

Herald Kaylan's Wild Ride

By

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AKA

Herald-Mage Adept Danya Winterborn

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Herald Kaylan Elderwood, dressed in a dark grey uniform not unlike the one worn by Weaponsmaster Alberich, sat astride his Companion, Adele, facing a small group of Advanced Trainees, six identical message tubes stuck in his belt. A slight fall breeze teased his straight, silky black hair, causing it to trail in wisps away from his handsome face. His bright blue eyes stared across the paddock at where Herald Keren was overseeing younger Trainees from behind the safety of the fence, her partner, Herald Ylsa, at her side. *Great. The day I decide to teach an unorthodox lesson, another Arrow of the Queen turns up. Maybe she won't notice.*

Herald Ylsa made eye contact and nodded her greeting at him.

Kaylan nodded back. *Yeah. She'll notice.* He turned his attention back to his students. The four young men and woman, all nearly ready to receive their Whites, sat cockily on their Companions, clearly impressed with themselves, although he doubted they saw themselves that way. Two of the men had FarSight as their main Gift, just as Kaylan's partner, Herald-Trainee Yarik Rafton, did. The other two men had Mindspeech. And the woman had Empathy. She also had a massive crush on Kaylan and kept throwing him suggestive looks. He was *shaych*, and his lifebond with Yarik was

probably the worst-kept secret that had ever graced the Palace grounds. Still, every time she slowly batted her eyes in his direction, he found his attention being pulled away from whatever he was attempting to concentrate on. *I should mention it to Dirk. We can't let an Empath go out on her Internship if her Gift isn't completely under control. Too bad I can't Mindspeak Yarik. I think he's in Dirk's class right now.* He pushed aside the thought with a mental sigh.

Adele stamped her front hoof, shook her mane and snorted.

The Trainee promptly schooled herself into a more professional attitude.

Kaylan wished Adele could hear his thoughts of gratitude, but she was more likely to hear stones sing. The only way he could talk directly with her was if he sank into a deep trance, and he rarely had the time for that. He cleared his throat. "I don't know how many of you will ever find yourself serving as an Arrow of the Queen. You might go your entire career without being asked to ride as a Special Messenger. But if you do find yourself carrying one of those all-important communications, you need to remember that, no matter what, the message must get through." He locked eyes with each of them in turn. "You've been taught to run toward trouble when everyone else runs away from it. You've learned to defend the innocent—and yourselves—especially when there is no one else to undertake that task. You've repeatedly drilled in everything Heralds are supposed to do. Because you represent all Heralds, you are supposed to be authoritative and above reproach in all things. But there's one caveat." He took the message tubes from his belt and held them up as Adele spun in an idle circle beneath him. "If you are carrying one of these and find yourself in trouble, I don't want you to pretend to be Vanyel Ashkevron or Lavan Firestorm. I want you to run away."

Adele came to a stop.

Kaylan sat motionless as the Trainees shouted their protests at him. He noted how their Companions stared at Adele, as if they were screaming at her just as loudly. *Which they probably are.* He waited until everyone had run out of things to say, then, with a gentle tap, sent Adele weaving among them as he handed each of them a tube. “The information you are carrying might be something that other Heralds have given their lives to obtain. It might be orders for movements of the Guard. It might be a change in the Law that needs to reach a Herald on Circuit. An invitation to someone’s dinner party may be just that—or it may be critical information in code that needs to reach a noble who would be a logical person to invite to such a party. The odds are that you won’t have any idea what it is, and you can’t carry anything anywhere if you’re dead.” He secured his own tube to his belt and watched as they copied him. “We’ll start with something simple: a ride to the other side of the Companions’ Field and back. No bandits. No cliffs. No thickets or game trails. Just across the Terilee, over the grass and through the trees. Tag the far side of the Field and ride back here. With your message tube still in your possession.”

One of the young men frowned. “Are you going to Fetch them from us?”

“Maybe,” Kaylan said with all seriousness. He relented at the sight of the crestfallen looks on their faces. “Don’t worry. Anyone with a Fetching Gift as strong as mine would be another Herald helping you get the message where it’s supposed to go. Today I just want you to make sure not to drop it in the Terilee, lose it in the grass during a fall or have a tree or bush scrape it off you.”

“A fall?” one of the young men echoed.

“A Special Messenger’s goal is to get the message through, no matter what.” Kaylan said in the sing-song voice of someone who has given the same lecture one too many times. “That usually means riding like a snowflake in a blizzard on that amazing Companion of yours, whose hooves sprout invisible wings when the need arises. I want your Companions to run at top speed. Your job is to provide as little wind resistance as possible while not falling off. Your Companion will worry about everything else: when to run, when to jump—and when to fly! Haw!”

Adele rose on her hind hooves, pawed at the air with her front legs, and leapt forward. In two strides she was in the air, clearing the paddock fence as if it were no higher than a bale of hay.

Behind them, Kaylan heard his students and their Companions trying to sort themselves out. He glanced back.

The young woman and one of the men had followed Adele over the fence. The other men and their Companions were tangled up, trying to get through the paddock gate.

Kaylan grinned. He crouched low over Adele’s neck. “Straight as an Arrow?” he called.

Adele answered by stretching out beneath him at the full-out, ground-eating pace that only Companions could manage. She shot toward the Terilee River.

