

Havenbound  
By  
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Herald Yarik Rafton sat astride his Companion, Illysha, at the side of the North Trade Road, watching travelers pass in both directions and wondering exactly how much trouble his glistening white mare had managed to get him into this time. It was bad enough that he had left his post at the Healer's Temple and ridden for three days through knee-deep snow to meet the stallion, Terrill, and his newly-Chosen rider, Danya Winterborn, at a Waystation in Sorrows Two. Companions were supposed to be able to take their Chosen back to the Collegium from anywhere inside Valdemar with little or no trouble. That's how the Queen wanted it. That's why there were rules--laws that Herald Yarik had been violating right and left since before he had even lain eyes on Danya Winterborn. The Queen would probably forgive him eventually for teaching the overwhelmed young woman enough about her newly awakened Gifts of Mindspeech, Fetching and Empathy for her to have a prayer of making the journey to the Collegium without leaving a trail of unintentionally terrified Valdemarans in her wake. Too, while Yarik himself paled at his decision to accompany Danya, he could not, in good conscience, let someone who looked like a Karsite ride up to the Queen's doorstep without someone besides her Companion to vouch for her. Heralds and Trainees familiar with Weaponsmaster Alberich would probably give the young woman the benefit of their doubt if she made it as far as the

Collegium. But Yarik did not trust the inhabitants of Haven, many of whom had lost loved ones in the war with Karse--or the travelers who were currently passing him, for that matter--to keep their hands to themselves, and he had quickly determined that Danya had neither training in self-defense nor a genuine understanding of why she might need such skills other than the Bardic drivel that, of course, all Heralds know how to fight. He found her naivete charming to a point, but he also knew how easily that innocence could get her killed. Better to risk a tongue-lashing from the Queen herself than to risk Danya's life. What he had absolutely not bargained for was that, in the slightly two months or so he had spent with the young woman, she had--with more than a little encouragement from Terrill and his own meddling Companion--developed an extremely inconvenient crush on him, due in no small part to the same escapades that ensured he would not be riding out of Haven for the better part of a year. Illysha was definitely pregnant thanks to Terrill, and Yarik was positive the four-footed troublemakers had arranged that little "accident" on purpose. *:Kaylan is going to laugh himself sick over this when I get back to the Temple,; he fretted. :If I get back to the Temple. And if he doesn't kill me for deserting him. What if plague strikes somewhere, and the Temple needs me to transport a Healer to a village? What if there's an emergency, and a Healer forgets to bring something important? Who's going to locate it so Kaylan can Fetch it?:*

Illysha snorted. *:It's too late in the year for plague,:* she reasoned, pawing at the iced-over snow some unit of Guards had piled along the side of the road. *:And Kaylan can Fetch just fine without your help. No one would ever have thought to team the two of you if Heralds Dirk and Kris had not accidentally discovered how the Gifts can complement each other. Besides, since we've gone to war with Hardorn, the Heralds riding the Border circuits have enough trouble without an unshielded Empath/ Fetcher/ Mindspeaker riding from Sorrows to Haven, causing chaos wherever she passes. Not to mention what a mess an experience like that would make of her!:*

*:You know Kaylan's Mindspeech is nonexistent,:* Yarik accused. *:He's going to think that I've been lying to him all these years about being shay'a'chern and that I've left him for the first woman who noticed I'm alive.:*

*:Don't be ridiculous.:* Illysha shook her head, jangling her bridle bells. *:Kaylan's your lifebonded.:*

*:I know he's my lifebonded!:* Yarik snapped. *:You're the one who keeps forgetting that not-so-little detail.:*

The mare craned her head around to give him a knowing look. *:As soon as the Seneschal's Herald realizes you're going to be stuck in Haven for a year, he'll send a team to relieve Kaylan. He'll be back in your arms before Midsummer.:*

*:Illysha,:* Yarik growled at his Companion's willful obtuseness, *:that was a dream posting for the two of us! We'll never earn another one like it!:*

*:It was Sorrows, she sniffed. :It was freezing almost year-round.:*

*:Kaylan and I like the cold, he reminded her. :It gives us a marvelous excuse to share a bed.:*

*:As if you needed an excuse!:*

Yarik sighed. *:That sounds like jealousy. Please tell me that the reason I'm looking at spending the next two years mucking out stables has nothing to do with his Adele being a mare.:*

Illysha shook her mane in denial but gave no other response as Terrill ambled out of the bushes, his Chosen once more in his saddle after taking care of the necessities of life.

