

Darkling Hour

By

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Herald Yarik Rafton circled around the floor of the salle, stirring up wood shavings with his boots, as he warily eyed his opponent. Normally, he would have been sparring with her on the training ground along with his other students, but Weaponsmaster Jeri had thought it best to keep the maneuver this particular trainee was perfecting a secret for the time being. The Herald-Trainee had discovered the trick completely by accident after running to weapons practice from her Gift class and, feeling more than usually fatigued due to her recent pregnancy, had forgotten for a heartbeat which exercise she was supposed to be practicing. The result had implications that Yarik wasn't sure he wanted to think about. He darted in and, with a flick of his blade, sent his student's weapon flying as he had done half a dozen times before. But, before he could close for the "kill", there the sword was, back in her hand, ready to engage him again. Yarik backed away and signaled for the trainee to lower her blade. "That's enough for today. You'll give yourself another reaction headache if we keep this up."

Herald-Trainee Danya Winterborn, sweat glistening on her golden skin and dripping from her night-black hair, saluted him and lowered her sword. "I take it you want to do something besides spend the rest of the day plying me with willowbark tea and Merro's bread?"

Yarik felt himself drowning in his lifebonded's coffee-brown eyes. "As soon as Kaylan gets back from

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

the Border, he can take over that duty. It's his baby, after all."

She glided over to him and placed her right hand on his left arm. "It's our baby, Yarik. It belongs to the three of us."

He sighed and kissed her soft, warm lips. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just annoyed that they sent him into a war zone without me."

Danya shrugged. "His talent was needed. No one else was available with his power of Fetching, and Adele, like me, is only three weeks pregnant. She's not feeling much yet. Illysha, however, is in no condition to make a trip like that. You wouldn't want her to risk losing her foal just so you could use your Far Sight to provide Kaylan with the same fix he can get from a picture drawn by a spy."

He wrapped his arms around her. "I know. It all makes perfect sense. Still, I don't have to like it. He was my lifebonded long before you were, and I miss him."

"I know," Danya whispered.

A wild-eyed man, who was missing his left arm and right foot, careened through the door of the salle and hobbled toward them as fast as he could on his crutch and good foot. "You two! Now! In the saddle! Goddess! You'll never make it! Move!"

"Where are we going?" Yarik demanded as he sheathed his sword and headed for the door, Danya in tow. He recognized the invalid as Herald Winthrop, one of the first Heralds to be maimed in the war with Hardorn

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

and proud possessor of one of the most frustrating Foresight Gifts anyone had ever encountered. Winthrop always knew when a Herald was about to be ambushed, and his Gift never gave anyone enough time to stop the disaster.

"Who?" Danya gasped.

"Saddle your Companions! I'll give you the details when I catch up!" Winthrop insisted. "No time! Go!"

Yarik frowned as he hurried outside. "But Illysha's pregnant!"

"I don't care if she's in heavy labor," Winthrop shrieked. "It's Kaylan! You have to be the one to go!"

"Take Terrill," Danya offered at once.

"No!" Winthrop panted as he hobbled after them. "It has to be both of you! He needs you both! Move!"

Yarik's terror for his beloved gave his feet wings as he sprinted to the Companions' Field.

Illysha and Terrill were already waiting by the Tack Building to be saddled. *:Don't fret for me, heartbrother,:* the mare assured him as he threw on her blanket, saddle and bridle. *:I'll be fine. Terrill can't go at full speed with Danya feeling the way she does, even if she ties herself in. I'll keep up.:*

Yarik was already mounted and Danya, her sword also sheathed, was cinching Terrill's saddle into place when Winthrop caught up to them.

"East Trade Road," the maimed Herald gasped.

"Village called Valetton a day's ride out of Haven.

Kaylan's going to stop there for the night. Doesn't know

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

bandits have taken it. They'll maim his Companion and torture him. He'll die shortly after dawn if no one gets there to stop it!"

Danya mounted Terrill and strapped herself into his saddle. "Why can't one of the Companions simply warn Adele?"

Yarik set his lips in a grim line. "Kaylan can't Mindspeak with her. If she acts as if something's wrong with the village, he'll assume the inhabitants are in trouble and need his help. He'll go in whether she wants him to or not."

Danya swore under her breath. "Let's go."

Terrill took off at a gallop, Illysha at his heels. The Companions carried them past the Heralds' Wing of the Palace, around the temple and through the Privy Gate. They thundered down the backroads of Haven as fast as they could without trampling unwary citizens.

