

## *Misty Vale*

By Linda A. Malcor

Aka

Herald-Mage Adept Danya Winterborn  
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Kaylan Elderwood focused, oblivious to the creak of leather, the scent of hay and horse sweat, and the sight of the other riders and their mounts cavorting around the practice ring. Nothing existed for him except the movements of the mare beneath his saddle. She was going to do it this time! He could sense it. She was ready. Her forequarters rose off the sawdust as he gave her the signal.

He followed quickly with the second command, using pressure from his legs and keeping his reins completely slack.

She leapt into the air as they had practiced so many times with her on a lead. But now he was on her back, and they were flying! Her hind legs kicked out in perfect form.

A heartbeat later her dainty hooves touched the ground.

Kaylan shifted his weight slightly, sending the mare into a spin.

At another nudge, the mare straightened out and pranced prettily around the edge of the practice ring.

Kaylan slowed the mare to a walk, then swung to the ground. He led her to the gate, where he stopped long enough to remove her tack and sponge the sweat from her glossy white coat using the bucket and rags provided near the entrance for that purpose. He replaced her bridle with a halter and led her around the outside of the ring, watching the other horses and riders as he walked with her, waiting for her to cool down.

The ring was particularly full today. Most of the Elderwood clan was in residence on the estate, preparing for the upcoming Midsummer Faire in Haven. Their dancing white horses were always a huge draw. And if a couple of Heralds and Companions accidentally slipped into their ranks as the caravan wound its way across

Valdemar in whatever direction the Queen needed them to go, no one ever said anything. After all, a ridiculous number of the Elderwoods actually were Heralds.

As Kaylan led Misty Vale outside, he spotted his grandfather, leaning against the wooden door to the massive building that housed the practice ring.

Dressed completely in black, his steel-grey hair combed straight back and caught at his neck with a black bow, and whipcord thin, Lord Elderwood looked more like a sword than a man.

Kaylan felt his cheeks flush, knowing that his grandfather had caught him doing something he shouldn't have done. The other horses in the ring were all stallions, not mares. Only the stallions danced. The mares were for breeding. Kaylan raised his chin defiantly—but made sure not to meet his grandfather's piercing grey eyes.

Barely a teen, Kaylan was a true Elderwood, in the saddle before he could walk. Heralds were a dime a dozen in the family. Literally. At least twelve members of the extended clan were currently in Whites. The Elderwoods and their archrivals, the Ashkevrons, had been in competition for as long as anyone could remember. Both families were famous horse breeders with manors included in the same Circuit. The Elderwoods had their white dancing horses, and the Ashkevrons had their warsteeds with their supposed Shin'a'in bloodline and fancy Shin'a'in training techniques. They both had so many blood relatives that they'd pretty much lost track of all of them. The Elderwoods produced Herald after Herald after Herald, and the Ashkevrons—well, they had produced Vanyel and proceeded to rub the Elderwoods' noses in that at every chance they got. *At least we have better looking noses*, Kaylan thought moodily.

The mare sensed that he was not paying attention to her and tossed her head.

Without thinking, Kaylan brought her back under control.

Misty Vale was a pretty little mare, even by Elderwood standards, and she'd taken an inordinate shining to Kaylan. Not that he minded. He adored Misty Vale and spent many candlemarks

pouring out his adolescent heart to her as she grazed near the lake. He had his chores. And his schooling. And his weapons work. And his share of the stallions to work with in the practice ring. But every spare moment he got he spent with Misty Vale. He knew he shouldn't be teaching a mare the maneuvers only the dancing stallions learned. The Elderwoods had more stallions than they knew what to do with. If a stallion was injured or killed, it would be a tragedy but one that would be accepted with good grace. If a similar accident befell a mare—

Misty Vale shoved her shoulder into him.

“Hey! Cut that out!” Kaylan admonished. He could have sworn the mare grinned at him. He patted her silky neck and unclipped the lead rope from her halter.

She gave a little kick and trotted off toward the pasture.

He laughed at her antics.

Misty Vale was strong enough to do anything the stallions could do. She was fast, too. If anyone had asked him why he wanted to teach a mare to act like a stallion, he probably could not have given an answer. He told himself that such skills might come in handy for the mare someday. Why the mare, destined to live out her days in the luxurious pastures of Elderwood Manor, giving birth to possible future members of the famous Elderwood Dancing Horse Show would need to know such tricks did not really concern him. He probably just wanted to see if it could be done.

