

Towers of Ibyadar

Caitlynn

Angelika Diem



JADON

Her long braids flying, the girl raced along the stalls.
"Jadon! Jadon!"

The stable master put the curry comb aside and raised his hand. "Shh, Lady Lynna! You'll scare the mice to death."

Her face bright red, Lynna stopped short, then laughed. "Well, someone has to if Mika can't. Where is she, anyway?"

Jadon closed the gray gelding's stall and pointed to the far end of the stable. "In the empty stall, behind the old saddles. But..." he tried to put a stern look on his face: "First put your braids up, little lady. Your mother will scold me if you go to the fitting with straw in

your hair." Lynna sighed and fished around in her pinafore for the spare hairpins she always carried. "Oh, who cares about straw! I just wish Mother would finally decide on a dress."

"The thirteenth birth festival is something special." Jason smiled. "Your family emblem is renewed and you stop using your childhood name, Lady Caitlynn," he said, emphasizing the title. "And you have to profess your calling."

"Everybody already knows." Lynna stuck the last hairpin into the irregular form on the back of her head. She put her right hand on her left shoulder. "I want to be a healer, like you, Jadon."

"You know I never finished the School of the Green Tower, Lady Lynna. My power wasn't strong enough to heal people. You should protect yours and nurture it."

She shrugged her shoulders. "What for? Gared is Father's heir, and Shina..." She hesitated. "Anyway, I hate all those charisma exercises. Why can't we just say 'please' whenever we want something done? Why do I have to practice 'persuading' people to obey my will?"

Jadon frowned. "You'd best not be asking such questions in the presence of your father, Lady Lynna."

She sighed. "Yes, Jadon, I know. – Way in the back, behind the old saddles?"

His face relaxed. He nodded. "Be careful. Mika protects them like a little lioness."

"I just want to look!" Lynna skipped more than ran to the half-opened stall at the end of the stable. She stepped over the pail of brushes and a half-full sack of oats and put the teetery stool off to the side. Back in the corner, behind the stack of old saddles, on a

bed of hay was the calico cat, lying on her side. Lined up on her belly were four – no, five – newborn kittens, suckling eagerly. Mika lifted her head and looked at Lynna.

"Hello there, Mika. What beautiful babies you have." The cat hissed softly. "Don't worry, I won't touch them. Not yet. Jadon says I'll be able to play with them in three weeks. Maybe two." She noticed that the water dish in the corner was empty and slowly reached for it. Mika hissed louder as Lynna took it. "I'll bring you the best water in the courtyard. Fresh from the well."

Lynna was just about to leave the stall when the stable door was flung open.

"Jadon!"

She flinched. Father! He himself wasn't so strict about how an earl's daughter should behave, but he'd tell her mother. Lynna didn't feel like listening to yet another lecture this morning.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"How's the new horse? Gared wants to ride him in the king's parade."

"My Lord," Jadon said matter-of-factly, "I spoke with the dealer and he confirmed that the horse has never been ridden. It would be too dangerous – both for me and your son in the parade. The stallion allows a saddle and bit, and I can lead him, but..."

"No 'buts'! It's high time you started breaking him in!"

"He's not ready yet, my Lord. In three weeks, perhaps."

"No. Today. Now."

Lynna was familiar with that tone of voice, and she hated it. Father always spoke that way when he used his charisma. She ducked down lower behind the stall gate as she sensed the earl's

will capping Jadon's spirit, smothering the stable master's resistance. "You will begin to break him immediately. Next week, Gared will start working with him, and in two weeks he and that stallion will be the star attraction in the king's parade. Do you understand me?"

"As you wish, my Lord."

"Good. Report to me in an hour how it went. I'll be in my study."

After the stable door closed behind the earl, Lynna breathed deeply. She had to give him a bit of a headstart so that he wouldn't see her walking across the courtyard.

She sat on the stool and watched Mika licking her little ones clean after their feeding.

"Be glad you're not a human, Mika," she murmured. "Otherwise Father would make you sort the mice by size and lay them out in front of the stable door for him to inspect."

The image made her smile.

A shrill neighing jolted her out of her daydreams. *The new horse!* flashed through her mind. She pushed the stall gate open and ran to the arena.

Jadon had obeyed. The dark bay stallion was saddled and bridled, and Jadon was sitting on its back. More accurately, his hands were clinging tightly to its mane while the animal bucked wildly.

Lynna wanted to call out to him and tell him to stop, but the words stuck in her throat. Only a sharp pain or a conflicting order could break Jadon's mute compliance, so strong was the charisma her father had used.

Running up to the fence, she feverishly debated trying to use

her power to bring Jadon to his senses. But if she did it wrong, it would only make things worse for him.

