

*Little Pirate*

By

Linda A. Malcor

AKA

Herald-Mage Adept Danya Winterborn

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“Hold still, you cur!”

Yarik Rafton stifled a yelp as the pirate’s open hand slammed down, connecting with the welts on the bare skin between his shoulder blades and driving him onto the rail of the poop deck. His bruised stomach muscles and ribs screamed in protest, but he dared not cry out. He knew from experience that a single sound, any sound, would only make things worse.

“The Cap’n’s right,” the pirate grunted. “This one’s gettin’ too old. We need to find another whelp.”

Yarik clenched his teeth, careful not to bite his split lip. *Too old.* He stared at the distorted reflection that gazed back at him from the spot where the ship’s anchor chain disappeared beneath the surface of Lake Evendim. He was all of thirteen, if he reckoned correctly. He’d been with the pirates for roughly ten years, ever since they’d killed his parents and the Captain had taken him to serve as her “cabin boy.” Lately his list of “duties” included many activities that he knew were not part of any cabin boy’s job. He was fairly certain he could have coped with them, though, if that had been the extent of her demands. But whenever he dissatisfied her—as he’d had the misfortune to do a candlemark ago by having his voice crack at an inopportune moment—she gave him to her crew to do with him as they pleased until she ordered them to stop. What they pleased always meant a lot of pain and humiliation for Yarik. His teeth, bones and nose remained intact—the Captain preferred them that way. And he could still see. The pirates preferred things that way. Yet he’d been stripped, kicked, pummeled, slapped, and

whipped and the pirates still hadn't tired of their sport. He desperately wanted to black out, but someone always managed to haul up a bucket of the icy lake water and throw it in his face whenever there was even the remotest chance of that happening. An unconscious body would be nowhere near as much fun as a conscious one. For the pirates.

His tormentors decided that lashing his feet until he could barely stand would be their next diversion. His abraded knuckles turned white from gripping the rail as two pirates held up his legs like the handles of a wheelbarrow and a third brought a switch down repeatedly on his soles. There was still no sign of the Captain emerging from her cabin to stop the abuse. *Maybe she plans to let them kill me this time.* He briefly thought about throwing himself overboard and trying to drown. *They'd probably just haul me back up with the damned bucket.*

"Let's see him try to run off now!" a bearded pirate said smugly.

Yarik admitted as they lowered his legs to the deck and his feet connected with the wood that he wasn't about to go anywhere, least of all over the rail. He couldn't walk. He couldn't pull himself up. His stomach muscles hurt too much to vomit. His ribs almost hurt too much for him to breathe.

"Who's next?"

Yarik didn't care. He tried to focus on the shoreline, willing himself to ignore present pain.

A white horse, neighing frantically, charged back and forth at the water's edge.

Yarik only failed to laugh because it would have hurt too much. Long ago he had given up all fantasies of escape and resigned himself to his lot in life. Which promised to be brutally short. As soon as he no longer appealed to the pirates, he'd wind up dead. He could never slit an innocent's throat or help the pirates torture someone else the way they abused him. They'd kill him for that. *Unless I kill myself first.*

As another pirate tired of maltreating him and the next one took his place, Yarik's mind suddenly filled with a ludicrous image: loaded catapults positioned on the cliffs above the cove where the pirate ship had taken shelter. A tall, heartbreakingly handsome man in a white uniform sat astride a blindingly white horse, not unlike the one screaming its fury on the shore. Certain he was hallucinating once again, Yarik braced himself to take a bucket of water in the face. Yet no water came.

\* \* \*

Herald Kaylan Elderwood sat motionless in his Companion's saddle, a look of grim concentration on his handsome face as he watched the boulders and flaming tar crash onto the deck of the ship, splintering wood and scattering the crew.

The ship groaned and lurched at the impact.

At Kaylan's current distance, he couldn't see what the pirates were doing to their victim, and he was sure he didn't want to know. Part of his mind kept track of the riderless Companion who raced frenziedly along the shore. When the impact of the projectiles sent the boy flying overboard, the Companion plunged into the lake, swimming for him as hard as she could. Kaylan left her to her task and focused all of his attention on next weapon he could see.

