

Danya Winterborn

By

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Any Valdermaran who saw Danya Winterborn would have guessed her to be a Karsite. Hawk-faced, with coffee-brown eyes and short, straight hair the same deep-black of a moonless night, no one would have given her a second glance if she'd been wearing the robes of a Sun Priestess or living in Jaggermeir or Sunhame. Neither tall nor short, slim nor stout, she was as average as any other Karsite anyone in Haven had ever met. The only problem was that when Danya rode into Haven on her Companion, Terrill, and wearing clothes borrowed from a kindly Guard, she claimed that she hailed from just inside the northern border of the Forest of Sorrows--and her Companion, and Herald Yarik and his Companion, and a brass token from Berrybay all confirmed her story.

Danya's mother or father could have been a Karsite for all she knew. Kestran, the retired Bard who raised her in the windowless one-room cottage he had built as close to Crook Back Pass as anyone could get and still be in the Forest of Sorrows, swore by every deity he knew that she had appeared on his doorstep as an infant, with only a Herald's stark white cloak to shield her from a bitter snowstorm. When Danya had asked to see the cloak, Bard Kestran said it had mysteriously vanished shortly after he had taken her into his care. He also claimed that the goats, which supplied milk for the infant Danya, had wandered to his cottage of their own accord less than a day later. The Bard did possess a nice herd of goats, just big enough that he could manage them without too much trouble. So, the young Danya decided

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

not to challenge him on the subject of her pedigree. Whatever origin she had had, the one Kestran invented for her was probably better.

The few times Danya misbehaved as all children are wont to do, the elderly Bard threatened to take her to a village called Berrybay and leave her for the next Herald who rode through on Circuit to take back to whatever meddling predecessor had deposited her with him. But Danya knew the lonely old man had no intention of casting her off. Everything from inclement weather, which is just about all there ever was that close to the Pass, to old age provided an excuse never to make the dreaded trip. Besides, Danya was a sweet-tempered child, willing to do more than her share of the work and eager to listen to her foster father as he prattled endlessly about everything he had seen, done or heard in his surprisingly long life. She was never quite sure when he was telling her facts or spinning one of his fictions, but she had a strong realistic streak that made her suspect that the world was a lot less fanciful of a place than her foster father would lead her to believe. Still, she enjoyed his tales of the misborn creatures in the Pelagir Hills and the bird-loving Tayledras and the horse-riding Shin'a'in. Yet most of all she loved his stories of the white-clad Heralds of Valdemar and the years he had spent at a wondrous place called Haven.

The older Danya got, the more tasks she took on around the cottage. She cared for the goats and chickens in the sturdy shed Bard Kestran had built to shelter the

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

cottage door before he had become too old for such labor. The construction helped keep much of the wind out of the main house and made tending the livestock much easier during the Midwinter snows. Kestran taught Danya cooking--not an easy task when just about the only things the Bard could grow were potatoes and onions and a few herbs, the latter of which he pampered in his garden during the brief spring and summer, then dried in the fall. Danya gathered nuts and berries when they were in season and preserved as many of them as she could. There was only so much hunting the elderly Kestran could do to supplement their diet. He was not particularly good at the skill, and, as long as some benevolent spirit guided the occasional bachelor or past-breeding female game animal into one of his traps, he had little need to improve. Bard Kestran did acquaint Danya with the basics of woodcraft. She particularly loved his casual way of easing her childish fears of the strange sounds a forest can make: "Never you mind if the critters make a terrible fuss yet there's no sign of a predator around. That's just Vanyel and Stefen having another one of their arguments. You'd think after all these centuries those two younglings would find a way to get along."

Danya used skins from the animals Kestran caught and from the goats that grew too old to fashion clothes for herself and her foster father. She spent hours sewing by the fire as the Bard taught her all the songs he knew. Danya had tried her hand at Kestran's harp, but she had

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

proven to be a bitter disappointment to both of them. Her voice, however, was reasonably sweet, and from time to time she added a descant to some of the more frequently-repeated offerings in Kestran's vast, if somewhat focused, repertoire. Reading and writing came more easily to Danya. Considering that she had to carve her lessons in the dirt or snow, she made reasonable progress. She committed the contents of all of Bard Kestran's books to memory by the time she was twelve, which was fortunate since the manuscripts were moldering and falling apart after several years of exposure to the northern damp. Kestran also schooled her in the languages of Valdemar, Hardorn, and, on the off chance that some long lost mother or father ever did show up to claim her, Karse.

