

Snow Fox

By

Linda A. Malcor

Based on the Works of Mercedes Lackey.

Licensed under Creative Commons

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Herald Kaylan Elderwood confessed. He sat, hunched over, in what should have been a comfortable chair near the merrily crackling fireplace in his cousin Jorge’s room in the Heralds’ Wing of the Palace, staring at the syrupy golden liquid in the bottom of his glass. Tall and thin, with muscles like whipcord, he had the straight black hair, brilliant blue eyes, and striking good looks the Elderwoods were noted for. His spotless Whites felt strange without the silver arrow on them that used to mark him as the Queen’s Special Messenger. He’d been out of Whites for what seemed like moons now, ever since the arrival of Herald-Trainee Yarik Rafton, who was barely half his age and whom he’d rescued from nearly being tortured to death by pirates at Lake Evendim. A powerful Fetcher, Kaylan was as deaf to Mindspeech as it was possible for anyone to be. But what everyone thought was an unhealthy obsession Yarik had developed with him had turned out to be a lifebond that maybe, just maybe, might allow them to work as a Fetcher/FarSeer team, one of the most valuable combinations of Gifts, as partners Herald Dirk and Herald Kris had proven. Since then, Kaylan had been kept off duty and on leave so he’d be interacting with Yarik as an older brother and friend rather than as an authority figure. Kaylan had assisted the new Trainee in his physical therapy, made sure he spent as much time as possible with his Companion and helped him conquer the basics of reading, writing and math while the Powers That Be were deciding what to do with the two of them once Yarik settled down. Regular classes were about to resume after the Midwinter break,

however, and Yarik was anything but settled. He needed to take his place in the Heralds' Collegium, and Kaylan needed to return to duty. The question up for debate was which was better for Yarik: assigning Kaylan to assist with Equitation classes because of his family's legendary riding skills, thereby keeping him around so the teachers could try out experiments on the pair or sending him out on Circuit for a couple of years to put some physical distance between the two so Yarik could concentrate on his studies. And grow older. Though Heralds were fairly tolerant of different types of liaisons in their ranks, this development was giving even the most open-minded of them pause. Including Kaylan. *Why couldn't I have met him five or six years from now?* he fretted for the millionth time.

The same answer, as always, immediately echoed in his head. Because in five or six years he would have been long dead.

Kaylan had left Yarik reading in the Collegium Library when a page summoned him to report to the Seneschal's Herald. Faster than he thought possible, he'd found himself back in Whites, which meant on duty, and he had a suspicion which way the decision had gone even though he didn't have his orders yet. He wasn't sure how he felt about riding Circuit again after spending so many years as an Arrow of the Queen, so he'd swung by Jorge's room, hoping the Elderwood family Empath could help him sort himself out. He'd barely crossed the threshold before Jorge had ordered him to close the door, pour them each a glass of brandywine, sit down, and tell him what in the Nine Hells was wrong.

"Your aura is usually red, and you look downright magenta!" Jorge exclaimed in dismay.

The age difference between Kaylan and Jorge was nearly as great as that between Kaylan and Yarik, but twenty-four seemed a lot closer

to thirty-three than twenty-four did to thirteen. Such details hadn't bothered Kaylan when he was thirteen and had had a crush on Jorge, but now that he was the older factor in the equation the gap seemed as vast as the Dorisha Plains. *And I only had a crush. This is a lifebond!*

More than anything in the world, Kaylan wanted to return Yarik's affection, but that was out of the question. While such an age difference was dismissed as irrelevant in some cultures in Valdemar, in others it made him look like a sexual predator. Not exactly the image a Herald is supposed to project. The fact that he was *shaych* only made everything look a thousand times worse. Some people would assume that he was "recruiting" the boy to his "lifestyle," whatever that meant, and others would speculate that he'd taken up with Yarik because he'd tired of the local sheep. Some people might understand, but for many Valdemarans he would become the personification of all the licentious horror stories ever told about Heralds. *And I'm completely celibate!* He found himself in a quagmire with no clear way to escape. Or from which there might not be any escape. Or from which he might not want to escape. And someone had just decided his fate for him, and he wasn't at all sure he liked what they had decided. He raised his eyes and stared despondently at Jorge.

The years had not been kind to Jorge. He'd always been a bit short, but people rarely noticed. He'd all but lived on horseback, high above the head of anyone on foot, before swapping out an Elderwood dancing stallion's saddle for the saddle of his Companion, Tieg. His salt-and-pepper hair, which used to be the same luxurious black as Kaylan's, was only just starting to grow out after the Healers had shaved it to tend to his recent head wounds. Angry red, scabbing lines crossed his scalp where his hairline had receded sharply since Kaylan had last seen him. No one could remember anyone in the family ever going bald before.

Probably because, with our tendency to breed Heralds like field mice, most Elderwoods die young. Jorge still had the Elderwood bright-blue eyes, but they had the haunted look of someone who had seen things the living should never see. The white line of a vicious, now-old scar ran from the corner of Jorge's left eye to his upper lip, narrowly missing his nose. Rumor said a Karsite demon had given it to him. Jorge didn't want to talk about it. He'd broken more bones than anyone wanted to count, especially him, and he currently sat on his bed with his purpled feet propped up on his desk, trying to reduce the swelling. He absently swirled the golden liquid in his glass without looking at it. "My poor cousin," he lamented when Kaylan finished bringing him up to date on the contorted details of his life. "I marvel that any of the Mindhealers around here were ever granted their Greens."