A cutlass disappeared from a pirate's grasp and reappeared with half a dozen other weapons near his mare's hooves.

Kaylan could feel her pleasure with him at the back of his mind, but he didn't let it distract him.

The mercenaries swarmed the beach, preparing to capture any pirates who made it as far as the shore.

Meanwhile, the pile of weapons grew.

\* \* \*

:*Grab on!*: a woman's voice commanded.

Yarik, with a decade of experience in instantly obeying a woman's orders, reached out, but his searching fingers could not find anything to grab. The expected water had finally hit his face—

*No. Wait. That's backward. My face hit the water.*

Yarik's bruised ribs screamed as he fought to hold his breath. Swimming was out of the question; his limbs wouldn't obey him. Besides, he had no idea which way was up.

An equine mass collided with him. *:Grab on!:*

Yarik felt the seat of a saddle ram into his bruised stomach muscles. The shock drove what little air he had left out of him. His fingers latched onto something. *Leather?*

The Companion swam until her feet touched bottom, then heaved him out of the water and carried him toward the shore.

Yarik tried to scream as his damaged body took his weight against the saddle, but he was too busy coughing water out of his lungs for any sound to emerge.

The Companion thundered across the beach and climbed a path Yarik thought only pirates knew was there.

No sooner had they reached the top of the cliff than Yarik lost his grip on whatever part of the saddle he'd been holding. As his world narrowed to an ever-collapsing tunnel of light, he slid off.

\* \* \*

Kaylan "caught" the boy just as he dropped from the saddle. The Herald's Fetching Gift was one of the strongest in the Circle, and that Gift now allowed him to "snap" the boy into his arms. He'd dismounted and sat on the grass beside his own Companion, Adele, the instant the boy's mare carried him into view. Now that he could see the child up close, he stared in horror at his brutalized body. "Get the surgeon!"

Adele took off toward the mercenaries' camp.

The boy's Companion—at least Kaylan assumed she was the boy's Companion—approached them cautiously and buried her muzzle in the child's curly hair.

Between the blood and the water, Kaylan had no idea what color that hair was.

Adele, the surgeon on her back, pounded up to them.

The surgeon, who had zero Healing Gift, dismounted and dropped to her knees beside Kaylan. "Kernos's balls! What happened to him?"

"Pirates," Kaylan said softly as he tried to remember the woman's name. *Lee? Dee? Bee?*

The surgeon unfolded her kit and set it on the ground. She pulled out a bottle, unstoppered it, and waved it under the boy's nose.

The child stirred, trying to get away from the odor.

"Is anything broken?" the surgeon asked.

The lad opened his eyes in terror at the sound of her voice and pressed himself as deeply as he could into Kaylan's arms.

"Easy," Kaylan soothed. "I have you. You're safe."

The look on the boy's battered face showed quite clearly that he felt anything but "safe."

Kaylan tried again. "The mercenaries are rounding up the pirates. This surgeon will tend to your injuries. I have to go—"

"No!" the boy screamed, grabbing onto the front of Kaylan's Whites.

Adele knocked Kaylan on the top of his head with her nose.

The boy's Companion folded her legs under her and lay down between them and the path, pressing as close to them as she could.

Kaylan didn't need Mindspeech to figure out that he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. "All right. I won't leave you. You're safe. I'll protect you. My Companion will protect you. You're Companion will protect you—"

The surgeon reached for the boy again. "Let me see—"

"No!"

Kaylan had the feeling that if the boy could have he would have climbed inside his Whites with him. All the pirates he'd seen had been male, but the child apparently had an even bigger problem with women. "Go get some water and towels so I can clean him up," he ordered.

The surgeon raised her eyebrow, but silently returned the stoppered bottle to her kit, picked up her pack and hurried toward the camp.

"Is anything broken?" Kaylan asked conversationally, repeating the surgeon's earlier question.

"No," the boy croaked.

"What hurts the worst?"

The boy's Companion gave Kaylan a withering look.

