

Midsummer Night's Dance

By

L.A. Malcor

Based on works by Mercedes Lackey

Licensed by Creative Commons

Sweat coated Herald-Trainee Danya Winterborn's palms, making her glad that her Companion, Terrill, needed no guidance from her as he ambled along the well-maintained road through Wyrfen Wood. The breakfast she had shared with Herald Yarik Rafton, at the inn where they had spent the night, had settled into a hard lump in her stomach. She had no idea what she had actually eaten. She felt guilty about letting Yarik spend his hard-earned stipend on something she had no real desire to eat, but he had insisted. He had cheerfully paid their entire way from the Collegium in Haven to the inn in Wyrfen Wood, knowing she had absolutely no money. He was practically bursting, he was so excited about showing her Elderwood manor and its famous dancing horses. She tried to seem cheerful for Yarik's sake, but all she could think about was that they would reach Herald Kaylan's ancestral home by late morning. There, she would be forced to meet the family of the man whose lifebonded she had unintentionally stolen. She had begun to make her peace with the strikingly handsome Kaylan before he had left to ride the Forst Reach Circuit that included his family's lands, yet she dreaded how strangers who loved him--and who had every reason to dislike her--would react to Yarik thrusting her under their collective noses.

"Amazing animals," Yarik rhapsodized about the Elderwood horses for the thousandth time. "Born dark brown. Pity they don't stay that way. Those horses

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

would be in as much demand as the Shin'a'nin warsteeds if they didn't turn into what mercenary captains politely call 'Here I am. Please, shoot me.' white by the time they're fully trained. Even their eyes change from brown to almost-blue."

His Companion, Illysha, jangled her bridle-bells in irritation at being subjected to the endless praises of mere horses yet again.

Yarik ignored his mare. "Kaylan comes from an extremely large family. Several of them in each generation are Heralds, and they tend to get handfasted to other Heralds and perpetuate the breed. The family Heralds send most of their stipend back to help with the expenses, so money's never a problem." His gold-brown hair damp with sweat, he glanced up at her with his gorgeous, brown, puppy-dog eyes to see if she got his joke.

Knowing full well that even a whole family of Heralds would never make enough money to sustain an estate the size of the one he described, she nodded absently. She wiped her right palm on her grey-clad trouser leg, leaving a dark, damp smear.

"Kaylan was a bit of a disappointment on that count. We've never found anyone willing to handfast a *shay'a'chern* couple, lifebonded or no. Besides, I'm unlikely to ever give him children anyway." Yarik winked at Danya. "Yet the family's all but officially adopted me. So, once they hear that I've gone and got myself lifebonded to a woman, maybe they'll ease up on

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Kaylan. I'm sure they'll adopt our children into the clan." He waited for Danya to smile again, then continued. "The Heralds in the family are mainly good for the tax breaks they provide by being Chosen. The bulk of the Elderwood money actually comes from the branch of the clan that works as traders. They take the star horses out to perform at various festivals and bring back the profits. The complex is quite incredible, really. The manor house and all of the outbuildings are designed so the horses can come and go as they please. Kaylan's grandfather says it's to accommodate the needs of the Companions of all the Heralds in the family, but I think his favorite stallion would share his bedroom even if no one in the clan had ever been Chosen." He snickered. "It was either that or convince Grandmother to move out to the stables."

:I've always wanted to visit Kaylan's family.: Terrill interjected, sensing his rider's nerves. *:Illysha says Yarik learned the trick about treats from Kaylan's grandfather.:*

:Don't fret, heart-brother.: Danya patted the stallion's silky white neck. *:I'm sure it's just the forest that has me on edge. Wyrfen doesn't sound anything like Sorrows. It's too quiet, that's all.:*

Yarik guided Illysha in close to Terrill. "Relax. Kaylan's grandparents are as wonderful as their dancing horses. They absolutely refuse to judge anyone until they meet the person for themselves. And anyone who

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

spends a few moments with you couldn't help but love you as much as I do."

Danya tossed her shoulder-length black hair away from her face. She'd started growing it out at Yarik's suggestion, hoping it would do something to detract from her obviously Karsite features. "How many times have you almost come to blows with people on this journey simply because I look like their hated enemies? How can Kaylan's grandparents feel any different about me, especially if they know what I've done to him?"

"You don't know Kaylan's grandparents," Yarik sniffed. "They wouldn't care if you really were a Karsite."

"For all I know, I am," Danya sighed. She concentrated on the sound of Terrill's hooves on the road in a vain attempt to keep herself from wondering about her never-known parents and the family she would never meet.

