

*Blackbird*

By  
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AKA

Herald-Mage Adept Danya Winterborn

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Herald Kaylan Elderwood soaked in bathwater so hot he could barely stand it. Lids shielding his bright blue eyes, he leaned his head backward on the tub's edge, letting water drip from his freshly-washed, straight, shoulder-length, black hair onto the towel he had Fetched to that spot when he'd belatedly remembered another male Herald might slip on the wet floor. He suspected that his partner, Yarik Rafton, was likewise occupied in the bathing room dedicated to male Herald-Trainees in the Collegium dorm, and he'd give even odds that Weaponsmaster Alberich was similarly engaged in the private bath in his quarters. *I need to figure out how to get me one of those rooms with a private bath. Nice feature that.*

He ached in places he'd forgotten he had. He'd had no idea what he was in for when he'd received Alberich's enigmatic request to join him in the salle with Yarik after dinner. The salle had been dark when they'd arrived. They'd figured Alberich would be joining them—

*The Weaponsmaster lunged at them from the shadows.*

*Kaylan instantly Fetched a sword into his hand and deflected Alberich's blow.*

*Yarik, however, simply vanished.*

*Well, actually he slipped under the crossed swords and scurried behind a bench.*

*Alberich caught Kaylan's eye and mouthed "Watch."*

*Puzzled, Kaylan stood motionless as Alberich crept up on the bench without making the tiniest of sounds.*

*Just as Alberich came within striking distance, the bench flew at him.*

*Yarik dashed toward where the practice weapons were neatly lined against the wall. He came up with a sword.*

*Alberich bore down on him.*

*Yarik skittered away, placing a pell between him and Alberich.*

*The Weaponsmaster signaled for Kaylan to join him in the hunt.*

*Kaylan spent the better part of the next candlemark with Alberich, chasing Yarik around the salle. Two Heralds against one trainee shouldn't have been a problem.*

*Yarik, however, found things to throw at them and shadows to lurk in that Kaylan had no idea were even there.*

*By the time Alberich called an end to the chase, sweat had turned Yarik's light grey uniform almost the same shade of dark grey that Kaylan and Alberich wore, and Kaylan's uniform looked downright black.*

*Alberich, naturally, looked as if he'd done nothing more taxing than walk across the courtyard. He'd offered them no explanation, simply ordering them to clean up the salle before retiring to his quarters.*

*Kaylan had helped Yarik set everything to rights and then suggested that they both go take a long soak in their respective bathing rooms.*

*Yarik had nodded wearily and trudged off toward the Collegium as Kaylan half-stumbled toward the Heralds' Wing.*

Kaylan found himself wishing they could share a tub. *This separation by genders and rank is ridiculous. What does it accomplish when there are people like me who are shaych and like that woman who rode in the other day on some fool Companion who thought it was a brilliant idea to Choose someone with grandchildren? Didn't someone tell me once that the Tayledras don't engage in such nonsense? Smart people, the Tayledras.* He really needed someone to work the knots out of his shoulders and legs. *Perhaps it's worth a trip over to the House of Healing to pick up some rubbing oil before returning to our rooms.* He didn't feel like going back outside into the crisp night air, though. *Hair would probably freeze. It'll start snowing soon.* And he'd found out long ago that the Healers took great exception to his filching their supplies with his Fetching.

The bathing room door opened and closed.

Booted feet made their way across the tiled floor.

*Maybe it's just someone coming to wash up. Or use the latrine. Or take a bath.*

The steps stopped beside Kaylan's tub.

*Didn't think I could get that lucky.* "Tell me this is important."

"This is important."

Kaylan opened one eye.

Herald Bae, wearing pristine Whites, grinned down at him. As with any other Elderwood, there was no mistaking the family resemblance. The same blue eyes, same black hair cut at shoulder length, same lithe build . . .

*No wonder Grandfather can't keep any of us straight.* "Liar," Kaylan accused.

"You told me to—"

“Shut up.”

Bae pretended to button his lips shut and throw away a key.

Kaylan rolled his eyes. “Here. Let me Fetch that for you.” He quickly raised his hand, as if he were catching something—sending a good quantity of the bathwater at Bae in the process.

Bae gave him his best “You’re really lucky you can’t hear what I’m thinking” look as he snagged the towel with his foot and absently mopped up the mess.

Kaylan sighed and handed him the make-believe key.

Bae made a great show of unlocking his lips.

Kaylan leaned back and closed his eyes again. “I’m perfectly happy to lie here all night—“

“Not possible, Cousin.”

