

Companions

By

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Herald Kaylan Elderwood sat cross-legged on a bed of pine needles in a grove of evergreens in the Companions' Field, his elbows resting on his knees and his palms pressed against the closed lids of his bright blue eyes. His shoulder-length, straight black hair, damp with sweat from the oppressive heat that always settled over Haven in the summer, hung in limp curtains from a center part. Not an ounce of fat showed anywhere on his lithe frame. Instead of Herald Whites he wore a dark gray uniform cut in the same pattern and tailored to fit him perfectly. As an assistant to the Equitation instructor, Herald Keren, he was the one inside the paddock with the Trainees every day, getting covered in dust and muck, while she stood in Whites, safely outside the fence, so he'd been assigned the type of uniform worn by Weaponsmaster Alberich. His partner-to-be, Herald-Trainee Yarik Rafton, took great pleasure in teasing him about how the students doing chores in the laundry were thrilled they didn't have to scrub splatters of unknown origin out of his Whites.

Kaylan wasn't thrilled about anything at the moment. His assignment for the afternoon had been to get his Fetching Gift to mesh with Yarik's Gifts of Mindspeech and FarSight through their lifebond. Stones had more Mindspeech than Kaylan did, though he was a powerful enough Fetcher that he should have been able to take those stones and place them in a straight line at a Waystation three days' ride from where they were. After more candlemarks of trying than he wanted to think about, he still hadn't been able to

get a specific stone in the Companions' Field that Yarik was concentrating on to so much as jiggle. "This is impossible. Let's just give up."

Yarik, arms folded stubbornly across his chest, sat beside the depressed Herald, not quite touching him. Average in height and weight with curly brown hair and brown eyes, he was as plain as Kaylan was memorable. He wore the same gray uniform as all the other Trainees at the Heralds' Collegium, which meant it was only approximately his size, well-worn and carefully mended. "Heralds don't give up."

Kaylan's older cousin, Herald Jorge Elderwood, sat on the ground a few paces away from them. He leaned heavily against his Companion Tieg's flank as the stallion lay unmoving behind him. His Whites blended with Tieg's coat, giving the disconcerting impression in the dimming light that his head was floating just above his Companion's spine. His short once-black hair stuck out in all directions, as if he had spent several se'nnights in bed. Which he had. His unfocused eyes, identical to Kaylan's in color, seemed out of place in his pale, scarred face. He braced his hands against the ground, as if trying to keep the world from spinning beneath him. "It's not a problem with you two meshing. It's impossible to tell where one of your auras stops and the other starts."

Kaylan raised his head. "No offense, Jorge, but you don't look like you could get two physical images to line up, let alone two auras."

Yarik tousled his hair in a futile attempt to dry it. "Heralds Dirk and Kris make it look so easy."

"Dirk and Kris both have Mindspeech," Jorge said. "They work together like a fine-tuned machine. It's all straightforward and logical for them. You two are trying to work with a lifebond, and logic has nothing to do with it."

Kaylan sat a bit straighter and pushed his hair away from his face. “I miss Grandmother and Grandfather.”

Jorge snorted. “Tell me about it.”

“What do they have to do with anything?” Yarik asked.

Kaylan used his sleeve to wipe away the sweat that dribbled down his face. “Grandfather is really good at teaching people to work together.”

“And Grandmother would have me back in the saddle by now,” Jorge added.

“It’s only been six se’nnights, Jorge,” Kaylan reminded him. “You’ve seen enough head injuries from people falling off horses to know that some cracked skulls take longer to heal than others. And you didn’t just fall. You had a bandit try to bash your brains out.”

“*Bandits*,” Jorge growled, starting to rise. “More than one.”

Kaylan waved him back down just before he fell down. “You know what I mean. You took a lot of damage to your head. Healers can repair the fractures, but having your brains sloshed around like mop strands in a wash bucket is something even Mindhealers can’t do much about.”

Yarik jostled Kaylan with his shoulder. “When was the last time you swabbed a deck?”

Kaylan automatically jostled him back. “You think pirates are the only ones who use mops?”

“Bah!” Jorge exclaimed. “How the two of you can stand to be practically on top of each other in this heat, I’ll never understand.”

Tieg turned his head, looked up and down at the spot where Jorge was leaning against him, and gave a snort.

Jorge glared at his Companion. "It's not the same, and you know it."

Tieg shook his head and stared off into the trees as if he were talking with someone.

