

Potter Fahr's Wife

By

L.A. Malcor

Based on works by Mercedes Lackey

Licensed under Creative Commons

Herald Danya Winterborn sang gaily at the top of her lungs. Her breath formed clouds in the crisp fall air as her Companion, Terrill, pranced, his hooves pounding in time to her song and making bell-like tones whenever they hit a stone in the road.

"Pride of the Land!
Magic in Hand!
He'll face down our foes
Wherever he goes!"

Herald Kaylan Elderwood snorted as his Companion, Adele, did her best to keep up with Danya's stallion. "Where did you learn that drivel?"

"My foster father," Danya smiled at the memory of Bard Kestran. She suggested silently to Terrill that he match Adele's more awkward pace. "He knew many a song that the bards in Haven don't seem to have in their repertoires these days."

Terrill settled his gait to one that was more comfortable for the mare.

Adele nodded her thanks to him. The mare either would not or could not recover fully from the severe injuries she had suffered at the hands of a unit of Hardornan soldiers. She wasn't saying which, but the result was that her Herald rode Circuits well behind the front line instead of joining Valdemar's troops.

Danya understood completely why it would be a tremendously bad idea to send Kaylan anywhere near the front lines ever again. Because of their tangled romantic relationship with Herald Yarik Rafton, they would never have been paired up normally for Danya's first Circuit. But when she had finally been deemed ready to become a full member of

the Circle, the war with Hardorn was still raging and only Kaylan was available to ride out with her. As fortune would have it, the Circuit that needed them was the one that ran up through Sorrows, the road Danya had taken so long ago with Yarik as Terrill had carried her to Haven for the first time. A part of her had been sad. She had longed to ride Kaylan's usual Circuit past Ashkevron manor, since she had never seen the ancestral home of Herald-Mage Vanyel Ashkevron, who had been the subject of most of the songs she had learned from Bard Kestran. But another part of her delighted at the prospect of traveling through the settlements near the fabled forest where she had been raised. She hoped some day to be able to show this region to the three sons whom she'd had by Kaylan. For now, she was content that the boys were living with Kaylan's grandparents at Elderwood Manor. As much as she missed them, Alden, Brandon, and Conrad were much better off with the Elderwoods than they would have been, dragging around after any of the threesome who were their parents.

Kaylan sat straighter in his saddle, if possible, and clucked his tongue as they approached the last village on their way north, Pottersville.

Danya followed her partner's example and sat as straight in her saddle as she could.

Someone must have spotted them, since a delegation waited for them at the edge of town.

:The headman is Josef Fahr. He's a potter by trade.:
Terrill reminded his Herald.

More white than blond hair graced the potter's head, and something beyond the hours spent bending over his wheel seemed responsible for the hunch of his shoulders. His bright blue eyes squinted at the Heralds as if sizing them up. His gaze flickered over Danya and settled on Kaylan.

"Potter Fahr is worried," Danya observed, passing the crucial information to her partner, knowing that he could not Mindspeak with his Companion except when in a deep trance nor did he share her Gift of Empathy. If he was going to be the one to handle whatever was on the potter's mind, he

should at least know the man's name and what sort of state he was in.

"I wonder why?" Kaylan drawled, smiling his appreciation for her tact.

"I fear we're about to find out," Danya grinned, then schooled her expression to be one of friendly greeting as they drew within earshot of Potter Fahr and the other townsfolk who had come out to meet them.

"Welcome to Pottersville, Heralds!" Josef Fahr exclaimed. He bowed, and the villagers with him followed suit.

"Greetings, Potter Fahr. I am Herald Kaylan Elderwood, and this is my partner, Herald Danya Winterborn," the older Herald said smoothly.

The headman glanced at the Heralds' left hands.

Danya and Kaylan wore matching rings with silver hands clasping a heart.

Fahr licked his lips. "I'd arranged for separate rooms, but it you'd prefer to share accommodations--"

"Separate rooms will be fine," Danya interrupted before Kaylan could respond. She sensed relief sweep over him and knew that she had assessed his needs correctly.

Fahr raised an eyebrow. "Very well. Stalls have been readied for your Companions at our common stable. I hope that will be suitable."

Both Companions nodded, to show that it was.

Fahr smiled a little less nervously, then gestured at one of the dwellings. "You will be guests at my house. If you will dismount and follow me?"

Danya swung to the ground and glanced at Terrill.