Kaylan had had some vaguely sane notion of taking one of the bridges in a couple of strides, but his mercurial mare appeared to have other plans. He’d often wondered if Adele was testing the legendary riding skills of the Elderwoods or simply insane.

Hopefully the other Companions are smart enough not to try to copy her, he thought as he resigned himself to the inevitable.

As if Adele could hear his thoughts and they annoyed her, she picked up speed. She hit the edge of the Terilee at its narrowest point and stretched into a long, flat jump.

Instinctively, Kaylan shifted his weight so his center of balance was directly over her shoulders. He raised his eyes just enough to see the spot where he hoped Adele wanted to land, hoping with all his heart that she actually landed there.

Adele's front hooves connected with the far bank. Her hind hooves took their place as she continued on without even breaking stride.

Kaylan heard his students scream, whether in frustration or despair he couldn't tell. He followed his own advice and simply focused on staying in his saddle as Adele raced across the Companions' Field. He'd learned long ago that he had no way to argue with her at this speed and that his efforts were best spent minimizing any damage to himself.

Grazing Companions sensed them coming and moved out of the way. A few—especially the Queen's Own's stallion, Rolan—looked exasperated. Some of the younger Companions tried to run with them. But most of them stood to one side as if they were watching a speed skating race at a Snow Day Festival.

In spite of himself, Kaylan thrilled at the feel of the wind against his face. His hair streamed out behind him, and his heart beat in time to the pounding of Adele's hooves. They rarely raced like this, just for the sheer joy of running. It seemed as if there was always a message to deliver, a disaster to avert, a life to save. *When did*

Heralds and Companions forget how to have fun? He smiled, entranced by the seamless way Adele moved with him.

They reached the far side of the Companions' Field faster than Kaylan wished.

Adele slowed only enough for Kaylan to tag the wall and to change direction before barreling back toward the Collegium.

One of the Mindspeakers had thought to copy Kaylan's posture and was only a quarter of the field behind them, the look of concentration on his face suggesting that his Companion had only partially reassured him that he wasn't going to die. The rest of the students were strung out in a staggered line with wide gaps between them.

As Adele approached the Terilee again, Kaylan expected her to angle toward one of the bridges.

She didn't.

She's too tired to make the jump again! The instant they were in the air Kaylan knew they weren't going to clear the river. He snapped the message tube off his belt and gripped it in his teeth.

Adele plunged into the Terilee.

The chill of the water shocked him out of the pleasant daze he'd been in. *Well, Kaylan sighed, at least she left my head above the water.* Message safe, he clung to her saddle as she swam for shore.

Adele hauled herself out of the river and shook herself like a dog.

Kaylan barely managed to stay in the saddle.

Adele gave a little skip and then proceeded toward the paddock at a high-speed rack.

Kaylan dripped. He took the tube from between his teeth and stuck it back in his belt.

“Pay attention to your own lessons, or you’ll never make it into his class!” Herald Keren barked at her students as they lost their focus and turned to stare at him.

Adele came to a stop near the fence.

Kaylan dismounted. “You’re lucky I love you so much.” He removed her tack and set it on the fence to dry.

Adele bumped his chest above his heart with her nose and shimmered, instantly shedding the water from her coat.

“Show off.” Kaylan tucked his damp hair behind his ears. His soaked uniform clung to him like cheesecloth.

Adele made a sound like a laugh and winked at him with one of her sapphire blue eyes. She nickered her affection and began to hot walk herself.

“What are you trying to teach them? How to fly?” Herald Keren shouted at Kaylan. “Last I checked only the horse on our coat of arms has wings!”

“They won’t know what their Companions can really do if they never try!” Kaylan retorted. He noted the look in Ylsa’s eyes: half disapproval, half respect. He’d get an earful from them later, but not in front of the students. He turned his back on them and

draped his arms along the top rail of the fence, looking like laundry hung out to dry. He watched Adele with pride as she walked in a lazy circle.

At last Kaylan's students straggled in, looking like half-drowned chirras. They dismounted and removed their Companions' tack.

"Simple," he says," one of the FarSeers grumbled as he hefted his waterlogged saddle onto the fence beside Adele's.

"How did you make that jump?" the other FarSeer demanded as he set out his tack to dry. The water had straightened his blond curls into limp waves. He tried to use his sleeve to dry the rivulets that dribbled down his face, but Kaylan couldn't see any improvement.

"Adele trained with the Elderwood Dancing Stallions," the young woman said, blatantly trying to impress Kaylan with her knowledge of him and his family as she added her soaked tack to the growing array.

"Donner has better sense than to try a jump like that," one of the MindSpeakers proclaimed. He finished arranging his tack beside the woman's and slapped his hands against his wet thighs. Which accomplished nothing.

Donner arched his neck at the praise.

Adele flipped her tail and sniffed.

Kaylan hid a smile as she shifted to a parade gait.

The other Companions bugled their annoyance at her, then looked at each other as if they were taking a silent vote. They seemed to sigh in unison and trailed after her like a line of sodden goslings.

The Trainee who had stayed closest to Kaylan in the race regarded him from behind tangled locks of dark brown hair. “You’re not the one who decided to take the jump. Your Companion did. You were just along for the ride.”