Adele and Illysha, Kaylan thought. They're probably down by the Terilee where it's cooler.

"The sun's setting. I should be getting myself back to bed." Jorge sighed. "I'm sick of living in a cubicle that's only slightly larger than a coffin."

Kaylan hid a wince. Jorge's room was the same size as that of every other Herald who spent most of his time out on Circuit. But his cousin's description of his living quarters struck a little too close to the heart. *I need to get him out of here.* Suddenly an idea so crazy he would have sworn it came from Adele slipped through his mind.

"Heyla! It's nearly time for everyone who's free to ride out on Mandatory Family Visits. Yarik and I were going to stay here because you couldn't make the journey. But what if you could make it? Think you can ride if we tie you to Tieg's saddle?"

"Huh?" Jorge asked.

"Huh?" Yarik echoed.

Tieg swiveled his head around until he was eye to eye with his Chosen.

Jorge crinkled his nose. "I know you aren't going to carry me anywhere except back to my room unless I'm tied to your saddle."

"You stuck me in a caravan to get me to Haven when I was too sick to ride," Yarik ventured.

"You were almost dead and had never ridden a horse in your life. Plus, we'll never get someone to loan us a caravan just to visit our family. Tied on, I think Jorge could do it." Kaylan grinned wickedly

at his cousin. “With a bowl in his hands so he doesn’t get Tieg’s coat dirty.”

“The only thing I’d do with a bowl is throw it at you.” Jorge pulled himself onto Tieg’s back.

Tieg winked at Kaylan as he stood up carefully.

Kaylan used his Fetching to steady Jorge.

Jorge bristled. “Cut it out. I can mount my own Companion without your help. You may, however, Fetch my bags to the courtyard when it’s time to leave. I’m already packed.”

“You’re never unpacked.” Kaylan stood and helped Yarik to his feet. “It’s settled, then. We’ll come get you the morning after the final classes let out.”

Jorge tried to nod but wound up clutching two fistfuls of Tieg’s mane to keep from falling off.

Tieg gave a long-suffering sigh and carefully wandered out of the grove.

* * *

Yarik felt Kaylan’s fingers press upward on his chin, gently closing his mouth once more.

“It really isn’t a good idea to leave your mouth open with this many horses around,” Kaylan advised. “Especially this time of year. You’re guaranteed to catch a fly.”

“You’d Fetch anything away from me before I could swallow it.”

“You have too much faith in my talents, little pirate.”

“Not when you’re from a family who can do that!” Yarik pointed at the Elderwood cousins who were riding half a dozen dazzlingly

white stallions around an indoor ring, weaving in and out like ribbons on a Maypole.

Three horses circled sunwise around the ring and three widdershins. They rejoined in a single line, and in unison side-stepped to the far side of the arena and then back to where Kaylan and Yarik were leaning against the rail.

Kaylan had changed into his Whites for the journey, while Yarik still wore his Greys. That left the riders, in blue uniforms that matched their eyes, as the only splashes of color inside the massive building. The air was markedly cooler than it had been in Haven, and the scents of straw, horses, and well-oiled leather wafted on a pleasant breeze.

“And you’re all related?” Yarik asked.

Kaylan grinned. “We marry outside the family, but the children all come out looking the same. We gave up trying to keep track of the exact relationships a long time ago and just call everyone ‘cousin.’”

The stallions skipped halfway across the ring and took to the air, kicking out their hind legs in unison at the height of their jumps.

Yarik’s mouth fell open again.

Kaylan obligingly closed it for him.

A stately man, his frosted black hair gathered at his neck with a black bow, joined them at the rail. Dressed in a black shirt, trows, and riding boots, he watched the practice with a critical eye. Tall and thin, with a rail-straight back, his eyes were also what Yarik had started to think of as “Elderwood blue.” His stern features could have belonged to Herald Alberic, but they lacked the Weaponsmaster’s scars.

Kaylan had introduced Yarik to him while Lady Elderwood, a comparatively soft woman in Healer’s Green with her silver hair

coiled into a bun at the back of her head had untied Jorge from Tieg's saddle and directed a swarm of young men to help the injured Herald into the main house, which apparently involved sweeping him off his feet and carrying him up a maze of ramps and through a door wide enough to have belonged to a barn rather than to a noble family's estate.

"Perhaps in Karsite speak I should," Lord Elderwood said in perfect Karsite. "Your friend looks as if I eat him will."

