

The Unicorn

The Lady Lindis looked down at the camp from the back of her steed. She was wearing leather. Leather jerkin, leather gauntlets, leather trousers, leather boots, and a light leather helmet. A light battle suit in other words. A large sword was strapped to her back. It was in a plain leather scabbard, and was itself unornamented. So, not a show sword or an overtly magic sword. A round leather-covered shield with cuts marking the leather was hooked to the front of her saddle. It was flat on one side where a part of it had been sliced off. The roll behind her saddle contained everything that she possessed, well, everything that she had brought with her. A crossbow was attached to the roll.

Her steed? It was as businesslike as she was. A sturdy chestnut, with white lower front legs and a white blaze on its forehead. It too wore light leather armour, on its head, chest, and flanks, just like the Lady.

The Lady Lindis watched the camp with care. You could tell much from the way that a camp was organised, simply by observing it. She nodded her approval of the neat lines of the tents, the corral for the horses, the neat arrangement of the camp facilities, and the large tents for the officers. She watched the sentries forever patrolling the camp perimeters, checking each other as they crossed. And the other sentries stationed at the main entrances to the camp.

"I suppose that we are going down?" said a voice in her head. It wasn't really a question.

"Of course, Gully," she answered, in her head.

The voice sighed. "I know, I know, Lin. I hoped that for once we could, you know, pass on by."

"There ought to be a wide patrol somewhere. They seem to be an efficient outfit," said the Lady, ignoring the voice. "Come on."

She urged her mount down the track towards the camp.

"I surrender!" she said.

One member of the wide patrol released a crossbow bolt at her, and she parried it with her small shield. The patrol man's shot was an instinctive reaction, and way off target.

"That wasn't very nice," she said.

"Sorry ma'am," said the leader, giving the twitchy member of his patrol a filthy look. "You're surrendering? You have to hand over your weapons, then."

"Well, no."

"Right, right. OK."

The leader was a professional and he was not stupid. "If you'll follow us, then?"

He was aware, of course, that by getting her to follow them, she had a clear shot at their backs. Since she was on horseback, and they were on foot, she also had an advantage there, but he wasn't worried. She could have picked them off one by one, without them being aware of her, he reckoned. By 'surrendering', she would be escorted into the camp without any problems with guards, but he didn't like the idea of entering the camp behind her, as if she had just captured them.

"Can I ask your name, please, ma'am?"

"The Lady Lindis."

"Ah. Thank you."

He had never heard of the Lady Lindis,

"Your name, Sergeant?"

"Evan, ma'am."

“Thank you, Evan. Can you tell me anything about the conflict that I seem to have stumbled into?”

“You don’t know, ma’am? The Duke and his allies are trying to stop the Witch from expanding her sphere of influence. She wants the Duke and his allies to submit to her authority, but the Duke is loyal to the King.”

“But the Witch would also be a subject of the King, wouldn’t she?”

“She’s very ambitious, the Duke says.”

“I see, so the King is providing support to the Duke?”

“No ma’am. He’s busy with other things.”

Evan hadn’t thought about it before, but that sounded a bit odd. He pondered for a bit.

“Is she really a Witch? That’s not just an epithet?” asked the Lady.

Evan knew what the word ‘epithet’ meant, but he suspected that the rest of the patrol didn’t. He wasn’t a noble, but he was well-read.

“Er, yes, ma’am. I believe so. We’ve had to fight some strange creatures.”

Evan reflected that the strange creatures did not seem to want to be there any more than he did. If there was an escape route, then the creatures would take it.

The Lady dismounted and led her horse into the camp. Evan escorted her past the guards and then stopped. He didn’t know what to do next, so he looked around for inspiration, and discovered that his patrol members had disappeared as soon as they had entered the camp. He sighed.

“Perhaps you could introduce me to the Duke,” suggested the Lady.

“Yes, ma’am, of course. This way.” It was obvious.

He led her through the camp to the biggest of the tents.

“Those are the Duke’s colours? A red wyvern? On a field of white and green?”

“Yes, ma’am. Those are the colours of the Duke of New Castle.”