Danya smiled sheepishly at him as her Companion pulled even with his. "Thanks for stopping."

"Any time," Yarik grinned in spite of himself, his foul mood and petty fears vanishing at the sight of her.

*:Like when you see Kaylan?:* Illysha needed.

The Herald groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose between his right thumb and forefinger. "I'm sorry, Danya. Illysha woke up on the wrong side of the stall today, and I'm afraid she's determined to make me rotten company as well."

"Really?" the trainee replied, squinting at the mare against the glare of the midday sun. "I hadn't noticed."

Yarik lowered his hand and stared at the young woman until he was certain that she was completely serious. She had mastered the art of finding her center, grounding and building a shield so quickly that he had found it hard to believe what his Sight confirmed. The

strength of those shields must be phenomenal if she could not sense his irritation with Illysha and his growing fears now that he was certain they would reach Haven before nightfall. His tiffs with his feisty Companion had brought more than one well-trained Empath from the Temple down on his head, and somehow his explanation that Illysha needed a good fight every week or so to keep her happy only sent Kaylan into giggling fits and never improved his own relationship with the Healers. The trick with Danya was probably going to be teaching her how to leave her shields down enough so she could sense trouble when she needed to. He'd better warn her Gift teacher--

*:You'll probably be her Gift teacher,:* Illysha commented, flicking her tail at Terrill and prancing carelessly out onto the icy road.

Danya turned as white as Yarik's uniform as her stallion danced beneath her in surprise.

"Well done!" Yarik praised as Terrill trotted up to join Illysha. "A week ago that little stunt would have landed you in a drift."

The young woman blushed prettily at his approval. "I sit him like a sack of potatoes, and you know it. I'm never going to be as good as you."

"I'm not that good," Yarik laughed. "I spent most of the first thirteen years of my life on the deck of a boat. Believe me, I'm just as jealous as you are of the lucky few who were practically born in a saddle. Their bones and muscles do things I don't think ours ever will!" He waved at a little girl in a merchant's wagon who stared at him

with enormous eyes as her family drove past. He was rewarded with a huge smile. *:It takes so little to make people happy, yet so few make the effort.:* "The trick is to find someone who is willing to work out the kinks for you after your equitation lessons." *Oh, that was brilliant,* he chided himself silently as Danya blushed again. *If that didn't sound like a pass, I don't know what does! I should just tell her I'm shaych and have done with. Half the Circle knows, and the other half guesses. Why can't I get the words out with her?*

*:Good question.:* Illysha capered beside Terrill, ignoring the poor condition of the road as she matched her paces to the stallion's.

"I'll have to look for someone," Danya replied.

Yarik winced at the sudden image of the dreadfully innocent woman, wandering around the Collegium dining hall, inviting total strangers to her room to give her a massage. "Just make sure it's someone you know really well and whom you trust."

Danya frowned in thought for a moment, then shrugged. "It will have to be you, then. I don't know anyone else."

*I should slit my wrists and put me out of everyone's misery!* the Herald groaned inwardly. *I couldn't make a worse muddle of this if I tried!*

*:Sure you could,:* Illysha commented smoothly.