Kaylan laughed and put a protective arm around Yarik.

"Grandfather! Grandmother is far too busy with Jorge for you to give Yarik a heart attack!" he exclaimed in Valdemaran.

Lord Elderwood glanced sideways at the two of them. "So, young Yarik, what do you think of our dancing stallions?" he asked in their common tongue.

It took Yarik a couple of tries to find his voice. "I understand why my Companion is so jealous of them."

Pride filled every wrinkle in Lord Elderwood's face, making him appear ageless. "It does take a while for us to train Companions to dance like our stallions when Heralds need to travel with our show, especially if the Heralds don't have Mindspeech. Too bad Kaylan's Adele is a mare. She dances very well and would fit right in. She's learned a lot from him."

Yarik saw Kaylan flush. "You said she danced with the stallions in Haven. How long did it take to teach her?"

Kaylan's face turned bright red.

Lord Elderwood raised an eyebrow. "So? You didn't tell him."

"Adele slipped herself into the herd a few years before she Chose me and tricked me into teaching her how to dance," Kaylan admitted sheepishly.

“That Adele is a crafty one.” Lord Elderwood studied the stallions as the riders dismounted, removed their horses’ tack and began to walk them around the ring to cool down. “She even had me fooled. I can’t keep track of the cousins, but I know every stallion, mare and foal on the estate as well as their lineage back three generations. I still don’t know how she did it.”

Kaylan released Yarik, gripped the top rail and braced one of his dark grey boots against the bottom one. “Does Grandmother think she can help Jorge? The trip was really hard on him.”

“Life is hard on all Heralds.” Lord Elderwood stared straight into Kaylan’s eyes. “You were right to bring him home. Elderwoods should always return home.” With that, he strode away.

Yarik watched him go. “What did he mean by that?”

“He wants me to show you something,” Kaylan said. “Come with me.”

* * *

Kaylan knelt near the edge of the Wyrfen Woods before a granite stone inscribed with the names “Marc” and “Valeree.”

Row after row of similar markers stretched across a huge pasture, all of the plots small because all of the bodies had been cremated.

“Your parents?” Yarik guessed.

Kaylan nodded. “There’s a reason Grandfather speaks Karsite so well. He spent the better part of a year trying to find out where they’d been consigned to the Fires so he could bring their ashes home. We’re not sure these really are their ashes, but he believes they are, so we all agree with him.”

“I assume your father looked like you,” Yarik said.

Kaylan gave a small laugh. “He was an Elderwood.”

“What about your mother?”

“I don’t remember much about her,” Kaylan mused. “They ran a tavern in Karse, gathering information for Valdemar. They were rarely here. The family raised me.”

“What *do* you remember about her?” Yarik pressed.

“She was tall. A giant. Almost as tall as father.”

“I think, perhaps, you were little.”

Kaylan smiled. “Yes.” He took a deep breath. “Father found her serving on a merchant caravan when he was traveling with our dancing stallion show. I don’t think he knew where she came from. I don’t think she knew where she came from. The story changes every time anyone tells it. She had straight dark hair and hazel eyes. She was very practical and efficient when she approached a task, but she could party harder than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“What were their Gifts?”

“Father’s main Gift was Fetching. Mother’s was Empathy. They both had Mindspeech. We don’t know what gave them away.”

“How old were you when they died?”

“Six.” Kaylan rose and faced Yarik, hugging himself. “Are you upset?”

Yarik’s brow creased. “Why would I be upset?”

“Because I can remember my parents, and you can’t remember yours.”

Yarik laid his hand on the spot where Kaylan’s arms crossed. “I think it may be harder to know what you lost than to not remember what you had. And it’s not just your parents.” He gestured at the graveyard. “You’ve known many of the others, too.”

“Yes.” Kaylan stared at something over Yarik’s head.

“So you’re Kaylan’s partner!” a woman called.

Yarik glanced over his shoulder to see Lady Elderwood picking her way through the stones toward them. “Not yet,” he said with a grin. “But I’m working on it.”

“How’s Jorge?” Kaylan asked.

Lady Elderwood smiled. “A little confused about which way is up, but he should be able to get his feet back under him now that he’s here. The House of Healing in Haven just isn’t set up to heal an Elderwood.”

Kaylan grinned at Yarik’s puzzled look. “You’ll understand once I’m finally able to show you inside the manor. We’ve always had so many Heralds in the family everything is built to accommodate Companions. They can be with us all the time, if they please.”