Kaylan grinned his approval. “That’s what a Herald and Companion look like at full speed. The less your Companion has to worry about you staying in your saddle, the faster the pace. The quickest way to get from where you are to where you need to be is a straight line. Your Companion can take obstacles a normal horse can’t, and the less of a hindrance you are, the more use your Companion can make of his or her natural abilities. Heralds out on Circuit usually don’t have to worry about that. They can idly wander around long loops in the road, enjoy strolling down forest trails, and follow winding brooks through the countryside. But an Arrow of the Queen has to fly like the shaft they’re named after: as straight as possible and as fast as possible. Speaking of which, how are your message tubes?”

“Why can’t we simply relay messages with Mindspeech?” Donner’s rider asked as he handed Kaylan his tube.

Kaylan felt his grin turn lopsided. “What if I’m the stone-deaf Herald you’re trying to contact?” He claimed the message tubes from the other students, making sure none were missing or damaged. All were a bit damp, but not so seriously that a message inside of them would have been damaged.

“Or what if you had the wrong kind of mushrooms in your evening stew and your Mindspeech is all messed up?” the young woman added, leaping to Kaylan’s defense.

“Or we could be at war,” one of the MindSpeakers ventured, “and too many people might be using Mindspeech to try to contact the same commander at the same time.”

“There are Wild Talents,” one of the FarSeers said. “Someone might have the ability to listen in on Mindspeech.”

Kaylan’s smile broadened. “Good! You’re starting to think. Tomorrow we’ll work on how you make use of those thoughts. Now take care of your Companions, then grab a hot bath before dinner. I don’t want Dean Elcarth complaining that I made you all catch colds. Dismissed.” As the students trotted off toward the stable, followed by their Companions, he ventured another look at Herald Keren.

The Riding Instructor regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then gave him a slow nod.

Kaylan’s lips curled into a small smile. *Maybe I won’t get chewed out after all.* “Come on,” he told Adele. “Let’s get you cleaned up, then I need to find a bath myself.”

A wicked gleam flashed in Adele’s eyes. She skipped a couple of paces away from him and kicked up her heels, expertly flinging mud at his chest.

“You little minx!” Kaylan bellowed as he lunged at her.

Adele danced out of the way and pranced toward the stables, keeping herself always one handspan out of his reach.

* * *

“CHOO!” Kaylan buried his stuffed, red nose in the folds of a much-abused handkerchief.

Yarik, still in his Trainee Greys, dissolved into a fit of giggles where he was sitting in the comfortable chair near Kaylan’s merrily crackling fireplace.

“Whad’s so funny?” Kaylan demanded as he snuggled beneath his down comforter, which matched his bright blue eyes. He tried to curl into a ball that looked as miserable as he felt.

Yarik shook his head, jangling his short, golden brown curls. “I’ll never know how someone with such a deep voice can have such a high sneeze!”

Kaylan tried to crinkle his nose in disapproval, but it hurt too much. “Ad leass’ you ‘ave a sane Comp—“ The word twisted into a tangle of consonants, and he reached for the willowbark tea on the desk beside his bed.

Yarik sobered, trying to look apologetic and sympathetic at the same time. *He must really feel awful. He wouldn’t have thought twice about Fetching that cup to him if he were well.* “If it’s any consolation, Illysha says Rolan has given Adele several pieces of his mind. She’s currently swathed in woolen blankets and consoling herself with warm mash.”

“Serves ‘er ri.” Kaylan sipped at his tea. “You shud go ba’ t’ your room. No nee’ for you t’ ge’ si’ too.”

Yarik nudged the edge of Kaylan’s bed with his boot tip. “And what am I going to do there? My homework’s finished. I have no one to write letters to. It’s too early to go to sleep—“

“Go fin’ some frens.” Kaylan tried to set his cup back on his desk.

Yarik leapt out of the chair and caught it just before it crashed to the floor.

Tea sloshed out of the cup and onto the desk and rug.

Kaylan swore.

“Not to worry, handsome! I’ve got this.” Yarik said cheerily. He dried off the desk and the bottom of the cup with his sleeve, set the cup down within easy reach, located a hand towel in Kaylan’s foot chest, and cleaned up the spill on the floor.

“I don’ deserf you.” Kaylan sniffled, leaning his hot face up against his cool wall.

Yarik rose and set the towel on the desk next to the cozy-covered tea pot. “Sure you do. Besides, who’s more qualified to wait on you hand and foot than a former cabin boy?”

Kaylan looked as if he were about to cry. “I’ll ne’er le’ anyone tree’ you the way tho’ pie-rats di’ e’er ‘gain.”

“I know that, handsome.” Yarik fluffed Kaylan’s pillow and adjusted his comforter. “Try to get some sleep. I’ll be right here at your beck and call, tending your fire and making sure your teacup remains filled.”

Kaylan stared at him with rheumy eyes. “I don’ kno’ why ev’ryone worries ‘bout us so mu’. You’re mo’ adu’t tha’ I am.”

Yarik smiled. “Sleep. We can go back to fretting about our other problems when you’re feeling better.”

Kaylan nodded and closed his eyes.