*:Eavesdropper!:*

*:Pirate!:*

*:I was only a cabin boy!:* Yarik protested as unbidden memories plunged him into a past he'd rather

forget. Pirates swarming his parents' fishing boat, killing them, taking their three-year-old son prisoner. Yarik was still convinced his gorgeous, doe-like eyes had saved him. The captain had been a woman who took him for her cabin boy--until he was old enough to perform other services. Yarik often wondered if he would still be *shaych* if he had had a more normal childhood. But Kaylan had had about as normal a childhood as anyone could get, and he was most definitely *shaych*. *Maybe how you're raised has nothing to do with it. After all, being raised by pirates didn't turn me into a brigand. Though Goddess knows they tried to make me one!* Yarik could still hear Weaponsmaster Alberich screaming at him for refusing to attack in combat. Years spent doing everything within his power not to kill his opponent had left Yarik with defense maneuvers that were the envy of every Herald in the Circle, but the lowliest page had better attacks.

Danya suddenly began singing a lively little folktune in time to the jangling of Terrill's bridle bells.

Yarik found his thoughts hauled rudely back to his present predicament--and his heart doing an amazing imitation of a hummer bird. He was about to join his voice to Danya's when Illysha slipped. The Herald watched the next few moments of his life flash through his mind. His mare would fall, seriously injuring her knees, and throw him over her head. He'd land on his back, unless he tucked in time and could roll on the ice-covered road. He'd probably earn several bruises and strained muscles for his efforts. Then he'd have to walk, or more likely limp, the rest of the way to Haven, leading

Illysha to the House of Healing where someone could tend to her damaged knees. Fully prepared for the worst, it took Yarik several minutes to realize that Illysha had not fallen. In fact, the mare was standing rock solid under him, shivering with something besides the cold.

A merchant who had seen Illysha stumble applauded the recovery, then urged his pack mules past the Herald and his charge.

Yarik looked warily at Danya. "Did you do that?"

"I didn't trip her," the young woman assured him hastily.

The Herald shook his head. "No. That's not what I mean. Did you keep her from falling?"

Danya bit her lower lip, then shrugged, "I think so. I'm not sure."

"Illysha?"

The mare's breath formed white clouds in front of her as she struggled to regain her composure. *:I think she held my halter up until I got my feet back under me.:*

"Bright Havens!" Yarik swore. He turned his concerned gaze on Danya. "You're going to give yourself a reaction headache trying to lift something that heavy!"

The young woman shrugged. "I was planning on having one by tonight anyway, if the trip through the streets of Haven is going to be as bad as you say."

The Herald crinkled his nose. "Ouch. You're right. I'm sorry. Thanks."

"Shall we cover what distance we can before you have to carry me?" she smiled, then gave Terrill his head.



The stallion neighed a warning at Illysha, then set off down the road at a ground-devouring pace.

The much-subdued mare followed him at a steadier gait than the one she had previously been using.

Yarik frowned to himself, wishing Terrill had had the sense to wear his field harness to go seek his Chosen.

The working saddle for a Companion had rings and ties to fasten the rider into place. Many an exhausted or ill Herald had been saved from tumbling out of the saddle by those straps. But the simpler version of the harness, which Companions wore for seeking their Chosen, had no such devices. Yarik feared Danya was right and that he might be carrying her before the day was out. *:Call ahead to Rolan,:* he ordered Illysha. *:Warn him that we're coming.:* The advance notice might mean someone would be waiting at the gate to chew him out, but the Herald knew he had no business worrying about public humiliation when Danya was likely to make herself quite ill just trying to ride through the town. After all, she had saved him and his Companion from a terrible fall. The least he could do was sacrifice a bit of his pride to make sure help would be available for her when they arrived.

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"Herald Yarik?" asked the silver-trimmed, blue-uniformed Guard. Posted at the small gate in the inner wall to the Palace complex, his main duty was to intercept the newly Chosen and escort them to the Herald's Collegium.

The Herald, who was literally holding Danya upright in Terrill's saddle, nodded. "Grab her."

The Guard eased Danya to the ground as Yarik dismounted.

"Sweet Goddess!" the Guard exclaimed as Danya's hood fell back, revealing her face. "I thought the Healing Temple you were assigned to was in the northeast sector."

"It is," Yarik growled, taking Danya from the Guard. "Has she been assigned a room?"

The Guard nodded. "And I hear the Dean has already had it stocked with willowbark tea and a headache-potion. He'll meet us there. Follow me."

