

'Normal people don't do that.'

Jesral quickened her already fast pace when she heard his steps approaching, determinedly not looking back. Vel was well able to keep up.

'Jez,' he called when he was about three feet behind her. She spun round so suddenly it stopped him in his tracks.

'Just stay away from me, d'you hear?' she hissed. Her eyes blazed with anger and fear. He put up both palms to indicate assent, but he was not going to give up.

'Jez, it's all right. I just want to talk.'

'Don't waste your breath,' was her recommendation as she carried on walking. He quickly caught her up and grabbed one wrist.

She snatched it away.

'Don't touch me!'

'Jez, this is mad...'

Her panicky laughter cut him off.

'*This* is mad?' she asked incredulously. 'She's having a conversation with someone in a cave somewhere, while you two expect her to ask questions of him, and you think walking away from the three of you is mad? *You're* the ones who are mad – or bad. I'm not staying to work out which.'

'Oh, come on, you've been with us for days, you know that's not the case.'

'Normal people don't do that,' she said, looking back at Renia who still sat on Bluey, making no effort to move either toward or away from them. She looked very ordinary, sitting there. 'Oh, God. You believe her, too... believe she really can hear someone.' Jesral did not know what to think any more, struggling to keep a grip on her sanity. 'She was pleased I joined you. She said so.' She couldn't drag her eyes away from Renia. 'Mama used to tell me: Be a good girl. If you

aren't the *gwrachod* will know, and they'll come and take you away because they'll think you're one of them.'

'She's not a *gwrach*, Jez.' There was warning, as well as understanding, in Vel's voice. He had heard the same himself as a child. In front of him, he realized, was someone who had dismissed such stories long ago, but now found herself fearing they were true after all, and wondering how far caught up in one she was.

This was not a thing you could reason with people about. Past experience had shown him that. So he saved his strength.

'Look,' said Vel with a sigh, 'we aren't going to make you come with us. If you want to go back, that's fine. You can take your stuff, and enough food to get you home.'

'You won't get me round by pretending to be nice.' Jesral said it without much force, but it was still enough to irritate Vel.

'Then let's assume you're driving me beyond endurance and I'm contemplating throttling you and throwing you in the marsh. Would you care to make a decision? I think it's plain other lives than yours depend on us getting on with this journey.'

'Vel, I'm sorry! I don't know what I'm saying at the moment, I'm too scared.'

'Well, don't be. Ren can't hurt you; she wouldn't hurt you. None of us would. You've got to come back for your stuff anyway.'

She followed him back apprehensively. Vel laid a hand on Renia's pack, and turned to Jesral as she trailed up behind him.

'Well, should I unload your stuff?'

She glanced at the other two. Kerin still held Bluey's reins; the stare he gave her held a mixture of anger and contempt. Renia's gaze was steady and unaccusing, and she was careful not to lean over Jesral when she spoke.

'It doesn't matter, Jez. Everyone feels this way when they first find out.' Kerin made a little movement; Renia looked at him, challenging him to deny that he had felt something. He could not hold the stare for long.

Impulsively, Jesral steeled herself and seized Renia's skirt.

'How do you do it?'

Renia shrugged.

'I don't know. It just happens.'

'Often?'

'Not very often.'

'What do you want me to do?' Jesral finally asked of her.

The question startled Renia and she looked to the others, but only she could answer it.

'I want you not to be scared of me,' she said simply.

The story continues...

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