“And being close to his Companion helps a Herald heal,” Yarik said in the tone of a student reciting a lesson.

Lady Elderwood studied Yarik as if she were measuring him for a new uniform.

“What do you two want for accommodations? A room for two Heralds? Two Heralds with two Companions? Separate rooms with or without Companions?”

Yarik froze. “Those are choices?”

“Why don’t you ask our ladies what they want?” Kaylan suggested.

Almost at once confusion flooded Yarik’s eyes. “Illysha says two Heralds . . . without Companions.”

Kaylan laughed. “I honestly haven’t been making up stories about my family. We really are madder than a warren of Spring hares.”

Lady Elderwood smiled impishly. “Except we built our warren for Companions.”

Kaylan chuckled. “Some things need to be seen to be believed.” He waited for his grandmother to take his arm, then led them toward the house.

* * *

“Too much for one day?” Kaylan asked as he strolled with Yarik toward the dining hall. He had traded his Greys for a linen shirt, a blue tunic that he had cinched at his waist with a silver sash, black trews and soft black boots.

Yarik wore a matching outfit, only his tunic was periwinkle blue and his sash was gold. “Well, you did warn me.” He heard the wave of noise ahead of them, louder than anything he’d heard in the Collegium Common Room. “Do the horses really eat with the family?”

“Some of them. Grandfather’s premier stallion, Snow Dancer, is almost always there.” Kaylan bowed slightly, waving Yarik through the massive entrance to the dining hall.

Yarik halted between the open doors that, given their size, could have graced a stable. Parallel columns of panels carved with scenes from tales of Valdemar, only some of which he recognized, covered the doors.

A riot of color swirled around the room. Stained glass set in lead filled huge arched windows along both sides of the hall with a masterpiece taking up most of the wall behind the head table. The windows glowed in the light of the summer evening, each one featuring a white stallion in a different stance. Intricate tapestries depicting Heralds in Whites against jewel-toned settings hung between the windows. The main window displayed the shield of Valdemar with its winged white horse and broken chains. Or not.

Yarik took a closer look. The white stallion lacked wings and chains and faced in the opposite direction from Valdemar's. His pose was the same as the final leaps dancing stallions had performed in the practice ring, and the field behind him was "Elderwood blue".

:It's the Elderwood coat of arms,: Illysha commented from wherever she'd gotten off to.

:And I suppose all the stallions in the windows and the Heralds on the tapestries have names?:

:Do you want to know them?: Illysha asked far too seriously.

:"Cousin" will do for now.:

Running the length of the room were four elongated wooden tables with benches on both sides. Elderwood after Elderwood sat shoulder to shoulder, with the youngest family members nearest the entrance. Here Yarik and not Kaylan was the one who stood out as did the Elderwood spouses. Servants, who didn't look like Elderwoods either, carried platters of bread, cheese, meat, vegetables and fruit in season—all healthy fare and lots of it. Fruit juice, honey-wine, cool water and chilled tea flowed in abundance.

Bins of delicacies fashioned for horses alternated with troughs of fresh, clear water around the edges of the room. Companions grazed from trough to trough like courtiers at a formal reception.

"Where are the Heralds?" Yarik asked over the clamor.

"Right in front of you," Kaylan replied. "No one wears white in the Hall."

"Why not?"

Kaylan shrugged. "I have no idea. That's just the tradition."

"Where are we supposed to sit?"

“All of the other family Heralds have Mindspeech,” Kaylan admitted a bit ruefully. “I, however, have to be sitting practically on top of Grandmother and Grandfather if I want to have a conversation with them.”

Yarik’s lips formed a silent “O.”

Kaylan nodded toward the two empty chairs beside Lady Elderwood. “Grandmother has saved seats for us. She knows I don’t like to spend the evening with Snow Dancer’s nose in my hair.”

Adele and Illysha came up behind them, their silver hooves chiming on the flagstone floor. The Companions took up positions beside their Heralds like ladies waiting to be escorted into dinner.

Kaylan led Adele into the hall.

Illysha nudged Yarik with her nose, urging him forward.

Yarik awkwardly caught up with Kaylan, Illysha at his elbow.

When they reached the head table, Illysha and Adele nodded at Lord and Lady Elderwood, then wandered off to join the other Companions.

Kaylan held out the chair beside Lady Elderwood for Yarik.