Kaylan smiled as he watched her prance and leap into the air in front of the other mares, practicing the maneuvers he had taught her, as if to say, “Look what I can do!” He put away his equipment and slipped off toward the baths, hoping he could get cleaned up before he ran into his grandfather again and got the tongue lashing he deserved.

To Kaylan's disappointment, the baths were already occupied. Half a dozen of the family Heralds were availing themselves of the facilities, which were fed by a local hot spring and which family legend insisted had been designed by the Tayledras. He suspected that the truth was that the family famous for breeding Heralds had

accidentally thrown an Artificer somewhere over the years. As a child, Kaylan had enjoyed soaking with the Heralds and listening to their banter and the tales of their adventures. But lately he had found his body reacted in embarrassing ways whenever he got near one of his male cousins, especially when that cousin turned out to be the far-too-handsome Jorge Elderwood. Kaylan contented himself with a quick yet thorough rinse in the washbasin, deposited his dirty clothes in the hamper and scrambled into a clean pair of trousers and shirt from the cubicle that had been set aside for his use. As he turned to leave, he nearly tripped over one of his cousins.

Herald Jorge Elderwood stood almost a head shorter than Kaylan even though he was in his mid-twenties and had his full growth. Jorge's size never seemed to bother him, though, the way being short troubled some men. Perhaps, since he lived his life in the saddle, well above the heads of most people, he never thought much about how he measured up to them—at least in terms of height. Jorge wore his black hair shoulder-length, parted in the center and caught back in a leather tie. His dashing smile was the only thing he was wearing—but that didn't seem to bother him, either.

It bothered Kaylan, though—a great deal. The teenager blushed bright red.

Jorge's bright blue eyes twinkled. "No time for a swim today?"

"I have chores," Kaylan croaked, wincing as his voice cracked almost a full octave on the last word. "Excuse me," he whispered and ducked outside. He froze just beyond the door, frantically looking around the courtyard for something to do. There was absolutely nothing to clean. Not so much as a twig of firewood out of place. With so much of the family in residence, every fingerwidth of the bizarre manor house and its equally strange common grounds was spotless.

The manor house. That was something else the Elderwoods were in competition with the Ashkevrons over. Whereas the Ashkevron house featured rooms and halls that were almost impossible to get to, every bit of the Elderwood home could be accessed by both man and horse. Winding walkways took the place of stairs. Every

doorway was oversized enough that even a mounted rider could pass through. Troughs and bins graced the dining room along with the tables used by the family. Every bedroom could be shared with at least one horse per human. Even the stalls in the sprawling attached stables had no doors. The Elderwood horses were trained from birth to deposit their waste in specific spots, to behave themselves indoors and out, and in all other ways to act as much as possible like Companions. And there was usually at least one real Companion on the property, accompanying one of the Heralds on a Family Visit, to “explain” to the horses that no infractions would be tolerated. The tenants all thought the entire clan was stark, raving mad—though they did appreciate the ramps and other modifications when they had to bring their own sick and injured to Lady Healer Elderwood, Kaylan’s grandmother, for help.

*Probably simple practicality with so many Heralds in the family,* Kaylan mused. Those who didn’t wind up dead tended to wind up here, missing an astonishing array of body parts. He couldn’t imagine a better place for a horribly injured Herald to live out life under the watchful eye of Lady Elderwood.

“I thought you had chores.”

Kaylan jumped a good foot in the air as Jorge’s voice sounded behind him. He came down in a fighting stance, facing his cousin.

Jorge put his hands up. “I surrender!” he laughed.

Kaylan dropped his guard. “I’m sorry. I—“

“Calm down, cousin!” Jorge said cheerily as he slid his arm behind Kaylan’s back and guided him toward the nearby lake where family members liked to take guests for picnics.

*This is not a good way to get me to calm down!* Kaylan thought irritably.

Almost as if he’d heard the thought, Jorge stopped and turned Kaylan to face him. “I’m the family Empath, remember? Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or am I going to have to spend the entire time I’m here with all of my shields on lockdown? Lord and Lady, cousin! I’m surprised Grandmother hasn’t dosed you to your

eyeballs by dropping something in your stew! You must be driving her as well as every other Healer between here and Haven half mad!”

Kaylan hung his head. “It’s that bad?”

Jorge took him by the arm and started leading him toward the lake once again. “It’s that bad. Now, tell me. What’s the matter?”