*I guess that means "everything."* "Never mind. That was a stupid question." *Lord and Lady, I wish I knew what the lad's Gift is. If he's a Mindspeaker, he could be screaming at me, and I'd never know it. We don't have animals crawling all over us, so it's probably not Animal Mindspeech. Nothing is flying around or burning up, so it's not Fetching or Firestarting. Farseeing? Foresight? Either of those would be awkward. By all that's holy, I hope he's not an Empath!* "What's your Companion's name?"

"My what?"

“Your Companion,” Kaylan repeated, gesturing at the strange mare.  
“What’s her name?”

The boy looked at the Companion.

She twisted her head over her shoulder so he could see her sapphire blue eyes.

The boy gasped. “Illysha. She says her name’s Illysha. She says she’s been trying to get to me for weeks.”

Kaylan nodded slowly. *Okay. So Mindspeech. I wonder if he has anything else.*

The surgeon returned with a bucket of water and rags.

The boy immediately coiled around Kaylan as tightly as he could.

“I’ll keep everything stocked where you need it.” The surgeon hastily retreated out of sight.

“Lie down beside Illysha,” Kaylan droned as he shifted himself out from under the boy.

Reluctantly the boy let himself be settled beside the mare.

Kaylan pulled the rags and water closer.

The boy trembled at the sight of the bucket.

Kaylan lay a gentle hand on one of the few undamaged spots of skin he could find. “Easy,” he called as if to a skittish horse. “The water’s warm, and I won’t hurt you any more than I have to. I need to get you cleaned up so we can see the damage.”

The boy shook his head violently. “Not ‘we!’ You! Only you!”

“Okay, okay. Only me.” Kaylan dipped a rag in the warm water and decided to start with the boy’s face, desperately hoping he’d paid enough attention in the Field Medicine course back at the

Collegium. *I'd better change into a clean set of Whites after I get him to sleep. Don't want to frighten the mercenaries.*

Adele promptly knocked him on the top of his head again.

Kaylan grimaced, then, as gently as he could, wiped the blood away from the child's cheek.

\* \* \*

Yarik, out of long habit, remained motionless as the Herald cleaned the blood and grime from his skin. There was something different about this man's touch. It wasn't rough like a butcher handling a haunch of meat. It wasn't so light as to suggest he was embarrassed. It was steady and sure, like an expert groom caring for a fine horse.

*:Kaylan's family raises some of the finest horses in Valdemar,:*  
Illysha commented.

Yarik wasn't exactly sure why he should care. It did matter to him, however, that the Herald was efficient, getting him onto his stomach on a blanket that had materialized out of somewhere before tending to his back, arms, legs and feet. Not that Yarik was particularly modest, but, at the moment, he didn't want the tenderer portions of his anatomy exposed.

Kaylan helped him lean his head over the edge of the blanket long enough to rinse the blood, fleas, oils and whatever else called his head home out of his hair. Buckets of warmed water and unsoiled rags appeared as the Herald worked, with no sight of the woman replacing them or hauling away the used supplies.

*:Kaylan's Gift is Fetching,:* Illysha explained, as if Yarik should know what that meant.

The Herald produced salves and bandages. He applied them to the worst of Yarik's wounds, especially his damaged feet. Then he turned him onto his back, tucked clean blankets around and over him and studied a spot of ground a few feet away.



Grooming supplies atop a horse blanket appeared where only grass had been an eyeblink before.

“Where is all of this stuff coming from?” Yarik tried to say, though he suspected his words came out a good deal more garbled than that.

“I know how the surgeon has the field hospital set up. She’s just replacing things as they disappear. The horse equipment belongs to Adele, and I know where I left it.”

Adele arched her neck, clearly very proud of her Herald.

Kaylan grinned affectionately at her, then stood and turned his attention to Illysha. As soon as the mare stood up and stepped a safe distance away from Yarik, he removed her tack. With the proficiency of long practice, he dried and groomed her thoroughly. He fastened the horse blanket on her and waited for her to lie down again. Then he gently repositioned Yarik along her back and knelt beside him.

Yarik noticed a cup of tea in Kaylan’s hands that he was certain hadn’t been there a moment before. “Where’d that come from?”

“Can you sit up enough to drink?” Kaylan asked, answering the question with a question. “It’ll make you feel better and help you sleep.”

