

Bonds
By
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Herald Kaylan Elderwood took the stairs to the rooms he shared with Herald Yarik Rafton three at a time, oblivious to the cries of protest from the three Guards, who were struggling along behind him with the rest of his packs. He dropped his saddlebags and bedroll in the hall and threw open his door, arms spread wide to intercept Yarik's exuberant greeting--

A young woman sat up, eyes wide as a snowhare's, from where she had been reading on an enormous bed that Kaylan most definitely did not recognize.

The Herald frowned and lowered his arms. He stepped back into the hall and looked at the door. Right room. Wrong furniture. Wrong occupant. He poked his head back inside and looked at the woman again. He couldn't remember seeing a Karsite in student grays when he had ridden out of Haven with Yarik almost a year ago. *Perhaps her looks are why she's being housed in the Herald's wing instead of the student dormitory?* "I'm sorry. I've been out in the field. Did my quarters get shifted while I was gone?"

"Not exactly." The woman smiled prettily. She pushed aside the history notes she had been studying and stood. "I take it you're Herald Kaylan?"

He nodded slowly. "And you are--?"

She held out her hand to him. "Danya Winterborn."

"Herald-Trainee." He accepted her greeting, then strode past her, into the room. "Where's Yarik?" He eyed the bed, baffled by the extraordinary dimensions.

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

"And what happened to our furniture? And, if I'm not in the wrong room, what are you doing here?"

"No one warned you?" Danya frowned.

Kaylan heard something in her voice that made him turn and stare at her. She came up almost to his collarbone. Her hair was the same deep black as his, and their hawk-like faces could have been stamped from the same mold. But the resemblance ended there. Her eyes were coffee-colored; his were the same blue as a clear winter sky. Her skin was almost golden brown; his was snowy white except where it had been darkened slightly by the late spring sun. She radiated warmth; he looked as if someone had chiseled him out of ice. She was as plain as any Karsite he had ever seen; his handsome features had broken any number of hearts both before and after he had acknowledged his lifebond with Yarik. He had known something was wrong when the two Heralds arrived to replace him at the Healer's Temple. He knew there was some reason Yarik couldn't return to duty so Kaylan was being sent to rejoin him at Haven. The Heralds had insisted that he ride for the Collegium as fast as his Companion, Adele, could carry him. But no one would tell him why, and he couldn't Mindspeak well enough to ask Adele. He'd tried trancing down to talk with her. Sketchy images of Yarik's Companion, Illysha, in foal neither explained why Kaylan had to make the journey to Haven in all haste nor what the emergency had to do with the young woman who was

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

standing in the middle of his rooms as if she belonged there. "Warned me about what? Did something happen to Yarik? With our lifebond, I thought I'd know--"

Guards swore and dove out of the way as Yarik pelted up the stairs, charged into the room, crashed to his knees and threw his arms around Kaylan's legs. "I'm sorry! I didn't do it on purpose! You have to believe me!" Grime had turned his whites, which were so worn as to be suitable only for arms practice, almost as gray as Danya's.

Kaylan lay one of his fine-boned hands on his lover's sweat-drenched head and arched his right eyebrow. "Bright Havens, little pirate! You're a mess!"

"I'm not letting go until you say you forgive me," Yarik swore, staring up at him with those huge, deer-like eyes that made Kaylan's heart melt.

"I forgive you," the newly-returned Herald laughed softly. "Now, what have you done that's got everyone in such a state?"

"I found out it's possible to have more than one lifebond."

Kaylan blinked. "What?" He heard the Guards drop his packs outside the room and retreat discreetly down the stairs.

Yarik gripped the hem of Kaylan's white leather tunic. "Please! You must believe me! I didn't know you can feel the same way about more than one person!"

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

Kaylan's heart suddenly wound up somewhere in the vicinity of his boots. He glanced at Danya, then grabbed Yarik's arms and forced him to stand. "What are you babbling about?"

"I've got two lifebonds!" Yarik confessed--then promptly burst into tears.

Kaylan couldn't stand it. He embraced his lover and let him sob against his chest. "Hey, now. None of that. You aren't the first person I've met who had convinced himself he was *shay'a'chern* because he was abused as a child. If you need to leave me for a woman, I won't be happy about it, but I will understand."

"But you don't understand!" Yarik wailed. "I don't want to leave you! I still feel the same way about you that I always have. I just feel that way about her, too!"

"Hush." Kaylan kissed the top of his head. He looked at Danya, who was hugging herself and shifting her weight from foot to foot, as if she couldn't make up her mind whether to stay or run. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit shocked. I don't Mindspeak. I thought my Adele was trying to tell me that Yarik had to take Illysha back to Haven because she accidentally got herself pregnant. I guess I didn't understand the part where my lifebonded left me for a woman."