They rode in silence for the rest of the morning. The sun was almost directly overhead when they broke free of the trees. Yarik gave a whoop and urged his pregnant Companion to head south at a faster pace.

Illysha grudgingly complied.

Terrill pranced excitedly beside her as Danya hung on for dear life.

The ground-devouring pace of the Companion's carried them over the well-worn track through a series of hills. Finally, Yarik brought Illysha to a halt at the top of a hill, grinned at Danya and gestured to the horizon.

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Terrill came to a stop beside Illysha so Danya could stop worrying about not falling off and see what Yarik was trying to show her.

"Oh, my!" Danya gasped.

Pastureland spread before them as far as she could see. Blinding white mares and their dark brown foals dotted the landscape. Actually, "foals" wasn't quite right. The colts and stallions with the mares ranged from practically newborn to greying steeds about four years of age. Beyond the mares was another pasture filled with older, light grey-to-bleached white stallions, who were balancing on their hind legs, leaping into the air, and capering around as if they were engaged in some strange kind of dance. Enormous paddocks and foul weather shelters and riding rings separated the stallions from an absolutely colossal, sprawling, one-story manor house.

"Welcome to Elderwood Manor," Yarik grinned, then sent Illysha down the hill and into the herd of mares and their offspring.

Terrill waited until he felt Danya's legs press tightly against his sides, then followed his fellow Companion at a slightly more sedate pace.

A frail, elderly woman, dressed in Healer's green, met them at the manor house door. "Yarik!" she smiled as the Herald leapt to the ground and ran to her.

Yarik picked up the woman, kissed her on the cheek and swung her around, setting her down close to where

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Danya was dismounting from Terrill. "Grandma Elderwood, this is Herald-Trainee Danya Winterborn."

Danya hesitated, unsure whether to bow or offer her hand.

The aged Healer settled the problem for her by hugging her within a breath of her life. "Good to meet you!" She released the Herald-Trainee and turned back to Yarik. "You'll be wanting to get your Companions out of their tack. You know where to store it. Grandfather's down in the main riding ring--but I don't need to tell you that!" She winked at him. "After you see to your Companions, be a dear and fetch him for the noon meal. I swear that man will starve himself to death for the love of horses if anything ever happens to me!"

"I'm sure you'd find a way to come back from the dead to make certain he never missed a meal," Yarik winked back. "Where's Kaylan?"

"Over Forst Reach way, at the festival by the river. He said he had a few things he wanted to buy. He'll be back in time for supper," the old woman assured him. "Now, off with you. I'm sure your Companions can't wait to get out of that tack!"

Yarik escorted Danya to the building where the tack was kept, Illysha and Terrill following at their heels. Some stablehands appeared to take the tack from them, promising to clean it "till it shines like the Midsummer sun!"

:You can groom me later,: Terrill offered. *:I want to meet Grandfather!:*

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

"You want a treat," Danya laughed as she took a curry comb to her Companion's silky white coat, scraping the dust of the road off him. "You can wait until I have you looking presentable. It won't take that long."

"I've warned you about his sweet tooth," Yarik smiled as he quickly, efficiently groomed Illysha.

Danya put the finishing touches to Terrill's mane, then stepped back to admire the handsome stallion.

"There. Now you look like a proper Companion."

Illysha nudged Terrill with her nose.

The stallion looked indignant.

Yarik snickered. "Illysha says there's nothing 'proper' about Terrill." He took Danya's arm. "Come on." He led her to the main riding ring, which was in the largest of the enclosed buildings. He stopped just inside the door and smiled as he waited for her eyes to adjust from the glare of the sun.

There, astride a magnificent white stallion, was an elderly gentleman who looked much the same as Danya imagined Kaylan would look in forty years. Tall, thin as an arrow, little more than bones lashed together with whipcord muscle, the man wore his long mane of snow white hair tied with an impeccable black bow at his neck. Bright blue eyes sparkled with sheer pleasure. His sat his horse so straight he looked as if he had an iron rod sewn into the back of his gold-trimmed tunic. Unlike Kaylan, his grandfather was dressed in a black outfit cut along the same lines as a Herald's whites.

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Danya took a deep breath and held it. She had never seen anyone quite so impressive in her life, but what he was doing with his stallion made him seem positively unreal.

With no visible commands from his rider, the stallion cantered around the ring, changing leads with every stride. As the visitors watched, the canter became a lively dance, then transformed to a slow trot that made it seem as if the stallion's hooves never touched the sawdust that covered the riding ring floor. The trot shifted to a prancing step just before, without warning, the stallion crouched on his hindlegs and raised his forequarters into the air, his forelegs tucked under his deep chest. The stallion hopped forward three times on his hindlegs, then launched himself into the air, extending his back legs as far as they would go. The stallion landed, pirouetted to face the visitors and dropped into a bow. Then the magnificent creature stood rock steady while his rider dismounted and crossed the ring to meet his guests.