Yarik eyed the cup skeptically.

“Don’t you want to drink it?” Kaylan asked.

Yarik’s skepticism turned to bewilderment. As best as he could remember no one had ever asked him what *he* wanted.

Kaylan set the cup down. The Herald looked like a disheveled, blood-covered statue.

Yarik couldn’t help himself. He smiled. Or at least he tried to. “You’re a mess, handsome.”

Kaylan glanced down at his hopelessly stained uniform. He shrugged philosophically. “Not the first time. Won’t be the last.” He unnecessarily readjusted Yarik’s blanket. “You’re also a mess, little pirate. You need a Healer with more skill than anyone around here has. I need to get you to Haven so someone at the House of Healing can help you.”

Yarik saw the shadow that crossed the Herald’s face. “And you have duties I’m keeping you from.”

Kaylan lowered his eyes and nodded. “I have to tend to those monsters, see to their trials, make sure their sentences are carried out—“

“And I can’t wait that long,” Yarik finished for him.

“No.”

Yarik absorbed the honest answer. “How bad is it?”

Kaylan’s eyes took on the detached look of someone making up a plan on the fly. “You can’t ride, even strapped to Illysha’s saddle. It would kill you. I think Lord Clifton has a caravan we can borrow. The surgeon probably has enough herbs to keep you drugged until you get to Haven. That way the caravan can travel faster without you being conscious of every bump. Illysha will go with you, and the mercenaries have enough men to escort you.”

“*Enough men.*” Yarik tried to focus on Kaylan’s startling blue eyes. The Herald couldn’t go with him, but maybe— “Promise you’ll be there when I wake up in Haven.”

Kaylan smiled. “I promise.”

As bad as he felt, everything suddenly seemed right in Yarik’s world.

Kaylan raised him slightly, then picked up the cup and held it to his split lips for him to drink.

Yarik drank whatever was in the cup without tasting it. He twisted in Kaylan's arms until he could press his ear against his chest. A powerful heart beat there. One filled with kindness and everything else Yarik had been missing from his life. Slowly he relaxed and let Kaylan simply hold him until he drifted into the first dreamless sleep he'd had in years.

\* \* \*

*Stupid Herald. Stupid Herald. Stupid Herald.*

The words repeated over and over in Kaylan's head in time to the chiming of Adele's hooves as she raced toward Haven. He sat effortlessly in her saddle over a course that would have had most Heralds in the Circle strapping themselves onto their Companions backs and praying to whatever deity they honored that they'd remain alive. At twenty-four he felt the effects of the lack of sleep, irregular meals and physical exertion a great deal more than he had a few years ago, but he still rode with an ease that few Heralds beyond those in his family could match.

*Why did I promise the boy I'd be in Haven when he woke up?* It had taken what seemed like an eternity for him to oversee the pirates' trials. With the boy unable to serve as a witness, Kaylan had had to send for a Herald who could work the Second Stage Truth Spell to force the pirates to confess their crimes. Then he'd had to wait for the woman to arrive. Then he'd had to question every pirate who had been unlucky enough to survive the sinking of their ship about a laundry list of crimes, some of which included gut-wrenching details about horrors inflicted on the boy. He'd had some seriously un-Herald-like thoughts about what he wanted to do with them—particularly with the woman who'd served as their Captain—but the Herald he'd summoned had recalled an obscure case where an abusive mine owner was set to work in his own mines and reminded him that there was a shortage of miners in northwestern Valdemar because of the war with Hardorn.

Escorting the prisoners to where he could turn them over to the Guard who would see that their sentences were carried out had taken another couple of weeks. Then he'd complained to Adele

about how tired he was and how he didn't think he could keep his promise to the boy. She'd lit out southeast almost before the seat of his breeches made contact with her saddle. He knew she wouldn't run herself to foundering, but he still worried. She was taking shortcuts they only used when he was serving as an Arrow of the Queen, a special messenger used to get information from Haven to and from the farthest corners of the kingdom as fast as possible. They'd stopped briefly for meals and sleep at inns, Waystations, streams, clearings at the side of the road, a farmhouse or two . . . Kaylan couldn't understand what was driving Adele. He just knew that he wasn't getting enough food or rest and that she was getting even less. She hadn't allowed him the time nor peace to trance down enough for her to tell him what in the Nine Hells was going on. *You'd think there'd be a Herald with Mindspeech out here somewhere!* But then such a Herald might relay orders for him to go somewhere else. Which no one could do if they couldn't find him. Which was probably why Adele was taking tracks that even goats and deer didn't know about as she shot like the silver arrow that adorned his uniform straight toward the capitol of Valdemar.