Kaylan's brow furrowed as he looked up—or rather over and down—at his cousin. "What do you mean?"

Jorge took a small sip from his glass and let the liquid roll over his tongue, delighting in it before swallowing. "You've gone on and on about 'Yarik this' and 'Yarik that'. You worry about Yarik. The Healers worry about Yarik. The teachers worry about Yarik. The Council worries about Yarik." Jorge gazed intently into his cousin's eyes. "Who worries about Kaylan?"

Instantly defensive, Kaylan assumed the posture of the fine rider he was. "I'm not the one with all the problems."

"You're not the one with enough different problems to keep half of the Healers and teachers around here dithering day and night," Jorge conceded. "But you do have one huge problem that everyone is dismissing because they are so distracted by all of Yarik's little ones."

“His problems aren’t ‘little!’” Kaylan snapped, his knuckles turning white as he squeezed his glass so hard it almost broke.

An annoyingly smug grin curled across Jorge’s face. “And I present you with the dancing stallion in the room: Your problem.”

Confusion swept away Kaylan’s fury. He relaxed his grip on his glass. “What?”

Jorge appealed to the ceiling. “Lord and Lady! It’s as plain as the nose on an Ashkevron’s face! Your not-so-little pirate has stolen your heart and has no plans to give it back. Nor do you want it back. Neither of you is looking for a temporary liaison. You have a lifebond! He’s at an age when hormones are raging, turning all the dorms around here into veritable bunny hutches, and everyone is expecting you to sit around with him practically in your lap all day long, acting as if you are some long-suffering penitent of Saint Thiera the Immaculate! You’re human, cousin! And Yarik knows all too well what you should also know from looking at our family graveyard: Humans die. Often young. Especially when they’re Heralds. He’s clinging to you because he’s terrified someone is going to take you away from him the way so much else in his life has been taken away. You’re just as terrified about being taken away, which is why you’re generating a million excuses to convince yourself that everyone who is trying to separate the two of you is right and that this is all okay. Well, it’s not okay.”

Kaylan bristled. “You’re just telling me what I want to hear. He was an abused child, Jorge. One of his worst abusers was a woman, so he thinks he’s *shaych*—“

“How old were you when you knew you were *shaych*?”

Kaylan made no reply, knowing that they both knew the answer.
When I was thirteen and had a crush on you.

“Has anyone even thought about asking Yarik that question?”

Kaylan shook his head slowly. “No.” He took a sip of his brandywine. “It doesn’t matter anyway. He’s too young. I’d be molesting—“

“As Grandfather would say, ‘poppycock.’” Jorge waited for Kaylan to look at him. “You say he’s not on the rolls anywhere. Why anyone even checked, I don’t know. As if pirates were going to send an abused cabin boy to school!” He shook his head gingerly. “Yarik’s not a ‘child’, cousin. With the life he’s led, he’s more grown-up than most of the snot-nosed brats in the Collegium. I doubt there’s anything you could teach him in bed that he doesn’t already know. Except kindness.” When Kaylan remained silent, Jorge pressed on. “Be honest. If not with me, at least with yourself. If you were out on Circuit and called upon to make a judgement, where would the line be between what was permissible and what was not? At the month of his birth? The day? The candlemark? What if we assign all Trainees with unknown birth dates midnight on Midwinter Day as the time we increase their age? If so, that just passed. Does that make him fourteen? Is that better than thirteen? Honestly, would anyone be thinking twice about this if he turned out to be sixteen and just small-?”

“He’s bigger than you,” Kaylan snapped.

“Muskrats are bigger than me.”

Not quite true, but he has a point. Kaylan rubbed his temple. *I should be drinking willow bark tea instead of brandywine.*

Jorge relented. “What does Adele say?”

“You know I don’t have Mindspeech.”

Jorge gave a scoffing grunt.

Damned Empaths. Kaylan had tried trancing down to talk with his Companion, Adele. She’d been as useless as all Companions were when it came to the personal lives of their Heralds. *But she knows my heart, and she didn’t object to my pursuing my desires. Wouldn’t she have tried to stop me if I was contemplating something evil rather than just unwise?* “You know what she said. The same thing they all say when we ask for advice about our love lives: Nothing.”

Jorge stared at him like a teacher waiting for a student to stop being exceptionally stupid.

Kaylan made a sound that was halfway between a groan and a frustrated scream. “Nothing helpful! ‘Listen to your heart.’”

“Sounds pretty helpful to me.”

Kaylan glared at him.

Jorge spread his hands as if he were laying something out. “The reason you are in such a tangle is that your heart is telling you one thing and your head is telling you another. I’ll wager Yarik’s in the same state.”

Kaylan reluctantly nodded.

“Does a breeder object if a fine three-year-old stallion shows interest in a well-bred fifteen-year-old mare?”