Yarik sat down nervously—and scooted his chair as close to Kaylan’s as he could as soon as the older Herald had taken his place.

“Easy, little pirate,” Kaylan soothed. “I promise, she doesn’t bite.”

“Much,” Lady Elderwood teased, snipping off the end of a carrot with her teeth. “So, young Yarik, what do you think of the cousins?”

Yarik let his gaze wander over the horde. The Elderwoods reminded him of the Heralds at the Collegium. They weren’t exactly wearing uniforms, but there was a similarity in the style of their clothing, roughly matching the outfits he and Kaylan wore. Some were

carrying on one-sided conversations. Others were taking turns telling stories. Still others were clearly using Mindspeech, having given up trying to shout over the roar of voices.

Lady Elderwood laughed, not unkindly, at the dazed look on Yarik's face. "You'll get used to it eventually. Some things take time."

Illysha caught Yarik's eye and winked at him.

Kaylan helped himself to food, passing the platters to Yarik, who had no choice but to put at least something on his plate.

Lady Elderwood smiled approvingly at the tactic. "Jorge tells me you two have a problem."

Kaylan grimaced. "If we could use our Gifts in tandem, we'd be extremely useful to Valdemar. But I'm so thick-headed—"

"It's not your fault," Yarik reassured him.

"Oh, but it is, little pirate." Kaylan took a sip of honey-wine. "Some god or goddess dropped you straight into my lap, and I can't figure out how to work with the perfect partner they've given me."

Lady Elderwood broke a bran muffin in two. "How do you work with Adele?"

"I talk out loud to her," Kaylan responded promptly.

"Not when you're riding you don't," Lady Elderwood said, placing the pieces of muffin back on her plate. "You don't talk to any of the stallions, either. How do you communicate with them?"

Kaylan shrugged. "I just do."

Lady Elderwood drummed her fingers on the table. "I think you're right, Grandson. I think the problem does lie with you. I think you're forgetting to use what you've already learned."

Lord Elderwood handed Snow Dancer a slice of pear and leaned over to join the conversation. “That’s an awful lot of thinking, my dear.”

Lady Elderwood ignored her husband. “Lifebonded pairs often finish each other’s sentences, know what each other is going to say before they say it, and copy each other’s movements without being aware of what they are doing. And there is no question that the two of you are lifebonded. You mesh perfectly, like an Elderwood riding a dancing stallion.”

“You sound like Jorge,” Kaylan complained.

Lady Elderwood raised her eyebrow.

Snow Dancer sidled over and knocked Kaylan on the top of his head with his nose.

Adele and Illysha made a noise that sounded like giggling.

Yarik pointed at Snow Dancer. “How—?”

Lord Elderwood raised his hand, and the stallion promptly returned to him, shoving his nose forward to be caressed. “So, our Kaylan didn’t tell you that little family secret, either.”

“Most of the Elderwoods have Animal Mindspeech,” Lady Elderwood elaborated. “That’s how we train the stallions. When Kaylan realized he was deaf to both humans and horses, he taught himself to ride the stallions without that sort of control. It was the only way he could think of to make himself useful to us. It never occurred to him that instead of being one of the family Riders he might be one of the family Heralds.”

Lord Elderwood snorted rather like one of his stallions. “For one who uses his head so much, a lot of things never occur to him.”

Lady Elderwood patted her husband’s knee. “You know very well that cousin Pam’s the smart one in the family.”

“You sure it isn’t cousin Sam?” Lord Elderwood asked. He turned his attention back to Kaylan. “Grandson, you’re a Riding Instructor. Teach Yarik to ride our stallions the way you do—by touch.”

“B-but that would take years!” Kaylan stammered.

“Best get started early tomorrow morning, then,” Lady Elderwood said, apparently following her husband’s thought.

“Yes,” Lord Elderwood agreed. “I’ll give orders for two of our retired stallions to be ready for you at dawn.”

Yarik could think of dozens of places he’d rather be than on the back of one of the dancing stallions. His terror must have shown on his face.

“You’ll do fine,” Lady Elderwood reassured him.

Yarik had his doubts.

* * *

Dressed in a plain linen shirt and brown leather trousers, Yarik was astride Snow Bank, one of the most sedate stallions ever to grace the Elderwood estate. But reins on a Companion were completely ornamental, and he had absolutely no idea what to do with real ones. As a result he kept giving the stallion unintentional signals that sent the horse into dance steps that caused him to overbalance one way or another, which resulted in Kaylan instinctively Fetching him back into the saddle.