Yarik resisted the urge to Look ahead of them with his Farsight, knowing he'd be of no use to Kaylan if he gave himself a reaction headache before they reached the village. The Herald could hear Illysha's labored breathing as she struggled to keep up with the stallion.

:I'm all right,: the mare assured him. *:As soon as we clear the city, we'll make better time.:*

As soon as they cleared the city, Yarik began to wonder if he should have followed Danya's example and strapped himself into Illysha's saddle.

The Companions galloped off the road as much as they were on it, leaping fences, hedges and everything

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

else that was in the way in their efforts to avoid the wide-eyed sojourners they past. Traveling at a gait far beyond what any horse could have achieved, Illysha and Terrill sped toward Valetton. At that pace Yarik estimated that they would arrive shortly after dawn if no one needed to stop to rest or to answer nature's call. He also knew that that was an impossibility with Danya and Illysha both suffering from the demands pregnancy was placing on their bodies. With the breaks, they would arrive in Valetton by midmorning at the earliest. And Kaylan would die if no help reached him before dawn.

Yarik shuddered, his mind veering away from the truth. *Don't let him die*, he prayed to no deity in particular and all of them in general. *Please, don't let him die!*

* * *

Sundown marked the foursome's third stop on their wild ride. Danya and Illysha took care of their bodily needs as Yarik obtained two loaves of bread and waterskins from a roadside inn. Having no money in his practice uniform, the Herald lied to the innkeeper, claiming to be on duty and, therefore, entitled to free provisions. Yarik made a mental note to send money to pay the man with interest when he returned to Haven, but he had no time to explain the emergency to a stranger and risk an argument that would delay them further.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

The Herald felt cold terror wrapping around his heart as he handed one loaf and waterskin to Danya and climbed into Illysha's saddle. He strapped himself in, forcing himself to eat as his Companion resumed her breakneck pace. His Gift, influenced by his lifebond with Kaylan, was starting to flash images at him that froze Yarik's blood in his veins. Kaylan, riding with his sword drawn into Valetton. Bandits swarming out of the silent buildings and surrounding him. Adele, lashing out with her hooves until one of the bandits brought a broadsword down on her hind legs. Kaylan, pinned beneath his Companion as she collapsed. Bandits disarming Kaylan, hauling him out from under the mare, and dragging him into the village inn, leaving Adele disabled and slowly bleeding to death in the road. Yarik felt tears of frustration stream down his clean-shaven cheeks. *Don't kill him! Don't kill him!* he prayed in time to the pounding of Illysha's hooves.

A feather-light mental touch brushed across his mind. *:Show me,:* Danya's voice demanded as she lowered her shields.

Yarik obeyed. He could feel her trying to do something and sensed her fail.

She swore, her fury sweeping over all of them as her unshielded empathic Gift broadcast her reaction to the nightmarish images Yarik had shown her. *:I'm out of my range. I'll try again when we're closer.:*

:Try what?: Yarik dashed the tears from his eyes. Crying was not going to help Kaylan.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

Danya shrugged. *:I thought maybe I could Fetch away his bonds and possibly put my sword in his hands. But I'm still too far away. He could do it, but he looks too terrified and disgusted to think about anything except what those monsters are doing to him.:*

Yarik nodded. *:And we can't tell him because he can't Mindspeak.:* That truth felt like a weight on his soul, seeming to slow Illysha's blinding pace to an insignificant crawl.

:I'm doing the best I can, heartbrother!: the mare wailed.

Guilt swept through the Herald. *:I know, little sister. I know.:* He tried to block out all thoughts of Kaylan, to make his mind as numb as the rest of him was becoming from the bone-jarring ride. But his lifebonded's fear and shame seeped along the tie between their souls, leaving a dull ache in his chest that he could not ignore. *Kaylan, we're coming. Danya and I are coming. Hang on! Please, hang on! Goddess, I love you! Don't you dare die!*

* * *

Danya tried several times to free Kaylan from his bonds with no success. By dawn she was showing signs of a reaction headache, and Yarik wasn't much better off.