Kaylan’s face turned redder than he thought possible.

Jorge stopped walking and got that look on his face that all the family Heralds did when one of their Companions mentally kicked them in the head. “Oh, lad! Tieg’s right. I’m an idiot.”

Kaylan stared at his boot tips.

Jorge punched Kaylan’s shoulder playfully. “No need to feel embarrassed, cousin! The Elderwood good looks are notorious for slaying male and female hearts alike. You’re growing into them yourself, you know. Give it a couple of years, and I bet every *shaykh* man in Haven will be after you.”

Kaylan looked up abruptly. He was pretty certain he was doing a fairly good imitation of a dead fish. “How did—?”

“Not by Mindspeech,” Jorge snorted. “There are too many Heralds in this family to get away with rummaging around in someone’s brain without an invitation.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, apparently speaking with his Companion once again. “Huh. Maybe you didn’t know that. Tieg says you’re deafer than a post when it comes to Mindspeech.” He shrugged. “Oh, well. Certainly, you’ll have one of the other Gifts awaken in you soon.”

Kaylan made a face. “There’s no guarantee that just because I’m an Elderwood that I’ll become a Herald.”

“No?” Jorge waved his hand in the general direction of the family graveyard.

Kaylan bit his lip. The side-effect of having many Heralds in the family was having a very large area of the property devoted to

holding the urns of ashes of many of those same family members, most of whom had died far too young. *Like my parents.*

“I’m surprised a Companion didn’t show up and haul you off years ago.” An awkward pause followed, after which it was Jorge’s turn to blush at something his Companion had said. “Yes, well, I do suppose you’re getting the next best thing to Collegium training right here, so there’s been no rush to take you away from Grandmother and Grandfather just yet.”

Kaylan felt an irrational surge of anger. He had no idea why he had been mooning over this particular cousin less than half a candlemark ago. Right now all he wanted to do was shove a towel down the insensitive fool’s throat! How can someone who is so thoughtless be Gifted with Empathy? He tripped Jorge to the ground and crammed the towel in his hand against Jorge’s nose and mouth.

“Heyla!” Lord Elderwood called as he and several of the cousins came running. “Stop that right now!”

Kaylan backed off at once. He stared stupidly at the towel in his hand as Jorge struggled to his feet. *Huh. Must’ve forgotten to put it down when I washed up.*

Jorge waved off his would be rescuers. “I’m fine. The lad was even kind enough to use a towel so he wouldn’t muss my pretty face.”

Lord Elderwood and the others slowed to a stop, then, shaking their heads went back to the tasks they’d been attending to when the fight had erupted.

Jorge eyed Kaylan warily. “You thinking about going with the family caravan to the Midsummer Faire in Haven?”

Kaylan blinked at the non sequitur. “Huh?”

Jorge took the towel from him. “I’ve seen you with that pretty little mare of yours. She’s good. Really good. So are you. I think there’s a place for you in the show. I’ll talk with Grandfather about it.” Before Kaylan could respond, the Herald turned and headed back toward the practice ring at a trot.

\* \* \*

Kaylan stood in a moonlit field near an inn brushing non-existent dirt from Misty Vale's already shimmering coat. Two of the family Heralds had ridden on ahead to Haven to make sure a pavilion large enough to hold the show had been erected beyond the Faire's horse market. The traders would have already staked out as much space for them as possible, knowing that the audiences coming to and from the show would not only have to walk by their strings of horses but also would be dreaming of taking a bit of the Elderwood magic home with them even though they couldn't buy any of the dancing stallions themselves.

The inn's barn didn't have a prayer of holding the four remaining Companions, all of the stallions and Misty Vale along with the other patrons' mounts. Which was fine by Kaylan. He loathed the idea of putting Misty Vale in a stall when she'd spent her entire life running free on the Elderwood estate, or at least he assumed she had since all of their other horses did. He honestly couldn't recall her until she'd started following him around like a lovesick puppy a few years ago. She wouldn't let anyone else near her, so, by default, she'd become his horse.