Yarik settled back into the chair and stared into the flames. He wished for the umpteenth time that he knew how old he really was. Fourteen? Fifteen? He knew he was younger than Kaylan. A lot younger. Enough younger that his lifebond with the twenty-five-year-old Herald was giving everyone in the Palace and at the Collegium headaches even willowbark tea couldn't ease. He thought he was about three when his memories started, but he'd met Trainees who couldn't remember anything before they were seven or eight. The pirates had killed all of the other residents of Rafton when they'd pillaged the tiny village on a river that drained into Lake Evendim, but the Captain had kept him alive to train as her cabin boy—until she decided to put him to other uses. *I'm not even sure that was the village's name or simply a description!* He had no memory of his parents, so someone had saddled him with the name "Yarik", which cleverly meant "Unknown." That was him: the unknown cabin boy from Rafton. *At least that's who I was. Before Illysha Chose me and I met Kaylan.* Without knowing his real name, there was no way to look him up in Valdemar's records to find out his true age. He was smaller than normal and likely to stay that way because of the mistreatment he had suffered at the pirates' hands. *Which only makes me look younger!* In another decade or so no one would give a second thought to the age difference between them. But they'd stumbled over each other too soon for their relationship to be socially acceptable in most cultures on Velgarth. "Most inconvenient" Kaylan had called their lifebond when he'd informed Yarik of it. That was the understatement of the millennium!

The fire popped.

The sound disturbed Kaylan. He turned partially over and began to snore.

Yarik chuckled silently. *“Inconvient”, maybe. But I wouldn’t trade him for all of the lovely women my own age in the entire world. Whatever that age is.*

* * *

“Just like your mother used to make?” the red-haired waitress at the Snow Fox tavern demanded as Yarik closed his eyes, savoring the first bite of his hot lamb and gooseberry pie.

“Joke’s on you, Meg.” Kaylan shoveled another spoonful of his shallot and asparagus soup into his mouth and swallowed. “He has no idea if his mother could even cook.”

Meg put her fists on her ample hips. “House wins then.”

Yarik waved her off. “I’m not going to argue. I just received my stipend. Tell the cook this is marvelous.”

Mollified, Meg headed over to another table to take their order.

The current minstrel, a blond man in his middle years, held a twelve-string gittern, performing an instrumental piece that was lively enough to promote good spirits yet soft enough to have a conversation over.

Kaylan applied himself to his soup as if he were starving. Which he was. He’d spent the better part of a se’night in bed, and his appetite had only begun to return the previous morning. Lithe to start with, he was feeling positively skeletal. Yarik had badgered him into shaving, taking a bath and changing into his Greys.

Somewhere in there his rumpled bedding and snot-encrusted comforter had disappeared to be replaced by fresh sheets, a clean comforter, and what appeared to be a new pillow. Yarik had fussed over him for half a candlemark, drying his hair and combing it out until it was as silky and knot-free as their Companions' manes. His feet stuffed into warm, dry boots, he'd let Yarik bundle him into a winter cloak, even though it was still Fall, and usher him toward the stable. A groom, who was helping to saddle Adele, had made a crack about him looking as dark as a Companion's shadow, but a glare from Yarik and snorts from both of their Companions had sent the man scurrying in search of other tasks. Yarik had checked the tightness of Adele's girth before letting him mount. Kaylan was glad he had refrained from helping him into Adele's saddle, but he'd caught the glint in Illysha's eye that indicated that the thought had occurred to him.

Adele had been rather subdued on their ride down the Hill, though she'd perked up when the tavern's children descended on her and Illysha and whisked them away to the stable. The Companions loved coming to the Snow Fox, where the hordes of children, who strongly resembled the owners and staff, always pampered them like princesses.

The night air definitely had a nip to it that had turned Yarik's cheeks an enticing pink—a color Kaylan was certain was mirrored on his own. While the rosy shade boasted of the teenager's vitality, Kaylan was pretty sure the effect on his own face made him resemble a Midwinter clown. The firelight danced in Yarik's deep brown eyes and caused his hair to glow like burnished brass. Any other boy his supposed age would have been as gangly as a newborn colt, but the Healers had had to do so much repair work on him when he'd first come to the Collegium after being tortured by pirates for over a decade that his proportions were those of an

adult instead of a teenager. His head would never rise above Kaylan's collar bone, but, as the young scalawag amiably pointed out, that put his ear at the perfect height to listen to Kaylan's heart when they embraced.

Kaylan paused between spoonfuls as he realized Yarik was staring at him, that mysterious half-smile on his lips that always made his pulse pound in a way the young woman in his afternoon class never would. "What?"

"Just enjoying the view," Yarik quipped. "You looked as if you were doing the same."

Kaylan felt the flush on his cheeks deepen.

Yarik kicked him playfully under the table. "Cut it out. We agreed, remember? What happens at the Snow Fox stays at the Snow Fox. I'm just glad I wasn't the one who got dragged through the Terilee. Since the other Companions decided to take their Trainees through after you, you aren't in trouble. In fact, Herald Keren is going to add such training to all the advanced classes so we'll have fewer Heralds drown during unplanned river crossings. She's made it very clear, though, that no one is to try that jump you and Adele made."

Kaylan successfully crinkled his nose. "Yeah, well, we missed it the second time."

Yarik took a roll from a basket Meg had provided for them, broke it in two, and sopped up the last of his gravy. "Illysha says the other Companions are convinced that was a trick Adele learned while she was training with your family's Dancing Stallions. They want her to teach it to them, but she won't. Illysha thinks the problem is she

can't. She thinks you Fetched Adele to the other bank. Is that even possible?"