“It used to be Castell Newydd. Oh, well. Please introduce me, then would you mind looking after my horse?”

“Sure, ma’am. This way.”

The Lady Lindis handed her horse’s bridle to a surprised guard and followed Evan into the tent.

“Who are you, sir, and who is this woman?” asked the tall bearded man in the tent.

“Sorry, sir. I’m Evan, and may I present the Lady Lindis. Lady Lindis, the Duke of New Castle.”

The Lady bowed towards the Duke, the sort of bow that equals exchange.

“You’re treating him as an equal, Lin?” said a voice in her head, in a tone of disbelief.

“Shut up, Gully,” she replied silently.

“Greetings, Castell Newydd,” she said.

The Duke smiled. “The old name. Greetings, er, Lindis. What can I do for you?”

The Lady nodded briefly at Evan, and he ducked out of the tent.

“I’ve come to see what assistance I can offer in this dispute, sir.”

“I see. How many troops do you command, ma’am?”

“None, sir.”

“None?”

“I have my own resources, sir. I can gather intelligence about your enemy, for example.”

“I see. I’ve sent out agents. It was a waste of time. The information was plainly wrong, and many of the agents did not even return. What makes you think that you can do better?”

She ignored the question. “So the King is supporting you?”

“Of course.”

She noticed that the Duke didn't look at her directly.

"So, how many troops has he supplied you with?"

"That's a secret. Sorry. As many as he could. He has problems of his own. The rebel tribes, you know."

She nodded, but didn't comment. Of course, she didn't know how many troops the King had supplied, but from what Evan had told her the number was probably zero.

"I'll leave you now, Castell Newydd. I will let you know what I find out."

"Goodbye, Lindis. You know, I don't remember your title."

It was a polite way to question her right to be referred to as "Lady".

She smiled. "It's an old title, sir. Oh, by the way, can I please borrow your Sergeant? Sergeant Evan?"

"Sure, sure." He waved her away and she left.

"Evan, the Duke says that I can borrow you. Is that OK with you?"

Evan considered. "Sure, ma'am. What do you need?"

"Let's get my mount fed and watered. Then I need to eat."

"Right. The horses are over here, ma'am." He looked at her mount. "Will he be OK with the rest of the horses? He's a thoroughbred, isn't he?"

She nodded. "He's an aristocrat, but he won't mind."

There was a snort in her mind. "Shut up, Gully. Information gathering, remember?"

"Who is Gully, ma'am?"

"What?!"

She turned on the soldier, and he flinched.

"You said 'Shut up, Gully', ma'am."

"Oh, bugger. You heard that?"

"Sorry, ma'am. There was a snort, then you told Gully to shut up. You said something to him, earlier too." He looked around for the invisible Gully.

"Oh, shit. Gully?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Evan, Gully is my steed. Or I'm his rider, depending on your point of view."

"But horses don't talk."

"Gully is a Unicorn. I have a bond with him. May I present the Unicorn Gullivere?"

"Oh, my goodness." Evan bowed to the horse, as he would bow to a noble.

The horse dipped his head in response.

"But Unicorns are white and have a ... Oh, I see. Disguise."

"Evan. You must not tell anyone."

"Yes, ma'am. But, sire, Unicorn Gullivere, you outrank anyone here. For that reason alone I couldn't tell anyone."

The horse snorted, but it was a positive snort this time. "Thank you, Evan."

For a second or so, Gully revealed his true nature to Evan. Evan saw a tall stallion, pure white, with a white horn on his forehead. Gully was not just white. He glowed.

"Oh, my Lord. Thank you," said Evan, bowing again,

"Call me Gully, Evan. Call me Gully."

Evan and the Lady were sitting in the mess tent, eating.

"Is it usually like this, Evan?"

“Yes, ma’am. There’s not so much fighting tonight. It’s quite quiet.”

They ducked as a plate was frisbeed over their heads.

“Hmm, they should save this energy for the battlefields. The camp itself is quite tidy, but the troops mess like this?! What’s the fighting about? You said that the Witch is trying to take control of lands that belong to the Duke, and he’s gathered an army to wrest control back. Then I saw you consider. Hmm. Did he tell you that? Is the Witch really extending her control?”