The images had continued through the grueling night. Kaylan, battered and bleeding, tied to a bench, being alternately beaten and raped. Even if Danya could

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

remove the bonds, Yarik doubted that his lover was still conscious enough to take advantage of his freedom. Besides, the number of bandits was daunting. They'd taken shifts all night long to continue torturing their victim. Constantly changing faces. Same horror. Sword or no sword, at his best, Kaylan could never have taken the entire unit. For a military unit, not ordinary bandits, had to be what they were. Yarik suspected the men were from Hardorn, some of Ancar's mindless troops, bent on causing as much pain and suffering to the hated Valdemarans--particularly to the detested Heralds--as they could. The unit had probably become separated from the rest of the army and found itself deep behind Valdemar's lines, where it blindly continued to follow its orders, destroying the inhabitants of the village and, slowly, doing the same to Kaylan. The thought further chilled Yarik's already-frozen soul. *Oh, Kaylan! Don't die! We're on the way!*

:Again!: Danya demanded as dawn began to show in the sky.

Yarik obediently locked his Farsight on Kaylan's bleeding form and linked with Danya.

Power suddenly surged through their lifebond, and a miracle happened.

Yarik saw Kaylan's bonds blink away and appear in Danya's open hand.

She threw aside the offending restraints, drew her sword and concentrated again.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

As stunned bandits watched, Danya's blade appeared beneath Kaylan's right hand.

"No!" Yarik shrieked as he saw a bandit laugh and raise his broadsword, bringing it down in an arc intended to sever Kaylan's hand from his arm.

Kaylan stabbed upward with Danya's weapon, taking the surprised bandit in the heart.

The battered Herald rose as the bandit dropped his sword. Kaylan supported his weight by leaning into Danya's blade, bracing himself against the body of the dying man.

Then chaos broke loose. Weapons flew out of belts and buried themselves in hearts, backs and throats. Bodies--ripped from slumber in stolen beds and not reassembled properly--blinked into the room and piled atop their fellow corpses.

"No!" Yarik shrieked. "Oh, Kaylan!" He watched, head pounding, until no more bodies appeared and Kaylan collapsed into a sobbing heap beside the bench. Then Yarik slammed his shields into place, grateful for the pain of the headache that drove the horrible images from his mind and thought of absolutely nothing until Illysha stumbled to a stop beside Adele's too-still form.

Danya hit the ground first and bent over the injured mare. "She's still alive. Terrill's called for a Healer. She'll be here soon. Get Kaylan out of there!" she spat toward the inn.

Yarik untied himself and half-slid, half-fell out of his saddle. He stumbled to the door of the inn, his

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

stomach revolting at what he knew he would find inside. He pushed his way past the corpses that were piled in front of the door and picked his way through the mangled bodies to where Kaylan sat hugging his knees to his chest, mindlessly rocking back and forth and whimpering in pain. He crouched beside his lover. "Kaylan," he called softly. "It's Yarik, handsome. I'm here."

Kaylan cocked his head at the sound of Yarik's voice. He mumbled something that might have been the younger Herald's name. Then he seemed to see the horror around him for the first time. He began to scream.

Yarik grabbed Kaylan's chin and forced him to look at him. "Kaylan! Stop it! It's me! Yarik! They're all dead. You're safe. Let me take you out of here. Would you like my tunic?"

Kaylan crumpled into his lover's arms, mouth still open in a silent scream.

Yarik held him gently. "I'm here, handsome. I have you. You're safe now. Danya's outside with Adele. There's a Healer on the way. Let me take you out to the bath house and help you get cleaned up. All right? Here." He released Kaylan just long enough to struggle out of his tunic and pull it over the battered Herald's head. "There. Any bones broken?"

Kaylan shook his head.

"All right," Yarik crooned. "Come on. Try to stand." He rose and held out his hands to his lover.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

The older Herald hesitated a moment, then let Yarik pull him to his feet. His breath hissed through his teeth as his body screamed with the abuse he had suffered.

Yarik slipped his shoulder under Kaylan's right arm, taking the bulk of his weight. "I'm right here. Lean on me." He led his lover through the maze of mangled corpses and out into the fresh air. He spotted Danya kneeling by Adele, crooning softly to the injured mare. *:No one else sees what's in there,:* he told his second lifebonded silently.

:Terrill already thought of that,: the young woman assured him. *:The Herald who's bringing the Healer is a Firestarter. I'll have him torch the building. There won't be anything left.:*

Yarik gave a grim nod and helped Kaylan limp to the bath house. The water would be cold, but that might help snap Kaylan out of his shock. He eased his lover through the door, shut the barrier behind them, and grabbed a towel from the pile near the pool. He settled Kaylan on the tile beside the water. He slipped out of his boots and peeled off his trousers. He bit his lower lip as he slid into the cool water. "Join me?" he asked.

Kaylan stared at him for a moment, then stripped off the tunic and slid into the water. He ducked beneath the surface and came up beside Yarik.