The stallion nickered. *:Don't fret, little mother. I'll call you if we aren't treated properly.:*

Kaylan dismounted with almost impossible grace and sidled closer to Danya as Terrill and Adele trotted toward the stable. "We thank you for your hospitality."

Fahr beamed. "Pottersville is not so far from Haven that we've forgotten how to treat Heralds. This way." He led them toward his house.

The cottage itself bespoke wealth without being ostentatious. Far larger than the rest of the buildings in the

town, Fahr's home seemed to serve as a combination of dwelling, inn and meeting place. A workshop, with a smoke hole for a kiln, abutted the cottage, accounting for some of the building's extra bulk.

A woman too old to be thought of as beautiful smiled as she stepped into the doorway to greet them.

Danya assessed the woman the way Kaylan had taught her. Clothes beyond her station, jewelry that she probably valued more than it was worth . . . Here was someone who thought she belonged somewhere other than a backwater border village. The black dye in her hair probably covered more gray than she was willing to admit to, and her too-thick makeup accentuated rather than hid the wrinkles that the harsh northern weather had carved into her skin. Her features, like Danya's own, had something more Karsite than Valdermaran about them, and her black eyes devoured her guests--particularly Kaylan--in a manner that the younger Herald distinctly did not like. Danya did not need her Empathy to read the desperation in the woman. She made a mental note to mention it to Kaylan as soon as they were alone.

"May I introduce my wife, Zuleika?" Fahr said smoothly. The Heralds nodded in unison.

Danya stopped herself from protesting at the way the woman slid up to Kaylan and escorted him into the cottage. Kaylan was devastatingly handsome, but he was also *shay'a'chern*, something that most women seemed to sense within a few moments of meeting him. Danya saw her partner flinch at the unwelcome contact, then force himself to relax so as not to offend their hosts. The younger Herald decided that she didn't need to warn Kaylan about the woman after all; he'd already figured out that something was wrong. He could take care of himself, and Danya needed to concentrate on the here and now, not on future problems that might never materialize.

The Heralds were soon settled in their adjoining but separate rooms. Danya would not have accepted the arrangement if she had felt that anyone was being inconvenienced. But Fahr's house had been built to house the commanders of military units on their way north to the posts

along Valdemar's northern border, so there honestly was room to spare since Fahr and his wife did not have any children. Danya found that a bit odd for villagers. Stranger still was the superb quality of the lamb's wool coverlet on the bed, which seemed to be newly made. She hadn't noticed any flocks of sheep on their approach to the village, and it was the wrong time of year for lambs.

Dinner proved to be more than a little odd. The extravagant meal looked completely out of place on the simple, hand-thrown pottery. Although Zuleika assured them that the fare was similar to what they would have enjoyed in Haven, the recipes were a good seventy-five years out of date, according to what the Collegium's cook, Mero, had taught Danya about preparing dishes that did not involve potatoes. Also, if the Herald was not mistaken, the meat was fresh lamb--far too young and tender to have any sensible explanation. She did her best not to frown as the discrepancies piled up behind her eyes, and she tried to concentrate on the conversation between Kaylan and the potter.

"We've been able to handle everything that has ventured this way so far," Fahr confided, "but we don't dare leave our womenfolk to go into Berrybay for our winter supplies in case something happens while we are gone."

"Herald Danya and I would be happy to keep an eye on your families for you while you make your supply run," Kaylan offered. "I don't imagine anything will wander past Sorrows that we can't handle."

The potter looked skeptical. "I'm not sure these things are coming past Sorrows. I'm the first to admit that I don't believe in magic, but if I did, I'd say that something on this side of Sorrows was creating these things. They just plain don't look natural, and I don't have a good--or even a bad--explanation for that yet."

Kaylan nodded thoughtfully. "I understand. We'll oversee things until you return."

"Thank Kernos of the Northern Lights!" Fahr exclaimed. "You are an answer to prayers! Heralds don't usually get this far north. Especially this close to first snow."

"Well," Kaylan grinned, looking exceptionally handsome in the firelight, "we thought we'd make the effort this time, with the war and all. Can't be too careful these days."

"Indeed," Fahr nodded as he sipped his ale. "Indeed."

Danya drained the last of her honeyed wine and soaked up the warmth from the hearth. The northern nights were already bitterly cold, and the heat from the fire felt good on her weary muscles. She was loath to leave the blaze when Kaylan decided to call it a night, but she joined her partner in retiring to their rooms.