Evan hesitated. He realised that the only information about the war came from the Duke.

“Yes, ma’am. That’s what the Duke told us. He’s very believable.”

A large man with a large beard sat down opposite them.

“I don’t know you! Where are you from?” he demanded.

“Go away,” said the Lady. “We are talking.”

“Why you...” The thug surged around the table towards her, trying grab hold of her, but she moved and tripped him. He fell onto his back, and before he recovered her sword was touching his neck.

“Apologise,” she said.

“Sure, ma’am, sure. I apologise. I’m sorry.”

“Now, my blade is a special blade. It requires a blood sacrifice before I sheath it.”

The thug closed his eyes. “Oh, the little gods preserve me.”

She touched the thug on both cheeks, drawing a drop or two of blood.

“Thank you,” she said, cleaning the blade. “Now get lost.”

She sat down. “That was easy,” she commented.

Evan nodded. “There aren’t many professionals in the Duke’s army. Mostly conscripts.”

“But you’re a professional?”

“Yes, ma’am. That why I was leading the patrol.”

“So, you could have taken out that thug?”

“Not as easily as you did, ma’am. But yes.”

“Useful to know. By the way, call me ‘Lin’. ‘Ma’am’ is too conspicuous.”

“Thank you, er, Lin. I will do.”

The next morning the Lady breakfasted in the mess tent. Last night, she’d walked into the officers’ dormitory tent as if she owned it, and taken possession of an unoccupied hammock at the back. No one questioned her presence and no one had tried to claim the hammock back.

She looked at the bowl of food. Well, it was at least fuel for her body. She ate.

Evan arrived and took his own bowl of food.

“Morning Evan. Is the food always like this?”

“Yes, pretty much, m... Lin. Pretty much.”

“I’m going to visit the Witch. Do you want to come along? The Duke said that I could borrow you.”

Evan considered. “Yes, Lin, I would like to come along. I don’t think that you are aligned with either side, and while I’m supposedly employed by the Duke, I’ve not seen any money yet, so I’m free to align with you for now.”

“Pragmatic. OK, let’s go and fetch Gully and get out of here.”

They wandered down to the corral. Even ‘disguised’ Gully stood out. He came trotting over.

“Thank goodness, Lin. The mares gossip all the time, and the stallions just keep as far apart as possible or want to fight.”

“What about the geldings, Gully?” asked Evan.

"I avoid them," said Gully.

"Evan, do you have a horse?"

"Yes, a skewbald mare, chestnut and white."

He whistled and she trotted over.

"She's quite cute, if you know what I mean," sniggered Gully.

He whinnied.

"Stop trying to gross me out, pal. She wouldn't be in the corral if she was in season," said the Lady.

They saddled up and set off. The guards at the gates passed them through, and they headed west.

"Evan, do you have noble blood?"

"Well, there were rumours that my mother was part noble. She said that her mother had met a noble boy, and, you know... But every family has similar rumours."

"Interesting. And your father?"

"I never knew him, and my mother never talked about him. Why do you ask?"

"You can hear Gully. Only a few people are able to mind-talk with Unicorns, and those people all have some noble blood. You're not the long-lost son of a noble or something."

Evan laughed. "No, Lin, that's not possible. Gully, sire, what do you think?"

"I think you are right, Evan. You are not noble, but of course, that doesn't mean that you can't become noble. Castell Newydd's father was an upstart, I hear, but the Duke himself is noble in rank, if not in blood."

The Lady sat on her mount looking down on the Witch's camp. It was chaotic. Tents were everywhere, and the mess tent was right up by the corral. There were no guards in sight on their side of the camp, and there was no sign of any other facilities.

"Bit of a mess," said Gully.

"Yeah, very unprofessional," added Evan. "With the tents scattered around like that, it will take everyone twice as long to get anywhere. That big tent is leaning! It will come down in a big breeze. It's a shambles."

"OK, let's go down," said the Lady.

This time the Lady didn't need to 'surrender'. No one even spoke to them as they entered the camp. They did attract attention though. People stopped what they were doing and wandered after them.