The Herald hefted Danya into his arms and carried her after the Guard.

Stablehands ran to greet the two Companions as they trotted to the Field.

\* \* \*

The nearly unconscious woman nestled against Yarik's shoulder, murmuring something he could not understand.

Heraldic students in gray uniforms stole glances at their newest classmate but otherwise stayed out of Yarik's way as the Guard led him through the maze of halls to the girls' side of the dormitory. Dean Teren waited outside one of the open doors. He dismissed the Gate Guard with a nod and motioned for Yarik to take his burden inside.

The Herald obeyed and eased Danya onto her bed. "So where do I report to be flayed alive?"

"Kyril's waiting for you in his office," Teren chuckled as he handed Yarik the headache-potion. "Don't look so worried. The girl's obviously suffering from a reaction headache even with your help. I don't know how they found out, but the Bardic Circle heard you were bringing in Kestran's protégé and you needed an excuse to help her. Believe it or not, they found one. They had to go back to Vanyel's time to do it, but Kestran wrote several songs about a similar incident surrounding a boy with a newly-awakened Fetching Gift that Vanyel and Savil had to control until a special tutor could be sent out for the lad. Granted, Vanyel and Savil were on leave and didn't abandon an assigned post, but I'm sure it's enough of an excuse for Kyril to work something out."

Yarik helped Danya sit up enough so she could drink the potion. "Poor dove. She lost the only person she'd ever known when Bard Kestran died. The second person she saw was a Guard at Berrybay--whose entire family had been wiped out in the war with Karse. That's why the woman was posted so far north. Terrill didn't know. He reported her to the Sorrows Two Field Herald's Companion. The Herald wasn't too far out of Berrybay, so she rode back to find out why the woman was so rude to someone who had been recently Chosen."

"If the Field Herald was that close, why didn't Terrill summon her to help with his Chosen?"

Yarik shrugged. "Danya's never been around a woman, except for the Guard at Berrybay. I guess Terrill

thought she'd be more comfortable with me." He helped Danya lie back against her pillow, then placed the empty vial on her nightstand. He caressed her cheek as the potion began to take effect, and she opened her eyes.

"Heyla, dove. Feeling better?"

Danya made a face. "Than a peckerbird with a head cold. But just barely."

"That's my dove," Yarik grinned. "There's some willowbark tea ready for you. That should chase off the rest of what ails you. I've got to go give the Seneschal's Herald my report. This is Dean Teren. He'll get you back on your feet and see that you get settled in." He started to rise.

Danya grabbed his arm. "When will I see you again?"

Yarik gently disengaged himself from her. "I'll stop by and check on you before I retire for the night," he promised. He saw the puzzled look in Teren's eyes, but he ignored it and hurried out the door. *:The stablehands treating you right?:* he asked Illysha as he headed for Kyril's office.

*:They've got the snow and mud off me,:* she assured him. *:I've got my blanket on, and they've got a nice thick layer of straw on the floor of the Shelter. The warming stoves are keeping out the worst of the cold. But no one can make a hot mash as good as yours.:*

Yarik chuckled softly, drawing a knowing look from a student who was mopping the hall floor. *:It can't be too bad if you're sounding civil again.:*

*:Don't fret, little brother. We won't let Kyril get too mad at you. It's Terrill's fault and mine that you're in trouble.:*

*:Thanks for admitting it, heartsister. I don't suppose you could have some of the Companions ask their Chosen to put in a good word for me with Kaylan when he reaches Haven?:*

*:You know we don't meddle in your personal lives.:*

*:Right, Yarik growled. :You'd never dream of asking me to abandon my lifebonded in the dead of winter without so much as a "fare-thee-well".:*

*:You said "goodbye", she reminded him indignantly.*

*The Herald paused outside the door to Kyril's office in the Palace suite. :Minx. You know what I mean. Wish me luck.:*

*:You don't need luck, she sniffed. :You've got me.:*

*:Why doesn't that make me feel better?: he teased, then knocked on the door.*

*"Come!" Kyril called from inside.*

*Yarik opened the door. He took a deep breath, then stepped into the small room--and into that most dreaded of all futures: an interesting life.*

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So many Unbonded Companions descended on Yarik as he trudged across the snow-covered Field to the Foul Weather Shelter that he feared he had not brought enough treats with him. The Herald had wheedled bits of

carrots and apples leftover from supper out of the Collegium cook, Mero, before heading for the Companions' Field, but the contents of his sack would only go so far.