"Yarik has no intention of leaving you," Danya assured him. She avoided his startling blue eyes. "I'm the intruder here. I'll go ask Dean Teren if I can have

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

my student room back." She gathered her notes and started to walk out the door.

Yarik tore himself away from Kaylan and grabbed for her. "Danya, no! I--" He hiccuped.

The young woman smiled and caressed his cheek. "You've been with Kaylan a long time. I had no business interfering with that."

The look on Yarik's face as he watched Danya walk through the door was too much for Kaylan. "Wait," he called. "Please. If it is a lifebond, you have as much right as I do to interfere." He embraced Yarik from behind. "You're sure about this?" he whispered in his lover's ear.

Yarik sniffled, wiped his nose on his sleeve and nodded. "I didn't mean to--"

"Hush!" Kaylan hugged him tightly before he could start to cry again. "I know you didn't. Danya, that's Yarik's and my stuff out there in the hall. Could you give me a hand bringing it into the room, then maybe go study in the library for a couple of hours? I haven't seen him for five months, and we apparently have a lot of things to sort out between us. Then I'd like to spend some time alone with you, if you don't mind. I want to find out what kind of woman managed to capture my little pirate's heart. I'm sure, at the very least, we'll find that we can be friends."

Danya smiled appreciatively at Kaylan. "He's as marvelous as you said he was," she informed Yarik.

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

"You absolutely must keep him." She set down her notes on the desk, then turned her attention to hauling packs and saddlebags into the room.

Kaylan released Yarik. "Go draw a bath," he commanded, giving his lover a slap on his backside. "You're a mess, and you need a good soak."

Yarik dried his tears on his sleeve. "You have a lot of the road on you as well."

"I have every intention of joining you as soon as Danya and I get our things out of the hall," he assured him. "Go." He shoed him toward the bathing room with a wave of his hands, then stepped into the hall and grabbed two of the packs. He heard water running, and Yarik was nowhere in sight when he dropped the packs near the foot of the enormous bed.

Danya almost ran into him as she turned to go get another load.

He gripped her shoulders, steadying her. "Don't look so worried. I promise I don't bite. I thought I was going to be spending the rest of my life alone with him, but he's obviously in love with you. Give me a little time to get my head around that idea. All right?"

She nodded, then whispered, "I'm so sorry--"

He pulled her into a full embrace. "Don't you start on me, too," he chided. "I don't even know you yet. You're not allowed to fall apart in a total stranger's arms right after you've just told him that you're barging into his love life. I'm sure that's a law. If it's not, the

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

Council should pass it before Midsummer." He waited until he saw a hint of a smile around her mouth, then released her. "Take your notes, and go study. I promise, I'll come find you before dinner."

"I don't think any of us will feel like eating," she sighed as she gathered her notes.

He hefted the last of his belongings into the room. "Nonsense. I've seen Yarik pack away enough to feed ten people when even the thought of food was making everyone else ill. Where he puts it, I'll never know."

"I'll see you before dinner," Danya smiled, then descended the stairs with a sure, solid step that fairly screamed of a lifetime spent trying not to trip over roots and fallen branches.

Kaylan closed and bolted the door after her. He brushed his night black hair out of his eyes and took a deep breath. He strolled over to the bathing room and leaned against the door jamb, admiring the view as Yarik stripped and slid into the steaming water. Kaylan peeled off his tunic and dropped it atop the pile of Yarik's clothes. He rolled up his shirt sleeves, then knelt beside the tub. "Want your back washed?"

Yarik stared at him a moment, biting his lower lip, then nodded.

Kaylan grabbed a sponge and soap. He worked up a lather and rubbed it over his lover's shoulders and arms and back. He squeezed the remainder of the soap onto Yarik's hair, then set aside the sponge and attacked

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

the oily mess with his powerful fingers. Satisfied the hair might actually come clean, he dropped his hands to Yarik's neck and shoulders, in search of muscles that refused to unknot. He waited until he felt his lover relaxing beneath his ministrations, then murmured, "I've missed you, little pirate. I'll take half of you, if that's all I can get. But please don't fault me because I expected more."

Yarik twisted in the tub, drenching Kaylan. "Since when does a Herald get even half of another Herald? With everyone we keep losing in the war with Hardorn, the odds of three of us being posted anywhere for any length of time are just about nonexistent."

"Unless one of the stallions gets Adele in foal as well," Kaylan grinned as much at the conspiratorial thought as at the completely ridiculous picture Yarik cut with soap making his hair stick out in all directions from his head. "We're losing Companions as well as Heralds. We have to replace them somehow. I don't think anyone would object too much if Adele obliged."