Kaylan finished his soup and fingered his mug of ale. "Maybe. Herald Dirk taught me that a strong Fetcher like me can Fetch a living being short distances if needed. But I'd never risk Adele on a stunt."

"Says the man whose family is famous for performing stunts on horseback!"

Kaylan laughed. "I'm not from that branch of the family. I'm from the one where the horses do the stunts and the Elderwoods simply stay in the saddle. The cousins at Great-Uncle Elderwood's manor are the ones who fly through the air while the stallions stay relatively still—or at least move at a steady pace."

Yarik's eyes widened. "There are more of you? How is that possible?"

Kaylan picked up his ale and leaned back in his chair. "We really do breed like rabbits. There are days I suspect Grandmother wishes more of the cousins were *shaych* like me."

"Your Grandfather said that most of the cousins who ride the Dancing Stallions have Animal Mindspeech. You sure the others don't have Fetching like you?"

Kaylan shrugged. "I've never asked. I always thought those with Gifts as strong as mine would be Chosen and join the ridiculously long roster of our family's Heralds."

The minstrel suddenly launched into a bawdy ballad that made further conversation impossible.

Kaylan stared at his reflection in his ale, letting his thoughts travel down a path they'd never pursued before. *Grandfather has always insisted that Gifts get in the way at high levels. But what if he's wrong? What if our riders do have unidentified Gifts and are just using them subconsciously, like that young woman may be doing with her Empathy? Like I may be doing with Adele?*

* * *

:Can I keep her?: Illysha begged.

Yarik doubled over with silent laughter at the sight of a pre-teen girl standing on his Companion's back, working her way from dock to withers with her bare feet.

The girl's auburn hair escaped from her braid in all directions, frustrating the efforts of her blue bow to hold it in place. Oblivious to the bits of straw clinging to her blue-and-black plaid jumper, she tilted her scrawny arms to and fro as she walked along Illysha's spine as if it were a balance beam.

"Breathe," Kaylan advised as he saddled Adele.

:Her name's Tandi,: Illysha prattled on, her eyes half-closed in pleasure. *:She knows where every stiff spot is and just how much pressure to apply and which way to rub it and-:*

"You mean she's some sort of Healer?" Yarik asked, finally catching his breath enough to straighten.

"I'm a what?" Tandi asked as she hopped down to the stable floor so Yarik could saddle his mare. Her emerald eyes grew wide with a mix of hope and disappointment. "I want to be a Herald!"

“You might be,” Yarik reassured her as he slipped Ilysha’s hackamore over her ears. “My Companion thinks you have a rare gift for making others feel good. That could be Empathy. You’re still too young for anyone to tell.”

Kaylan, already finished with Adele, swung up into his saddle, adjusted his cloak and smiled at the elfin redhead who reminded him of Meg. *Or is it Peg?* “Or it could just mean you have a way with horses.”

Tears began to fill Tandi’s eyes.

Adele stomped her right front hoof.

“A way with Companions,” Kaylan amended his statement.

“Thank you for taking such good care of our Companions.” Yarik tightened Illysha’s girth and climbed onto her back. “They want us to bring them here again as soon as possible. We’ll make sure to ask for you.”

Joy replaced despair, and Tandi rushed forward. She hugged Illysha’s neck. “I love you!”

Adele sniffed and carried Kaylan into the courtyard.

Illysha gently shoved Tandi away from her with her nose and followed them, humming a happy little tune in Yarik’s head as they made their way back to the Collegium.

* * *

“And this is supposed to teach me what?” Yarik demanded a little too shrilly as he clutched handfuls of Illysha’s mane in his fists as she carried him in gentle figure-eights deep in the Companions’ Field. Large patches of sweat spread out from his armpits, turning his uniform nearly the same dark grey as Kaylan’s.

Kaylan, dressed in his dark grey leather trousers and boots and wearing his equally dark grey shirt unlaced, played with a couple of sticks, tossing and catching a pinecone, oblivious to the fact that Adele was galloping in mad patterns around Illysha. “To stop thinking. Let go. Illysha isn’t going to drop you.”

Illysha confirmed his proclamation with a reassuring nicker.

“Let go?” Yarik squeaked. “Are you insane?”

Kaylan tossed the pinecone high above his head.

Adele spun beneath him.

The sticks closed expertly on the cone, stopping its descent. “All Elderwoods are supposed to be insane,” Kaylan said absently.

Yarik shook his finger at Kaylan. “You Fetched that!”

Kaylan smiled and nodded at Yarik’s finger. “And you let go with one of your hands.”

Yarik checked the front and back of his free hand as if he were looking for Illysha’s mane.

“Catch!” Kaylan tossed the cone at Yarik.

Yarik yelped and caught it with both hands.

Kaylan grinned mischievously. “Did you use Fetching?”

“Of course, not!” Yarik threw the pinecone back at him.

Adele swiftly sidled to the left and backward so Kaylan could catch the cone between the sticks.

“Then what makes you think I did?” Kaylan let the pinecone fall into his right hand, taking both sticks in his left. “And you aren’t holding on anymore.”

Yarik quickly grabbed for Illysha’s mane again.

Illysha shook her head, stretched out her neck and lengthened her stride. She straightened out her path and skirted the tree line at a slow, steady canter.

Adele fell in beside her and matched her pace.

“I don’t Fetch everything.” Kaylan dropped the pinecone and sticks to the ground. He pulled his legs up until he was squatting on Adele’s back. Slowly, he stood up.