The other riders had turned their stallions loose near the wagon that held the fancy tack, costumes, and props for the show. The four remaining Companions took quite a proprietary interest in the dancing stallions and protected them as if they were their very own foals while the Elderwoods ventured into the inn to eat in shifts. The innkeeper had almost turned them away, having nowhere near enough guest rooms for so many people before they had finally convinced him that they really did intend to bed down in the field with their wagon and animals. Throughout his dinner Kaylan had caught whispered speculations about how they must be Shin'a'in in disguise because they were so close to their horses. One comment had made him laugh so hard that he'd dropped his fork—only to find it back beside his plate a moment later with absolutely no memory of his picking it up. He'd been doing that a lot lately. Things he was certain he'd forgotten to take with him somewhere—Misty Vale's curry comb, a hair tie, saddle soap—little things just

kept turning up just as he made up his mind to go look for them. He'd always been a bit absentminded, but this—

Misty Vale shifted her weight, narrowly missing his foot as she repositioned her hind legs.

“Hey!” Kaylan slapped the mare on her rump.

She snorted indignantly and shook her mane.

Kaylan immediately felt guilty. It was his own fault for not paying attention. By noon tomorrow they would be in Haven. They could have made it by sundown tonight, but they wanted to make a grand entrance, their horses groomed until they shined like starlight and the riders dressed in their silver-trimmed outfits of blue and white. He set down his brush and looked around for the comb he would use to braid Misty Vale's mane and tail into the tight, intricate pattern that would leave them flowing and wavy when he loosed them in the morning. He swore silently as he realized he'd left the comb back in the wagon. He started to fetch it but had taken no more than a single stride before he stepped on the metal teeth. He bit back another oath, unwilling to admit that he should have been grooming the mare in the lantern light closer to the wagon rather than in the semidarkness almost half a furlong away from the stallions. One of the Companions was keeping an eye on him and the mare, but it was stupid to be off at such a distance now that night had fallen no matter how much Misty Vale's presence bothered the other horses. He picked up the comb and brush and moved closer to the light, the mare trailing after him. The Elderwood horses were more like dogs than equines, and the riders rarely actually pulled on their bridles and lead ropes, especially when there were Companions around. Kaylan knew the locals thought they were all quite mad, letting the valuable animals roam at will. *Which is probably why they think we're Shin'a'in.* He had no such pretensions. With so many Heralds in the family, answering unasked questions and laughing at unheard jokes, the Elderwoods all seemed quite insane wherever they went, no Shin'a'in blood required.

Kaylan's fingers rapidly braided the strands of Misty Vale's tail. He tied it off with a bit of white yarn that he didn't recall sticking in his

pocket. *This is ridiculous. I need to get more sleep.* Their schedule had been brutal to his teenaged body. They set out by dawn every day, and he could never get to sleep early enough at night because dinner was served so late at the inns where they stopped. He needed to eat even more than he needed to sleep, so he'd been shorting himself on the latter since they'd left the manor. *That's probably why I can't remember where I'm putting things,* he mused. *I'm working out of habit without thinking about what I'm doing.* There was a longstanding saying, originally intended as an insult that the Elderwoods had turned into a motto of pride, that they could ride in their sleep. Kaylan suspected it was true. He'd repeatedly caught himself dozing in Misty Vale's saddle, and he'd never fallen. *Well, at least not yet.*

He finished braiding the mare's mane and walked toward the wagon to return his comb and brush. Halfway there he got the strange feeling he was being watched—and not by a Companion. He scanned the inn and spotted a man standing just outside the door, leaning against the side of the building.

The man's shoulder-length white-blond hair made him stand out in the shadows. His piercing eyes looked straight at Kaylan. He was tall and lean. His finely tailored clothing was even darker than the shadows, and a long, sheathed sword was firmly tied to his left leg.

Kaylan frowned and closed the distance between him and the wagon a little more quickly than he'd intended. He tried to recall if he'd seen the man at dinner, but, to his chagrin, all he could remember seeing was the food. His stomach chose that moment to rumble. Loudly.

Jorge laughed from where he was hauling bedrolls out of the wagon. "We're not used to traveling with growing boys. Run back in, lad. I'm sure there's leftover bread in the kitchen. Your mare will still be here when you get back."

Kaylan flashed his cousin a grin, handed him the comb and brush and raced off toward the inn. As he charged through the entrance he glanced at the man who was still watching him with a curious

smile on his face. He felt his own lips quirk, returning the smile, and as he headed for the kitchen a strange thought settled in his mind: The man's eyes were emerald green.

\* \* \*

Kaylan felt far too hot in his silver trimmed blue-and-white costume as Misty Vale pranced beneath him, carrying him through the winding streets of Haven. Jorge and the other Heralds had left them at dawn, riding for the Palace to report for duty. The stallions and their riders had somehow managed to box Kaylan in among them as the crowds surged along the streets, cheering at the Elderwoods and their dancing horses.