*Stupid Herald. Stupid Herald. Stupid Herald.*

\* \* \*

Wrapped in blankets with hay packed around him as if he were a vase made of hand-blown glass, Yarik lay on the floor of the caravan, slipping in and out of a drug-induced sleep. He was just conscious enough to take care of his bodily functions with help from his escorts. He dutifully drank every cup of broth and tea they presented to him. And other than that he spent his time in the land of dreams.

Which he didn't mind at all because the handsome Herald was there. Kaylan . . .

Yarik would lie for candlemarks, listening to story after story from a young woman out of his sight, somewhere in his head, about the madcap family in which the Herald had grown up. Kaylan had also lost his parents when he was young, but otherwise his life couldn't have been more different from Yarik's. Kaylan's grandmother and grandfather presided over their own little fiefdom, which was populated with dancing horses and more relatives than anyone could count. The house with twisting ramps and horses eating with their riders in the dining room could only have been conjured out of a fever dream. Yarik had hurt himself laughing at the size of the puddle these people called a lake.

Firm, gentle hands wiped the blood away from where it dripped out of the corner of Yarik's mouth.

"There has to be some sort of a Healer between here and Haven," a voice muttered. "They can't all be off to war."

"Our orders are to deliver him straight to the House of Healing," a low, rough voice growled.

"He'll never make it," the first voice fretted.

"Are you going to argue with his Companion?" a third voice asked. "I'm not going to argue with his Companion."

Yarik tried to pull the dream more tightly around him in an attempt to block out the voices. Not a dream. A shield.

*:That's right.:* The young woman's voice brimmed with approval.

Yarik started to shrink way from her, then realized the voice was far too young to belong to the Captain. Someone else. *:Illysha?:*

*:Right here, Chosen,:* came the reply.

Yarik knew from the scents on the breeze that he was very, very far away from Lake Evendim. The chill in the air suggested that weeks

had passed. I should be healed by now. Another dream claimed him.

Kaylan appeared, sitting beside him. “They hurt you very badly, little pirate,” he said sadly. “They damaged more than your skin. Your organs are hurt.”

*:And your mind,:* Illysha added.

Yarik gazed up at Kaylan with his doe-like eyes that had so fascinated the Captain. “You’ll fix me. I know you will.”

“You trust me too much, little pirate.”

Yarik looked at him quizzically. “Why do you call me that?”

Kaylan gave a small laugh. “Because you never told me your name.”

That took Yarik by surprise. “Sorry. I guess we were only together long enough for me to bleed all over you.”

Kaylan’s laugh grew heartier. “That just gave me an excuse to order a new set of Whites.” His eyes twinkled. “You can tell me your name when I meet you in Haven, when you wake up.”

Yarik smiled contentedly, knowing the Herald would never lie to him.

\* \* \*

Kaylan was mortally certain Adele was going to flatten someone in the winding streets of Haven.

The Companion twisted through the crowds like a *kyree* in a wheat field, but she was so exhausted she could barely stand.

By the time they reached the large homes of the wealthy nobles outside the Palace walls, Kaylan feared he was well on his way to getting a reaction headache, she was pulling so much power from him.

No one stopped them at the Privy Gate. Adele practically dumped him at the House of Healing and staggered off toward the Companions' Stable without giving him time to remove his saddlebags.

Kaylan stood, brushing himself off and staring after her, until someone rushed out of the House of Healing and grabbed his arm.

"At last!" a Master Healer exclaimed as he propelled Kaylan into the building.

"What's going on?" Kaylan demanded.

The Master Healer, whose name was eluding Kaylan—Derrick? Gerrick? Merrick?—showed him to a room.