"Do you mind?" Kaylan asked softly as he saw her to her door.

"Not at all!" Danya grinned. She kissed him on the cheek. "I know you do your best to shield, but your pining for Yarik leaks through and makes mine seem twice as bad as it is. Wish we could spare three Heralds per Circuit."

Kaylan smiled, kissed her goodnight, and strode down the hall to his room.

Danya squashed the unkind thought that her partner might be wishing for time alone with Yarik without her. Truth be told, she had occasionally found herself wishing that Yarik rather than Kaylan had been assigned to take her on her first Circuit. She acknowledged the wisdom of their current arrangement, but being separate from her lifebonded was almost more than she could bear some nights. Still, if she and Yarik had been on Circuit, they would probably both be missing Kaylan just as badly as she and Kaylan were missing Yarik. She stripped and crawled into the bed, wondering yet again how deep the bond ran between her and the *shaych* Herald who was serving as her mentor. She half expected the question and the cold to keep her awake all night, but the long ride had tired her. Content from the full meal and groggy with the memory of the fire's warmth, she quickly drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Dawn came too early for Danya. She was never a later riser, but for some reason she could not fathom, she felt more

exhausted than when she had retired as she dressed and staggered to the dining hall for breakfast.

"You okay?" Kaylan asked, concern lining his handsome face.

"Fine," Danya assured him. "Nothing a week or two with the boys at your family manor wouldn't cure."

The older Herald grinned. "I know what you mean. I miss them, too." He dished up her plate and served her. "The menfolk left on their supply run before dawn. All's quiet so far."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Danya teased. "Nothing has bothered anything this far north since Herald Vanyel's time!"

:Hate to interrupt your breakfast, little mother,;: Terrill fretted, :but you'd better come take a look at this.:

Danya sighed, glancing wistfully at her untouched plate. "Terrill says there's something outside that needs our attention."

Kaylan rose in a single, fluid movement and actually beat her to the door--grabbing his cloak from the peg next to it in the process--despite the fact that he was over ten years her senior.

Danya followed her partner outside, leaving her own cloak behind. She'd grown up in the region and had no need of the extra warmth, though she could understand why Kaylan, who hailed from more southerly climes, felt the need for a wrap. She loped after him toward the field that adjoined the stable where their Companions were housed. She skidded to a stop beside Kaylan at the pasture fence.

Adele and Terrill raced toward them from across the field.

Behind the Companions what looked like a flock of lambs seemed to be grazing peacefully on the hillside.

:Get up!: Terrill commanded as he skittered up to the pasture fence. *:It'll be easier to show you than to try to explain.:*

Danya swung onto her Companion's back and grabbed a handful of his snowy mane.

Kaylan raced ahead of her on Adele.

Even though Terrill could have easily outrun the mare, the stallion traveled at a milder gait. Danya would never be

the superb rider that her partner was. The younger Herald was as proficient as most of the Circle was in the saddle or bareback, but Kaylan had practically been born in the saddle and had been riding almost before he could walk.

As they approached the flock of lambs Danya nodded at Zuleika, who was currently serving as shepherd. The Herald hid a frown. First, the lambs were too small to have been born during the last lambing season. Second, there should not be a flock of all lambs at any time of the year. *Where are the ewes?* Third, each animal seemed to be tethered in place and had grazed the grass in a circle about four feet in diameter down to bare soil.

:*Look closer*,: Terrill ordered as he drew up beside Adele. Danya's frown deepened.

The lambs were attached to leafy patches on the ground via a vine that seemed to serve as an umbilical cord.

Kaylan dismounted for a closer look. "I've never seen anything remotely like this."

"Perhaps whatever created them strayed here from the Pelagir Hills?" Danya ventured.

The older Herald shook his head. "I've been to both the Pelagir Hills and the Pelagir Forest, and I can't think of anything that either looks like this or that would create anything that looks like this."

Danya had Terrill trot around the flock. "They seem to be distributed roughly in a circle," she reported.

"Have you seen these creatures before?" the older Herald asked their hostess.