"I'm sure Danya's Terrill will be more than willing to help, if you're serious." Yarik lowered his eyes. "I'm frightened, Kaylan. We know Gifts usually show up in certain combinations for a reason. What could possibly be on the horizon that a Mindspeaker/Farseer needs to be lifebonded to an extremely powerful Fetcher and a Mindspeaker/Fetcher/Empath?"

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

Kaylan brushed away a puff of suds that was threatening to drip into Yarik's gorgeous brown eyes. "Goddess. I don't even want to think about that." He shivered. "Once we get ourselves sorted out, we should probably mention that little nightmare to the Queen's Own so someone will know about us when the need arises." He shivered again and eyed the water. "Got room in there for me?"

"Hm-hmm," Yarik grunted. He dipped under the water, rinsing the soap from his hair, then scrunched down to the far end of the tub.

Kaylan peeled off his soaked shirt and tugged off his boots. He suspected he looked downright absurd, removing his soggy trousers, but Yarik seemed to enjoy the display. Free at last, Kaylan smiled and stepped into the tub. He eased his weary body down into the hot water. It was a tight fit with both of them in the tub, but they had learned a long time ago that they liked it that way. "There were several times after you hared off to rescue your problem child that I thought I would never be warm again."

Yarik curled into his arms. "She's not a child."

"I know," Kaylan sighed. He nibbled at Yarik's neck. "I'm sorry. I'm trying not to be difficult about this. But I'm only human, and, Lady Bright, someone's gone and claimed a part of my beloved when I wasn't looking. I think I have a right to feel at least a little hurt." He regretted the words immediately when Yarik

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

started to break into tears again. "Here, now! I'm sorry. I know you didn't do this on purpose." He wrapped his legs around him, surrounding him with his body. He forgot how young Yarik was sometimes. The former cabin boy had been through enough in his twenty-two years to make him act at least a decade older than he was. Not that Kaylan was an antique at thirty, but somehow those extra years of riding Circuits alone had given him the wisdom to know that the best part of life was not the moments of blinding passion but rather the steady, day to day sharing of trivial things with someone else who held them dear. Kaylan had no doubt that he would still have as many moments as he pleased with Yarik. What he saw slipping away from him were those simple joys, and he was not sure he had the courage to let them go quietly.

"Please, give her a chance," Yarik asked in a voice Kaylan could barely hear.

He kissed his lover's temple. "Only if you promise you won't fall to pieces on me while I do. You've had almost half a year to get used to the idea of having two loves. I've had less than a candlemark to realize I'm going to be sharing you with someone for the rest of your life. Give me time to adjust."

Yarik nodded, then twisted in his arms so he could kiss him full on the mouth.

Kaylan felt the walls he'd so carefully built around his heart during the months of separation come crashing

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

down. Somehow, he got them both out of the tub and onto towels, but they failed to make it even halfway to the bathing room door before their bodies were joined as closely as their hearts. The passion passed and left a strange comfort in its place. Kaylan had never exhibited a tendency toward Foresight, but he suddenly knew that somehow everything with Yarik and him and Danya was going to be all right. The two lovers cleaned each other up, then raided their closets for fresh uniforms.

"I'll unpack for you," Yarik offered.

Kaylan started to object as he pulled a clean tunic on over his head, then remembered that he had promised to meet Danya in the library before dinner. If they were going to have any time to talk at all, he had to get going. Besides, the activity would help keep Yarik's mind off what his two lifebondeds were talking about behind his back. Two lifebondeds. The only other trio he had ever heard about was only one that might have been between Heralds Ylsa, Keren and Sherrill if Ylsa hadn't been killed. Kaylan certainly never dreamed he would ever be caught in such a tangled emotional net. "Thanks," he grinned. He pulled on a pair of soft leather boots. He kissed Yarik one last time, then unbolted the door and strode into the hall, looking a lot more confident than he felt. He heard Yarik close the door behind him. He had no idea what he was going to say to the mysterious Danya when he reached the library, but he hoped either the Goddess or the Lord of Lights would inspire him.

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

After all, the way his life had been going lately, that didn't sound like too much to ask.

* * *

No inspiration had been forthcoming, but Kaylan was slowly discovering that Danya had enough for both of them. He strolled with her through the Palace garden, listening to her talk. The flowers gave off a heady perfume in the early summer sun. Birds chirruped and called to each other, venturing forth from their nests now that the heat of the day was passed. But Kaylan barely noticed the beauty around him as he tried to come to terms with the stranger who had ridden so unexpectedly into his life. Danya was being completely candid with him, answering his questions about herself, her childhood in the company of a Bard-turned-hermit in the Forest of Sorrows, and about her and Yarik, almost before he asked them. He had wondered at first if she were using her Gift of Mindspeech to read his surface thoughts or her Empathy to put him at his ease, but no Companion would ever Choose such a manipulative and unethical person. He had to accept her as the complete innocent she seemed to be. He had no choice but to believe that she was simply telling him everything she would want to know if their places had been reversed.