Then Evan saw someone who he knew. "Rich! Rich! Brother!"

"Hi, Evan. What are you doing here? I heard that you were with the Duke!"

"Ma'am, may I introduce my friend and fellow professional, Richard. Rich. Rich, this is the Lady Lindis."

"Ma'am," said Rich, bowing.

Evan continued. "Yes, Rich, I was with the Duke, but he 'loaned' me to the Lady. We're here, well, I guess we're here 'information gathering'."

"I see," said Rich. "So, you want to see the Witch? Follow me."

He led them through the camp, rounding tents and stepping over guy lines.

He sighed. "It's a huge mess, but it's a tribute to the Witch that she has managed to arrange this much after the Duke's surprise attack."

"His surprise attack? We were told that the Witch was trying to take over lands that belonged to the Duke."

“Well, they’ve been in dispute for centuries, but have belonged to the Witch’s line for at least two hundred years. The Duke knows that the King is tied up with those tribes up North, the ones who want independence, so the Duke launched an offensive against the Witch. Burnt one of her towns. Many of the people here are from there and there’s only a few professionals like us, Evan.”

“Gully?” It was the Lady’s voice in his head.

“He seems honest. He’s not lying, but of course he could be mistaken.”

“Evan? Think at us. In your head,” said the Lady in his mind.

“I’ve known Rich for a long time. I don’t think he is lying. I vouch for him.”

“There’s a few of the Duke’s agents around,” said Rich. “They didn’t want to go back. Anyway, here’s the Witch’s tent.”

“Ma’am, may I present the Lady Lindis and my friend and colleague, Evan. They have just come from the Duke’s camp, ma’am. Lady Lindis, may I present the Witch and her husband, Neville.”

“The Duke’s camp? Do you have a message for us?”

The Witch was young and pleasant looking, probably in her mid twenties, with light brown hair. Her husband was about the same age, maybe a little older. Both were looking worried, tired, and stressed.

The Lady bowed, equal to equal. “I’m sorry, ma’am. We do not have a message. I am not aligned with the Duke, and Evan is currently aligned with me. Perhaps you could tell us about this conflict from your point of view.”

“I would like to. You have power, Lindis, I can tell that by using my own. Maybe you could suggest a way to end it.”

“How did this dispute come about, ma’am? And please call me ‘Lin’.”

“I’ll tell you. And please call me ‘Rose’. This is what happened...”

“You will cede me those lands,” said the Duke.

“No, New Castle,” replied the Witch, formally using his Duchy to remind him that her rank was the same as his.

“But I need to expand my tobacco fields! I can’t keep up with demand! I need those fields.”

He thumped the table as he spoke the last sentence.

The Witch remained firm. “No, you can’t have them. Besides, I’ve heard that tobacco is not the only crop you grow. I’ve heard that you have some plantations of cannabis, and you even have some plots of poppies. In addition, you want to drive out the current farmers of those lands. They are **my** ancestral lands, and I protect my people!”

“You’re going to regret this, Witch! Witch? You have few of your ancestors’ powers! No wonder! Your line keeps marrying commoners like your husband!”

She gestured at him and it felt to him as if invisible hands were strangling him. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t speak, and he was blacking out. She let him go and he gasped and choked.

“Don’t be so sure, New Castle. I could have stopped your heart or broken your neck, you worm, but I don’t like killing. You talk about nobility! Your own father was born a commoner! He achieved his nobility by seizing your Duchy, but he was a fine man, for all that! As for his son...”

“You can’t stop a whole army! You should have taken my offer. Now I will have it all, for nothing!”

"I thought that he would give up. Nothing happened for a while, and then the King had to go North to negotiate with the Independence Movement up there. New Castle attacked one of my towns and burnt it. He killed dozens of my people. All because I was too squeamish to kill him!"

She sobbed. "I sent some of my creatures to hold him back, and we barely managed to set up this camp between his forces and my capital. Oh, my poor creatures! I sent them out to die!"

"Ma'am," said Evan. "I've fought against them and not many were killed. We soon found that if we allowed them an escape route they would run away. Most of them are probably hiding somewhere."