*:They missed you, Chosen,:* Illysha's smiling voice drifted through his mind.

Yarik passed out his treats, calling each Companion by name and murmuring pleasantries until his sack was empty. He was fairly certain some of the Companions who had met him at the fence had done without a slice of carrot or apple paring, but they had faded unobtrusively into the herd as he reached the Shelter.

Illysha wandered over to him and butted him with her head. *:They don't want to make you feel bad, little brother. They love the fact that you think to bring any of them treats. They don't expect you to feed them all.:*

*:I know, heartsister.:* Yarik combed his fingers through her silky white mane. *:Did you get your mash?:*

*:Hm-hmm.:* She lipped at his sleeve, tugging him deeper into the Shelter.

Suspecting that there was a new foal she wanted to show him, he followed--only to stop in his tracks when he saw Terrill lying on the straw, Danya curled up beside him and using his neck for a pillow. "What's wrong?" he panicked, rushing over to kneel beside her. "Danya! Why aren't you in your room?"

The young woman opened her eyes at the sound of his voice and sat up. "Well, there's this problem. I have never, ever spent a night alone in my entire life. Kestran and I lived in a one-room cottage. The night he died,

Terrill showed up. I can put up with sleeping in a stable better than I can put up with sleeping in a room by myself."

Yarik was certain he looked as if someone had smacked him in the back of the head with a board. "Oh, fish entrails! I bet Teren thought the last thing an Empath would want was a roommate."

"Could you share my room with me?" Danya asked shyly.

"Kyril wasn't quite mad enough to bust me back to Grays," Yarik smiled gently, "although by this time tomorrow I'll wish he had. I've been assigned to help Jeri drill people in weapons' work. Everyone tries to get past my legendary defenses, then I have to figure out how to defeat them when they copy me. I'm going to be bruised in places I've forgotten I have."

"I'll trade you massages." Danya arched her right eyebrow suggestively.

Yarik felt his heart flop like a dying fish in his chest. The gesture was identical to the one that had first endeared Kaylan to him. "Who told you to do that?" he whispered.

The young woman frowned her puzzlement. "Do what?"

"Raise your eyebrow like that." The Herald flashed an accusing look at his Companion. "Have Illysha and Terrill been telling tales on me?"

"I don't know what you're babbling about."

:*She doesn't, heartbrother,*: Illysha chuckled, inordinately pleased with something.

Yarik folded his arms across his chest and glared at the mare. "You are not supposed to meddle in my personal life!" he reminded her.

Illysha gave him her most innocent look. *:Me? Meddle? I wouldn't dream of it. I'm only doing what you want, allowing you to spend time with your lifebonded.:*

"Kaylan's my lifebonded, Illysha!" Yarik roared as he surged to his feet. He clenched his fists into tight balls, only half aware that Danya was mimicking him.

*:Yes,:* the mare agreed. She took a step forward and thrust her muzzle at Danya's chest. *:And a shay'a'chern pirate from Lake Evendim could never feel anything more than friendship for a thoroughly enchanting Karsite from Sorrows.:*

Yarik actually backed away from his Companion-- and into Sherrill, the riding instructor for the Collegium. He yipped in surprise and jumped away from her as if he had accidentally collided with one of the warming stoves.

Sherrill glanced from the Herald to Danya then back to Yarik. "I assume there is some reason my Companion badgered me to come out here in this weather at this time of night when I could be curled up in front of a fire with Keren?"

"Who is Kaylan?" the baffled Danya asked when she finally found her voice.