The younger Herald took the rag, wet it and dabbed gently at the cuts and blood and grime on his lover's face.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

"Oh, handsome," he murmured. "You look worse than I did when Illysha brought me to the Collegium."

"You didn't kill the pirates who attacked you!"

Kaylan exploded out of his daze. He grabbed the towel from Yarik. He pulled away and scrubbing frantically at his body, trying to wash away the memory of the rapes. Blood turned the water pink around him.

"You can bet your Afterlife I would have if I'd had your power!" Yarik roared back, knowing Kaylan needed his approval as he had once needed the older Herald's. "If I were a Firestarter, I would have turned every one of them into a pile of ash--taking myself and the boat with them!"

Kaylan slammed his right fist into the water, sending a spray across the bathing house. "We're Heralds, Yarik! We're not supposed to do things like what I did. Ever. No matter what. It's--it's unthinkable! Inexcusable! Monstrous!"

"We are humans. Those things that attacked you--" Yarik's voice broke. He hugged himself. "Remember my Gift? I could see what those creatures did to you! I would have done exactly what you did if I had been you and if I had had your power. Believe me."

Kaylan snorted. "Danya did what I couldn't. There was something about the bonds that kept me from Fetching."

"They didn't stop Danya. She freed you, and she put her sword in your hand." Yarik placed his fists on his hips. "She's a first year Collegium student, Kaylan.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

She didn't know that what you did was possible. You only knew because Dirk warned you when he realized how powerful your Gift was and he didn't want you to do something like that by accident. Seleney had Griffon use his Firestarting Gift to torch Hardornans in battle. The men you killed were Hardornans, Kaylan. This is war. The Queen will understand. As for Danya, she dropped her shields so she could see what I was seeing. I know what she was feeling. She's an empath, remember? She was broadcasting like I've never felt anyone broadcast before. It was a killing rage, Kaylan. Just like what I was feeling. Just like I know you felt. And she would have killed, if she'd known she had the power."

Kaylan ducked under the water again, rinsing the sweat and blood from his hair. He surfaced near the edge of the bath and threw the rag against the wall. Then, suddenly, he bent over the side of the bathing pool, dry heaves wracking his thin frame.

Yarik swam over to him and braced him.

"I remember the lecture on post-rape trauma from my days at the Collegium," Kaylan whispered, avoiding Yarik's doe-like eyes. "'Just in case you ever run into anyone suffering from it when you're in the field.' They said it could take years for anyone who's abused like that to be able to bear the touch of another person. I don't want to be like that!"

"Then don't." Yarik draped his arm gently across his half-flayed back. "That lecture was on generalities.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

We're all different, Kaylan. We all react in our own way. Remember me? After ten years of being raped off and on by pirates, I hated being touched so much it took me less than three candlemarks to climb out a window in the House of Healing and sneak into a total stranger's bedroom, looking for physical affection."

A smile at the shared memory flitted across Kaylan's lips, momentarily distracting him from his present pain. "No one ever did believe that I had nothing to do with that."

"Not even after the Healers had Ylsa put you under a Second Stage Truth Spell to prove you had no 'dishonorable' intentions toward me?" Yarik murmured.

"Every single one of my intentions were completely dishonorable, and you know it." Kaylan gave a small laugh. "You also know the only thing I did under that Truth spell was acknowledge a lifebond with a snot-nosed little pirate who was eleven years my junior!"

"Made me happy, even if the Healers didn't like it," Yarik shrugged. "And we don't know it's eleven years. The Healers said I could be older. I was in no shape to keep track of time. I'm still not. I almost ran away from the Collegium when they sent you out on that two-and-a-half-year Circuit to keep you away from me. The only reason I stayed was that Illysha got Adele to tell her about every bite you ate, every breath you drew--and every man you even accidentally looked at!"

Kaylan grew very still. "And now?"

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

Yarik touched his chin lightly and turned his face toward him until he could see his deep, blue eyes. "Adele has tattled on you to Illysha constantly for the six years we've been lifebonded. I have not seen anything that would make me want her to stop. I love you, Kaylan. I always will. Just the way I know that you love me: No matter what."

Kaylan placed his hand against Yarik's jaw. He hesitated a moment, then locked his lips to his lover's in a desperate kiss.

Yarik returned the kiss with all the force he could manage. He let Kaylan feel his body hungering for him, wishing he could assure him mind-to-mind of his love. He let the Herald break the kiss and returned the fierce embrace that followed.