The potter's wife nodded. "A Gift from Kernos, my husband calls them. A curse, if you ask me. A few weeks ago, they simply sprang out of the grass like popping corn and promptly ate everything down to the roots, the way sheep will do if you don't move them. If you try to move these things, though, they die as a plant would when you pull it up. And if you don't toss feed to them every day, now that the grass is gone, they starve. I imagine they'll start freezing soon as well, with the winter coming on. They do make good eating, as you may have noticed last night, and their fleece is some of the softest I've ever encountered. But we might as well have

planted a sign that said 'Fresh Bait' at the edge of town. Every predator within a hundred miles has stopped by here to try a taste of them. Wait until they attract something that kills one of us as we try to defend them or something that considers lamb no more than an appetizer. Then what will we do? The creatures aren't worth that kind of trouble."

Danya sensed real fear from the woman, and the Herald didn't blame her. Several similar scenarios had already crossed Danya's mind, and none of them boded well for Pottersville. *Even if the townsfolk could keep the lambs in feed, what in the name of Astera would they do with them when winter set in and the local predators were really hungry?!* The young Herald studied her partner, waiting for his reaction.

Kaylan scratched his head. "I suppose slaughtering the lot of them, salting the meat and making what use you can of the fleeces are all out of the question."

Zuleika snorted. "None of that has a prayer of happening as long as my husband considers them to be holy. He only permitted me to slaughter the one we ate last night because Kernos insists that we present our honored guests with the best of everything that we have."

Kaylan smiled ruefully. "And somehow I don't think I can arrange for a parade of 'honored guests' to solve your problem for you before real trouble presents itself."

"One of those Tayledras Healer Adepts in the songs Bard Kestran taught me would be useful right now," Danya sighed. "Or at least a Herald-Mage. Too bad they don't exist anymore."

"If they ever did." Kaylan echoed her sigh. "Well, let's see what we can do with what we have." He concentrated on one of the lambs.

The creature disappeared, then reappeared a few feet from its original position.

The Heralds and the potter's wife watched the lamb intently for a few moments.

The lamb grazed greedily on the new grass that surrounded it, apparently unaware of its relocation.

Kaylan rubbed his temple. "Okay. So I can move them safely."

"As long as you don't move them out of the area of their circle," the potter's wife cautioned. "We tried that, and the creature died."

:Look,: Terrill directed Danya's attention toward the lambs, *:as you would if you were "looking" at a shield, only deeper.:*

Danya stared at--and through--the lambs. She saw a pool of light beneath them that was fed by streams from beyond their circle. *:What is that?:*

:It's what keeps them alive,: Terrill replied.

Danya frowned at her Companion. She sensed that he knew a great deal more than he was saying, but she suspected that he had his reasons for keeping her in the dark. "She's telling the truth, Kaylan. Don't move them out of the circle."

Kaylan threw a questioning look at Danya.

The younger Herald glanced at their Companions then met her partner's gaze.

Kaylan nodded. "All right. I can't move them far, and I can only manage one at a time. That's not going to get us anywhere. So, what can we do?"

Danya shrugged. "I can't communicate with them; I can only Mindspeak with humans. As to my other Gifts, Fetching won't get us outside the circle, and beyond panicking them or broadcasting their current calm, I don't see where Empathy will get us either."

Kaylan scratched his head. "You'd think between two Heralds we'd have something more useful."

The bloodcurdling shriek of an animal in pain cut off almost as quickly as it had started.

Danya and Kaylan glanced in the direction of the sound just in time to see what looked like a swarm of locusts descend on a hapless milk cow that had been fleeing toward the village.

The cow's bellow ceased abruptly.

The cloud shrank for a moment, then swirled and lifted—revealing a pile of cleaned bones where the cow had been.

"Lord and Lady!" Kaylan swore.

"Get her out of here!" Danya shouted, pointing at Zuleika. "Warn the villagers to seal themselves inside

somewhere those things can't get in! I'll see what I can do about the lambs."

"Forget the lambs!" Kaylan roared, as he hefted Zuleika onto Adele's back and sprang up after her. "Get to safety!"

"We can't leave something like this roving the countryside," Danya protested.

Kaylan frowned. "And just what do you suggest that we do about them?"

The cloud swirled and began to move toward the hilltop.

"Go!" Danya ordered. "You ride better than I do. You need to get the villagers to safety. I'll handle this."

Kaylan swore under his breath but rode off with Zuleika.

:I'm open to suggestions, Terrill.: Danya pulled herself onto the stallion's back.