Misty Vale kept tossing her head as if she were purposefully trying to get the midday sun to reflect off the beautiful waves in her mane. She wasn't breaking formation, though, so Kaylan let her have her head.

*Not that she could go anywhere anyway with all these stallions and people around,* Kaylan thought sourly. Having two parents and so many family members who were Heralds he'd been to Haven more times than he could count. But he'd never been part of a parade, and he wasn't sure he liked all the attention. With Companions coming and going all the time, he had no idea why the people were so impressed by a bunch of white hor—

Misty Vale gave a little kick.

Kaylan promptly refocused his attention on his riding. The family reputation was at stake, and the last thing he wanted the crowds to see was an Elderwood riding on a misbehaving mount.

The wagon lumbered along behind them, the driver waving at the by-standers and the man who would present the show calling out the days and times they would perform.

*Minstrel,* Kaylan reminded himself. He'd forgotten that Minstrels did more than sing. They could also talk loudly. Really loudly.

Misty Vale didn't seem to care. She was having the time of her life, showing off a fancy step or two without him giving her the commands.

Kaylan eyed the market stalls as they wound their way through the Faire toward the section set aside for horses and other livestock. There, haggling with a merchant over a dagger, he spotted the green-eyed man with the white-blond hair. In the daylight Kaylan could see that his outfit was red. Not the same red as a Bard's. *Looks more like drying blood.*

The man glanced up at Kaylan as he rode past, giving him a sly smile this time.

Kaylan tore his eyes away, knowing that he'd stared a moment too long. He focused on the space between Misty Vale's ears and concentrated on taking slow, steady breaths until they reached the pavilion.

\* \* \*

Kaylan's mind was absolutely everywhere except on the performance. Misty Vale danced beneath him flawlessly while his body matched her every move out of sheer habit rather than conscious control.

The green-eyed man sat in the front row. Again. He'd been there for every performance. Staring at Kaylan with a hungry look in his eyes.

Kaylan kept his seat—barely—as Misty Vale leapt into the air and kicked out with her hind feet, mimicking the stallions. He doubted anyone in the audience noticed his sloppiness, but he knew the other riders did. His face turned almost as red as the man's uniform—for a uniform it was, though not of anything Kaylan had ever seen in Valdemar.

The crowd rose, cheering and clapping, as they did every time the horses took to the air.

The man cheered and clapped loudest of all.

At least it seemed that way to Kaylan.

This was their last show on their last night in Haven. Jorge and a couple of Heralds had agreed to guard the horses while the riders spent the rest of the night on the town as a reward for a job well done.

Kaylan had agonized the entire day about whether to go with the others or stay with the horses. He was as old as most of the Heraldic, Healer and Bardic Trainees, and this was Haven. The place was positively crawling with Heralds and Companions. *What could possibly go wrong? Especially if I stay with my cousins.* But even as the thought crossed through his mind, it was chased by the doubt that his older relatives would want someone his age tagging along as they attempted to enjoy themselves at their revels. But then there was the alluring man. Clearly fascinated with him. Gorgeous enough to be a god. And certain to be waiting outside the pavilion once Misty Vale had been settled with the stallions. He'd been waiting there after every show, and Kaylan had studiously avoided him. The man was far too old. At least eighteen. And Kaylan wouldn't be fourteen for another month.

Kaylan shook his head. *What in the name of all that's holy is wrong with me?*

As the performance drew to a close, the green-eyed man rose, applauding and smiling warmly when he wasn't whistling his approval.

Kaylan blushed and rode out of the pavilion, back to the roped-off area where they kept their horses and their wagon.

\* \* \*

Kaylan woke hurting in places he didn't know he had. A fierce headache pounded in his temples, and a taste he failed to identify filled his mouth. He was on his stomach on something soft, and his left eye was smashed into something that felt very like a pillow. He slowly sat up, instantly wishing he hadn't. *Where in the Nine Hells am I?* He squinted against the sunlight that filtered through some kind of curtains above the bed.

It was a rather nice bed. Big enough for two. A fancy, round, wooden three-legged table with a pie-crust shaped edge, flanked by

two comfortable chairs, stood across the room beside a thankfully unlit fireplace. A chest of drawers in the corner held a wash basin and a pitcher of what he supposed was water.