Kaylan winced. “We aren’t horses, Jorge.”

“My point. Why is everyone running around treating horses better than they’re treating you?”

Kaylan took a swallow of brandywine. *That last bandit must have hit Jorge on the head harder than we thought. Why does he think I’m the smart one in the family? That’s cousin—Tam? Ram? Cam?*

Jorge clinked his glass against the bottle on the floor next to him to get Kaylan’s attention. “Answer the question.”

“I’m a Herald, not a child molester,” Kaylan snarled.

“Did I miss a change in the law when those bandits were trying to turn me into fertilizer? He’s past puberty. The Orientation class teaches birth control to Trainees who are carried in here at eleven years of age and even younger. Someone must be expecting them to get up to something. And it’s not like either of you is going to get the other pregnant.”

Kaylan cringed.

Jorge tried to shift position and failed. “Look, cousin, if the Queen’s Own were around instead of out on Circuit with Herald Kris, she’d be down everyone’s throats about this. It’s positively preposterous to expect you to work as partners in Gifts while forbidding you to be partners in any other way when the one thing that makes it possible for you to be partners is a lifebond. It’s equally ludicrous to separate you by distance. It’s like asking you to train with a young stallion while he’s running around the pasture and you’re stuck on the other side of the fence—or out in Karse or Hardorn.”

Kaylan grimaced. “When you put it that way . . . “

Jorge smiled slyly over the rim of his glass, knowing that his arrow had struck home. “You know the answer you want. Yarik wants it, too. If you don’t get the right set of orders, object. Spell it out for them if you have to, though you shouldn’t need to do that.”

“You’re going to get me busted back to Grays, Jorge. They’ll stick me out at the Guard post in Sorrows Two mucking out stalls until Yarik earns his Whites.”

“Since when does an Elderwood mind mucking out stalls?”

Kaylan resisted the urge to throw the rest of his drink in his cousin’s face and drained it instead. He rose and set the glass on the desk with a solid thunk. “Thanks, Jorge.”

“Anytime, little cousin.” Jorge raised his glass to Kaylan in a toast. “Anytime.”

* * *

“Heyla, little pirate.”

Yarik looked up from the book he was puzzling through in the Collegium library. Panic replaced his welcoming grin the instant he realized Kaylan was wearing Whites. *They’re sending him away! Why? What did I do wrong?* The Winter Grays, which he’d been thankful for just a moment before, suddenly felt too hot. His hand trembled as he closed his book.

Kaylan caught him by the wrist and gently, but firmly, pulled him to his feet the way a gentleman would help a lady up who had accepted his invitation to dance. “Come with me.”

Yarik hesitated for several heartbeats before he realized Kaylan's voice hadn't been angry. It was . . . playful?

Kaylan shifted his grip to Yarik's no longer-bruised upper arm and swept him out into the hall, leaving his book behind. "It's too nice of a day to be slaving away at your studies. Let's go for a ride."

Yarik studied him warily. "A ride?" He half expected his voice to crack, though it had stopped doing that weeks ago.

The corners of Kaylan's dazzling blue eyes crinkled. "Not for a lesson. Just for fun."

Still dubious, Yarik let himself be guided toward the Companions' Stable. He would have let himself be guided through all Nine Hells if it meant being able to feel Kaylan's hand on him as the snow crunched beneath their boots. "Fun?"

"Yes. Fun. When was the last time you had fun?"

Yarik stopped short, what little color he had draining from his face. "*Fun*" was something the pirates had, not anything I had.

Kaylan absently wiped the perspiration from Yarik's forehead as he brushed his golden-brown curls back from his face. "That's what I thought. You don't even remember how to have fun." He draped his arm across Yarik's shoulders and escorted him toward the Companions' Stable once more.

"What's fun about riding?" Yarik asked, at least half a dozen images of other things he'd rather be doing with the handsome Herald flashing through his mind.

:Can we wear our bells?: his Companion, Illysha, asked plaintively.

Kaylan's smile turned mischievous. "Let me guess. Our Companions want to wear their bells."

"How'd you know? You can't hear Mindspeech."

"No, I can't," Kaylan agreed. "But I know the look Heralds get on their faces when they're talking with their Companions, and I know our pretty ladies haven't had a chance to dress up in quite a while." He suddenly released Yarik's arm. "Race you!" He took off toward the stable

Yarik hesitated a moment, then, with a great deal more caution, chased after him.

Kaylan was already brushing the straw off Adele's silky coat when Yarik panted into the breezeway.

Illysha shook her head and neighed her disgust. *:Shame on you! Letting an old man beat you like that!:*

Yarik bristled as he strode forward and grabbed a brush. *:Kaylan's not old!:*

:Get that spot right behind my left ear, and I'll agree with you.:

Yarik applied himself to his task.

Kaylan had Adele saddled and her bridle bells hung before Yarik had even gone to fetch Illysha's tack.

Yarik headed for the tack room, grumbling under his breath about Heralds who were born with curry combs in their hands. He

stopped and stared at the spot where Illysha's tack should be.
"Where's-?"