Terrill shook his mane. He pranced into the center of the flock of lambs and turned to face the locusts. *:Ground and center,;* he ordered.

Danya would have liked a bit more explanation, but she knew there was no time for that. She obeyed. Everything seemed to start happening at a distance, as if she were watching the locusts advance on someone else very, very slowly.

:Now, I'm going to help you "touch" someone who can help us,; Terrill informed her as he stood rock-solid beneath her.

Danya firmly squashed the panic that threatened to paralyze her and put her trust in her Companion. *:All right.:* She suddenly had a strange feeling as if Terrill were taking her hand and putting it in someone else's.

:Trust me,; a resonant male voice that was not Terrill's begged. *:There's no time to explain this the way I would like.:*

Danya swallowed hard, hoping that whatever happened would happen soon. *:I understand.:*

:I am an Adept mage,; the voice explained as fast as Mindspeech would allow. *:I can't get to where you are, and I can't do what needs to be done at my current distance. You, however, have an amazingly powerful Mage Gift, and your Companion is standing directly over something that is called a "node". With your Companion's help, I'm going to work through*

you. Now, look down, as if you were looking for a shield beneath the ground.:

Danya obeyed. She “saw” the pool of light she had noticed before, only this time she could tell that it was the point at which several mighty rivers of light converged. The large rivers were fed by smaller rivers, and the smaller rivers were fed by tiny rivulets of light that seemed to come from every living thing.

:That large pool of light,: the voice said quickly, *:is the node. We’re going to “touch” it.:*

With no more warning than that, Danya felt the Adept “guide” her left hand toward the pool, even though she knew her fingers were firmly locked on Terrill’s reins. She had the unsettling sensation of being thrown headfirst into a raging river during a spring flood.

:Don’t panic!: Terrill warned.

The Adept “twisted” the way Danya was sensing the power.

The Herald abruptly felt a whole lot less like a tree in the middle of a flood and more like a gate on a sluice as the power from the node flowed into her.

:Now, drop your reins, and repeat after me,: the Adept instructed.

Danya dutifully dropped Terrill’s reins and did her best to imitate the throaty sounds she “heard” the Adept forming in her mind.

:Quickly! Make throwing motions as if you were lobbing rocks into the middle of the swarm, and repeat that phrase with every toss.: The Adept did something that redirected the flow of power through Danya and into her hands.

The Herald “tossed” imaginary rocks toward the advancing swarm—and stifled a yelp as balls of fire impacted the cloud. She kept tossing the balls until she could no longer see any of the insects.

Terrill flared his nostrils, sweat dampening his white coat as if he had just run for half a day. *:I think that’s all of them, little mother.:*

The Adept redirected the flow of the power back toward the ground. He hesitated a moment, then sealed off the flow of power to the flock of lambs.

The vegetation vanished, and the lambs staggered away like newborns.

The Adept shielded Danya from the power of the node and then withdrew.

The Herald-Mage suddenly felt the great-grandmother of all reaction headaches explode inside her skull. She slipped from Terrill's saddle and blacked out before she hit the ground

...

* * *

Danya woke to someone shoving a cup of willow bark tea into her hand.

"Drink," one of the village women commanded.

The Herald-Mage winced as she struggled to sit up. She drank the tea too quickly, burning her tongue and throat in the process. Compared to the pain in her head, though, the discomfort was trivial.

"Hurry, Herald," the woman fretted. "I know you feel poorly, but you must come judge for us."

"Judge?" Danya croaked. "Ask Herald Kaylan."

The woman tugged at Danya's arms, trying to heave the Herald-Mage to her feet. "Can't. He's the one you must judge."

"What?!" Danya's shock beat back the pain for a heartbeat.

"Hurry." The woman pushed the Herald-Mage upright.

Danya winced as she tried to stand on her own and swayed dangerously under the force of the headache. She had not felt this bad since she had first ridden into Haven with Herald Yarik when she was still not in control of her Mind Gifts.

:I couldn't shield you and channel for the Adept at the same time,; Terrill apologized in a soft voice that rang like all the bells of Haven inside Danya's head.

:Don't!: the Herald-Mage begged. She tried to focus on the woman. "Which way?"

The woman curtsied and darted out of what Danya finally resolved into the guestroom.

The Herald-Mage did her best not to stagger as she followed her guide, but Danya suspected that she looked like someone who had just been on a three-day drinking binge.

The woman led her patient outside the house and into the village square.