"My lifebonded!" Yarik yelled at her. He immediately regretted the action as he saw the young woman start to crumble in on herself. He reached out and grabbed her shoulders. "Danya, I'm sorry. I just can't feel about you



the way you feel about me. I'm shay'a'chern. Do you know what that means?"

Danya nodded slowly. "Yes, but remember my Gift? I know what you feel. It's the same--"

"No, it's not!" Yarik insisted. "You aren't listening to me. I have a lifebonded. You only get one of those--"

"Maybe," Sherrill interjected. She hugged herself. "I think I know why I'm here. Before Keren and I became lifebonded, she was lifebonded to Ylsa. Keren told me once that she and Ylsa wondered why I never approached them. I said I knew better than to intrude on a lifebond, but Keren insisted that I would have been welcome. A threesome is rare, even among us Lake Evendim folk, but they can happen. Yarik, Danya seems to sense that you have a lifebond with her. You have one with Kaylan. You know what it feels like. Do you feel the same way about her?"

"I can't," Yarik whispered. "I'm *shay'a'chern*. I am lifebonded to another *shay'a'chern*. I can't feel that way about a woman."

The riding instructor pursed her lips. "Why?"

"Why?" he echoed. "Because you are either *shay'a'chern* or you aren't."

"Why?" Sherrill repeated.

Yarik blinked. "What?"

"Why can't you like both men and women?" the riding instructor asked. "Like threesomes, it's not common, but I have met a couple of people from our home Sector who feel that way."

Yarik felt his knees buckle. He sat down hard on the straw. He cocked his head to one side, trying to see himself from the angle Sherrill suggested. The endless doubts he'd had about being *shay'a'chern* tangled with memories of intimate moments he'd shared with Kaylan.

Danya crouched beside him, more than a simple crush glittering in her coffee-colored eyes.

He could see the difference now. There was nothing simple about Danya's feelings for him--or about his for her. He tried to speak, failed, then tried again. "I--I'm--I had no idea this was even possible."

The young woman touched his cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to complicate your life."

He favored her with a weak smile. "I wouldn't recognize my life if it were anything but complicated." He cupped his hand along her jaw and kissed her tentatively. The thrill that shot through him felt almost identical to what he felt with Kaylan. He leaned his forehead against Danya's. "Oh, Goddess! What am I going to tell Kaylan? He'll have a fit!"

"Maybe," Sherrill chuckled. "Then again, that's what I thought Ylsa would do if I ever told Keren how I felt about her. Turns out she would have welcomed me with open arms. Kaylan just might surprise you, too."

Yarik stood and helped Danya rise. He snaked his left arm around her and pulled her close. "Now, what? Do we stay in separate rooms? Or do I join her in the dormitory? Or does she move into Kaylan's and my rooms in the Herald's wing? Or--?" He shook his head.

"Dean Teren is going to kill me, if Kyril doesn't get to me first!"

Sherrill laughed and tossed her night-dark hair.

"Teren is Keren's twin. If anyone will understand your predicament, it will be him."

"I don't want to be alone," Danya murmured against his shoulder. "There's precedent for Trainees living with Full Herald's. According to one of Kestran's songs, Vanyel's aunt Savil had several students who lived with her."

Yarik kissed the top of her head. "I'll talk to the Dean in the morning while you're in your Orientation class. We'll have everything as straightened out as it's going to get until Kaylan arrives by the time I meet you for lunch. All right?"

Danya nodded, then smiled at Sherrill. "Thanks."

"Seeing you three happy will be thanks enough."

She favored Yarik with a knowing grin. "The Wake-up Bell rings awfully early. See she gets some sleep." With that, she threaded her way through the gathered Companions and out into the snow.

Yarik stood there simply holding Danya for a few moments before he felt Illysha nudge him with her nose.

*:Go on,:* his Companion instructed. *:You heard Sherrill. See that our little sister gets some sleep.:*

Yarik stroked the mare's neck. "Meddler."

Illysha and Terrill both made a noise that sounded rather like a laugh.

The Herald stuck his tongue out at his mare, then escorted Danya out of the Shelter and into a permanent place in his life.