:By my hooves, you dolt,: Illysha teased. *:I keep reminding you that he's a Fetcher, and you keep refusing to take advantage of his skills.:*

Yarik plodded back toward Illysha. *:I don't want to take advantage of him.:*

Illysha arched her neck and gave him a pointed look. *:Maybe he wants to be taken advantage of.:*

"Next time warn me that you're going to save me the walk before I make the walk," Yarik grouched.

Kaylan's cheeks turned red from something other than the cold.
"I'm sorry. I was just trying to help. Here. I'll make it up to you. I'll get her saddled while you tend to her bells."

Yarik started to apologize.

:Bells!:

:Aye aye, ma'am. Anything you say, ma'am.: Yarik picked up the bag of bells and started to hang them on Illysha's bridle.

Kaylan finished saddling Illysha long before Yarik hung the last bell. He leaned against Adele's side, watching him, an unreadable look on his face.

Yarik swore silently as his hands shook under the scrutiny. *What's the matter with me? I'm not this weak anymore.*

Illysha swiveled her head around until she was staring at him with one of her sapphire blue eyes. She winked. Slowly.

:You're not helping.: Yarik set his bag next to Kaylan's.

Kaylan swung up onto Adele's back.

"Where are we going?" Yarik was only halfway into his saddle when Adele took off. He hadn't even seen the small muscle movement from Kaylan's legs that he used to communicate with her.

Illysha shifted her weight suddenly, landing Yarik firmly on her saddle. She neighed a challenge and took off after Adele.

:Slow down!: Yarik begged.

:We don't want to lose them!:

:Lose them? How can we possibly lose them? The Field is covered in snow! You don't need to be a fox to track a rabbit out here!: Yarik finally got himself sorted out in the saddle enough to risk glancing at where he thought Kaylan and Adele should be.

They were nowhere in sight, but their tracks vanished over a snowy hillock so far out in the Field that none of the other Companions was in sight.

:See?: Yarik was hanging onto her pommel too tightly to gesture at the tracks. *:Even I can follow those!:*

Illysha snorted her disdain as she charged after Adele. *:That's an Elderwood who's up to something if I've ever seen one! Just you-:* Illysha stopped mid-thought as she crested the hillock.

Yarik spotted Kaylan riding Adele in bizarre patterns inside a large rectangular outline they'd marked in a hoof-deep patch of otherwise pristine snow.

:Snow Fox!: Illysha squealed with delight.

:Snow what?: Yarik echoed.

:It's a game. We're supposed to catch them, but I can only step in the hoof prints Adele's already made. Once I touch her, I can only step where there are no prints and she can only step in existing prints until she catches me.:

Yarik frowned. *:What's the point of that?:*

:There isn't any!: Illysha picked her way down the slope, carefully stepping in Adele's prints. :That's what's fun about it!: Her bells chimed merrily. :Keep an eye on them, and tell me where they are while I concentrate on where I'm setting my hooves.:

Yarik didn't see how Illysha could ever catch Adele, but he dutifully relayed Kaylan's ever-changing position. It wasn't a difficult assignment. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was take his eyes off the gorgeous Herald. Used to sitting for candlemarks on end with his shoulder pressed against Kaylan's, trying his hardest to make progress at his lessons so they wouldn't have to break that contact, the distance the game put between them grated on his soul.

Illysha tagged Adele. She promptly stepped out of the prints and onto untouched snow, bounding away before Yarik had a chance to "accidentally" brush against Kaylan.

Yarik forced himself to look at the ground so Kaylan wouldn't read the frustration on his face. As he absently analyzed the hoofprints, the game suddenly started to make sense. Just as there had been few prints to start with, there would eventually be very little snow without prints in it.

:Let me know if they get too close!: Illysha instructed.

Yarik had absolutely no intention of obeying that command. *I just want to curl up with my arms around him somewhere no one is watching us and giving us worried or disapproving looks. I've had my entire childhood stolen from me. Why can't I at least have him?*

Adele tagged Illysha and sprang off, leaping from free space to free space, not unlike a fox hunting mice as they scuttled beneath the surface of the snow.

In a matter of heartbeats Kaylan was on the opposite side of the makeshift board, an insufferable grin on his face.

Yarik crinkled his nose. *:He's enjoying this far too much.:*

:This is how the Elderwoods always win,: Illysha complained. *:They grow up riding those dancing stallions of theirs and can practically fly over obstacles that would have any other Companion dumping their Herald in the snow.:*

:How do we win?:

:We make it so they don't have another move.:

Yarik considered the hoofprints. *:And they have to stay within the border established at the beginning?:*

:What do you have in mind?:

Yarik hoped Kaylan was too far away to see devious look in his eyes.

:Use his style against him. Herd him around until there are so many hoofprints everywhere that there's nowhere for Adele to jump.:

:But I'm supposed to be trying to tag her,: Illysha protested.

:You will be. I'll guide you in at angles that will send them leaping to where there are fewer and fewer places they can move without coming within tagging distance of us.:

Illysha gave a conspiratorial chuckle. *:Where to, O Crafty Chosen?:*

Yarik scanned the ground, looking for the direction in which Adele would have to make the greatest jump. He's showing off. He'll go for it. He met Kaylan's gaze. *:Left four paces, then make a sharp right.:*

Illysha complied.