As Danya grew older, so inevitably did Bard Kestran. His grey hair turned completely white. His already lank frame became frighteningly frail and thin. His skin hung on him like a shirt on a clothesline. But his bright blue eyes always shone with his love of life, and his beautiful, baritone voice lost none of its magic--at least to his foster daughter's ears. By necessity Danya became skilled in the use of herbs as medicines to ease the ailments that come with age. She would spend hours concocting pastes and oils to rub on Kestran's swollen joints, never once suggesting that her foster father seek a warmer clime. She knew that the old Bard's lifelong obsession was the songs of Vanyel and the many compositions by Vanyel's lover, Bard Stefen. Kestran

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

spent countless days and nights plucking out the tunes on his harp and singing his tales, daydreaming about how he would climb Crook Back Pass some day and see the place where Vanyel died. Danya knew he would never go there: His body was too old to make the climb. Besides, she rather preferred the version of the legend that Kestran developed as his mind began to wander and he forgot the details of the songs. In the aging Bard's fancy, Vanyel did not die in Crook Back Pass, calling down a Final Strike, which destroyed his enemy, but which also killed himself as his lover rode for help. Instead, the Last Herald-Mage used his tactical skill, slight talent of Fetching, and legendary magical powers--he was supposedly capable of leveling half of Haven--to undermine the base of the sheer walls of the magically-carved pass, burying Learth and his army beneath half a mountain of stone. Afterward Vanyel and his Companion, Yfandes, stayed in Sorrows, guarding the Pass in case Learth ever dug himself out, and Bard Stefen visited them as often as his duties allowed, all of them living happily in a cottage on the same spot where Kestran had built his home. Danya feared that if her foster father ever made the pilgrimage, he would find a clear trail through the Ice Wall Mountains and perhaps a singed boulder or two where Vanyel had indeed called down his Final Strike. She often wondered who Kestran had loved and lost, whose death had made the stories of Vanyel and Stefen so dear to him, but she never asked.

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

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The seventeen-year-old Danya was sewing a new vest for Kestran the night he died. The Bard had been sick for days, driven to his bed by joints that ached unbearably in the cold of a Midwinter storm. The blizzard was not quite as bad as the one that had kept them housebound for over a month the previous year, but any storm at all was proving to be too much for the aged Kestran. The chill in his limbs gripped his chest, and he developed a deep, rattling cough, the likes of which Danya had never heard before and hoped never to hear again. Her potions and salves proved all but useless against the mysterious illness. Soon a dangerously high fever set in, and Danya realized too late that she should have forced the ailing Bard to make that promised journey to Berrybay before the winter storms had clutched the entire countryside in their unrelenting grasp. As it was, all she could do was make him as comfortable as possible and pray to Astera and Kernos while occupying her hands with mindless tasks.

Near midnight Kestran sat bolt upright in his bed. His feverish eyes met her gaze. "They're calling me. Do you hear them?"

Danya listened obediently, then shook her head. "I don't hear anything but the storm."

The Bard frowned. "It really is them. They want me to come to them. I should go. I've waited so long . . ."

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

He stared through her, through the fire, through the wall

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Danya was about to go back to her sewing when Kestran leapt to his feet, raced to the door with a speed that belied his illness and his years, and charged though the shed and out into the storm, wearing nothing but his bedclothes. Danya threw down the vest and ran after him. "Kestran! Come back!" Within a couple of strides, she had lost track not only of the Bard but also of the cottage. She staggered a few steps further, then panicked as a sense of fear and imminent loss seized her, chilling her far more than the wind-driven snow.

"Kestran! Don't leave me! I don't want to be alone!"

:Then you shan't_: a young man's voice declared. *:I Choose you.:*

Danya's eyes widened at the sound of a stranger speaking in her head at the same time as she felt a surge of incredible joy that pushed aside her growing fear.

Something big and white loomed ahead of her, forcing its way through flurries of snow as it struggled to reach her side.

:Vanyel?: she ventured.

Laughter cascaded through her mind. *:Nothing so grand, I fear_:* the young man's voice replied. *:I'm Terrill-- or as I am affectionately known to the stablehands in Haven "that idiot of a Companion who waited until half of Valdemar was covered by snow to go find his Chosen." Most importantly, I am one exceedingly weary and frozen creature. Do you mind if we go inside?:*

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

Danya blinked at the Companion, whom she had only heard about in Kestran's stories and songs. The thought of the Bard dispelled her joy, and fear snatched at her once more. "Kestran!"