Danya silently thanked Astera that night had fallen.

Light from hand-held torches illuminated the square.

Kaylan, his hands bound behind his back, stood between two burly villagers.

Potter Fahr, Kaylan's cloak clutched in his left hand, visibly fumed while his wife huddled, weeping, at his feet.

Danya almost asked Terrill what was going on, but then, remembering the pain in her head, decided against Mindspeech. She frowned at Potter Fahr. "What's going on?"

The potter stabbed an accusing finger toward Kaylan. "He raped my wife!"

Danya winced and fought the urge to shake her head, knowing that the action would not clear it. "That's nonsense," she protested before she remembered that she could not explain why. Telling these overly religious villagers that Kaylan was only attracted to men was not going to improve their situation.

Potter Fahr shook Kaylan's cloak under Danya's nose. "You call this nonsense? My wife grabbed it as he fled from her for fear of discovery."

"Let her cast a Truth Spell on me and on your wife!" Kaylan demanded. "Then you will see who is telling the truth."

"After that light show she put on atop our hill?!" a woman in the crowd exclaimed. "Anyone who can do what I saw could fake a Truth Spell."

"You won't take the word of a Herald?" Danya asked, baffled. She desperately wanted to know what their Companions were up to, but the pain in her head discouraged her from asking.

“No one is perfect,” Potter Fahr raged. “We are all capable of sin.” He turned on Kaylan, once again shaking the offending cloak. “I offered you my food and my home! And this is how you thank me! You must be castrated and flung out of the village for your offense!”

Zuleika sobbed more loudly.

Kaylan simply cocked his head expectantly at his partner.

Danya sighed, knowing that her headache was likely to go away sooner than this problem was unless she got more involved. “You,” she commanded the weeping woman. “Tell me what happened.”

Zuleika hiccupped and sniffled. “He took me back to the house like you said, but then he forced me into the root cellar and shut the door after us. Once we were alone, he attacked me. We heard his Companion whinny and the other women shouting outside. He thought they were coming for him and fled, but I managed to grab his cloak.”

Danya rubbed her temple, feeling the tea starting to work. She wished she had something to settle her stomach. She looked at Kaylan.

The handsome Herald shivered, visibly forcing himself to remain still.

Danya Felt the fear coming from her partner, but she was fairly certain that he was responding to the bonds around his wrists, which were probably bringing back terrifying memories for him of being captured by the Hardornans, rather than to anything Potter Fahr’s wife had said. “What happened?”

Kaylan glared at Zuleika. “I took her back to the house and put her in the root cellar because there were no windows and she could shut the door after me. I figured that if the locusts got past you, they might not be able to get to her there. I turned to go, and she grabbed my arm. She told me that her marriage contract specified that she must bear him a son before she could divorce him. She said that her husband expected her to conceive without his touching her and that she knew that was impossible. That’s why there are no children in the village. They all belong to the same cult of Kernos of the Northern Lights, one that believes that children are only worth

having if they can be conceived by a miracle. Our hostess begged me to mate with her. I refused, not only because I would not honor such a request anyway but also because I needed to get the other women to safety. When she realized I was going to leave, she asked for my cloak, saying that she was chilled in the cellar. I gave it to her, since I needed to move quickly to get the other women to safety and the cloak would only encumber me. I never dreamed—!“ He choked on the thought.

“See?” Potter Fahr howled. “He chokes on his own lie!”

Danya winced, knowing even without the Truth Spell that every word Kaylan had spoken was the truth and that every detail Zuleika offered that differed from his story was a lie. *How do I prove that, though?*

Kaylan perspired freely in the chill night air.

Danya could smell her partner’s fear. She knew he trusted her to free him. He was not going to flee anywhere until this matter was resolved. There was no need for him to be bound while they sorted it out. Knowing that she would only be aggravating her headache, she reached out her right hand and Fetched Kaylan’s bonds into them.

The crowd gasped and stepped back.

Danya clenched her teeth against the pain, silently thanking Kernos that Kaylan had the good sense to remain precisely where he was. “These are unnecessary.” She dropped the ropes on the ground at her feet. She shivered, suddenly chilled.

“Here,” Kaylan said. “You look cold.”

Danya’s cloak materialized at her feet.

The villagers squeaked and signed against Evil.