The boy from the ship, looking far too pale, lay on a bed near an open window. His Companion had her head stuck through the gap in the wall, her nose pressed gently against his temple.

The Healer guided Kaylan over to the bed. "We've mostly repaired his internal injuries, but he won't wake up. His Companion says he's waiting for you. We have no idea what she's talking about."

"I do." Kaylan sat on the edge of the bed and took the boy's hand in his. He immediately knew that the drain on him had not come from Adele but from the lad. "Little pirate," he called. "I'm here."

The boy's eyes fluttered open almost instantly. As soon as he recognized Kaylan he latched onto him like a leech. "You kept your promise!"

The Companion raised her head slightly and sighed.

"Relax, little pirate!" Kaylan said softly. "I'm not going anywhere!"

"Yarik," the boy said. He eased his vicelike grip enough to lean back against his pillow. "My name is Yarik. Yarik Rafton."

Kaylan forced himself to smile. “Nice to meet you properly, Yarik Rafton. I’m—“

“Kaylan Elderwood,” Yarik said. “Illysha told me.”

“Do you think you can get him to eat?” the Healer asked.

Kaylan’s smile broadened. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll eat for me.”

Yarik returned the grin. “For you, I’ll do anything.”

Kaylan did his best not to wince. He must be half my age. To have that kind of power over someone—

The Healer hurried out of the room.

Kaylan studied the boy. Over the weeks the swelling had gone down and the cuts had healed. But severe bone bruises had been complicated by a growth spurt. All without much in the way of food. Which had left the child painfully thin. “You look a lot better than the last time I saw you,” he ventured.

“I knew everything would be fine once you got here.” Yarik’s voice cracked on the last word, and panic flooded his eyes.

“Here, now,” Kaylan crooned. “Nothing to worry about. That should settle down in a few months.”

“You don’t mind?” Yarik whispered.

Kaylan’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “Why would I mind? It happens to us all. It just means you’re growing up.” As soon as the words passed his lips, he knew they were wrong. This “boy” had grown up a long time ago. The physical abuse he’d endured would prevent him from ever reaching the height he might have been. In return it had gifted him with eyes that looked out on the world with decades more experience than they should have had.

The Healer returned with a cup of broth.



Kaylan took it from him and helped Yarik sit up enough to drink it. “Much better,” he said as the boy finished. “Now, can you manage without me for a candlemark or two?” He hurried on as he saw Yarik’s face start to fall. “My Companion nearly killed herself getting me to you. I have to make sure she’s being fussed over properly. Then I need to carry my saddlebags to my room, unpack, rinse off, find some fresh clothes, and grab something to eat for myself. After that I’ll come straight back here and sit with you until I fall asleep. Deal?”

Yarik giggled. “Deal.”

As the boy laughed, Kaylan felt the drain on his life energy lessen. He stood. Then, on impulse, he bent down and planted a kiss on Yarik’s forehead. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

\* \* \*

Yarik lasted all of about a dozen heartbeats before he started Looking for the Herald. He could see Kaylan in his mind as clearly as if he were walking beside him.

The Herald looked tired. Very tired. Exhausted.

His Companion looked worse. Kaylan hadn’t been joking. The mare really had nearly killed herself getting him to Haven.

Why?

*:Because you needed him,:* Illysha responded to the question he had not voiced. She snorted. *:Of course I can hear you! You have Mindspeach, and you’re shouting like a barker at a carnival. I can’t hold shields on you forever. You really do need to learn to shield yourself.:*

Yarik ignored her in favor of Watching Kaylan claim his saddlebags and trudge from the stable to the Herald’s Wing of the Palace.

Kaylan climbed and climbed and climbed until he reached the third floor.

Yarik paled.

*:Where did you think his rooms were going to be? He's a messenger. He's almost never in Haven.:*

Yarik immediately panicked. "No!" He leapt out of bed.

Illysha's ears grazed the top of the opening as she tossed her head in surprise.

Yarik, wearing only a nightshirt, staggered out of the room in the direction he'd seen Kaylan take.