Terrill thrust his nose against her chest. *:I'm sorry, youngling. He's gone.:*

:No!: Danya's heart protested as grief closed fingers colder than the snow around her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe.

Terrill gave a startled neigh as snow-laden branches began snapping in the trees around them and crashing to the ground. *:Chosen, no! Do not mourn so! Bard Kestran is in the Havens with his loved ones, and I have come so you will not be alone. I am here. I Choose you. Let him go.:*

Danya grabbed onto Terrill's neck and buried her face in his silky white mane. She felt his sturdy presence and unconditional love for her. She clung to him, instinctively knowing that he had the power to shield her from the grief that threatened to overwhelm her, that the comfort he offered could make her sorrow bearable. Terror and loneliness and loss found an outlet, and she began to cry.

With her sobs the disturbances around them ceased. Soon the only sounds were of her weeping, Terrill's steadily-beating heart and the splats of the wind-blown snow.

:Can we go inside?: the young stallion asked again after a few heartbeats.

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

Danya nodded, unable to speak.

Terrill guided her back to the cottage, through the shed, and into the living quarters. He leaned his shoulder against the door until it closed. Then he stood still, snow melting from his tack, coat, mane and tail as he listened to Danya weep for the Bard she would never see again in this world.

Someone else listened as well. Someone in the depths of the Forest of Sorrows. Someone who sent a wave of comfort and happiness at Danya, filling her with peace.

Terrill sensed the change in her and whuffed at her now-wet black hair. *:I don't suppose you have anything you need to groom a horse?:* he asked half-hopefully.

Danya shook her head as she dashed away her tears. *:No. I've never even seen a horse.:*

The stallion sighed. *:Right. Well, then, this will be quite the adventure, won't it?:* He tried to sound cheerful, but he looked more like a bedraggled, half-drowned squirrel than a Companion caparisoned for seeking his Chosen.

Danya couldn't help herself. She laughed. *:I'm sorry. I don't think you could have Chosen anyone less prepared to be a Herald if you tried!:*

:Oh, I won't be the first Companion to come trotting back to Haven with someone who gives the teachers at the Collegium pause.: His bright blue eyes sparkled with humor. *:But then they'll figure out that you can sew and cook and chop wood and practice herbal medicine--not to*

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

mention that you have Mindspeech and Fetching and Empathy--and they'll fall all over themselves vying to see who can claim you as a student first.:

Danya flicked one of the silver bells on his blue-dyed halter experimentally and was rewarded with a pleasant tinkle. *:All right, then. How in Astera's name do I get this stuff off of you?:* She tried not to look too daunted by his silver-and-blue reins, saddle, and other trappings.

:One step at a time,: Terrill replied. *:One step at a time.:*

That was how she cared for him that night and every night after that until the snow let up. Danya made a halfhearted search for Kestran's body as soon as the weather cleared, but she found no sign of the Bard. Terrill told her that she wouldn't, that Bard Kestran had been taken into the Havens, and, whether her Companion's explanation was the literal truth or a pleasant fiction offered to comfort his Chosen, Danya decided to take the young stallion at his word.

As soon as they were able to force their way out of the forest, Terrill patiently instructed Danya in the basics of sitting on a saddle. Promising her that they could send someone from Berrybay to take the livestock to the village where they would be cared for, Terrill carried his Chosen away from the only home she had ever known and into what quickly proved to be a rather cold and frightening world.

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

Danya was not shy, but she had never dealt with anyone except Bard Kestran. She had no idea how to react to the way the Guard posted at Berrybay stopped smiling and frowned with distrust at the sight of what looked like a Karsite astride a Companion.

Terrill snorted his disapproval as he planted himself defiantly in front of the Guard. *:It will be all right,:* the stallion promised Danya. *:Tell her you are my Chosen and that you need decent clothes and provisions. Tell her to tie the packs on me, and you'll change at the next Waystation.:*

Trying not to look too stunned by the force of the Guard's unshielded emotions, Danya relayed Terrill's message to the young woman.

An unexpected wave of relief accompanied the Guard's mumbled response.