"Oh, Yarik," Kaylan whispered. "I admired you so much when I found out what had happened to you, and all I could think of when those monsters were raping me was what you would think of me when I saw you."

Yarik nibbled at his ear. "I think you are my lifebonded; we're supposed to behave very much alike. I think there's every chance you'll react by wanting to live the rest of your life inside my tunic the way I tried to live the rest of mine inside yours. And I think you must be the most ill-fated Herald in Valdemar with all the rotten things that keep happening to you!"

Danya chose that moment to enter the bathing house with two fresh uniforms. "I found one of these in Kaylan's pack. The other is from the Herald who

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

brought the Healer. I thought you might want--" She stopped midthought, unsure whether to continue or simply put down the uniforms and leave.

Yarik gazed up at her with pleading eyes.

She smiled, set the uniforms beside Yarik's discarded clothes and padded over to them. She knelt on the deck and lay her hand on Kaylan's head.

Yarik felt her drop her shields, sensed her calm reassurance and love as it swept over them. He recognized, with approval, that there wasn't a shred of pity or censure in that love.

"Terrill said to tell you that Adele wants you to know that she'd Choose you all over again if she could," Danya said quietly. "She says she didn't think it was possible for one person to be so full of courage and honor and love." She withdrew her hand and rose, but the sensation of protective love stayed with them.

Kaylan curled, sobbing with relief, into Yarik's arms.

"It's all right, handsome," Yarik murmured. "I have you." *:Thanks,:* he added silently to Danya. *:He's in pretty bad shape. How's Adele?:*

:Not good,: Danya confessed. *:The Healer's with her now. The tendons of her hindlegs are cut, and the Healer says the bones are cracked. If she were a horse instead of a Companion . . .:* She finished the thought with a mental shrug. *:I don't know if Kaylan's ever going to be able to ride her again. The Firestarter has taken care of the inn and put out the flames. There's nothing left. He's gone to find a wagon we can use to transport Adele.:*

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

:Help the Healer until I can bring Kaylan out,: he ordered. *:Maybe trying to help Adele will distract him from his own trauma until we can get him back to Haven.:*

Danya nodded and hurried out of the bathing house.

Yarik rocked Kaylan gently. "See? No one's blaming you for what happened. Adele still thinks you're wonderful, and so does Danya. And so do I."

"I th-thought I w-was going to d-die," Kaylan hiccuped.

"I know, handsome." Yarik kissed him on his temple. "But you're safe now. I'm here. Want to get dressed and go see Adele?"

"I'll b-bleed all over the uniform," Kaylan fretted.

Yarik smiled and caressed his jaw. "Heralds do that quite regularly. I could have the Healer come in and tend to you before you dress."

"No," Kaylan objected, hauling himself out of the pool. "Adele needs the help more than I do."

Yarik decided not to argue. He climbed onto the tile, tossed several dry towels at Kaylan and took a couple for himself. He tried not to stare at the bruises and cuts on his lover's body, knowing that the invisible marks on the Herald's soul were even worse. *:Oh, Illysha, he's a mess. This is going to take a Mindhealer.:*

The mare's reassurance and affection swept through him. *:Rolan says Talia herself will be there to help him when we get him back to the Collegium. Danya has a couple of draft horses harnessed to a wagon. She's*

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

practically blind from reaction headache, though. Is Kaylan well enough to use his Gift to help us get Adele into it?:

Mention of Danya's headache reminded Yarik that he should probably have been bathing himself inside and out in willowbark tea. Kaylan was probably even worse off. That any of them were still on their feet was a miracle. "Kaylan," Yarik called softly, "do you think you can help Danya Fetch Adele onto the wagon?"

Kaylan stiffened. "I'll do it. Danya's never done something like that before, and I don't want to risk Adele." He finished belting his tunic into place and limped outside.

Yarik, surprised his borrowed uniform fit him as well as it did, strode after him.

* * *

Kaylan knelt with Adele's head in his lap.

Yarik sat beside him in the back of the wagon, letting the older Herald lean against his chest and bracing him against the bumps and jolts of the road.

Danya groaned from where she lay stretched out beside Adele.