"Yarik's convinced that Terrill's sweet tooth got us into this mess." Danya smiled impishly at him. She

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

settled onto a carved, stone bench in a quiet corner of the garden and motioned for him to join her. "I, however, think it's all Yarik's fault. If he weren't so absolutely loveable, I would have been happy just having him for a teacher and a friend. But, honestly," she continued as Kaylan sat beside her, "how many Heralds even think to take treats to the Companions who have not Chosen when they visit the Field? Or use their stipends to buy little gifts to make newly Chosen students a little less lonely? Or drop by the House of Healing with freshly picked flowers for people they hardly know?"

"Not many." Kaylan hugged himself and stretched out his legs, crossing his ankles. Most people saw Yarik's quirks as a nuisance to be endured because the Companions liked him so. Danya actually loved the former cabin boy for pretty much the same reasons Kaylan did, not the least of which were those completely charming quirks. "Do you know why he does those things?" He asked the question, expecting the young woman to praise Yarik's noble soul or some such nonsense.

As she had so many times in the half-candlemark they'd spent together, Danya surprised him. She bit her lower lip for a moment, avoided his eyes, then gave a single nod. "All the stories Kestran told me while I was growing up never prepared me for why Heralds act the way they do. To hear him tell it, every Herald was motivated by selflessness and a calling to give up his or

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

her life in a noble cause. But I don't think he believed that. I think he knew the reality is a lot more complicated. Each of us has a different motive or even a dozen motives for everything we do. Yarik goes out of his way to be thoughtful to others because no one was thoughtful to him--and because, deep down, I suspect he believes that he is less worthy of kindness than everyone else. Why else would his God and Goddess have let those horrible things happen to him?"

Kaylan draped his arm around her and pulled her close. "You understand my little pirate very well. Only someone who loves him as much as I do would see that about him." He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it out slowly. "I suppose it was a bit stupid of me to think that I could have him all to myself just because we were lifebonded. He needs more than one person to care for him if he's ever going to believe that he's worth caring about. He only had two supports in his life--Illysha and me. He needed a third to stabilize him. I should have seen this coming. I don't know." He shook his head. "But I do know I can't do anything to take that third support away from him. I love him too much to hurt him like that." He looked into her dark brown eyes. "I'll never love you the same way he does. I'm *shay'a'chern*, not like whatever Yarik is. I don't have a word for someone who can feel the same way about both males and females. But I do think I can learn to

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

treat you as I treat Illysha, as someone Yarik is bonded to by a soul-deep love I do not share. Is that acceptable?"

Danya gave a small, sad laugh. "That's the Herald in you talking. The Wounded Lover is going to take off to the Field and cry on his Companion's shoulder while I nursemaid Yarik through dinner. Then maybe the Lifebonded part of you will come back to our rooms and help me convince Yarik that his world is not falling apart, that we both love him, that we intend to be there for him as long as we live, and that the three of us can find a way to make this work."

"I didn't know you had Foresight," Kaylan teased.

Danya blushed prettily. "I don't. I don't need to use my Gift of Empathy, either, to see the hurt in your eyes--or the love behind that hurt."

He kissed the top of her head, then rose and sprinted toward the Companions' Field.

Adele met him at the Grove and let him sob against her shoulder until his pain eased, slowly replaced by the realization that his stomach was trying to gnaw through his backbone. His mare made a noise that sounded rather like a laugh as his stomach growled. She shoved him toward the kitchen with her head, in an unmistakable command to go get something to eat.

Kaylan knew he couldn't eat, though, until he saw Yarik again. He splashed his face with water from one of the many streams that babbled happily through the Companions' Field. Feeling as if he'd repaired the worst

"Bonds", Linda A. Malcor

of the damage his outburst had caused to his face, he made his way slowly back to his rooms. He hesitated a moment, wondering if he should knock, then opened the door--without knocking--and stepped inside. He frowned at the sight of Danya, quite alone, reading on the bed. "Where's--?"

"Dinner?" Yarik called from outside the open door.

Kaylan spun around to see his lover carrying a plate of food and a mug of ale toward him.

Yarik held out the peace offering. "Illysha said Adele said you were starving."

Danya scrambled off the bed and rescued the plate and tankard from Yarik as Kaylan lunged at him and drew him into a fierce embrace.

"Everything will be all right, little pirate," he promised. "Together, the three of us will make everything all right."

"Thank you!" Yarik whispered.

Kaylan smiled at Danya over Yarik's shoulder. "Bright Havens! You're so calm! Whatever possessed you to get tangled up with two hysterical males like us?"

Danya set the food and drink on the desk. "You two did," she smiled as she closed the door and joined their embrace. "You two--and your love."