\* \* \*

Kaylan tugged open his door and stepped inside. The space was sparsely furnished with only the necessities: a bed, desk, chair, rug . . . He sighed. He never seemed to be in Haven long enough to make anything look like his own. A layer of dust covered everything, and the air smelled musty. They weren't expecting me back so soon. He dropped his bags on the floor and crossed the room to open the shutters and window.

The evening breeze felt pleasantly cool on his skin. He'd completely lost track of time. Even the season. Is it before the Harvest Faire? After? It doesn't feel like winter yet.

He returned to the door and waved it back and forth several times, doing his best to clear the room of the stale air. After five tries he gave up and left the door standing open while he sat in the chair and yanked off his boots and socks. He stood and freed himself from the top part of his uniform, stripping all the way to his skin. He tossed the dirty clothes in a corner, planning to deal with them later, and unpacked his bags. More dirty clothes joined the pile. He lined up everything else on the table the way he would have set out

grooming supplies in a barn. He looked longingly at his bed. I don't dare. I'll sleep for at least three days.

A noise on the stairs caught his attention. "Please . . ."

Kaylan glanced over to see Yarik crawling up the top stair. He rushed to him and heaved him into his arms. "What-?"

"Illysha said you're a messenger! That you're leaving!"

Kaylan felt the pull on his power grow even stronger than before. He carried Yarik over to the bed, kicking the door closed behind them.

"You can't leave! You just got here!" Yarik's skin felt far too cold against Kaylan's flesh.

Kaylan slid the boy under the covers. He glanced around. No one had put firewood by his hearth. Why would they? I'm not here yet.

Yarik started to shiver violently.

Oh, Hellfires! Kaylan quickly climbed under the covers with him, holding him against his skin for warmth. Sick as he is, running around half naked—

Someone pounded on Kaylan's door and threw it open.

\* \* \*

Yarik sat up, clutching the blanket to his chin as two of the Palace Guards hauled Kaylan out of the bed.

A male Healer strode into the room after them.

Far below in the Queen's Garden, Illysha and Adele screamed repeatedly at the top of their equine lungs.

The Healer's body blocked Yarik's view of the door as the Palace Guards hauled Kaylan outside. "How did he get you out of the room without anyone seeing you?"

“He d-didn’t,” Yarik stammered. “I left! I’ve spent m-most of m-my life t-trying not to b-be seen on the sh-ship!”

The Healer grabbed Yarik’s wrist and swore. “Tell that thrice damned Companion of yours to stop carrying on and shield you!”

“Where are they taking Kaylan?” Yarik wailed.

“Don’t know,” the Healer said brusksly. He stepped to the door and called down the stairs, “Get a stretcher up here!”

\* \* \*

Kaylan sat on the grass near a stream in the Companion’s Field, hugging his knees to his chest. He was still barefoot and shirtless.

Adele stood beside him, hanging her head over his shoulder so her temple pressed against his.

It had taken Kaylan ages to calm himself down enough to achieve the trance-like state he needed to “talk” with Adele, and jagged sniffs still shook his breathing. *:They put me under a Second-Stage Truth Spell!:*

*:And the only thing you did was confess that you share a lifebond you didn’t know about with a snot-nosed little pirate you’ve hardly met. They should have figured that out for themselves. The way he’s pulling energy from you, it’s as plain as the nose on a Companion’s face!:*

*:He’s a child!:* Kaylan lamented silently.

*:Old enough to be married among Holderkin.:*

*:I would never hurt him! I could never hurt him!:*

*:I know,:* the mare soothed. *:They know that, too.:*

*:They’re going to send me out on Circuit. I’ll be separated from him until he earns his Whites! That’s going to take years!:*

Adele breathed softly on his tear-stained face. *:I'm not carrying you anywhere until he stops draining you and Illysha assures me he can handle the separation. Then he'll be in Training, and you'd barely see each other anyway. Illysha and I will help you talk with each other in your dreams, and since he has no family of his own, he can spend his Mandatory Familial Visit with your grandparents. You'll be riding the Forest Reach Circuit, so it will be easy for you to join him there.:*

*:For "supervised visits,"*: Kaylan thought bitterly. He didn't need to look up to know that Adele was glaring at him. His shoulders sagged. *:You're right. I would never do anything wrong with him even if the visits were unsupervised.:*

*:You aren't the first Herald to have this problem. Savil had Vanyel and Tyrendel keep their relationship a secret because of Van's age.:*

Kaylan grew sober. *:Really?:*

*:Really.:*

*:But if I weren't shaych and he was a Holderkin girl-:*

Adele brought her nose down sharply on the top of his head.