"Really? Oh, thank you, Evan. Thank you."

"What are your plans, Rose?" asked the Lady.

"I don't have any. I'll just try to hold them here. It's all that I can do."

"Do you have any generals?"

"No, we are a peaceful region. Almost all the people in this camp are refugees. We only have a few professional soldiers like Rich."

"Shall I take command of the defence, Rose?"

"Would you, Lin? That would be great! Thank you."

"Was the Duke correct? Have you lost most of your powers?"

The Witch literally blazed, and they all moved away from the heat.

"No! He is wrong! I don't like to use it, but I still have it!"

She reverted to her usual self.

"Ooops!"

Her hand-print was burned into the table, and the tent above her head was singed.

The Lady Lindis made a decision. "OK, I did not align myself with the Duke, so I am free to align myself with you, Rose, and I do so. Evan, that leaves you in a delicate position, since you did align yourself with the Duke. What do you say?"

"The Duke said that you could 'borrow' me, ma'am. I choose to believe that that means that I am aligned with you, ma'am. I confirmed that, if you recall. And if you align yourself with the Witch then I am aligned with her too. Besides, he didn't pay me!"

"Good! Thank you. Now, can you please locate all the professionals in the camp and get them to report to me? Rich, please help him."

The Lady looked down at the defences from a slight rise, and sighed. It was the best that they could do in the time but it wouldn't be enough. Their main force commanded the road, and a farmer had ploughed the flat areas on either side. It would be hard going for the attackers, and the defenders had set up a few booby traps but it wouldn't be enough. Even if they somehow managed to hold the frontal attack, the attackers could send forces round the flanks.

On one flank it was boggy, and on the other was rocky, but the flanks were not impassable, and there were only a few defenders there.

"Where's Gully, ma'am," asked Evan quietly, in her mind. "I haven't seen him for a couple of days."

The Witch glanced in their direction but didn't comment.

"He's around. He'll be here by the time the Duke arrives."

Evan looked along the line. The professionals were relaxed, checking their weapons, chatting together, testing the wind, assessing the weather. The rest were jumping at every sound, holding their weapons clumsily.

Scouts started coming back. This was their land so most of them made it back safely. The enemy were a kilometre away. Then half a kilometre. One hundred metres, and the defenders started to see them moving.

“The little gods preserve us,” said someone.

“So be it,” said someone else.

“One,” called the Lady, raising her sword.

An advance line of defenders fired their crossbows from shielded positions, then fell back. Most of them made it, but one was hit by an attacker’s bolt and two others dragged him to safety.

The enemy moved forward again,

“Two.”

Longbows fired a hail of arrows over the heavily armoured foreguard and some attackers fell, disrupting the orderly advance in a few places.

“Not enough,” muttered Evan.

The Lady glanced at him and nodded. So far the enemy had held their fire, but now crossbow bolts and longbow arrows started to fall on the defenders.

“Uhh!” said the Lady fending off a crossbow bolt with her leather-clad shield. The bolt hit the ground behind her. “Close!”

Someone behind her screamed but she didn’t look.

“Three!” she called and the defenders’ crossbows started to fire.

“Pick your targets!” yelled Evan. “Aim for the gaps.”

A few bolts got through and the attackers line was disrupted in a few places.

“Four! Engage!”

The two forces came together, and swords, spears, axes and other weapons were brought into play as the fighting split into melees. The sheer numerical superiority of the attackers meant that many of them could not engage in the fighting but the defenders were being worn down. Evan saw someone go down to his left. But he was too busy to check on the injured person.

From the corner of his eye he saw the Lady taking on several attackers at the same time. His own conflict happened to move him at that direction, and he came face to face with her.

“Back to back, Milady?”

“Yeah, head back to our lines.”

They battled back to the defenders’ line which was being forced back.

“Duck!” yelled the Lady, and the Unicorn vaulted over their heads. No longer disguised, his coat and horn gleaming brilliantly, he charged at the attackers.

Horses are large and move fast. They are fastest when moving in a straight line it is true, but they can jink and spin. Unicorns are like horses but bigger, and they have an extra weapon, their large horn. Even a large horse would cause significant disruption in an attacking force, and Gully was bigger than most horses. The attacking forces were trampled by his hooves or impaled on his horn.