Kaylan grimaced and sat up. “I thought not. Which Mindspeaker can’t be bothered to come talk to me in person?”

“How’d you—?”

Kaylan Fetched a clean towel and threw it at his cousin. “No one without Mindspeech would have bothered to send you! They’d have come themselves!”

“True.” Bae took advantage of the clean towel to dry himself off.

Kaylan waited.

“Well? Stop lazing about. Fetch a clean set of Whites, and report to the Queen’s Own’s rooms. A page will be waiting to take you where you need to go.”

Kaylan groaned. “Why me?”

Bae shrugged. “There are three other Arrows in residence, so I’m guessing someone needs a Fetcher for this message.” He stepped backward, narrowly avoiding another soaking, as Kaylan surged to his feet. “Hey, if they needed someone to talk with an animal, I would have volunteered to take your place.”

Kaylan Fetched another towel into his hand.

Bae retreated out of the bathing room before Kaylan could throw it at him.

*Why in the name of all the gods would someone need a powerful Fetcher at this hour? Kaylan angrily toweled himself off. And why do I have to wear Whites? He let the water out of the bath and cleaned up his mess. It had better not be something stupid!* He Fetched the robe he had brought with him back to his wardrobe and called a clean set of Whites to replace it. He dressed, ran a comb through his damp hair and headed down the hall of the Heralds’ Wing toward the Palace, just barely keeping himself from stomping like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum along the way.

\* \* \*

Yarik had washed up hurriedly, dashed by the House of Healing for some of the almond oil Kaylan loved, snagged some cheddar cheese and fried crackers from the pantry, and sprinted to his room in the Collegium. He put the vial of oil on the foot chest near their bed and carried the rest of his treasures through the secret door to Kaylan’s room in the Heralds’ Wing, which now served as their sitting room. He set up the cheese and crackers on their desks. He thought he heard a sound come from Kaylan’s wardrobe, but a quick Look with his FarSight told him no one was there. *That Weaponsmaster has me jumping at my own imagination!* He built up the fire and tousled his short blond curls in the heat in an effort to dry them.

Someone knocked at their bedroom door. He scrambled back into the dorm, closed the secret door as quietly as he could, straightened his tunic, and cracked the door to the Collegium hallway open slightly to see who could possibly have come calling.

Kaylan's cousin, Bae, stood outside in casual garb of indeterminate color.

*At least they aren't Whites, so he's not on duty. He's probably not here to tear me away from an evening with Kaylan.*

Bae held a bottle of red wine and two stemmed glasses. "A little mouse told me that you grabbed some cheddar cheese from the pantry but didn't pick up anything to drink."

Yarik thought that was a bit of a complicated comment from a mouse, but Bae did have Animal Mindspeech, so it wasn't impossible. "Uh . . . "

Bae handed him the wine and glasses with a wink. "Kaylan's been summoned over to the Palace to help someone with something. I doubt he'll be too long."

"Uh . . ." Yarik wondered if he could possibly find a way to sound more stupid.

Bae laid his hand on Yarik's shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. "Heralds honestly don't bite." He cocked his head, not completely unlike the way Kaylan was wont to do. "Well, maybe Alberich does. Daryl says he spent the evening chasing you all over the salle."

"Uh . . ."

Bae laughed, not unkindly. "You, Cousin, need to get it through your head that no Elderwood will never harm you. In fact, every last one of us will defend you with our lives."

"Cousin?" *Well, at least I didn't say "Uh."*

Bae gave him a pretend hit to the chin. “Take all the time you need to let that sink in. Kaylan’s made you one of the family, whether you want to be or not. Get used to it.” He gently pushed Yarik back into the room. “Might want to open that bottle and let the wine breathe a bit. Kaylan should be back soon.” He closed the door.

Yarik stood there for a moment, trying to get his brain to work.

*:What was that about?:* he asked his Companion.