As Illysha made her turn, Kaylan and Adele leapt right, precisely where Yarik wanted them to go.

:Back two paces, then angle right.: Yarik imagined he could see the laughter dancing in Kaylan's eyes as clearly as if their Companions were standing next to each other. *:Keep going forward, then angle left on my mark.:* He waited until Illysha pulled even with Adele, then Mindcalled, *:Mark!:*

Illysha turned abruptly left.

Adele startled forward.

Kaylan stuck to his saddle as if he were sewn to it. He spun Adele in place.

Adele jumped to a fresh patch of snow that had been behind them.

Yarik's eyes widened. *:I didn't know Companions could do that.:*

:Adele trained with those annoying stallions of theirs,: Illysha griped.

:And there are times I swear that Kaylan helps Fetch her.:

Yarik considered the problem. He spotted a clear area at what he suspected was the limit of Adele's range. *:Head straight for them. As soon as she jumps, turn right.:*

:Whatever you say, Chosen,: Illysha replied, doubt coloring her Mindvoice.

Yarik stared at Kaylan's eyes, holding his gaze.

Illysha turned.

Dismay swept across Kaylan's face as he saw the trick too late and had no way to warn Adele.

Adele took to the air.

Yarik watched her land and freeze in place. He sat back in his saddle, a self-satisfied smile on his lips as Illysha sidled up to where Adele was standing on an island of snow with absolutely nowhere to go.

Illysha firmly butted Adele with her head.

“Good match, little pirate!” Kaylan laughed without rancor.

Yarik preened at the praise. “So that’s what you call ‘fun.’”

Kaylan nodded. “What do you want to do next?”

Yarik was pretty sure what he wanted was not on the menu. He shrugged. “Dunno.”

Kaylan tilted his head in the way that always made Yarik’s heart flop. “You must have some idea! I made the first choice. Now, it’s your turn.”

Yarik’s stomach rumbled. “Lunch?” he suggested.

“Simple or fancy?”

Yarik was sure he looked as puzzled as he felt. “Aren’t we going back to the Collegium?”

“After getting our pretty ladies all dressed up?” Kaylan asked.

“We’re going into Haven so they can show off!” He swung Adele around with another invisible command and rode toward the main gate of the Palace grounds.

Yarik hadn’t been outside the walls since he’d arrived. He’d been thrilled to leave the meals at the House of Healing for ones he could share with Kaylan in the Collegium’s Common Room, so it had never occurred to him that there was another option. *:Is he serious?:*

:Quite. And you’d better answer his question about ‘simple or fancy’ or you’ll wind up in a tavern that caters to the elite, trying to eat something that’s staring back at you.:

“Maybe something in between?” Yarik shouted.

Kaylan waved to show that he’d heard, but Adele only slowed enough for the Herald to say something to the Guard as they passed through the gate.

Illysha ambled after her, hooves chiming on the road in time to her bells.

:Why aren’t you catching up with them?: Yarik asked.

:I thought you might like to enjoy the view.: Illysha indicated Kaylan with a toss of her head.

Yarik stared at her ears. *:I thought Companions weren’t supposed to meddle in our personal lives.:*

:Fine. I’ll enjoy the view while you sit up there and be grumpy. Adele has such splendid—:

:I thought you fancied that stallion who hasn’t Chosen anyone yet.:

:His name is Terrill.:

:Yeah. Him.:

:He’s okay as Companions go. But would you look at that Kaylan? I’m surprised more Trainees in Bardic aren’t making up dreadful songs about his, uh, assets.:

Yarik stared at the older Herald’s back. Well, maybe a little lower than his back. And he entertained a couple indecent fantasies about what it might be like to be his saddle—

Illysha snorted and trotted up to Adele's side.

"Soup?" Kaylan asked. "Or something more substantial?"

"Huh?" Yarik blushed, wondering if he could possibly find a way to sound more stupid.

"There's a good tavern up here on the left that specializes in bangers," Kaylan said conversationally as their Companions carried them through the nicer neighborhoods of Haven. "Their mash is fairly decent, and their ale isn't the worst I've ever had."

Yarik was trying to decide if that was a good recommendation or not when Kaylan gestured off to his right.

"Or there's another place over there that offers a good assortment of pasties. And this time of year they carry some seriously good cider."

"That sounds interesting."

Kaylan grinned. "Let's go there then."

Adele promptly took the lead with a speed that startled Yarik.

:What's her hurry?: Yarik tightened his grip on Illysha's pommel as she picked up her pace as well.

:You'll see.:

Kaylan ducked slightly to keep his head from hitting a sign with a white fox on it as Adele carried him through the gate and into the

freshly-shoveled courtyard. He dismounted and stepped nimbly out of the way as she took off toward the far wall.

Yarik, who'd had no need to duck, watched her go, completely baffled. "Aren't we supposed to take them to a stable or something?"

"Dismount, and you'll see your answer." Kaylan resisted the temptation to lift Yarik down.