Danya blinked at her cloak, then looked to make sure that Kaylan’s cloak was still in Potter Fahr’s hand. She picked up her own garment slowly and shook it out, as if the action would make her thoughts fall into place. She wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and rounded on Zuleika. “You lie. Herald Kaylan left his cloak with you willingly, just as he said. If you had taken it from him by force, as you claim, he would have done precisely what he just did now and Fetched the garment out of your hands.”

Zuleika shook her head slowly and opened her mouth to lie, but no sound would come.

Potter Fahr looked from Danya to the cloak in his hand to Kaylan, then turned to face his wife. "Tell me again what happened," he demanded, "and this time tell the truth."

Zuleika trembled before her husband's wrath. "It's as he said!" she sobbed. She buried her face in her hands.

Potter Fahr threw Kaylan's cloak at him. "How dare you lie about such a thing?"

Despair made Zuleika reckless. She turned her tear-stained face up toward her husband. "Because he refused to touch me! Just as you refuse to touch me! How am I supposed to get pregnant when no man will touch me?"

"The Lord will grant you a son when you are worthy of such a gift," the potter declared.

"You spout more nonsense than the unholy Sun Priests of my homeland!" Zuleika spat. "All the prayers in the world will not get a woman pregnant unless she has contact with a man!"

"It would seem to me," Kaylan drawled as he calmly fastened his cloak around his neck, "that you have a choice. You may stay here and be clothed and fed and abide by your husband's religious beliefs, or you may leave him and find a way to clothe and feed and shelter yourself elsewhere."

Potter Fahr picked up the ropes that had bound Kaylan. "She knows what happens to liars."

The tone in the potter's voice made Danya fairly certain that she did not want to find out. She crouched beside Zuleika. "We are leaving. We will ride alongside you until you reach Berrybay if you go with us. After that, you are on your own."

"May I go, too?" another woman piped up.

"And I?" yet another chimed in.

Danya straightened at the chorus of requests. She glanced at her partner.

Kaylan nodded once.

Danya drew herself to her full height. "It is my judgment that your civil marriage contracts are void since they impose a restriction that cannot be met in any reasonable amount of

time by any ordinary means. Those who do not share your religious beliefs may not be bound by them. There is no one true way. We will see your women safely to Berrybay, if they are willing to leave at once.”

“They take nothing with them!” Potter Fahr snarled.

“They take themselves,” Danya smiled. “I think you’ll soon understand how much that is once they are gone.” She spotted Terrill and Adele at the edge of the crowd. “You have the surviving lambs for your children. Find them if you can.” She gripped Kaylan’s arm and steadied herself against him as he escorted her toward her Companion.

Kaylan Fetched their packs from their rooms, tied Danya’s on Terrill for her and strapped her into Terrill’s saddle. Then he fixed his own pack on Adele and swung into her saddle.

Zuleika dashed away her tears, rose to her feet and stared straight ahead as she began to walk along the road to Berrybay. Slowly, the other women of the village followed her.

“You take point.” Kaylan smiled sympathetically at Danya. “I’ll watch for danger while you get some sleep. Terrill can follow the road.”

Danya nodded and closed her eyes.

Terrill trotted to the front of the group of women, then settled into a slow walk that his charges could maintain through the night.

Danya sensed a mix of fear and relief in the women as they began their journey way from Pottersville. She also felt Kaylan’s tumble of emotions settle into understanding and grim satisfaction as he took up his position at the back of the group with Adele. Danya sighed and wondered if she had a prayer of convincing Kaylan to cut their Circuit short and ride for Haven rather than have her riding around like one of the Herald-Mages in Bard Kestran’s songs, scaring poor Valdemarans out of their wits. After all, she had convinced their beloved Yarik to make this same journey with her once before, when her Mind Gifts manifested and she was untrained. Perhaps Kaylan would agree that an untrained “Mage Gift”, as the Adept had called it, was equally dangerous and that she should return to Haven as soon as possible so

that her teachers at the Collegium could help her figure out what had happened to her. Yarik would, of course, be waiting for them in Haven as well. Danya hoped she was not letting her love for the Herald influence her judgment. Kaylan had been making such decisions far longer than she had. She would leave the choice up to him and abide by his wisdom.

Terrill snorted. *:Sleep, little mother. You are worrying too much. I will protect you. Always. You know the right choice in your heart.:*

Danya smiled and drifted to sleep, her dreams already setting them firmly on the road to Haven.