:I can do that,: Terrill gave a jealous sniff.

Danya chuckled and patted his neck. *:I'm sure you can. But I don't recommend it if you want me to stay in your saddle.:*

Yarik beamed. "That's what I mean when I talk about being 'born in the saddle.' Kaylan can ride like that. All the Elderwoods can."

"Yarik!" the old man called as he embraced the Herald. "You've lost weight."

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Yarik blushed. "Grandfather, this is Herald-Trainee Danya Winterborn."

The old gentleman executed a stately bow in Danya's direction. "Charming."

"We're supposed to fetch you for the noon meal," Yarik continued.

The aged man produced a couple of bits of carrots from his tunic and offered them to Terrill and Illysha. "You are looking marvelous, Illysha," he commented, ignoring the Herald. "Pregnant, I see. Congratulations! Is this fine young man the father?"

Illysha nodded her head.

"Well!" the elderly rider exclaimed as Terrill munched happily on his carrot. "And what is this handsome fellow's name?"

"Terrill," Danya answered softly.

The old man turned and smiled at her, eyeing her student greys. "Terrill Chose well." He turned sharply on his heel and strode back to his horse. "You youngsters run along. I'll be in as soon as I see to Snow Dancer."

Yarik folded his arms across his chest. "You know Grandmother's not going to let us anywhere near the food unless we have you with us."

"I suppose she won't," the rider chuckled. "Terrill, Illysha, there's no reason you need to hang around here and watch me groom a horse. Off with you. The house and estate is yours."

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Illysha whinnied her thanks, then lead Terrill outside.

Danya leaned closer to Yarik. "Do Grandmother and Grandfather know about us?"

Yarik shrugged. "I have no idea what Kaylan told them. Maybe we'll find out over the noon meal." He draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Don't worry, dove. I'm sure everything will be all right."

Danya nodded and nestled against him, reveling in his strength and love.

* * *

Danya still had no idea what Kaylan's grandparents did or did not know about her and Yarik by the time supper rolled around and the handsome Herald returned to the family estate.

Kaylan greeted Yarik with a kiss, then hugged Danya. "So, what do you think of my family home?"

"It's amazing," Danya said quietly, staring wide-eyed as Kaylan's Companion, Adele, wandered through, apparently helping Illysha take Terrill on a tour of the house. Even if she stayed in this strange place for a year, she doubted that she would ever become used to the sight of dancing stallions walking down corridors, half-dozing in the sitting room and library, and shamelessly begging for treats in the kitchen and dining hall. But Kaylan and his grandparents seemed to take

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

no notice that most of the occupants of the manor were of the four-hooved variety. Yarik had explained that the stallions were trained to deposit their waste in specific spots outside, not unlike the way Companions behaved naturally. Still, Danya suspected that she would never possess Kaylan's ease at the prospect of sharing a house with horses.

:You shared a cabin with me, heartsister,: Terrill reminded her from wherever Adele had escorted him.

:Yes, but these horses are acting more like Companions than I thought was possible!: she exclaimed silently.

Terrill's laughter filtered through her mind.

:They've had good teachers.:

Danya had a suspicion that her stallion was referring to people other than Kaylan's relatives, but she decided not to press the point. She sent a wave of agreement toward Terrill, then turned her attention back to Kaylan. "Do your grandparents know about us?" she whispered.

The aged Healer chose that moment to join them in the main hall. She carried a large basket, covered with a blanket, that she thrust at Yarik. "Here you are. One picnic supper, as ordered." She winked at Kaylan. "We won't wait up." She turned and waltzed out of the hall, humming to herself.

Yarik favored Kaylan with a suspicious look.

"Picnic supper?"

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

"Come on," Kaylan grinned. He grabbed Danya's elbow with one hand, Yarik's with the other, and escorted them out the door. He led them through the maze of paddocks and across a pasture until they came to a stream. They followed the stream to the edge of Wyrfen Wood, to a picturesque little spot. There, Kaylan paused and arched his right eyebrow at Yarik.

"Kaylan," Yarik growled. "What's going on?"

"We're having a picnic, little pirate," the Herald smiled. He released them, took the blanket from Yarik, and spread it on the ground just beneath the trees nearest the stream.

Yarik put down the basket and eyed his lifebonded suspiciously. "You are up to something."

"Join me," Kaylan commanded as he settled onto the blanket.