Kaylan swayed to his feet and staggered over to the wash basin. He poured some of the water into the basin from the cream-colored pitcher, which decorated with some kind of pink flowers. He splashed the water on his face. Some dribbled down his chest. Past his hips. Onto his leg. Over his foot. *Lord and Lady! I'm naked!* In a panic, he glanced around the room.

His clothes were folded neatly in the chair nearest the wash basin, his boots on the floor beneath the chair. There was no sign of anyone else in the room or that there ever had been anyone else in the room. Except he was pretty sure he wasn't a restless enough sleeper to make that much of a mess out of the bed all on his own.

He turned back to the basin, poured some water into his hand and rinsed out his mouth. He drank as much water as he could directly from the pitcher. Then he dumped the rest of the water over his head and stood dripping into the basin until he judged it safe to stand up again. He ran his fingers through his damp hair, slicking it back then absently pulled on his clothes, trying desperately to remember what had happened after he'd left the pavilion.

Flashes of the green-eyed man interspersed with far too much beer and a precarious climb upstairs to this room—

He gingerly shook his head. *I don't even remember his name.* All he recalled was bits of a conversation about the man being a mercenary who needed to report for duty and wanting to have one last night of fun before going off to most likely get himself killed—

Kaylan sat in the chair and yanked on his boots.

Something jingled as his elbow hit the table.

Coins.

Kaylan stared at them stupidly. *Aren't you supposed to pay the owner—*

His stomach lurched, and he fought down nausea as he realized the coins were intended for him. For services rendered.

He pushed himself out of the chair, stumbled to the door, and fumbled with the knob. Unable to figure out how to work a simple handle, he leaned his head against the door jamb. *Hellfires! I don't even remember if I had a good time.*

Eventually everything stopped spinning and his coordination returned. He opened the door and braced himself against the wall as he made his way down the stairs.

A barmaid, already setting up cleaned tankards for the day's customers, smiled knowingly at him.

He ignored her and made his way out the door.

*Bright!* He clamped his eyes shut tightly against the light of the midday sun.

A horse's nose slammed into his chest nearly knocking him over.

"Hey! Cut it out!" Kaylan opened his eyes to see Misty Vale—

*No. Not Misty Vale.* A mare, yes. But a Companion.

Kaylan looked into her sapphire eyes, feeling soothing blue light move over and through him.

*:Misty Vale no more,:* a mischievous female voice said. *:I am Adele, and I, my beloved, Choose you.:* As suddenly as the voice had been there, it was gone.

Kaylan blinked at the Companion. His Companion. "Adele?"

The mare nodded her head.

"What happened to your voice?" Kaylan asked.

Someone slapped him on the back. "I told you that you are deafer than a post when it comes to Mindspeech."

Kaylan turned to see Jorge, who was grinning ear-to-ear. “You mean I don’t get to talk with her the way you do with Tieg?”

Jorge shrugged. “They’ll probably be able to teach you how to talk with her in a trance. You aren’t the only Herald ever to lack Mindspeech.”

Behind the Herald, Tieg had the equine version of a bemused grin on his face.

Kaylan frowned suspiciously at the Companion. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Jorge chuckled. “I thought we were all going to burst trying to keep the secret. Adele’s been hanging around the manor for years now, waiting for that damned Fetching Gift of yours to wake up.”

Kaylan stared stupidly at Adele.

The Companion looked proud. Far too proud.

Jorge’s chuckle became a hearty laugh. “Tieg says they were afraid you’d start tossing horses across the pasture in your sleep if a Companion wasn’t around to slap shields on you when your Gift awoke. Adele has a right to be proud of you. Tieg says you have one of the most powerful Fetching Gifts he’s ever seen. Good thing you did all that studying under Grandfather. You’ll need the time you would have spent taking basic classes just to learn to control that thing. And I thought I had it tough with Empathy and Mindspeech!”

Kaylan raised his hand toward Adele, and she pressed her nose into it.

Memories of last night became clearer to him. Apparently, he had had quite a good time with a young man he would never see again. There had not been coins on the table, only an empty cup that had held willowbark tea. *I’m going to need more of that.*

Adele waffled playfully at his hair.

“Come on, lad. You’re blocking the street.” Jorge grabbed him by the arm and propelled him up the Hill toward the Palace. “Time for another Elderwood to meet the Dean.”

Adele and Tieg followed behind them, their silver hooves chiming against the surface of the road in a joyous pas de deux.