Yarik gaped. “How can you ride like that?”

Kaylan lowered himself into a kneeling position. “I don’t think about riding. I just do it.” He swung his legs down so he was sitting astride Adele once more. “That’s the only fancy trick I ever learned.”

Yarik wiped his palms against his thighs, leaving faint, sweaty streaks. “Next you’re going to want me to use my Farsight while I’m trying not to die.”

“How’d you guess?” Kaylan asked far too innocently.

Yarik rolled his eyes. “Why can’t we practice using our Gifts in tandem while we’re both sitting safely on the ground?”

Kaylan gestured at their mares who were still moving in perfect unison. “Because I’m going to try to use the way Adele feels beneath me to Fetch what you’re Seeing.”

Yarik appealed to whichever deity happened to be looking down on them. “Because that makes so much more sense than trying to improve on everything we’ve spent moons practicing.”

“Just try it,” Kaylan begged.

Yarik closed his eyes. “All right. There’s a stable towel with a blue stripe.”

Kaylan closed his eyes and concentrated.

Something appeared in his hands.

Kaylan studied it for a moment, then pulled the stripe away from the white towel. He held it up. “It’s not a stripe, Yarik. It’s a ribbon.”

Yarik’s eyes snapped open just before his jaw dropped in shock. “Tandi! At the Snow Fox! The gittern! It’s the minstrel! Go! I’ll call for help!”

Kaylan threw aside the ribbon and towel as Adele took off across the Field. Within a half dozen strides she was at full speed, and Kaylan was having second thoughts about leaving behind her tack.

He bent low, his black hair streaming away from his face. He centered his weight above her shoulders, placed his palms against the sides of her neck, and let her do what she did best: Run!

Adele skirted hillocks and narrowly missed trees, her silver hooves throwing up clods of grass and dirt.

Companions darted out of her way.

Rolan trumpeted at her, but her pace never faltered.

As they approached the Terilee, Kaylan saw Heralds pouring out of the Collegium and Palace, racing toward the stables. Keren perched on the fence, waiting for her Companion to reach her from wherever she'd been off grazing.

No one else is going to make it in time! Kaylan could feel that Adele was not angling toward a bridge. *If she misses the jump now, no one will make it to the Snow Fox in time because I'll be swept off her back and be busy trying not to drown!* Still, he silently gave his consent, unsure whether Adele knew he agreed with her tactic. He focused on the opposite shore.

Adele's front hooves touched the edge of the water. Her back hooves replaced them as she stretched out and took to the air.

Kaylan held his breath.

Adele's front hooves touched the far bank and were in the air again before her hind hooves struck the sod. In fewer strides than Kaylan thought possible she reached the paddock. She cleared both fences, scarcely touching the ground between them. Her hooves rang like silver hammers on the courtyard stones, sending sparks flying in all directions. She barreled toward the main gate.

Kaylan hoped someone had warned the guards to get out of the way.

Adele flew past the guard posts and onto the streets lined with the mansions of the wealthiest courtiers in residence. She avoided the loop in the road that wound past the magnificent estates by cutting through a well-manicured park, jumping hedges and benches. She burst out onto a cobblestone street that was lined with the mansions of the Guildmasters and wealthy merchants. Here increased traffic had etched tracks in the stones. She stayed between the ruts as if the road were a sidewalk.

Kaylan's mind froze in a half-trance as the street curved again and Adele didn't.

She shot through an alley, between a stable and laundry yard.

Kaylan took a bedsheet to the face. He fetched it away and bent closer over Adele's neck.

Heartbeats later they were back on the street once more. Adele took blind corners at full speed, missing obstacles, animals and people as if they simply weren't there. A wild, winding ride that should have taken a quarter of a candlemark took scant moments.

Kaylan narrowly missed hitting his head on the wooden sign painted with a snow-white fox as his mare thundered into the tavern's courtyard.

Adele turned a half-skid through the stable doorway into a spin that dumped Kaylan into a pile of hay. She backed up to the tack room door and laid into it with her hind hooves.

The wood splintered.

Kaylan thrust himself to his feet and forced his way through the opening.

Tandi, red-rimmed green eyes, wide with terror, stared up at him from where she lay on the floor beneath the minstrel. Her unbound hair formed a disheveled halo around her head.

Kaylan grabbed the man by his shirt collar and waistband and flung him away from his prey.

The minstrel collided with a bench.

Kaylan tackled the man before he could regain his balance.

Their combined weight flipped the bench over. It landed on something that snapped like a tree branch in a winter wind. A discordant jangle filled the air.

“My gittern!” the minstrel shrieked as he clawed his way to his feet, searching for his damaged instrument.

Kaylan stood and kicked at the man’s backside, shoving him forward into a saddle on a rack.

The saddle slipped off, carrying the man with it.

The minstrel tumbled pate over boot heels into a wall draped with bridles.

Leather and metal clattered down on top of him.

The minstrel twisted and planted his hands on the floor in an attempt to rise. He fouled himself on his unlaced trousers, which had fallen down around his ankles.

Kaylan leapt forward, intending to land on the man's back and pin him to the ground until help arrived, but his jump fell short. His knees crashed down on the minstrel's fingers.

The staccato snaps of multiple bones breaking gave way to an inhuman howl.