Yarik shrugged his innocence at Danya. He dropped onto the blanket beside Kaylan.

Danya hesitated a moment, then knelt on the far side of the blanket from them.

"That won't do at all," Kaylan scolded. "Come here." He held out his right arm to her. He waited until she moved closer, then he pulled her down beside him. "Yarik already knows that this is my favorite place in the whole world. The stream always sounds so cheerful, and you can see the stallions dancing and the mares playing with their young. I love to spend the night out here, listening to the stream and watching the stars."

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

"And making love," Yarik rumbled. "I do hope you didn't bring us out here to make Danya feel any worse about being lifebonded to me than she already does."

"Give me some credit, little pirate." Kaylan's voice lost its dreamy quality and took on a hard edge. "I brought you out here because this is where I feel safest trying to make the best of an awkward situation." He kissed the top of Danya's head. "The answer to your question is, yes, I have told my grandparents about you and Yarik. And Grandmother's reaction, in particular, was not exactly what I expected. It seems I've been an insensitive idiot who doesn't recognize a gift when the Goddess throws it in my face."

"What are you babbling about?" Yarik asked in a completely bewildered voice.

Kaylan smiled softly. "Us. I know you love children. I assume you and Danya plan to have them?"

Yarik glanced at Danya, then nodded slowly. "Yes."

"I thought so," the handsome Herald said quietly.

"And how, exactly, do I fit into these future plans?"

Yarik frowned. "You're my lifebonded. You fit in right where you've always fit in."

"Do I?" Kaylan arched his eyebrow again. He took his arm from around Danya and hugged his knees to his chest. "Danya's attending the Collegium. You're teaching there. But I'm still riding Circuits until Adele recovers enough for me to serve as an Arrow again. We're at war with Hardorn. Both my parents were dead before they reached my age under a lot less dangerous

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

circumstances than I'm facing." He ignored Yarik's squawk of dismay. "Assuming I beat the odds and do survive, I'm seeing myself as some kind of inconvenient 'uncle' who escapes into the bedroom with 'Da' from time to time." He disregarded another sound of protest from Yarik. "Then Grandmother asked me a question that made me wonder if I was looking at the three of us all wrong. So, I've brought the two of you out here to ask. Is it your family, and I'm an intrusion to be dealt with when I'm between assignments or on leave? Or do you both want it to be 'our' family? Literally. The three of us. As parents. Together." He held up a hand to quite the instant responses that leapt to both Yarik's and Danya's lips. "I'm going to put this badly, but I've never had to ask anything like this before. What I want to know is would you, Danya, be willing to have one of those future children by me?"

Yarik froze, his face unreadable.

Danya glanced from one Herald to the other. The thought that Kaylan might want her to bear his child had never occurred to her.

"I'm *shay'a'chern*, but I'm not unable to function with a woman," Kaylan pressed. "Because of your Gifts, you have four, maybe five more years at the Collegium before you'd have to leave on your internship. A child would be old enough for Yarik to take care of by then if something happened to me. And Grandmother's a Healer. She could make sure that we only have to mate once, if it's too awkward. I've heard it's like dancing with

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

a friend . . . " His voice trailed off as he watched her mouth working, no sound coming out. He hung his head. "Never mind. I'm sorry I asked."

Danya glanced at Yarik, saw the torn look in his doe-like eyes, and knew there was only one future that she wanted to be a part of. She touched Kaylan lightly on the arm. "We're a threesome, Kaylan. All the way. Yarik and I would never shut you out of any part of our lives." She brushed his blue-black hair away from his eyes, smiling at the disbelief she saw there. "You just surprised me, that's all. It never occurred to me that you might want a child. I'd planned to have a large family with Yarik after I finished my internship, but I understand why you can't wait. You're right: Now is a perfect time to start a family. And, unless Yarik feels differently, I have no objection to starting it with you."

Yarik blinked at her. "No. I don't mind. I--" He started to rise. "Is this where I should go see what trouble Illysha has gotten herself into?"

Kaylan grabbed the younger Herald's arm. "Only if it would bring back too many bad memories for you to join us. I could use your touch."

"So could I, but I'd understand," Danya whispered, suddenly remembering the stories Kaylan had once alluded to about Yarik being abused by pirates while he was growing up on a ship on Lake Evendim.

Yarik smiled, his eyes filled with tears. He threw his arms around his two lifebondeds. "Bad memories? Is that what you'd call fulfilling one of the fantasies I've

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

had ever since I realized I'd gotten the three of us into this mess?!"

Kaylan ruffled his lifebonded's hair. "Wicked little pirate," he teased.