Then the stallion stood on its hind legs. Jadon slid from the saddle to the sand, where he lay motionless, dazed. The stallion rolled its eyes, and, foaming at the mouth, lunged and kicked. Once, twice. After the last kick it pranced away and trotted around, snorting, on the far side of the arena.

"Jadon? Jadon!" Lynna climbed over the fence and ran to him. So much blood...the gouges on his chest, the way he was lying there...She dropped to her knees and brushed the hair, sticky with blood, from his face in order to see his eyes.

"Jadon, look at me. Say something!"

She'd never seen such an empty expression on anyone's face. Was her father's charisma so completely in control of him? She had to break it – now!

Lynna didn't even need to close her eyes, the way Jared always did during the exercises. Her power lay there open, ready to be applied. Her spirit reached for Jadon's, but nothing was there. Or...? Her will came up against a barrier. Father's charisma, no doubt. Beyond it, Jason was waiting to be permitted to awaken. Determinedly, she pushed against the barrier with her entire will. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, ran down her temples and dropped into the sand. Gritting her teeth, she enfolded Jadon's slack fingers in her hands. A little more, just a little bit more...Suddenly a crack appeared in the barrier, she reached through, and her power touched his soul. A flood of emotions burst over her: anger and worry, a scant bit of hope, and unease. Insecurity, vague despair, terror, a kick, a blow to the back,

confusion, pain....fear, and still more pain. So much pain...Whimpering, Lynna pulled her power back. Tears ran down her face. She had to get rid of the pain – quickly. With effort, she put it into a corner of her spirit, rose unsteadily to her feet, and stumbled out of the horse stable. Father! She had to find Father. He'd help her; he always knew what to do.

Half-blinded by tears, she found her way across the courtyard to the left wing of the castle. No one noticed her; this time of day, Mother was busy ordering around all the servants so that the midday meal would be ready punctually. Lynna dragged herself to the study and, without knocking, pushed open the door.

"Lynna, surely you can see that I..." was her father's brusque greeting. When he saw the state she was in, he jumped to his feet. "What on earth's happened to you?"

"Jadon," she wailed, doubling up. "Jadon fell...fell off the new horse. Father, he's..." she choked the word out, "dead. And it hurts, it hurts so much!" She raised her head and looked at him through her tears. "Why did you force him to ride the new horse, Father?"

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Force him?" he said in a voice dripping with false dismay. "What gives you that idea?"

"I was in the stall way at the back," she managed to get out, wrapping her trembling arms around her abdomen. "I heard you two talking, sensed you, Father."

Her father shook his head. "You're wrong, little one." His grip on her shoulder grew stronger. Two sharply angled creases formed on his forehead. "He came up with that idea himself, conceited as he is about his little bit of talent, the idiot. No real understanding of the animals, no ability. Now who'll break the new horse in? Your

brother will have to ride his old gelding in the parade. What a shame."

Was that still important? Why wasn't he listening to her? "The stallion trampled Jadon! His eyes, Jadon's eyes – so empty – help him, Father! It hurts so much!"

He looked at the wall behind his desk. "I'll take care of it right away, Lynna. But first," he said, bending down to her, "you promise me you won't tell anyone what you think you heard in the stable. Jadon was stupid. He deserved what happened to him." His cool gray-blue eyes bored into hers. She sensed him capping his charisma over her, the way he'd done with Jadon. She didn't want that! She wanted him to stop! Now! "Be a good girl and obey!" he hissed. His fingers dug deeper into her shoulder. New pain. Desperate, Lynna grabbed his wrist and pulled on it, to no avail. Rage welled up in her. Why didn't he want to understand or help? Why wasn't he even sorry? She reached for the only weapon she had: she connected her charisma to his – and released the pain...



“C an't you stand still for even a second?” Karinna, Countess of Honourton, circled her daughter, critically inspecting every pleat of the green-and-cream-colored dress. Two steps behind the tall mirror stood the village seamstress, fidgeting while she awaited the judgement of the countess.

Finally, the countess stood up straight and gave an approving nod. "Good work. It looks brand-new."

Caitlynn wondered who her mother was trying to fool. Yes, the skirt's gold borders, which had come from her mother's wedding

gown, covered up the threadbare places on the seams; and shortening it had taken care of the sad-looking hem. But under the lace insert on the wide, square neckline, the material lay very loosely on her skin, since her bustline was smaller than her mother's, who had bought the dress for the announcement of her betrothal, many years ago.

The trumpet sleeves were hopelessly out of date, as were the flat, white, leather shoes. Shina, Caitlynn's sister, had worn them to her Pearl Festival.

The seamstress curtsied deeply. "Many thanks, my Lady. If perhaps my Lady has another job for me...?"