As soon as Yarik's boots hit the cobblestones, Illysha gamboled off to join Adele. Together the mares whinnied.

"Companions!" A horde of children burbled out of somewhere and engulfed the mares, petting them and offering them treats.

Kaylan stole a glance at Yarik, who, as Jorge had pointed out, looked nothing like these youngsters. Maybe he really is older than we think. "Our ladies will be so pampered and spoiled rotten by the time we're ready to leave that they may not want to go." He held the door open for Yarik and ushered him into the taproom.

"Heyla, Heralds!" the barkeeper called. "What can we get for you?"

Yarik, unaccustomed to being asked what he wanted, chewed on his lip briefly. "You order for me."

Kaylan shook his head. "That's not how it works at this tavern. Here we play a game. You're supposed to come up with something they don't have. If you do, then they'll try to fool you into thinking they've met your request. If you catch them at it, your drink is free."

Yarik frowned. “That seems like an awful lot of work for a free drink.”

“That’s the point!” Kaylan waved for the barkeeper’s attention. “Lamb and potatoes with mint!”

The barkeeper kept his face perfectly straight, waiting for Yarik’s order.

Yarik’s frown deepened. “What’s so hard about that?”

Kaylan chuckled. “They might have mint in a hothouse, and they might have stored potatoes for the winter, but finding a lamb this time of year—?”

The expression on Yarik’s face brightened. “Oh! I see!” Then as quickly as it had appeared, his excitement vanished. “All I know is fish, and if I never see another fish as long as I live it will be too soon.”

Kaylan folded his arms across his chest. “What do you do when you don’t know something?”

“Admit it,” Yarik replied promptly. “I must be honest and not make things up.”

“True. If you are studying or working or doing something else serious. We’re playing a game. A game of trickery. So, what do you do?”

Yarik puzzled for a moment, then beamed. “I make something up.”

Kaylan grinned like a fox.

Yarik turned to the bartender. "Squirrel!"

The bartender looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "Drinks?"

"Do you want to try the cider?" Kaylan asked. "Or would you prefer something else?"

Yarik's eyes grew wide, making him look like a deer staring down a crossbow bolt.

"Try the cider," Kaylan suggested. "If you don't like it, you can ask for something else. Don't worry about money. This will be my treat."

Yarik still looked uncertain, but he said, "Okay."

"Two ciders!" Kaylan called. "Where would you like to sit?"

Yarik pointed at a table for two near the staircase. "How's that?"

"Excellent! Lead on!"

Yarik threaded a path through the occupied tables to the one he'd chosen.

Kaylan angled the chairs so they both had a good view of the raised platform at the far end of the room where a minstrel was settling himself. "Davit," he said as he watched Yarik sit. "He usually alternates between ballads and drinking songs." He claimed the remaining chair, moving it close enough that their legs touched. He saw the blank look on Yarik's face. "Ah. I suppose minstrels and Bards don't spend much time on pirate ships."

Yarik lowered his captivating eyes. “No.”

“You’ve already learned that ballads are story songs,” Kaylan said patiently. “Drinking songs are . . . well, let’s just say that they are best listened to while you aren’t sober so you don’t care how many people around you are bellowing along with the only person in the room who can actually carry a tune.”

Yarik peeked out from under his long lashes and smiled shyly at the joke.

The minstrel began to play.

Kaylan recognized the ballad as the story of a young girl who contrived all kinds of twisted schemes to trick a comically old man into marrying her so she could inherit his money only to have a Herald show her that the would-be husband had planned to marry her all along.

Halfway through the song, their food and drinks arrived. The serving wench watched them expectantly.

Kaylan made a show of studying his pie. He bit into it, savoring the meat and gravy. He sighed. “Okay. I give up. How’d you find lamb this time of year and get it cooked this tender this fast?”

“Trade secret, and you know it!” the wench teased. She turned her attention to Yarik. “Well?”

Yarik nibbled experimentally at his pie. He turned pleading eyes on Kaylan.

“You have absolutely no idea what squirrel tastes like, do you,” Kaylan said softly. “Is it edible?”

Yarik took another small bite, chewed, swallowed and nodded.

Kaylan clapped him on the back. “Enjoy!” He handed the server far too much money. “You got us again! I have no idea how you manage it!”

“Not even a Second-Stage Truth Spell could get that answer out of us!” the wench swore, setting their tankards of cider next to their pies.

Kaylan winked. “Now why would I want to do that to you and spoil the magic?” He gestured at the coins. “Share some of that with Davit, and ask him to play ‘The Drunken Guardsman.’”

Yarik looked quizzically at Kaylan as the server smiled conspiratorially and made her way toward the minstrel.

Davit accepted the coins she gave him with a flourish.

Kaylan raised his tankard to the minstrel, who promptly struck up a jaunty tune.

“What do we do with a drunken Guardsman?”

What do we do with a drunken Guardsman?

What do we do with a drunken Guardsman?

Early in the morning?”

Through repetition, Yarik quickly picked up the words to the chorus and joined his decent tenor to Kaylan's smooth baritone.

Within a few verses the crowd was roaring with laughter and calling out suggestions for the hapless Guardsman's punishment.