Danya suddenly sensed that Terrill and Adele were engaged in an activity that she hoped they were not performing in the manor house. She hid her blush by squirming out of her tunic and trousers, grinning sheepishly as Yarik and Kaylan followed her lead. Sensing that they could all use a little help to smooth over the awkward situation, she relaxed her shields slightly, allowing her power of Empathy to reassure them all of their mutual love. Then the three of them began practicing the steps to a new dance that they would be a lifetime perfecting, but which had its beginning in laughter, a tangle of limbs and a lot of love.

* * *

The moon was rising when Danya slipped back into her student greys. Beside her she could hear Yarik and Kaylan also getting dressed. "Should I wake your grandmother?"

"No." Kaylan's voice was muffled as he pulled his white tunic over his head. "Morning will be soon enough."

"Good!" Yarik pronounced, reaching for the all-but-forgotten picnic basket. "I'm starving!"

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Kaylan settled his tunic into place and grabbed Yarik in a half-tackle. "Just a heartbeat, little pirate! There's one more thing I want to ask the two of you."

Yarik gave his lifebonded a suspicious look.

Kaylan released him and picked up his own belt pouch. He emptied something into his right hand, closing his fist over it so the others could not see. "I took a chance today that your answer to my first question would be 'yes.' If it wasn't I was going to offer you two of these and suggest that you have Grandfather's priest handfast you to each other. But since you did say 'yes,' and I can't imagine even a priest from Lake Evendim handfasting the three of us, I thought maybe we could share these with each other out here under the stars and just know that they'd mean the same thing if we ever could get a priest's blessing." He opened his hand.

Three silver bands designed in the hands-clasping-a-heart pattern that Heralds reserved for their dearest friends, glittered in his palm.

Yarik kissed him first, and Danya followed his example as soon as they came up for air.

"Here," Kaylan laughed. He slipped one ring onto Yarik's left hand and the other onto Danya's.

Yarik took the third ring from him, handed it to Danya, and let her place it on Kaylan's left hand.

Tears glistening in his bright blue eyes, Kaylan pulled Danya close and kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you."

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

"Thank you." She took Yarik's hand and held it tight. "So, what's in that basket?"

Yarik opened the basket with his free hand--and grinned. "I swear sometimes that woman has Foresight." He held up the basket so the others could see the contents: a modest, but lovingly packed, handfasting feast for three.

* * *

"That's it?" Danya marveled as Kaylan's grandmother emerged from her Healing trance.

"That's it," the old woman assured her, a tired smile playing across her wrinkled lips. "The rest is up to you and the baby. Thank you. Kaylan would never have agreed to this with just anyone."

"I know," Danya admitted.

The aged Healer rose with a sigh. "I need to lie down for a while. This sort of thing takes a lot more out of me than it used to. By the way, Yarik tells me that Adele found a way to keep my grandson Haven-bound until the child arrives."

Danya blushed. "Well, at least my Terrill did. Herald Kris is on his way to replace Kaylan on this Circuit. That way Kaylan, Yarik and I can ride back to Haven together after the Midsummer festival."

"You're welcome to stay longer, if you like," the old woman smiled, "but I know Illysha's already pining for

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

the Companion's Field. Now, run along. I need my rest, and you need plenty of exercise and fresh air."

Danya grinned her thanks and went in search of Yarik and Kaylan.

* * *

Danya sat beside Yarik, watching Kaylan and his family put the dancing stallions through their paces for the Midsummer celebration. The white horses capered, leapt and flew through the air with a precision she had only thought possible with Companions.

:Yes,: Terrill drawled from where he stood, keeping a protective eye on Adele and Illysha at the far end of the riding ring. *:It's amazing what a little proper training can do.:*

:You sound as if you have something to do with these horses' skills.: Danya laughed.

He tossed his mane. *:Who's to say we don't?:*

Danya pondered that as she watched the swirling dance of white-bleached, blue-eyed stallions. No one would ever mistake them for Companions, but they were about as close to Companions as horses could get. "You're right," she murmured to Yarik. "They're perfect just the way they are--even if mercenaries won't buy them. I couldn't stand to think about any of them being killed in war. They're much too beautiful to risk like that."

"Midsummer Night's Dance," Linda A. Malcor

Yarik draped his arm around her and held her close. "It's the dance of life," he whispered in her ear, sending a shiver of delight along her spine. "I'm glad you decided to share that dance with Kaylan and me."

She patted him on the leg, knowing he needed no reply, then concentrated on watching Kaylan as he guided his stallion into step with his grandfather's and both horses carried their riders high into the air in leaps of pure joy.