*:That,:* Illysha said, humor sparkling in her voice, *:was someone being nice to you. You might have said “Thank you.”:*

Even though she couldn’t see him, Yarik blushed. *:Could you relay my thanks through his Companion–? :*

*:Daryl,:* Illysha supplied. *:I can, and I will. But it wouldn’t hurt to thank him in person as well the next time you see him.:*

Yarik, too embarrassed to say anything else, hoped she could sense his intention to follow through with her plan. He managed to get the secret door open with the glasses and wine still safely in his hands. He set them beside the cheese and crackers, then looked at the cork. He located his dagger and pushed the tip into the cork just slightly off center. A few turns later, pulling up as he went, he was able to grab the cork and yank it out. He set his dagger and the cork beside the cheese. *Guess being a cabin boy all those years taught me a few useful skills.* He settled into the armchair in front of the wardrobe and stared at the fire, watching nightmares from his past dancing in the flames. *Hell of a way to learn them, though.*

\* \* \*

“You want me to Fetch what from where?” Kaylan had been ushered into a suite that was usually reserved for ambassadors. The lighting was close to nonexistent, but no one seemed to be bothered by that. After forcing him to wait for a ridiculous amount of time, a lighter shadow had separated itself from the darker ones. It still looked

more like a shadow than a human, and he honestly hadn't made up his mind whether he was talking with a man or a woman or something else entirely.

"A blackbird from a pie." The hoarse voice gave no hint as to the gender—or even the species—of the . . . well, "spy" was the best description Kaylan could come up with.

"And this pie is where?"

"It will be on Master Seisyll's table."

"Will be," Kaylan echoed. "When?"

"In three days."

"Okay," Kaylan drawled.

"There's one problem."

*Just one?* Kaylan had already thought of several. He waited for the shadow to elaborate.

"I don't know which bird it is."

Kaylan stared at the spy suspiciously. "There's more than one?"

"There will be two dozen birds."

"Two doz—?"

"You're the only one who can Fetch the bird and keep it alive."

Kaylan's eyebrows flew up toward his hairline. "Alive? Two dozen live blackbirds in a pie, and you want me to Fetch a specific one?"

"There's something special about this one."

"Do tell!" Kaylan prompted, failing to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"It won't be able to sing."

Kaylan stared up at the ceiling, doing his very best to control himself. “You want me to figure out which blackbird inside a pie that will be on the Master Baker’s table in three days can’t sing and Fetch it where?”

“You’ll know. Just make sure it stays alive.”

“Fine. If that’s all—“

“There’s one more thing.”

Kaylan, already halfway to the door, froze, trying not to sigh in exasperation.

“The bird likes rye.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Kaylan opened the door and let himself out. It wasn’t his job to question assignments. It was his job to carry them out. But that didn’t stop him from Fetching the spy’s belt into his hand. He wished he had Yarik’s FarSight so he could tell if the shadow’s pants had fallen down. “Here,” he said, handing the belt to the page who had escorted him to the suite. “Someone lost this.” Without further explanation, he headed back to the Heralds’ Wing.

\* \* \*

Yarik lay awake in bed, spooned against Kaylan’s back, listening to his steady breathing.

From the moment Kaylan had closed the hallway door, everything had been as he dreamed.

Kaylan had gushed over the thoughtfulness that had gone into their private feast. He’d made a show of testing the wine to see whether or not Bae had put something in it, and he’d praised Yarik effusively for recognizing the display as a joke. The scent of almond oil hung in the air, and Kaylan’s skin felt smooth and slightly slippery beneath his cheek.

Still, something wasn't right. *Why did Weaponsmaster Alberich make Kaylan chase me all over the salle?*

*:Do you want to keep puzzling about that, or would you like an answer?:*

Yarik couldn't tell whether Illysha was annoyed that he was keeping her awake or if she was trying to be helpful. *:I'd like an answer, please.:*

*:Kantor says his Chosen wanted your Beloved to see what you can do. He thought it might be useful.:*

Yarik's forehead furrowed. *:Running away is useful?:*

Illysha gave a mental shrug. *:If you need to live to fight another day.:*

Yarik bit his lower lip. *:Heralds are supposed to run toward trouble, not away from it.:*

*:Not always. You're supposed to be brave, not stupid. If you crest a hilltop and see an army, no one expects you to charge at it by yourself. And sometimes a message needs to get through to someone who doesn't have Mindspeech, like your Beloved. What if he needed to Fetch something and you were the only Herald who could give him the instructions he needed to do it?:*

Yarik couldn't remember when Illysha had started calling Kaylan his "Beloved," but he rather liked it. *:That's what we're training to do.:*

*:But you still have to be touching either each other or Adele and I have to help make the link work. What if there is some reason one of us isn't around? You need to be able to get to your Beloved, to touch him. You can't be caught up in a fight or captured.:*

Yarik tried not to finish the thought, but his brain supplied it anyway. *Or dead.*

Illysha remained silent.