Kaylan, in a matching outfit, rode Avalanche, a rangy stallion whose unpredictable antics constantly threatened to unseat him in spite of the fact he’d been in a saddle since before he could walk. With his attention split between Yarik and Avalanche, he found himself incapable of teaching anything.

Illysha and Adele were being no help, standing outside the paddock, amusement dancing in their sapphire eyes.

“I’m never going to get the hang of this,” Yarik grumbled.

Snow Bank elegantly reared.

Yarik yelped and started to tumble over the stallion’s hips.

Kaylan held Yarik in place with his Fetching until Snow Bank had all four hooves once again planted firmly on the ground.

“Stop catching him!” a voice barked directly behind Kaylan.

Kaylan spun Avalanche around to face his grandfather, only half aware that Snow Bank was copying the maneuver with Yarik clinging to his pommel.

Horse and rider melding perfectly, Lord Elderwood and Snow Dancer looked like a centaur. “One of your letters said Yarik grew up on a ship. If he did, then he knows how to balance.”

“Do you want Yarik to wind up like Jorge?” Kaylan demanded.

“Does your Weaponsmaster Alberich assign Fetchers to protect his students?” Lord Elderwood asked.

“No,” Kaylan admitted. “Shouldn’t I care what happens to Yarik, though? This isn’t like working with a wooden sword!”

Lord Elderwood quickly tapped Kaylan on the top of his head with his riding crop. “Since when did you become such an idiot? How many times have I watched you make mistakes? Does that mean I don’t care what happens to you? How many times has your Companion let you make mistakes? Does that mean Adele doesn’t care what happens to you? We can’t learn from our mistakes if we aren’t allowed to make them.”

Kaylan stubbornly stuck out his chin. “Yarik—“

“Is tired of being spoken about as if he isn’t here.” Yarik had finally managed to bring Snow Bank to a full stop by holding perfectly still. “Truth be told, though, I may be in a bit over my head.”

Lord Elderwood gave a half-laugh. “When is a Herald anything else?”

Avalanche suddenly flanked Snow Bank without any direction from Kaylan as Snow Dancer took up position on the other side. He suspected his grandfather had given the order using Animal Mindspeech and fumed silently.

“Grandson, Yarik was quite capable of surviving everything life threw at him before you met. And Yarik, you have no need to hide under Kaylan’s wing. You have two perfectly good wings of your own.”

“I have—?” Before Yarik could finish the question, Snow Bank was on his hind legs, pawing at the air in perfect unison with Avalanche and Snow Dancer.

As Kaylan concentrated on staying astride Avalanche, Lord Elderwood turned a stern eye on Yarik, who was well on his way to sliding off Snow Bank’s back. “There’s a hoop on the top of your head! A rope runs through it! Someone up in the sky is pulling straight up on the rope! Show me!”

Kaylan completely missed Yarik’s response as Avalanche abruptly raised himself almost vertical and took three jumps forward on his hind legs. He turned a wild flail into a command for his own stallion to drop back to the ground and spin. By the time he could risk a look at his grandfather, Yarik was sitting firmly in his saddle with Snow Bank standing quietly beneath him.

Lord Elderwood sent Snow Dancer sidestepping in a circle, always facing them with his chest and hindquarters pointed precisely away. He brought the magnificent stallion to a graceful halt directly in front of them. “Your horse is a weapon just like your sword. When you are fighting with your sword, where should your attention be?”

“On your opponent’s eyes!” Yarik answered.

“Not always!” Kaylan shouted as if he were still a Trainee instead of a Herald who’d been in Whites for almost six years.

Lord Elderwood looked slyly at his grandson. “Ah! I see you have paid at least a little attention to that Weaponsmaster of yours.”

Yarik glanced at Kaylan. “I don’t get it.”

Lord Elderwood urged Snow Dancer to step up beside Snow Bank so they were nose to tail. “What if your enemy is behind you?” He slapped Yarik’s back with his riding crop. “How do you look at his eyes then?” He tapped Snow Dancer with his heel, causing the stallion to reverse until the two horses stood halter to halter, staring at the Wyrfen Wood. He pointed at the trees with his crop. “What if your enemy is too far away for you to see his eyes?”

“I’m a FarSeer!” Yarik snapped. “In back of me, behind a tree, on top of a mountain, inside a mine, it doesn’t matter! As long as I know where he is, I can see his eyes!”