Terrill stamped his left hoof impatiently as the woman hurried off to fill the request. *:We'll avoid the other villages between here and Haven.:* he explained to Danya. *:We can stay at Stations. I've called for a Herald from the local Healer's Temple to meet us at the nearest one. He can help you control your Gifts until we get you to the Collegium. His name's Yarik. You'll like him. He always brings treats for the Companions who have not Chosen when he visits his Illysha in the Field.:* The stallion kept up his idle chatter, distracting Danya until the Guard returned with the requested provisions.

Without a word, the young woman secured the packs behind Terrill's saddle, regarding the Companion

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

as if she suspected that he had lost his mind. When the last pack was in place, she handed Danya a brass token. "Here," she said gruffly.

Danya placed the token in her belt pouch. She quietly told the Guard about the livestock at Kestran's cottage and how to find the dwelling. Then she let Terrill carry her toward what he told her was the North Trade Road without attempting to talk with anyone else in the village.

:Don't let her fluster you,: Terrill sniffed. *:You can't help what you look like. Anyone with common sense would wait until they knew you well enough to see your heart instead of making ignorant assumptions about you on the basis of your features.:*

Danya released her death-grip on the saddle long enough to pat his right shoulder reassuringly. *:It sounds as if you're the one she flustered. Kestran warned me that others might take me for an enemy because of the way I look. Maybe I never quite understood what he meant, but I do know getting upset never solves a problem. Kestran always said to "Do what needs doin', and if you can't do it the usual way, find an unusual way that will work.":* She fancied that she felt Terrill smile.

:You had a very wise teacher,: the stallion commented in a much calmer tone.

Danya had the impression that her Companion was absurdly pleased with her ability to control her emotions and that for some reason it was vitally important for her to continue to do so. She accepted his unspoken praise

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

as she would have taken an approving smile from Kestran. Then she concentrated on simply staying on Terrill's saddle until they reached the Station.

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Danya dismounted, stiff from the unfamiliar activity and certain that she was going to pay for her overexertion in the morning. She led Terrill through the sheltered entrance way to the Station and into the main room. She noted absently that the Station was not all that different from Kestran's cottage in its furnishings and supplies. She stifled a snicker as the stallion sighed with relief at the sight of a proper currycomb, stiff brush, body brush, mane comb, hoof pick and rub rag. She got the impression from him that Stations were rarely quite so well equipped, and she wondered what had prompted someone to leave such an array of supplies.

:Foresight,: Terrill informed her.

Having only a vague idea what he was talking about, she decided to let the matter drop. She removed Terrill's packs, bridle and harness, then schooled herself to act like the perfect student as the stallion acquainted her with the strange devices and their use. She found that the steady movement of grooming her grateful Companion actually worked some of the soreness out of her own muscles. She located something called grain for him among the Station's provisions and made a warm

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

gruel in a kettle, which she set over the small fire she built in the hearth. She melted snow for water for him and a sponge bath for herself. Finally, her Companion's basic needs attended to, Danya turned her attention to the packs the Guard at Berrybay had given her.

Along with dry rations that would serve her later in her journey, she found a wonderful cheese-and-meat sandwich on freshly-baked bread. Bread definitely not made from potato or nut flour. She promptly decided that there must be no grander food in the world.

:It's made from grain,: Terrill informed her, feeling quite good-humored now that he was properly groomed.

:Which must be the food of the gods,: she teased, *:since you are a Companion and you lust after it so!:*

The stallion gave a snort that sounded almost like a human laugh. *:You'd lust after it, too, if you'd been subsisting on pine needles and goat fodder for weeks.:*

Danya conceded the argument with a grin, finished the last bite of the sandwich, and rummaged through the packs again. This time she came up with a leather tunic and breeches, boots and a hooded wool cloak that was lined with rabbit fur.

Terrill eyed the garments for a moment, then butted his Chosen with his head. *:Put them on.:* he commanded.

"Yes, sir!" Danya laughed aloud. She discarded her worn vest, shirt, breeches and boots and squirmed into the new clothes. The garments proved to be slightly tight, but Danya had the distinct impression that Terrill

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

thought they had a wonderful effect on her maturing figure as she modeled them for him.

:Maybe I'll forgive that Guard her insolence after all,: he mused. *:She seems to have done quite well by you in spite of her personal prejudices.:*

Danya ran her hands over the soft leather of the tunic. *:These are the first things I've worn that weren't made by Kestran or by my own hand.:*

:They won't be the last,: Terrill promised her.

Danya set aside the packs and turned her attention to the stallion's tack. She had just finished cleaning the last piece to his satisfaction when there was a knock at the door.