Kaylan scabbled backward. He collided with a wall. He slid down the rough surface, oblivious to the damage it was doing to his shirt and back. He watched in horror as the hysterical minstrel curled into a ball around his destroyed hands.

Something, which he belatedly recognized as Tandi, slammed into his chest and sobbed incoherently against his neck.

The room exploded in swirls of white.

Meg wove through the swarm of Heralds like the skilled serving wench she was, pried Tandi off Kaylan and swept the girl outside.

Kaylan stared at his knees. Spatters of blood that was not his own stained the dark grey leather. He started to shake as a violent headache claimed him.

Blue blobs and a smudge of green joined the blurs of white.

A white barrier suddenly interposed itself between him and the chaos.

The minstrel whimpered as he was carried from the room.

The colors receded with him.

A sure hand closed on Kaylan's shoulder. "You okay, handsome?" Yarik's worried voice asked.

The dizziness settled into the pit of Kaylan's stomach. "I don't think so." The words had barely left his lips when he rocked forward onto his knees, braced his hands against the wooden floor, and narrowly missed Adele's hooves as he started to heave.

* * *

Yarik sat in the chair beside Kaylan's fire, watching as the older Herald balanced on the edge of his bed, his hands trembling as he tried to drink a cup of passionflower tea that Mindhealer Paige had spiked with ginger beer to help him calm down and settle his stomach. *Probably tastes like ale-soaked hay*, Yarik mused. *Though I doubt he'd know. I don't think he's gotten any into his mouth.* He quickly shoved aside the memory of why he knew what ale-soaked hay tasted like. His nightmares could be dealt with some other time. At the moment, Kaylan needed him. The scent of willowbark rose from a teapot on the desk. He was supposed to make Kaylan drink a cup of it as soon as he finished with the other concoction. *I think he needs a lot more than willowbark tea. Doubt there's any rum around here. Maybe some honey-wine? I've seen him drink that.*

Kaylan, his hair still damp from his recent bath, had donned clean, dark grey treads but had forgone a shirt in deference to the scraped skin on his back. A Healer had removed the splinters of wood, slathered him with hemp salve, and told him the abrasions should clear up in less than a sen'ennight. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, he resembled a frightened boy, far closer to Yarik's suspected age

than to his own. It didn't take an Empath to figure out that he was scared halfway into the Havens, and his refusal to join Adele in the stables left no doubt as to the source of his fear.

:Something happened between him and his Companion,: Mindhealer Paige had warned Yarik silently so Kaylan wouldn't overhear the diagnosis. *:I think she initially took over his mind with his consent but then continued to control him past when he wanted her to. Maybe she didn't know how to let go. Maybe he didn't know how to be released. But someone needs to figure it out and teach them to do it on purpose so it doesn't happen by accident again.:*

Yarik had chewed on his lower lip. *:If he could do it accidentally with Adele, could he do it accidentally with me?:*

Paige's answer had not been reassuring. *:I don't know.:*

Voices—only half of which Yarik recognized—had been gibbering in his head almost nonstop since Kaylan had fallen apart. He was certain that the only reason he hadn't been flattened by a reaction headache as strong as the one Kaylan had was that Illysha was doing something to shield him as he sorted through the noise. He'd been bespoken by the Queen, the Queen's Own, Dean Elcarth, Herald Ylsa, Herald Keren, Herald Dirk, at least three of Kaylan's cousins, several Trainees, most of the Faculty and all of the Heralds who had arrived at the Snow Fox. *Now I know what a battlefield commander feels like.* He also knew that there had to be several dozen more qualified people on the Palace grounds to talk Kaylan through what had happened to him, but apparently some sort of vote had been taken and everyone had decided that he was the best person for the job.

:You are,: Illysha reassured him.

Yarik studied Kaylan's quaking hands. *Yeah. Right. Everyone just run away and leave the too-young Trainee in charge. I swear, the next time complains about my age, I'll-* He left the thought unfinished as he rose and caught the cup as soon as Kaylan started to drop it again.

The liquid remained where it belonged this time.

Yarik set the cup on the desk and settled beside Kaylan, almost but not quite touching him. "Copper for your thoughts."

Kaylan gave a harsh laugh. "You're the MindSpeaker. Why don't you just take them?"

"I wouldn't even if I could, and you know it," Yarik said in a soft, flat voice.

Kaylan winced. "I know." He braced his elbows on his knees and gripped his head between his hands.

Yarik put his elbows on his own knees and leaned forward, trying to see Kaylan's face. "That means I need you to actually talk with me about what you think happened."

Kaylan straightened as he slammed his fists down on his knees. "I lost control! That's what happened! Fetching's like riding with me. It's so second nature that I don't know when I'm doing it and when I'm not anymore! I could have killed Tandi! I could have killed that minstrel! I could have killed someone on the street! I could have killed a Companion or Herald! I could have killed Adele!"

Yarik pushed himself upright and ticked off his points on his fingers. "No one could have stopped the attack in time if you and Adele hadn't done what you did. The minstrel is alive, under arrest

and will be dealt with. No one on the street reported being hurt, though they would like a trumpet call or something to warn them the next time a Herald plans to ride hell-bent for leather through Haven. At least half a dozen Heralds have told me Tandi's been asking for you, wondering where you are in case she needs someone to keep her safe—"

"I shouldn't make anyone feel safe," Kaylan whispered as he perched on the edge of the bed, looking for all the world like a peregrine preparing to take flight.