"Thank you, my dear, if I do, I'll contact you." A small velvet string-bag changed owners. But instead of simply stowing the bag away, the seamstress pulled it open and counted the silver coins.

Caitlynn couldn't blame her. Word had gone round the village that opulent carriages now only rarely traveled to Honourton to buy horses from the earl. After Jadon's death two years ago, it quickly became apparent that Caitlynn's father, on his own, wasn't nearly as successful at handling the high-spirited young horses. And Perlus, the new stable master who'd previously worked at the village inn, was no better. He was hard-working, honest and conscientious, and he had a way with animals, but he was no Jadon.

When the door closed behind the seamstress, Caitlynn relaxed and let her mother help her out of the dress.

"Mother....," began Caitlynn as the countess carefully laid the dress out over two chair backs. "Mother, why do I even have to go through all of this?"

Countess Karinna narrowed her eyes to two small slits.

"You know what I mean," Caitlynn continued, putting on the plain blouse and the full, gray skirt – two hand-me-downs from Shina."The 'assessment' and the big party in two weeks. I don't need to be ranked on the marriage lists at all."

"Are you talking about your childish plan of becoming an executor again?" the countess snapped, coming very close to her daughter. Angry red spots flared up on the otherwise pale cheeks, and she pursed her lips into a thin, bloodless line.

"It's not a childish plan!" Caitlynn objected, laying her left hand over her right, which was still blank, as with everyone who had not yet found their calling.

"Yes, it is," the countess shot back. "It's just lucky your father doesn't know about it. Your calling is to find a good match. You owe him that."

What for? Father had only himself to blame for Jadon's death. And the pain he received served him right. She said none of this aloud, because she knew that her mother always took her father's side, even though the countess had cried when they'd put Jadon on the funeral pyre. I'll never understand Mother. She dropped her gaze and said nothing more, which her mother always understood as capitulation. Satisfied, she stroked Caitlynn's head, just as if she were petting a small animal. "Don't be so sad, Caitlynn. We know what's hidden in your heart. Soon you'll be living in a big castle, eating sumptuous food, and hosting grand festivals dressed in your splendid gowns. You'll be very, very happy."

Caitlynn cautiously opened her aura sensor: her mother actually believed what she'd just said! *I'm not you. My idea of*

happiness is different, Caitlynn thought. But more than once she'd argued with her mother about this very thing and run up against a wall. A title of nobility, a fortune, admiration, glitter, frippery, being the envy of others – only those things seemed to matter to the Countess of Honourton.

There was a knock at the door. The countess turned away from Caitlynn and cleared her throat. "Yes?"

Perlus, the stable master, opened the door. His bow was as clumsy as ever. "My Lady, the marriage broker has arrived."

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When Caitlynn, wearing only a nightgown, was led to the tower room her mother used as a study, the big window facing the moat was open wide.

The marriage broker rose from the upholstered chair in front of countess's rolltop desk.

Caitlynn had expected an old woman, wrinkled and clothed in black velvet. But Bryanna, as she introduced herself in a soft voice, was not only younger than the countess, she was nearly a head taller. Her tan satin dress had no doubt cost as much as the countess's entire wardrobe.

"This is my youngest daughter, Caitlynn." The countess pushed Caitlynn forward.

The head of blond tresses, accented by only a few iridescent gray hairs, nodded politely as Caitlynn curtsied. Bryanna crossed her wrists in front of her breast so that Caitlynn could easily see the professional insignia on the back of her right hand – two wreaths, flowers for the bride and leaves for the groom, tied together by a white ribbon and a yellow-gold chain. Her family emblem, on the

back of the left hand, showed on the maternal side the famous raptor's claw with its three drops of blood, along with a bronze crown and two pearls; Bryanna was thus identified as the granddaughter of a baroness from the powerful Gryphon clan. Caitlynn swallowed. The family was known for its strong charisma, and marriage brokers were well-trained. This would not be easy – not at all.

Bryanna drew close to Caitlynn, practically looming over her. The gaze from her pale blue eyes wandered slowly over Caitlynn's facial features. Caitlynn had to brace herself in order not to wince as Bryanna's breath, reeking of fermented duckberry juice, entered her nostrils.

"Not quite as pretty as your elder daughter, but still pleasant to look at," said the marriage broker, and took a step back. "Now I would like to see the rest."

Caitlynn had been warned what would happen next. Still, she would have liked very much to refuse when her mother told her to take off her nightgown. Stark naked she stood there, not allowed to move, while Bryanna examined every hand's width of her body.

"She's a little thin, and rather short," she heard. "Has she already bled?"

Caitlynn's cheeks burned, and she stared at the floor while her mother announced that she'd been capable of breeding since last year's Winter Lights Festival.

"Good." Bryanna nodded. "She can cover herself up again. I'll test her now."