Before she could answer, the door swung open, and a young man clad entirely in white stepped inside. Average height, average build, average looks, as common as anyone Danya could ever hope to meet, the Herald, who was probably only a year or two her senior, stared at her with huge brown eyes that would have made a deer jealous. He stamped the snow from his boots and ran his fingers through his gold-brown hair as he grinned at the suddenly-defensive stallion. "Bright Havens, Terrill! You weren't kidding when you told Illysha that you'd Chosen yourself a real challenge!"

A snow-white mare shoved the young man into the room with her nose, shouldered her way past him and delicately tapped the door with her left hind hoof to close it. Laughter danced in her brilliant blue eyes as she

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

sidled over to Terrill and greeted him by touching her nose to his.

The Herald slapped the mare good-naturedly on the rump. "Behave yourself, you little vixen," he chortled. "This youngling has quite enough problems without you making Terrill all hot and bothered." He laughed, apparently at something the mare said, then closed the distance between himself and Danya with three quick strides. He held out his hand to her. "Yarik Rafton, originally from Lake Evendim," he introduced himself. "And you are?"

She took his hand in hers. "A snowflake that seems to be caught in a blizzard, Danya Winterborn," she finished with a blush.

"Well," Yarik clucked his tongue thoughtfully, "we'll just have to help you do something about that, Herald-Trainee Danya."

Terrill lipped the young man's belt pouch.

"Greedy guts," Yarik teased as he pulled a slice of dried apple out of the pouch and offered it to the stallion. "You'll have to watch Terrill," he warned Danya in a conspiratorial voice. "He's got a terrible sweet tooth."

:I do not,: the stallion protested with so much dignity that Danya laughed aloud.

The Herald combed his fingers through Terrill's mane. "I see she's taking good care of you."

Danya felt a wave of affection and pride sweep toward her as the stallion regarded her with a possessive eye.

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

Yarik smiled, patted Terrill's shoulder, then turned his attention back to Danya. "All right. First things first. I don't know about you, but I object to having the local wildlife crawling on me in the middle of the night. Let's take the food outside and fumigate this place. Then we can come back in, get to know each other better, see what we can do to control your Gifts until we can get you to the Collegium, and sleep--in any order you like."

* * *

Sleep came a lot sooner in Danya's revision of Yarik's plans, but she sensed that he didn't mind. She felt Terrill's instinctive trust of him, and she found herself quite taken with the charming young Herald as well. She reminded herself sternly that Yarik was really only the third person she had ever spoken to besides Kestran and the Guard, but she sensed that here was someone she would dearly like to have as a mentor, protector and friend.

"It's a good thing you don't get flustered easily," Yarik had told her as they waited for the fumigating smoke he set inside the Station to clear. "Or at least Terrill tells Illysha you don't. Newly-awakened Fetching Gifts tend to make everything that's not nailed down go flying every time you get upset until you learn to control them. It'll take us a couple of months to reach Haven. I should be able to teach you enough about shielding to

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

get you safely through the city and to the Collegium by then."

"Two months?" Danya marveled. "Kestran said it took him five to reach Sorrows from Haven."

"Herald Kestran?" Yarik ventured.

Danya shook her head. "Bard."

"Ah," the Herald grinned. "There can only be one of him! He rode a horse, not a Companion. We'll make better time. Kestran retired over a decade before I was even a twinkle in Illysha's eye. The Bards always wondered what happened to him."

"I happened to him," Danya blushed. "Someone left me on his doorstep in a Midwinter storm. At least, he always celebrated Midwinter as my Birthing-Day because he said they did."

"I'm sure you made his retirement quite wonderful," Yarik assured her, "even if it was different from the one he'd planned." With that, he aired out the Station and finally let Danya back inside.

She settled Terrill next to Illysha on the far side of the room while Yarik filled the two bed-boxes with hay. She collapsed into one farthest from the door, strangely comforted by the Herald's presence as he rekindled the fire. The young man seemed pleased with her stubborn determination to do whatever was required of her. But after all, she mused as she drifted to sleep, if Terrill could fight his way through a snowstorm to be with her the night Kestran died, the least she could do was try to be the best Herald she could be. Her tasks would be

"Danya Winterborn", Linda A. Malcor

difficult, but she would have help. Terrill and Yarik would see to that. Danya wrapped herself tightly in her new cloak and drifted to sleep, certain that, by facing the challenges of this new life that had claimed her, she would be, in some small way, living in her foster father's dreams.