Kaylan abruptly fell out of trance. He rubbed the spot where she'd hit him. "That hurt."

The look in her eyes said quite clearly that she'd intended it to.

\* \* \*

Yarik gripped Kaylan's hand as the Herald sat on the edge of his sickbed.

Kaylan was out of uniform, wearing a loose-fitting, undyed shirt and black breeches. A gilded, black leather belt encircled his slender waist. His feet, which he'd propped up on the nearby chair, sported soft, black leather boots.

“Did they hurt you?” Yarik whispered, slurring his words slightly as he came out of the drug-induced fog the Healers had placed him in.

Kaylan flashed a smile that was not quite reassuring. “No. They were afraid that I had hurt you.”

“But you’re a Herald!” Yarik frowned. “Or aren’t you? You aren’t wearing Whites.”

Kaylan gave a small laugh that sounded a little hollow. “I’m off duty. Only on-duty Heralds wear Whites. And the only being who can decide I’m not a Herald is Adele. Apparently, she’s giving quite a piece of her mind to the Companion of any Herald who so much as looks sideways at me.” His gaze grew distant, but not with the look of someone talking with his Companion. “Wish I could hear some of that.” He gave his head a small shake. “You really don’t have to crush my fingers, little pirate. I’m not going anywhere.”

Yarik heard the unspoken “Yet.” He couldn’t take his eyes off the handsome Herald. “You will,” he said petulantly.

Kaylan’s laughter was genuine this time. “I’m human, Yarik! I will eventually have to go relieve myself!”

Yarik felt the corner of his mouth quirk in a timid attempt to smile. He released Kaylan’s hand and shifted to a more comfortable position. “The Healers told me we have a lifebond.”

Kaylan nodded solemnly. “And it’s a damned inconvenient one. You’re a Herald Trainee, and I’m—“

“Needed elsewhere,” Yarik finished for him. “But that isn’t why you got in trouble. There’s another problem. I’ve ‘Heard’ people ‘Talking.’ I’m too young.” He hugged himself. “They’re going to send you away until I’m older.”

“Not immediately. Our very clever Companions have come up with a plan to keep me here for a while.” Kaylan’s smile became

conspiratorial. “There’s a pair of Heralds who work as a team: Dirk and Kris. Dirk is a Fetcher like I am, and Kris is a FarSeer like you are.”

“A team?”

“That’s right. Kris uses his FarSight to locate things so Dirk can Fetch them. Unlike Dirk, I’m completely deaf when it comes to Mindspeech, so I can’t communicate with you the way Dirk does with Kris. But the teachers think we can use our lifebond to create the same effect. They just don’t know how we do that yet. While they’re working on it, I get to start you on your education.”

“My what?”

Kaylan grinned wickedly. “Your education. I’m guessing that, in spite of the laws of Valdemar, you haven’t been taught to read, write or do basic calculations.”

“Calcu-?”

“Work with numbers. Do more than count.”

Yarik brightened slightly and scratched at the stiff hair beginning to grow on his upper lip and along his jaw. “That’s right! I’m not good with numbers! I might be older than I think I am.”

“Perhaps.” Kaylan didn’t sound convinced. “There’s also no use sending me anywhere until we figure out how to keep you from draining my life energy every time you get scared.”

Yarik’s joy vanished, and he blushed to the roots of his hair.

Kaylan lay his cool hand against Yarik’s burning cheek. “No need to worry, little pirate. None of this is your fault. It’s not mine, either. We can’t fix everything, but we’ll fix as much as we can.”

“We’?” Yarik echoed nervously.

Illysha promptly stuck her head through the open window and hit Yarik on the top of his head with her nose—sending Kaylan into a helpless fit of giggles.