The attackers split up in front of him.

“Dodge, Gully, dodge.” said Evan.

“On to it,” said Gully.

His tone was tense as he twisted and weaved. As the unicorn spread chaos, the Lady rallied her forces and the defenders held the attackers at bay. Gully eventually returned to the defenders’ lines.

The Witch stepped forward, blazing with light. Just by walking forward she burned a gap in the attackers’ lines.

“With me, Evan and Rich. She can’t keep that up for long,” ordered the Lady.

The three followed the Witch as she slowly walked forward, driving the enemy back. Suddenly her light dimmed and she slumped to her knees.

“Evan, you carry her. Rich and I will cover you.”

Evan grabbed the Witch in his arms, and found that she was still a little hot. He headed back to the defenders lines, while Rich and the Lady fended off anyone who approached.

“Stand me up,” said the Witch as they regained the defenders lines. “They must see me!”

“Defend and Protect!” she shouted her motto and raised a sword. Lightning shot from the tip into the sky, and she staggered again. Evan steadied her with a hand and received a small shock.

“Are you OK, ma’am?” asked Evan.

“Yes. A minute.” She straightened up.

A scout, one of the young lads from the burned town ran up.

“They’re breaking through on the right, ma’am!” he said to the Lady.

He was holding a bloody cloth to his arm.

“Thanks. Well done. Get that seen to. Now!”

“We can’t spare anyone,” said Evan. “They will outflank us.”

It was a statement of fact.

“Don’t worry,” said the Lady. “That is taken care of.”

A commotion had begun away to the right. Those attackers who weren’t fighting were looking in that direction and the defenders could see flashes of white and attackers backing away. Some were running.

“Unicorns?” Evan said in his mind, casting a glance at Gully.

“Friends of mine,” said Gully. “Would you please pull this bolt from my shoulder, Evan. I’m not easily hit, but I’m not invulnerable.”

“Sure.” Evan looked at the bolt. “Yeah, I can get it, I think. It might hurt.”

Gully snorted and tossed his head.

Evan pulled the bolt and it came part way out. Gully shuffled his feet, but didn’t otherwise move.

“Sorry,” said Evan. “This time.”

He pulled the bolt and it slid out. Gully’s coat was stained with a little blood, but that soon disappeared and there was no hint of a wound.

“Thank you!” Gully’s voice called in his head. “Keep the bolt. It is now special.”

He spun round and returned to the fray. Gully’s two friends on the right were joined by two others to the left, and the attackers started to withdraw. The defenders cheered.

“It’s not over,” said the Lady and indeed the attackers only withdrew about one hundred metres.

A lad with a huge white banner made his way towards the defenders and stopped.

“What does the Duke want?” muttered the Lady.

The Duke rode out alongside his page and stopped.

“Come along with me and Gully, please, Evan. Ma’am, can you come too?” asked the Lady.

Evan boosted the Lady onto Gully’s back, and a horse was found for the Witch, then the small party advanced towards the Duke. He was fuming.

“Surrender or parley, New Castle?” asked the Witch.

A white flag could mean either, of course. It didn’t improve the Duke’s temper.

“Parley, of course! You were lucky, Witch! You won this round, with the help of the Unicorns, but I’ll be back. I will force you to give me those lands, sooner or later!”

He looked at the Lady. “Oh. No wonder I didn’t recognise your title! I’ll not be surprised by them a second time. There are ways...”

Just as he turned away there was the sound of a bugle. It was the King and he was not happy.

The Lady Lindis, the Duke, and the Witch stood before the King.

"I've had to leave the discussions that I've been having up North at a really inconvenient time. Fortunately the Independence Movement agreed to a break in the discussions, but they are probably laughing their heads off about now."

He looked at the three of them.

"Hmm, the Duke and the Witch I know. Who are you, ma'am?"

"I am the Lady Lindis," she said with a bow.

"Oh, yes. The Unicorns. Well, I'll talk to you, first, ma'am. You two others leave us for a moment, please?"