Yarik edged closer to him. He draped his arm across his shoulders like a parent taking an eyas under his wing. "If your Fetching was out of control, there was a lot of stuff you could have thrown around in that tack room. Nothing moved that wasn't supposed to. Your Fetching was under control." He paused for a moment for that to sink in, then decided to gamble on telling Kaylan the truth. "Adele was controlling it."

Kaylan gaped at him, horrified.

Yarik pressed on. "Illysha says Adele wanted to attack the man with her hooves, but she couldn't. So she had your body do it for her."

"I—She—what?" Kaylan stammered. "A Companion would never do that!"

Yarik squeezed him gently. "It didn't make any sense the first six times Herald Dirk explained it to me, either. You entered into a trance with Adele, sort of like the one you enter when you want to with talk with her. That made it possible for her to use your body to do things she couldn't just as when you're riding you use her body to do things you can't." He favored him with a wry grin. "It's

been suggested that you practice the skill on purpose before it happens again by accident.”

“By accident?”

Yarik arched his eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure you didn’t intentionally jump the Terilee, ride like a blizzard through Haven, and cripple that minstrel on purpose. I’m also sure Adele didn’t mean to do what she did. Your heart knows that.”

Kaylan buried his face in his hands. He took a deep breath. After a silence that didn’t seem as if it would ever end, he whispered, “You’re right. It’s not her fault. It just happened.”

Yarik jostled him. “Illysha says it wouldn’t hurt for her to hear that from you.”

:I did?:

:Shut up, horse.:

Yarik tensed as babble suddenly filled his head. *:I’m sorry!:*

Peace descended on his mind once more.

Yarik turned his attention back to Kaylan. “There’s something else. If you can accidentally link with Adele, you might accidentally link with me.”

Kaylan dropped his hands and stared at Yarik, appalled. “Link with you?” he echoed.

Yarik shrugged. “We’re lifebonded. We can finish each other’s sentences, and half the time we copy each other’s movements. It

apparently wouldn't take much for you to do with me what you did with Adele." He put his free hand on Kaylan's knee. "I trust you, handsome, but I'd rather try it deliberately before it happens by accident."

Kaylan shook his head slowly. "Oh, little pirate, you trust me too much."

Yarik jutted out his chin. "I think the problem is you don't trust yourself enough."

Kaylan gave a half laugh and swept his hand through the air, gesturing at the world around them. "Why should I? No one else trusts me! Especially with you!"

Yarik mirrored the gesture. "Right. That's why so many people are in the room with us, trying to keep us apart." He imagined that deer looked less panicked in the presence of a *kyree* than Kaylan did at that moment. He reached out and gently gripped the fingers of Kaylan's right hand. "One of the many things that has happened in the past couple of candlemarks is that Herald Keren realized exactly how much I don't know about my own culture even though I grew up literally on Lake Evendim. She thought we were being forced to work together rather than being forced to stay apart. Illysha says Keren gave Dantris an extremely loud and lengthy lecture about how sometimes Companions don't meddle in the love lives of their Heralds enough. Apparently the fisherfolk of Lake Evendim breed as soon as they are functional to make sure enough children survive to work the boats just like the Holderkin do to make sure there are always able-bodied family members to work their farms. Even though I'm *shaych*, I'd probably already be a father if I were still in my home village since everyone is expected to breed as often as possible. That's been awhile for me now."

Kaylan frowned. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Yarik tapped him on the tip of his nose with his forefinger. “Herald Keren thinks everyone is being absolutely ridiculous about us. As long as our Companions aren’t having fits, there’s no problem with us being together in any way we please. Your heart has been right about that all along. It’s your head that’s been getting in the way. You need to stop thinking so much.” On an impulse he dipped his head and brushed his lips against Kaylan’s.

Kaylan startled backward on his bed.

Yarik grinned wickedly. “I rather liked how your head got in the way that time.” He climbed on top of Kaylan and kissed him in earnest. He waited until he felt Kaylan respond, then he searched with his FarSight until he found what he wanted. He held Kaylan close and mentally reached—

Kaylan startled as something appeared in his hand. He untangled himself from Yarik and stared at the message tube, completely baffled. “What—? Where—?”

“It worked!” Yarik crowed. “Open it. It’s a message for a stone deaf Herald.”

Kalan obeyed and withdrew a tiny note. He unscrolled it. The three words written there brought tears to his eyes.

Yarik took the tube and tapped Kaylan lightly on the forehead with it. “It’s the tube you were using when you practiced with your students. Dirk helped me set this up se’ennights ago. When I was in his class, I concentrated on that tube, hoping you would open it. You kept the right one for yourself, but you practiced with the tubes closed.”

Kaylan grabbed the tube from Yarik and set it on the desk, along with the note. He pushed him down on the bed and straddled him like a rider kneeling on a bareback horse. He leaned forward and pressed their lips together a third time.

:You were right,: Yarik informed Illysha.

:I'm always right,: Illysha sniffed.

:Now we just have to figure out how to do this without having to climb inside each other's trews in public.: Somewhere in the back of Yarik's mind he thought he heard Adele laughing. He ignored her. All he wanted to do was link with Kaylan in more ways than just using their Gifts.

And Kaylan, apparently with the same thought in mind.