Yarik pressed his nose against Kaylan's shoulder blades. He couldn't bear the thought of Kaylan being killed, but he'd never thought to reverse it. *Can Kaylan bear the thought of me dying? Is that what the Weaponsmaster was really trying to show him? How good I am at staying alive?* He rolled onto his back. *:He has a problem he's not telling me.:*

Illysha's smile preceded her words. *:Now that's the brilliant little pirate I Chose.:*

*:And you aren't going to tell me what his problem is.:*

*:Nope,:* Illysha confirmed.

\* \* \*

Kaylan rode alongside Bae, far out in the Companions' Field where they would not be overheard. The sky was as grey as the uniform beneath his white cloak, and he had no doubt the first snow would indeed come soon. "You're the one who knows all about animals. What would make a bird unable to sing?"

Bae, in his Whites and cloak, blended almost seamlessly with Daryl's coat. He would be all but invisible in snow. He looked up and watched a peregrine snatch a snowbird out of the sky. "It could have its mouth full."

Kaylan followed the falcon as it glided to the ground with its prey. He spotted jesses. "It's the wrong season for songbirds, and it would have to be trained to get it into a pie. Someone would have to be keeping it captive and teaching it. Could a blackbird be trained to hold something in its beak?"

Bae turned a sardonic look on him. "Asks the man who comes from a family who breeds dancing horses." He mulled over the thought.

“Something in its beak would be visible. But maybe it could hold something in its crop. That would prevent it from singing.”

Kaylan sighed. “Two dozen birds, and I need to figure out which one has something hidden in its crop and Fetch it when I can’t see—“ A thought suddenly occurred to him. “Yarik! Can I have a trainee work with me on something this important?”

Bae laughed. “Cousin! What happened to the man who always told me it’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission? Let Yarik help you. It will be good practice.”

Kaylan bit his lip for a moment, then nodded. “He should be getting ready to take Tandi home.”

“Then you can tell him now. Race you!” Bae called as Daryl took off toward the Palace.

Adele sprang after him.

The race would end the way it always did, with Adele winning. But for a while the cousins rode side by side, their Companions galloping beneath the glowering sky.

\* \* \*

Yarik sat on a bale of hay watching Tandi walk barefoot along Illysha’s spine. His Companion’s purr of pleasure hummed in the back of his mind. “I think she may have been a Firecat in a former life.”

“Which one of us are you talking about? Or to?” Tandi reversed direction and worked her way back toward Illysha’s withers. The girl had changed quite a bit since Yarik had started bringing her up the Hill from the Snow Fox to spend the afternoons in the stables. Well, she was supposed to be spending her afternoons in the stables, but the Companions—especially Illysha—had sort of appropriated her.

She'd grown out her close cropped, auburn hair so that it now made her look rather like a pixie. She wore a light blue tunic over a heavy muslin shirt, and warm, light blue trews covered her legs. She wasn't quite old enough to be a true Blue yet, but some mysterious, wealthy patron had sponsored her so that she would have a place at the Collegium to study whatever she pleased once she completed the mandatory schooling required of all children in Valdemar.

"Either." Yarik blushed. "Both." A stupid chanty the pirates used to sing when he was held captive aboard the ship on Lake Evendim kept echoing in his head, and he found himself singing it under his breath.

"I don't know about your toes,  
But I can't feel my fingers or nose . . ."

Tandi laughed. She jumped to the floor and snatched up her black leather boots. "I should be getting back."

Yarik rose and pulled on his grey cloak, then helped Tandi into her light blue one. Silently he saddled Illysha, putting an extra pad behind the main seat for Tandi to ride on.

Tandi slipped Illysha's bridle onto her head. "You'll let her warm up in the Snow Fox's stable a bit before heading back? It looks like snow."

*:You'd better,;* Illysha threatened before Yarik had time to answer.

Yarik pretended to be shocked. "I wouldn't dream of doing anything else!" he said, though he knew it would mean he'd probably miss his own dinner. *Maybe Kaylan will save me something.* He climbed onto Illysha's saddle and gave Tandi a hand up.

Tandi had no sooner settled into place than Kaylan trotted into the stable on Adele.

“Oh, good! I caught you!” Kaylan signaled for Adele to stop beside Illysha.

Tandi encircled Yarik’s waist with her arms. “We could be halfway to Karse, and you would have caught us,” she teased.

Kaylan winked at her, then turned his attention to Yarik. “Do you know Master Seisyll’s house?”

Yarik shook his head helplessly.

Kaylan looked at Tandi, who shrugged her ignorance. He swore softly. “Guess I’m going with you.”

“Not that we don’t enjoy your company,” Yarik said, “but why?”

Illysha carried Yarik and Tandi out of the stable as Adele fell into step with her.