The Healer, after pumping the three Heralds full of as much willowbark tea as they could hold, had insisted on driving the wagon back to Haven while Terrill and Illysha trailed wearily behind.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

Yarik guessed that they would not reach Haven before the midday meal on the next day. By then, maybe, at least one of them would be coherent enough to help the other two up to their suite in the Heralds' Wing of the Palace. The Healer had assured him that Danya, Illysha, Adele, and their unborn offspring would all be fine, but Yarik had a suspicion that the woman was just saying that so he wouldn't worry. Danya was right: Adele was going to be extremely lucky if she could ever stand on her own again. Yarik didn't want to think about what would happen when the mare gave birth, and the prospect of Kaylan riding her made the younger Herald wince. *Well, Kaylan's not going to feel like riding for a while, anyway. Maybe by then . . .* He kissed the top of his injured lover's head.

Instead of pulling away, Kaylan curled tighter against him.

"I love you, handsome," Yarik whispered. "You're safe."

Kaylan sighed something inaudible, then drifted into a troubled sleep.

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The trip through the streets of Haven seemed to take forever. They had to take the route wagons used to haul supplies to the Palace and the three Collegiums on the Palace grounds. By the time they got Adele into the Companions' foul-weather shelter, held up by straps and

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

pulleys to keep her weight off her hind legs, Kaylan was swaying from weariness and Yarik was fairly certain his lover had another reaction headache coming on. Danya volunteered to groom the three Companions while Yarik helped Kaylan up to their suite.

Horrible bruises and cuts covered almost every inch of Kaylan's skin, and even with the Healer's ministrations, the Herald could barely walk.

Yarik let his lifebonded lean on him as they crossed the grounds toward the Palace. So intent was he on keeping Kaylan upright that he almost walked them both into what he originally mistook for a Companion in the fading light.

A deceptively frail, heavily calloused hand reached out and steadied Yarik. "Easy, lad," a familiar voice chuckled. "Snow Dancer may look like a ghost, but I doubt you can walk through him."

Kaylan's head snapped up at the name.
"Grandfather?"

The old man winked at his grandson. "Your grandmother threw me into the saddle a week ago and told me to ride for Haven. She seemed to think that one of the family Heralds was going to be in need of a decent mount." He pressed the reins into Kaylan's hand and patted the snowy stallion on the neck. "He's not as fast as a Companion, but, well, you know what he can do. He's yours as long as you need him." He handed the reins to Kaylan.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

The Herald gaped at his grandfather. "I can't take Snow Dancer! He's your premier stallion!"

The old man lightly embraced his grandson, mindful of the Herald's obvious injuries. "Sure, you can. You can bring him back when your Adele gets well."

Kaylan choked. "She might not, Grandfather. She's hurt really bad. And I think I may have done more damage when I Fetched her into the wagon."

The old man touched the Herald's bruised cheek. "Then Snow Dancer will be yours. Your grandmother's right. We can't have one of the family Heralds retiring for want of a mount when we have an entire estate full of mounts that can rival the warhorses of the Shin'a'nin. I know Snow Dancer can't compare to a Companion, but I'll bet he can put everything else in the Queen's Stables to shame."

Yarik felt a sudden pang of guilt at the thought of the magnificent stallion, used to roaming the Elderwood estate in complete freedom and even sharing their house, being locked in even the largest box stall the Queen's Stables had to offer.

A whinny and the ringing stamp of a Companion's hooves on cobblestones attracted the attention of the Heralds and the old man. Terrill trotted over and took the stallion's reins in his teeth.

Kaylan released his grip and blinked as the Companion led the white horse toward the shelter where Danya was grooming Illysha.

"Darkling Hour", Linda A. Malcor

:Snow Dancer is a perfectly well behaved stallion,:
the mare's voice slipped through Yarik's mind. *:Danya*
can remove his tack, then turn him loose with us.:

:But he's not a Companion!: Yarik protested.

The mare laughed. *:Yes, but whoever said*
Companions can't have pets?:

Yarik laughed and hugged Kaylan gently. "Illysha says not to worry. The Companions have everything under control."

Kaylan did not look completely reassured, but he embraced his grandfather. "Thank you."

"You just get well," the old man smiled. "And tell that sweet little mare of yours to do the same. That will be thanks enough." He stood watching as Yarik helped Kaylan toward the Heralds' Wing. As the younger men reached the door, the aged horseman turned and strode to where a groom was holding a second white horse. He mounted, waved as the stallion danced merrily for a moment on his hind legs, then rode into the night.

"You're wrong, little pirate," Kaylan whispered. "I'm the luckiest Herald in Valdemar. I have an amazing family, a wonderful Companion, a clever and caring friend in Danya, and, most of all, I have you." He kissed him tenderly on the lips, not caring who saw them from the Palace grounds, then let Yarik guide him inside and up to their rooms.