Lord Elderwood rocked back in his saddle, intrigued. He turned his attention to Kaylan. “And what of you, Grandson? Where is your attention?”

“On his arrows,” Kaylan replied, “if he’s shooting at me. Fetching them into trees or the ground or whatever else is handy.”

“And if he’s behind you?” Lord Elderwood pressed.

“Am I mounted or dismounted?” Kaylan asked.

“Mounted,” Lord Elderwood said. “And he has a sword instead of a bow.”

With a quick sequence of heel taps Kaylan sent Avalanche flying into the air. At the peak of the jump, the horse kicked out at the imaginary foe with his hind legs. As soon as the stallion’s hooves

touched the dirt, Kaylan spun him around, raised his hand, and fetched a sword into it. He caught it by the hilt and pointed it at the imaginary attacker. "He's disarmed."

"Dismount to arrest him!" Lord Elderwood instructed.

Kaylan swung to the ground.

"Another bandit comes at you from behind!"

Kaylan reached out his free hand, and a second sword appeared in his grasp. "He's also disarmed."

Lord Elderwood smile grew grim. "Yarik, dismount and stand beside my grandson." He waited for the Trainee to obey. "Here is where Kaylan took the swords from." His eyes unfocused briefly. "Without using words, tell him when it's safe to put them back."

After a moment, Kaylan felt Yarik touch him. He returned the swords where they belonged.

Lord Elderwood smiled. "Nicely done."

One of the cousins strolled into view with a stallion tacked up for work on long reins.

"Heyla, Ned!" Lord Elderwood called.

"It's 'Fred,'" the cousin said good naturedly.

"I don't care if you're Jed!" Lord Elderwood growled. "Get Flurry over here and work him in the paddock."

Fred led the stallion through the gate in the fence.

"Watch," Lord Elderwood commanded.

Fred walked just behind and to Flurry's left so the horse could see him. Using signals from the reins and his elongated riding crop, he put the stallion through his paces.

Flurry sidestepped, trotted in place, and changed lead with his front legs. There seemed to be an invisible string between them just as there was between an entertainer and his puppet. Only this puppet had no strings. And he had a mind of his own. And he weighed at least five times as much as Fred. He was perfectly capable of killing his handler should he take it into his head to do so.

“What you are seeing is not done with Animal Mindspeech,” Lord Elderwood said. “At this level such a Gift actually gets in the way of the performance. This didn’t happen overnight. It is the result of almost six years of daily practice, of carefully building the bond between horse and handler.” He looked straight at Yarik. “You, young man, are the handler. You tell the ‘horse’ what to do.” He turned on Kaylan. “You are the ‘horse’. You do as he says.”

“I’m not a horse,” Kaylan said petulantly.

“When you work with Yarik you are. Take care of your stallions, then practice what you should be practicing.” With that Lord Elderwood rode out the gate and toward the indoor arena.

“He should be teaching at the Collegium,” Yarik marveled.

“He could have been,” Kaylan mused as they led their stallions toward the stable. “He’s one of the very few people ever to refuse to be Chosen.”

“Why would he do that?” Yarik’s disbelief underscored his words.

Kaylan gestured at everything around them. “He thought he would be of more use to Valdemar raising Heralds than he would being one.” He halted Avalanche near the tack room and removed his saddle and bridle.

Yarik brought Snow Bank up alongside Avalanche as Adele and Illysha joined them. “How did you Fetch those swords to you without seeing them?” he asked as he unsaddled his stallion and removed his reins.

“I knew where they were.” Kaylan took a cloth and rubbed Avalanche down as Yarik mirrored him and their Companions watched. “Grandfather just gave us better advice than anything we’ve been hearing for the last moon at the Collegium. We started with the Advanced stuff without thinking about the Basics. Instead of me taking something unfamiliar and putting it somewhere I can’t see, I need to Fetch something that is familiar to me. Then you tell me when it’s clear to put it back.”

Their Companions whinnied and nodded their heads in unison.

“How can I do that if I don’t know where you’re taking things from?”

“You are going to tell me what to take.” Kaylan turned Avalanche loose.

Yarik sent Snow Bank after Avalanche and watched as the stallions headed for their paddock without anyone leading them. “I’ve been here less than a day, handsome. I don’t know where anything is.”

Kaylan grinned as he put away his tack and grooming supplies.