The Companions headed for the Privy Gate.

Yarik frowned at Kaylan’s silence. “Are you planning for us to eat down at the Snow Fox, or are you just acting strange?”

“Both.”

Tandi, accustomed to the strange ways of Heralds, simply pressed close to Yarik’s back for warmth and ignored them.

*:What’s going on?:* Yarik asked Illysha.

Illysha gave a mental shrug. *:Adele says he has a secret, but she won’t tell me what it is. I think she doesn’t know.:*

Having grown up on a ship where everyone knew the length of each other’s toenails, Yarik was still trying to make up his mind whether or not he liked mysteries.

Kaylan kept him in suspense all the way down the Hill, throughout dinner, and halfway back up the Hill, until he suddenly guided Adele onto one of the streets where Master Guilders lived. “Don’t

turn your head,” Kaylan instructed, his breath turning white in the cold night air. “Use your FarSight. The third house on the right. The one with the shutters that look like lattice pie crusts on the windows. Look through the lowest level. Find the dining room. Do you see the table?”

Yarik rolled his eyes. “Kaylan!” The name misted out of his mouth before dissipating into the air. “I’m not that good with my Gift yet! Weaponsmaster Alberich was showing you how I can See an attacker and get out of the way. Herald Dirk has shown you that if you have a general idea where something is I can See it well enough for you to Fetch it to you and tell you when it’s safe to Fetch it back. But you have to know where it is first! Remember how well things don’t work when you try to Fetch a specific rock I’m Seeing but you don’t know exactly where it is?”

“I don’t need a specific rock. I need a blackbird. That can’t sing. That’s in a pie. With twenty three other blackbirds.”

Yarik’s mouth fell open, and Illysha stopped.

“Keep moving!” Kaylan ordered in a hushed voice.

Adele and Illysha walked slowly down the street.

“I’m a Mindspeaker, not an Animal Mindspeaker!” Yarik protested. “I can’t tell you which of two dozen blackbirds is the one you want even if I knew where they were!”

“Keep your voice down,” Kaylan whispered.

Yarik rubbed his eyes. “If you’re serious about doing this, we need an Animal Mindspeaker. Isn’t your cousin Bae one? He could have the bird go somewhere different from all the others. I could look for it. Then we could do whatever it is we do so you can Fetch it.”

Kaylan nodded slowly. “That’s not a bad plan.”

“Which means you don’t have a better one,” Yarik observed shrewdly. “The part you aren’t going to like is that I’ll have to physically look through the right window instead of using my FarSight to find the bird.” He saw Kaylan’s jaw clench and his face darken. “If you can come up with a better idea, I’m all for it. But, like you, I don’t have a better one.”

“Come on,” Kaylan said as Adele picked up speed. “We need to talk with Bae.”

Yarik held onto Illysha’s saddle bow as she chased after Adele. *I swear, if he does this to me one more time . . .*

*:Oh, just shut up and enjoy the view!:*

Yarik smiled in spite of himself. *:It is a nice view.:*

\* \* \*

Bae half-sat, half-lay on the foot chest opposite Kaylan’s fireplace.

Yarik lounged in the over-stuffed chair.

Their eyes moved from side to side as they watched Kaylan, who was pacing between them, well on his way to wearing a trench in the floor.

“Why do you have to physically look through a window?” Kaylan challenged Yarik. “Why can’t you just use your FarSight?”

“Cousin,” Bae admonished. “He’s already told you a million times. You’re asking him to pick one bird out of two dozen in a room that’s bound to be in chaos. There will be people and the Lord only knows what else is in it. He’ll have a hard enough time passing the information to you even with a visual image of where the bird is—provided I can even talk it into staying in one place. I can’t imagine him trying to do it only using FarSight! Did you start out Fetching living birds or did you start out Fetching quills?”

“Curry combs, actually.” Kaylan elaborated in response to the confused look on Bae’s face. “The first thing I Fetched was a curry comb. And I only did that because I wasn’t thinking about it.” He stopped pacing, put his hands on his hips and hung his head. “I’m sorry, Yarik. I know I’m being unreasonable.”

Yarik pulled his legs up and hugged his knees to his chest. “I can do it. You and Bae and your Companions will be nearby. You can pretend to arrest me if I get caught. You can tell the Master Baker you’ll turn me over to the Watch. I’m a curious young boy who’s never seen celebrations like that. They don’t need to bother with me. They’ll buy it.”

“I don’t see that we have much of a choice,” Bae said.

“I have a choice,” Kaylan insisted. “I could find some excuse to go into that room and Fetch the bird away while I’m there.”