"But, sire..." interjected the Duke.

"That's enough. Get out!"

The King half rose from his seat, and the Witch and the Duke left the tent.

The King looked at her. "Five Unicorns?"

"I am bonded with one, sire. The others are his friends."

"So, what can you tell me about this mess, Lindis? I hear that you are aligned with the Witch."

"Yes, sire. When I arrived, this conflict was already occurring. I went first to the Duke, and he told me that he was reacting to the Witch's attempt to take control of his lands. He claimed to have your support, sire."

"Hmm. Did he know about the Unicorn?"

"No, sire. The Unicorn was disguised. I did not align myself with the Duke, and, indeed, he never asked me to. I crossed over to the Witch. It was obvious that her forces were not ready for conflict. There were few professionals, and no other trained fighters."

"So she wasn't ready?"

"No, sire. The Witch's people, including some professionals, claimed that the Duke had attacked and burned one of the Witch's towns, and that most of her force were refugees. The Witch claimed that the Duke was trying to pressure her to hand over some of her lands to him."

"I see. So you aligned yourself and the Unicorn with the Witch?"

"Yes, sire. I am bonded to the Unicorn but I do not control him. He also chose to align with the Witch. Her story seemed much more likely than the Duke's. I set up such defences as I could, and G..., the Unicorn brought in his friends, to surprise the Duke at the right moment. It wouldn't work a second time. A handful of caltrops ..."

"You believe the Witch?"

"Yes, sire. Her forces were disorganised, not battle ready. The people who I spoke to, professionals and non-professionals, all claimed that the Duke had attacked first and burned one of the Witch's towns. Their story was consistent."

"I see. Thank you, Lindis. Now I need to talk to the Witch and the Duke. Are you going to stay around?"

"You could order me to, sire, but I'd prefer it if you didn't."

The King sighed. "I'm not going to order you, Lindis. Go well, and may the little gods preserve you."

"Thank you, sire. I think it's pretty obvious what happened here."

The King nodded, and the Lady passed out of the tent.

"You're still aligned with me, Evan," remarked the Lady.

"Yes, Lin. It is my choice now, and I'm happy about that."

They were sitting on a rock on the edge of a clearing, and the five Unicorns were wandering about, sometimes wheeling and trotting pairs or triples. One or two lay on the grass and rolled over, then stood up, shook themselves, and ran around. Sometimes they cropped the grass. Now and then they touched horns. Evan's mare was cropping the grass nearby and ignoring the Unicorns.

"I wonder what they are doing," said Evan. "I can't hear what they are saying, but I have the rumble of a conversation in my head."

The Lady nodded. "Yes, me too. I've never asked what they talk about on these occasions. It would be impolite."

"Where are their people? I assume that they are bonded like Gully."

"Gully says that all Unicorns bond with humans. He's not interested in why this is so. I've seen one or two Unicorn 'conversations' like this, but up to now, I've always been the only human. I don't know why, and Gully is not interested in talking about it."

"They are all stallions, aren't they?"

She laughed. "Yes, and Gully won't tell me about that, either! I don't know if there are Unicorn mares, or if they handle reproduction another way. Maybe ordinary mares?"

Four of the Unicorns melted into the woods and the fifth one trotted over to them. He lost his horn and turned brown with white socks and blaze. Gully, disguised.

"I heard that," said Gully. "Sorry, I can't tell you. It's private. Have you asked Evan yet, Lin?"

"No. I'd better. Evan, do you want to remain aligned to me? I promise you it won't be boring."

Gully snorted. "Just one awkward situation after another. That's our life. All I ask for is a peaceful couple of weeks, but no. We have to keep getting ourselves involved."

He sighed in Evan's head, and the Lady laughed.

"You'd hate it if nothing exciting happened, you big fraud!"

"I'd love to stay aligned with you, Lin."

"One more thing. For a number of reasons, you can never go back. I'm serious. It would be impossible."

Evan nodded. "That's OK. I'm in."

They headed out of the clearing. The mare and Gully carried much of their gear, but of course, the humans carried their weapons.

"I never did get paid, by either side," complained Evan.