"Send him to Sorrows to clean the stables!" Kaylan hollered.

Davit laughed and took up the verse.

Yarik stopped singing. "Is that what they're doing to you?" he asked just loud enough for Kaylan to hear him.

Kaylan fingered his tankard. "I don't know, little pirate. No one's told me yet."

"But you haven't done anything wrong!" Yarik protested. He lay his hand on Kaylan's thigh. "I don't want you to get punished because of me."

"Whatever will happen to me has already been decided. Nothing I do now will make it any worse." Kaylan tried to ignore the demanding pressure of Yarik's hand, but he was fast losing the battle with his body, which had very clear ideas of its own.

Davit finally drew the song to a close and launched into the next number in his set.

Kaylan tried to satisfy at least one of his appetites by applying himself to his food.

Yarik polished off his pie and stole some of Kaylan's.

Kaylan pretended to be offended. “How dare—!”

“What?” Yarik asked innocently. “I’m a growing boy! If I don’t get enough food, I’ll wither away to nothing!”

Kaylan shoved the rest of his pie at Yarik and picked up his tankard. “You may still be growing, but you’re definitely not a boy anymore. You’ve become quite the charming young man.” He nursed his cider. *He looks worlds better than when I found him. A lot more flesh on his bones. No more visible injuries. He cleaned up as pretty as a new copper. Maybe he is older . . .* “Try the cider.”

Yarik obeyed. He made a face. “Well, it’s better than rum.”

Kaylan chuckled. “Many things are better than rum.”

“Like you,” Yarik whispered.

Kaylan put down his tankard. Between the brandywine and the headiness of being alone with Yarik, his good sense had saddled up and ridden off on Circuit somewhere. He addressed the table. “If you want, we can go back to the Collegium. Or we can stay here and find somewhere out of sight for a while, some where people aren’t judging us.”

Yarik’s brow furrowed. “Out of sight?”

Kaylan glanced at the ceiling.

Yarik made a small sound. “That’s an option?”

Kaylan tried to keep his shrug casual. “Only if you want it to be.”

The server returned, cleared away their food and left a key on the table between them.

Yarik stared at the key.

Kaylan tried to keep his tone light. “If you want to leave, then that’s what we’ll do. If you want to do something else, all you have to do is tell me. Others can order me around tomorrow, but, for now, I’m at your command.”

“Are you sure?”

Kaylan nodded. “If I’m going to wind up mucking out stables for the next few years, I’d at least like it to be for cause.” He forced himself to look into Yarik’s incredible brown eyes, drowning in them almost as completely as he’d drowned in Adele’s sapphire ones when she had Chosen him. “I will never force you to do anything against your will. I swear it. It’s your choice. Always your choice.”

Yarik sat quietly for a moment, then picked up the key.

* * *

Yarik walked side by side with Kaylan toward their Companions, who had had their manes and tails braided with far more ribbons than he’d thought possible. The mares glowed in the afternoon sun. Both appeared completely sated, and still the children swarmed around them. He laughed at the sight. “Oh, dear! It’s going to take forever for us to undo all that!”

Kaylan tilted his head to consider the mares. “If we leave the braids in overnight, their manes will look wonderfully wavy in the morning. The other Companions will be terribly jealous.”

:Neither of you will touch a single hair on our braids until we tell you to!:

Yarik giggled and passed along the message to Kaylan.

The children backed off as the Heralds swung into their saddles.

Adele and Illysha carried them once more onto the streets of Haven.

“Are they really going to send you all the way to Sorrows because of me?” Yarik asked as they rode into the less populated part of the city.

Kaylan considered the question for the better part of a block. “As of this morning, I think they were sending me somewhere. Perhaps for a year or two. Now, I’m not sure.”

Well, I am sure what’s going to happen if they try! Yarik thought rebelliously. *I’ll walk after you if I have to!*

Illysha made a sound very like a laugh. *:You won’t have to walk, little brother. I’ll carry you. That’s if they can convince Adele to carry him anywhere without you. Which I doubt they can.:*

:Why?: Yarik puzzled.

Illysha turned her head enough to glance at him. *:Don’t you feel it?:*

Yarik didn’t have to ask what she was talking about. Away from prying eyes, they’d done nothing more than curl up in each other’s arms and enjoy being alone together. That was simply what had felt “right.” No pressure. No criticism. No threats. No fear. That was what Yarik’s most persistent dream had been, and Kaylan had willingly accommodated him. Their lifebond felt every bit as strong

as his bond with Illysha, and he wasn't about to let anyone change that even if they could.

As they rode on in silence, the Companions fell into step, keeping pace with each other like a fine pair of horses pulling a noble's carriage.

Yarik stared at the Palace, which loomed in front of them as they drew closer to the gates.

"Herald Kaylan!" a Guardsman hailed. "The Seneschal's Herald wants to see you."

Yarik blanched.

"As soon as I take care of Adele."

Yarik fancied that he heard a waver in Kaylan's voice. *They can't send him away! It would be like losing part of my soul!*

They rode to the stable and tended to Illysha and Adele in silence.

As the mares trotted out into the Field, Kaylan started off toward the Palace.