“We’ve been over that!” Bae looked as exasperated as he sounded. “Without me, you don’t know which bird it is. Without Yarik, you won’t know if the bird is where I told it to go. And without you, I don’t see how anyone has a snowball’s chance in hell of getting the right bird out of there!”

Kaylan nodded. “I know. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I just wish we knew why this was so important,” Yarik muttered.

Bae shrugged. “Heralds are lucky if we know what season it is. We just follow our orders and do what needs doing, whether or not we understand it.”

Yarik crinkled his nose as if he smelled rotting fish. “Winter.”

Bae frowned. “Huh?”

“Winter,” Yarik repeated. “It’s going to snow soon. That’ll make it hard to see the two of you, but I won’t be wearing Whites.”

Kaylan shot Bae a worried glance. “We have to do this tomorrow for some reason I don’t understand. There’s no time to steal some livery or anything like that.”

“Tandi!” Yarik exclaimed. “I can borrow a set of her stable clothes. We’re not that much different in size.”

Kaylan’s brow creased. “Blue is going to make you harder to see?”

Yarik shook his head. “No. The clothes she used to wear before she started wearing blue.”

Kaylan looked even more worried. “A plaid jumper?”

Bae snickered.

Yarik blushed. “No! The ones she used to wear before that mysterious patron bought her those new clothes. She’s not using the old ones anymore. She won’t mind. I’ll just be a low-level groom who’s adding manure to the flower beds.”

Kaylan winced. “Who adds manure to flower beds when it’s snowing?”

Yarik shrugged. “So, I’ll be putting straw on the beds to protect the plants from the snow.”

Kaylan rubbed his temple.

Bae looked at Yarik, impressed. “How does a pirate know so much about farming?”

Yarik glared at him. “You don’t want to know.”

Bae conceded the point with a nod. “So, absent a better plan, Yarik rides down to the Snow Fox as he always does. Instead of bringing Tandi back here, though, he changes into her old clothes and makes his way back to the Master Baker’s house. Somehow he sneaks up to the dining room window, whichever one that is. He waits outside until the pie is opened and the birds fly out. Then he

cues the two of us to ride down the street. When we pull even with the house, I tell the correct bird to land somewhere, and Yarik figures out how to tell you where that is so you can Fetch it into my hood so I can calm it down. Then the two of us ride on while Yarik escapes to the Snow Fox. He changes back into his uniform and rejoins us at the Collegium.”

“Unless he gets caught.” Kaylan sighed. “It’s a great plan. A wonderful plan. What’s not to like about this plan?” He met Yarik’s gaze. “Any bright ideas about how to figure out which window belongs to the dining room, so Bae won’t have to worry about all the kittens I’ll be having while he’s trying to talk to a bird.”

Yarik giggled. Then his eyes widened. “Kittens! There must be cats somewhere around the house! We even had a cat on the ship to help control vermin. Bae can ask a cat which window is the right one.”

Bae rose. “Fine. I’ll ride down into Haven and talk with some cats. I’ll meet you at the Privy Gate tomorrow before dinner. Hopefully it won’t be snowing too hard. Oh, and Kaylan, remember to wear Whites.” He let himself out of the room.

Kaylan thought seriously about Fetching away his cousin’s belt but decided to let it slide. He had far too many things beyond his annoying cousin to worry about, Yarik being the most important of them. “Hungry? Which pantry shelf is the sausage on?”

Yarik stopped pouting and looked up at him with a mischievous grin.

\* \* \*

Yarik casually made his way along the alley that would eventually pass behind the Master Baker’s house. He had traded his uniform for a set of Tandi’s woolen trousers, homespun shirt, and brownish tunic when he’d left Illysha in her care at the Snow Fox. The pants

were too short, but not comically so. The shirt was tight, but he could still move in it. *The Lady knows I've worn worse!* He'd retained his grey boots since, without his uniform, they were well-worn and completely unremarkable. He was just another stable boy who had been sent on an errand and who was making his way back to his post—hugging himself because it was bloody freezing and starting to snow.

Somewhere out on the streets, Kaylan and Bae, in their Whites and hooded cloaks, were wandering up and down every street in the vicinity except the Master Baker's street, waiting for Yarik to give them the signal to approach.

By the third time Yarik had walked the block, his head was starting to ache from using his FarSight. He knew what the house looked like from the front, but he couldn't figure out which one it was from the back. The twilight had long since faded to darkness, and the falling snow wasn't helping.