“You just told Grandfather that you only have to know where something is in order to See it. Use your FarSight to select something, then tell me what it is. I’ll Fetch it, and you can tell me when it’s safe to put it back.”

Yarik mimicked Kaylan, putting away his equipment as well. “You, handsome, have more faith in my abilities than I have in yours.”

“Grandfather’s right. We already have faith in each other. We need to have faith in ourselves. Come with me.” Kaylan headed out of the stable.

“As if I’m going anywhere else,” Yarik quipped as he fell into perfect step with him.

* * *

At the edge of the Wyrfen Wood, a bright stream babbled over rocks, marking the edge of the Elderwood property.

“This is my favorite spot,” Kaylan said as he stepped onto the sunlit patch of grass between the water and the woods. He climbed atop a boulder and held up his arms as if to embrace the view.

Pastures and paddocks spread out before them. Humans and horses bustled around the stables, the paddocks and the massive building that contained the indoor practice ring. Beyond the house, pastures stretched as far as Yarik could see. In one pasture mares grazed while their foals played nearby. In another young stallions ran free, developing their endurance, sorting out their social order, and otherwise, well, just being horses. Yet another pasture contained retired stallions who were more interested in grazing than anything else. Yarik imagined that the farms and villages that produced the food and goods needed to maintain the massive estate lay somewhere beyond the distant hills.

“I came here when Grandmother told me my parents had been killed.” Kaylan dropped his arms to his sides. “I thought that if I just tried hard enough I could see them riding over the hills, the sound of their jingling bridle bells being drowned out by the stream, and I imagined what a good laugh we would have over dinner about how everyone in Haven thought they’d died when they’d actually escaped and ridden home.” He hopped down onto the grass. “I didn’t know about the Death Bell back then. Some of my cousins heard it and relayed the message to Grandfather through Mindspeech.”

Yarik’s eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. “If this place holds such sad memories for you, what are we doing here?”

“The view.” Kaylan sat cross-legged on the grass, facing the main house. “Kneel behind me.”

Still puzzled, Yarik obeyed. He put his hands on Kaylan's shoulders to balance himself. "Now what?"

"I can find practically anything on the estate blindfolded. Keep your hands on my shoulders, and tell me what to Fetch."

The light of understanding danced in Yarik's dark brown eyes. "I get it! I'll unconsciously tighten my grip on your shoulders the way you give silent commands when riding a horse."

"Exactly. Start with something easy."

Yarik concentrated on the breezeway of the stable. "Do you remember where you left the curry comb you were using?"

A heartbeat later the curry comb was in Kaylan's hand.

Yarik grinned. "Okay. It's clear."

The curry comb disappeared.

For the next candlemark they practiced, with Kaylan Fetching and returning different items from all over the estate by following Yarik's directions. "Jorge's uniform."

Kaylan laughed. The uniform appeared in his hands.

Yarik yelped as he saw Jorge in his room, leaning against Tieg, wearing only his small clothes.

:*KAYLAN!*: Jorge screamed in Mindspeech.

Yarik rubbed his temples. "There's nothing wrong with Jorge's Mindspeech. I meant the uniform in his wardrobe!"

"Of course, you meant the one in the wardrobe. I'm just making Jorge feel at home." The uniform vanished from Kaylan's hands. He rose and helped Yarik stand.

Illysha and Adele stepped out from behind the trees and approached their Heralds, humor glittering in their eyes.

“Was the look on Jorge’s face worth it?” Kaylan asked.

Yarik snickered. “Priceless.”

Kaylan swung up onto Adele’s back.

Illysha waited for Yarik to mount. *:You really are perfect partners,:* she commented as they rode through the trees and onto the lane that led to the manor. She skipped forward until she was even with Adele. *:So are we.:* The mares tossed their heads in unison and pranced in perfect step.

Yarik laughed. “I don’t think we’re the only ones practicing to be partners around here.”

“That’s what Elderwoods do,” Kaylan said with a wink. “We spend our lives training to be partners with our stallions. And with each other.”

“Like Heralds and Companions.” Yarik thought he saw Adele and Illysha exchange a bemused look. *:You’re hiding something.:*

Illysha leapt forward.

Adele mirrored her.

Kaylan easily maintained his seat.

Yarik wobbled for a moment, his half-formed suspicion completely jostled out of his head.

Adele and Illysha winked at each other and set off in a synchronized trot toward the house.