Yarik caught him by the arm. "I'm coming with you."

Kaylan began to object.

"We're a team," Yarik said stubbornly. "They are not going to separate us! I won't let them! Everyone is just going to have to deal with that!"

Kaylan touched Yarik's cheek. "Let me guess. Illysha and Adele are making their opinions known to the other Companions."

Yarik smiled. "You could say that." He took Kaylan's hand and kissed his palm. "I plan to give the humans an earful as well."

Kaylan sighed. "At least everyone always thought I looked good in Grays."

They walked shoulder to shoulder toward the Palace.

* * *

Jorge tugged at his chin, studying Kaylan and Yarik as they sat on his bed, their fingers intertwined. They were both in Grays, though Kaylan's were a slightly darker shade, not completely unlike those worn by Weaponsmaster Alberich.

"I told you you'd get me busted back to Grays," Kaylan teased. He was actually still a full Herald. He simply needed a darker uniform because he was to assist with the Equitation classes, teaching advanced riders and their mounts how the secrets of the dancing stallions could be used in war. Whites wouldn't last a quarter candlemark once the melting snow turned the paddock surface to mud.

Jorge made a face.

Kaylan had been reassigned to a room directly across from Dean Elcarth's office—which shared a wall with Yarik's room in the Trainee Wing of the Collegium. Jorge wasn't sure how long it would remain a secret that a door had been plastered over between the two rooms when the Collegium had been built and that it was no longer covered with plaster. The two were under orders to keep

their hallway doors to their separate Wings locked at all times, but someone was eventually going to catch sight of the connecting portal through a window or as one of them was going in or out of his room, and within a candlemark the entire Collegium would know of its existence. They were also supposed to maintain a strictly professional relationship outside their suite. *That won't last a fortnight. Oh, the Powers That Be could try to attribute the pair's meshing to the drills they were undergoing to learn to use their Gifts together—* Jorge revised his estimate. *It won't last a se'nnight.* “And everyone is okay with this decision?”

Kaylan rolled his eyes. “That’s why we’re talking with you, Jorge. You’re supposed to tell us if we’re okay with it.” His expression softened. “You asked me ‘Who’s worrying about Kaylan?’ I know the answer now. Yarik is.”

Yarik blushed but squeezed Kaylan’s hand.

Jorge absently scratched at the healing scabs on his head, which were itching dreadfully. The boy—no, not a “boy”—had a pink aura that blended seamlessly with Kaylan’s red one. How could any Healer have missed that? Even someone with no Empathy at all should be able to see it!

:Not unless we want them to,: Tieg commented absently.

:Arrogant equine.: Jorge briefly longed for the days when stallions didn’t talk back to him. *:You going to enlighten me as to why you didn't keep them apart until Yarik was older?:*

:We need them, and Yarik was going to die,: Tieg said practically.

:And this is the best solution you could come up with?: Jorge concentrated on Kaylan. The Queen’s Special Messenger. The

Arrow. Stuck in a target for an indeterminate number of years. All because the mouse had caught the Snow Fox and wouldn't—couldn't—let him go. He shifted in his chair, trying to move his still-swollen legs to a more comfortable position. Which didn't exist. “What happens when the rumors start to fly? Because you know they will. And they won't be kind.”

Kaylan winced. “I hadn't thought about that.”

Jorge sighed. “That's right. Cousin Pam is the smart one in the family.”

Kaylan frowned. “Are you sure it isn't Cousin Ham?” The bewildered look on Yarik's face made him laugh. “It's a family joke, little pirate. When I take you to the Estate for a Mandatory Visit, you'll understand.”

Yarik paled. “Mandatory Visit?”

Jorge saw the lad's aura take on an orangish tinge. “You're terrifying him, cousin.”

Kaylan jostled Yarik with his shoulder. “Anyone who can stand up to the Seneschal's Herald can handle anything we Elderwoods can throw at him.”

A shy smile curled across Yarik's lips as his aura settled back to pink. “As long as you're there to Fetch away anything that might actually hit me.”

Jorge made a steeple with his fingers, his elbows on the arms of his chair. “I can't see where one of you ends and the other begins. You're fine. Just promise me you won't start finishing each other's sentences.”

Kaylan grinned like a fox in a henhouse. “Now, why would we—?”

“—do that?” Yarik asked.

Jorge promptly threw his pillow at them.

Kaylan deftly fetched it back onto his cousin’s lap.

Jorge flashed a beleaguered look at him. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

Kaylan chuckled. “You only have yourself to blame, Jorge.”

“Out!” Jorge ordered. “I don’t know why I bother with lifebonded pairs. They all drive me crazy!”

“Crazy like a fox,” Kaylan teased as he and Yarik rose as one and left the room.

Jorge threw his pillow at the door. He swore. “See what you made me do? Now, I have to go pick it up!”

The pillow disappeared from the floor and reappeared on Jorge’s lap.

Without me being in Kaylan’s line of sight. Jorge felt his lips twitch into a smile. They’re already starting to work together. “Thanks.”

“Anytime, older cousin,” Kaylan’s voice called from the other side of the door. “Anytime.”