:*Here,*: Bae's voice suddenly said in his head, startling him. :*A little help from a friend.*:

A grey maulkin leapt silently to the top of a wall beside one of the gates and began pawing at the snowflakes that were beginning to pile up on the post.

Yarik eyed the cat suspiciously as he made his way through the gate, but it ignored him. He quickly scanned the grounds, spotted the building he was fairly certain was the stable, and walked in the shadows along the wall until he reached it—leaving footprints in the freshly-falling snow every step of the way. The smell of hay, horse manure and leather confirmed his guess as to the building's purpose. He passed between the building and the wall, heading toward the street. Yarik thanked the Lady for temporarily shielding him from the snow. He paused when he reached the corner nearest the street. :*Which window is it, Bae?*:

*:Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!:*

A tabby with the burly shoulders of a mouser brushed past Yarik.

*:Follow the feline!:*

The cat shot off toward the house.

Yarik completely forgot about the plan to grab some straw to put on the plants. He pretended to chase the cat, wondering if all the Elderwood cousins trained to be so annoying or if they were just born that way.

Bae's chuckle preceded his abrupt instruction to *:Duck behind the bushes!:*

Yarik, accustomed to following orders for as long as he could remember, dove behind the neatly-trimmed rosemary hedge. He found himself nose-to-bill with an extremely overweight puddle duck whom he suspected was being fattened up for the holidays.

The duck quacked, turned awkwardly and waddled along the wall, coming to rest behind a lavender bush.

*:Very funny, Bae,:* Yarik growled silently as he crawled on his belly to join the duck. *At least the snow isn't penetrating the bushes yet.*

*:I thought so,:* Bae replied, sounding altogether too pleased with himself. *:Take a look. Do I have you under the kitchen window or the dining room window?:*

Yarik, hoping the rosemary would shield him from watchful eyes, rose carefully and peered over the windowsill.

Sideboards and hutches concealed every fingerwidth of the white-plaster walls. Cookies, cupcakes, tarts, pies, rolls, loaves, muffins, pastries, pretzels, and buns covered every remotely flat surface. A long, sturdy table ran the length of the room. Oversized chairs occupied by oversized people lined the sides. A massive fireplace

stood at one end, providing both light and a place to heat drink, which was then presumably ladled into the massive punch bowl on the octagonal table beside it. Overhead tallow candles burned in wrought-iron chandeliers that were shaped like frosted cakes.

Yarik sank to the ground and leaned his back against the chilled foundation stones of the house. *:I have no idea. It could be either. Or both.:*

*:Do you see a pie large enough to hold two dozen blackbirds?:*

*:No.:*

Bae was silent for a bit. *:Kaylan says that means the pie could have been carried into the dining room, if you are looking at the kitchen or that it has yet to be carried in from the kitchen if you are looking at the dining room.:*

Yarik planted his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands. *:That's not helpful, Bae. Have you found the bird?:*

*:It's in the pie.:*

Yarik dropped his hands and appealed to the gutters three stories above his head. *It could be worse, he reminded himself. I could be scrubbing a poop deck.*

The sound of cheers and applause suddenly assaulted the shuttered window.

Yarik hopped up and peered through the lattice.

A massive pie now squatted on the middle of the table.

*:Now!:* Yarik signaled Bae.

A bald man, who could have done some considerable damage had anyone thought to launch him from a catapult, stood proudly beside the pie, preparing to carve it with a knife that looked more like a sword to Yarik's stunned brain.

“ere, now!” a voice bellowed directly behind Yarik. “Somethin’ no’ gud’s always up when prints walk inta bushes an’ don’ walk ou!”

Yarik’s FarSight showed him a powerful hand with dirty fingernails reaching behind the rosemary for him. He grabbed the duck, flung it at his would-be captor, and fled into the snow-whitened courtyard.

Chaos erupted both inside and outside the house.

Yarik could See Kaylan and Bae riding down the street but they were still several houses away. *:I’ll be flying out the gate. Please, tell Kaylan to be in the way.:* He dodged, slid, twisted and scrambled in all directions, always a hair out of the reach of anyone who tried to lay a hand on him. He side-stepped a tackle attempt by one of the pages.

A groom came at him with a rake.

Yarik slipped in too close for the man to use his weapon, and then tore off in another direction.

People tried to burble out of the house, but the door was too narrow for more than one of them to fit through at a time.

A few blackbirds flew out over their heads.

