted after him. "You know she likes a soft voice and a slow hand," she struggled to remind him.

Calum paused outside the stall door.

The grooms inside, trying to calm and blanket Star spotted Fiona. He raised an eyebrow to which Fiona nodded, and slipped swiftly out the door.

"You remind me of my duty," Calum said gravely. "To treat this glorious steed in a manner befitting." He furrowed his brow in thought. "You!" he exclaimed suddenly. "You have the voice that calms her - will you anoint Star so she will be in readiness for adventure?"

Seizing the opportunity, Fiona curtsied and held out her hands for the vial. "I would be honored to have a part in your great quest." She took the little bottle of water and stepped into the stall.

Star was no longer kicking, but she eyed the doorway warily.

"Hey, girl, shoo shoo," Fiona began in a soft singsong which brought the mare's ears forward. "All's well. You're a good old softie and an apple-cruncher, aren't you?" She took another step toward the mare which was answered by Star approaching her and whuffling Fiona's face. Fiona blew back into Star's nostrils and began to scratch and stroke her. "Was that a little scary? Were the big voices rude? All done now. All's well." Fiona kept up the patter as she opened the vial of holy water and shook some drops into her hand. Reaching up, she rubbed the drops into the white spot on Star's forehead. "Be strong and swift, dear one. May the blessings of the saints ride with you. Be brave, and come home safely." Fiona blanketed the mare, patted her a bit, and the horse sighed contentedly.

Once outside the stall, Fiona looked up to be sure that Calum signaled approval. She caught a touch of wistfulness in his eye.

“You have the touch with her,” he said in compliment.

“I just know where she is now, milord.” Fiona picked up her bucket of brushes and began walking. “She’s young and sweet. She doesn’t know about the great adventures to come - or what her ancestors did. I talk to her to prepare her. First she has to be calm and confident she will be treated well. Courage will come later. And you can greet her here and now, too, I’ve seen you.” She returned her tools to their places. “Shall we try again, milord, without those grooms?”

Calum looked back down the row of stalls. “I should. I will. She’s a good beast, but she’s only just learning confidence.” He spoke more to himself than to the girl.

Returning to the stall, Calum copied Fiona’s tone of voice and spoke to Star from a distance. He started and looked down when the girl slipped something into his hand. “I’m not going to buy her with treats!”

She barely shook her head. “Confidence, milord.”

He regarded the slice of apple and his brows lifted. “Of course! I’m telling her I will feed her and care for her!” He offered the juicy morsel.

Star pricked her ears and took a step, but did not come to get the apple immediately. She regarded the young man.

“Come and get -,” Calum started impatiently.

“Milord -” Fiona interrupted softly.

He quieted. “I will be patient with her, too. That’s also today’s lesson.” And at the change in his voice, Star took another tentative few steps, reached out her muzzle and lipped the tidbit off his fingers.

Calum wiped his hand on his pantleg and didn’t take his eyes from Star as she crunched her bit of apple. “She really is gentle, isn’t she?”

From the end of the row of stalls, Angharad whispered to the Stable Master. “She’s more than a Horse Friend, Trevowen.”

The old man nodded and scratched his ear. “Aye, a good deal more. She has her mother’s touch with animals, that’s sure, and I think there’s more than a bit of her great-grandmother in there, too.”

A soft quietness fell over the stable, filled with whuffles and the crunching of oats. Angharad moved down to scratch Bonker and think. The Stable Master accompanied her.

“I need to take her with us.”

Trevowen raised his eyebrows. “Her mother will never let her go!”

Bonker leaned into Angharad's hand. The captain sighed. "Trev', I can shout him into submission. She can calm him in one sentence. She lifts him up. He won't tolerate a healer - and she can care for the beasts..."

"I'm not saying you don't need her, Angha." he shook his head slowly. "I'm saying you'll have to make one mind-numbing deal with Omlie to get what you want."