*:Birds escaping, Bae! Tell the right one to hide behind the cake stand on the third shelf of the hutch next to the fireplace. The white one with the peppermint frosted cupcakes on it.:*

Bae made no attempt to hide his annoyance. *:It’s a blackbird, not one of those things the Tayledras scouts are supposed to use! Think simple!:*

Yarik was having trouble thinking at all. He stepped between two servants, paused, and scrambled away.

The servants slipped on the cobblestones and crashed into each other.

Yarik saw the sword half a heartbeat before it would have taken off his head. He threw himself at the wielder's legs, rolled to the side and was already running again before his target hit the ground.

*:Kaylan's asking if there's any rye bread.:*

Yarik jumped over a bench and skated a few paces down the driveway before he got enough traction to start running once more.

*:What in the name of all that's holy is "rye bread"? Rye's what you use to make whiskey!:* He pulled up short, waited for two more pages to collide with each other, darted left and continued his dash for the gate.

*:Whiskey!:* Bae's Mindvoice sounded gobsmacked. *:Was there a punchbowl in the room?:*

A form of double vision took hold of Yarik as he half ran, half-glided toward the gate. *:On a table near the fireplace! There's a bird there!:*

*:That's the one!:*

Two servants started to close the leaves of the gate.

Yarik slid through just before the leaves clicked together. He sprawled into a warm, white wall that he belatedly recognized as a Companion's side.

"Catch him!" Bae yelled.

A hand snagged Yarik by the back of his shirt and hauled him into the air.

"You're under arrest," Kaylan's voice growled as he pressed Yarik firmly across his lap.

Yarik closed his eyes to get rid of the overlay of images and concentrated on his mental picture of the bird drinking from the punch bowl.

“No need to trouble yourselves any further,” Bae said in a far too cheery voice. “We saw what happened. We’ll turn him over to the Watch for you. Go back inside and enjoy your evening. It’s far too chilly out here for you to be bothering with the likes of him. It smells as if fine food, good drink and a warm fire await you. Have a good night!”

“Where’s the nearest Watch station?” Kaylan asked.

“Huh?” Yarik tried to sit up.

Kaylan forced him back down as Adele and Daryl walked forward.

“Not too far,” Bae said impishly. “Over by the Snow Fox I think.”

Yarik looked up at him.

Bae made sure Yarik glimpsed the blackbird, almost invisible against his dark hair, hiding on his shoulder beneath his hood.

“You know this means you’re rubbing my bruised ribs with liniment when we get back to the Collegium,” Yarik grumbled as they passed out of earshot of the Master Baker and his guests.

Kaylan chuckled. “Oh, I’m sure I can do better than that, little pirate.” He patted Yarik reassuringly on the rump. “Yes, I can definitely do better than that.”

\* \* \*

“So, it never was your assignment? It was Bae’s?” Yarik stuffed another pocket pie they’d picked up at the Snow Fox for their long-delayed dinner into his mouth as they lounged in front of their fire.

“Venison and blackberries,” Kaylan said as he examined the filling of the pie into which he had just bitten.

Yarik swallowed his mouthful and washed it down with apple cider from the mug at his elbow. “Who cares? It’s food. Answer the question.”

Kaylan grinned. “Yes. I didn’t figure it out until he refused to join us for dinner and insisted on turning in the bird without me.”

“Then who was the spy who gave you the assignment?” Yarik claimed another pie from the fast-disappearing pile on the plate between them.

Kaylan shrugged. “Probably Bae. We’re from a family of performers, remember? Plus, the assignment was so bizarre I was concentrating more on how in Valdemar I was going to complete it than on who the person was who was giving it to me.”

Yarik took another swig of cider. “Why didn’t he just ask you to help him the way you asked me?”

Kaylan nibbled at his pie as he contemplated the question. “Who knows? Maybe he wasn’t supposed to ask for help. The whole thing was supposed to be a secret after all.”

Yarik snagged the last of the pies. “What did the bird have in its crop anyway?”

“Something small. Something important. Something fed to it by someone in the kitchen or in wherever the birds were before they were placed in the pie. I doubt we’ll ever find out.”

Yarik finished his cider and stared at the bottom of his empty mug. “I don’t think I much like mysteries.”

Kaylan chuckled and took the mug from him. He fetched the detritus of their meal onto their desks, planning to deal with it in the morning. He rose, squatted, and hefted Yarik into his arms. “Get used to them. Heralds spend a ridiculous amount of time solving them. Every time we’re presented with a court case—“

Yarik stopped him with a kiss. “You talk too much.”

Kaylan grinned wickedly and carried him into their bedroom, an entire host of activities on his mind that had absolutely nothing to do with talking.