

They're Singing That Song!

By Linda A. Malcor

AKA

Herald-Mage Adept Danya Winterborn

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“He rode down Hill,” the Blues sang as one of them shoved Herald-Trainee Yarik Rafton in the rump with the arch of his boot.

Yarik sprawled forward onto the pavement, which was still damp from the evening rain. The rough surface scraped his palms and tore holes in the knees of his light grey treads. He tried to rise.

“Through Haven’s streets.”

Another Blue slammed his shoulder into Yarik’s ribs.

Yarik sat down hard in a puddle. Cold rainwater squirted up the back of his tunic and seeped through everything, including his smallclothes.

“Past many a glow’ring Companion” the song continued.

A Blue hauled Yarik to his feet only to bring his knee up sharply into his groin.

Yarik couldn’t concentrate enough to get his Mindspeech, or anything else, to work. Instincts formed by years of remaining limp while the pirates abused him aboard the ship on Lake Evendim had taken over and left him at the mercy of the bullies.

“And they did say that saw him go,” the boys chortled. A Blue caught Yarik’s jaw with a solid blow.

Yarik felt several of his top teeth loosen. His bottom teeth bit into his tongue, and blood filled his mouth.

Another Blue grabbed Yarik’s hand and spun him around.

“Herald Kaylan he is coming.” They twisted the last word suggestively. They formed a line as if they were playing a game of “Crack the Whip” and spun at a dizzying speed. The one holding Yarik’s hand abruptly let go.

Yarik flew off the end of the line. He crashed into one of the rose bushes in the Queen’s Garden.

A Companion skidded to a stop between him and his attackers. She reared on her hind legs, which made her look twice as large as she already was.

The Herald on her back wore a hooded White cloak that glistened in the moonlight. “Enough!” Kaylan Elderwood’s deep voice echoed off the Palace walls.

The Blues scabbled toward the Palace.

Kaylan’s booted feet hit the ground. “Adele! After them!” He threw back his hood as his Companion chased the fleeing Blues. Rain and sweat stuck his straight, blue-black hair, to his wind-burned cheeks and forehead. He knelt in the mud beside Yarik. “Don’t move,” he said softly.

Yarik had no intention of moving. The rose thorns had narrowly missed his dark brown eyes, but his mouth hurt too much for him

to worry about that. In all the years at Lake Evendim, the pirates had never once touched his face. The Captain had liked it that way. Yarik had liked it that way. He sucked air through his damaged teeth as blood dribbled down his chin. “Kay—?”

“I’m going to Fetch you out of there.”

Yarik didn’t think much of the idea, but he was in no position to argue. An instant later he was in Kaylan’s arms.

The clasp that fastened Kaylan’s cloak around his neck disappeared. The sodden garment fell to the ground.

:*Chosen?*: The worried voice of Yarik’s Companion, Illysha, whispered inside his aching head.

Yarik didn’t reply. There was no point. The voice was an illusion. He was caught in yet another nightmare, just like the ones he’d had every night since Kaylan had ridden out of Haven. A message needed to be delivered, and Yarik had assured everyone that he’d be fine for the se’nnight it would take for Kaylan to ride to Lord Olmsted’s manor and back. He hadn’t been “fine,” though. He’d spent every night clutching Kaylan’s pillow to his chest as he slept, and that had to be where he was now. In their bed. Alone. Having another nightmare. *But Kaylan’s scent is so strong, and nightmares don’t hurt this much.*

The chiming of silver hooves sounded on the cobblestones somewhere nearby. *:It’s not a nightmare, Chosen. Your Beloved really is here. He has you. You’re safe.:*

Yarik tried to laugh. A gurgling sound came out instead.

“I’m taking him to the Healers’!” Kaylan called, cradling Yarik as he rose and stepped away from his cloak. “Help Adele!”

:I’ll find you as soon as we catch those brutes,: Illysha’s voice promised as the bell-like sound of her hooves quickly retreated from them.

Kaylan carried Yarik toward the House of Healing, leaving his cloak behind like a coldrake’s cast-off skin. “You’re safe,” he said, unknowingly echoing Illysha’s words.

Yarik didn’t feel safe. A cacophony of bedlam surrounded him. Shouts, pounding boots and hooves, slamming doors—everything exploded into colored shadows in the moonlight. Dark grey. Light grey. Dark blue. Light blue. Scarlet. Russet. Light green. Emerald green. White. Lots of white. *How can shadows be white?*

Kaylan eased Yarik onto something that felt like a stretcher.

Hands turned him onto his side so the blood could flow out of his mouth and onto a towel someone had placed beside his head.

“Stay you here!” a man’s voice commanded. “Take care him of! We will his attackers catch!”

“Kay—“ Yarik couldn’t get the rest of the name past his swelling lip. He held out his hand in what he hoped was Kaylan’s direction.

Warm, familiar fingers gripped his. “I’m right here, little pirate. I’m not going anywhere.”

But I am, Yarik thought as the stretcher whisked him across the courtyard, Kaylan trotting at his side.

* * *

Chair legs scraped across tiled floor. Kaylan, uncertain whether he'd moved the chair with his Fetching or his hands, sat down, never taking his eyes off Yarik's too-pale and bruising face. A dark-haired boy dressed in light green had shoved a towel at him while a grey-haired woman in an emerald green robe worked on Yarik. Kaylan had toweled off his hair, wiped his face and tried to sponge the congealed blood from the front of his White uniform. He'd only managed to smear it more. He'd wiped his hands as clean as he could and tossed the towel aside. A redheaded girl had handed him a jar of salve made from aloe. He'd absently applied the ointment to his face as he watched a Healer reset Yarik's teeth. Healer Trainees had stripped his partner, cared for his other injuries, and tucked his naked body under a warm blanket before leaving them alone. The willowbark tea he'd downed hadn't kicked in yet, and he hoped no one had noticed the reaction headache that was creeping up on him. He knew he shouldn't have Fetched Yarik out of the rose bush, but the prospect of doing more damage to him by trying to pull him out by hand was more than he could contemplate. He studied the scratches on Yarik's face. The thorns came so close to his eyes! He gently took his hand. "I'm sorry."

Yarik cleared his throat experimentally. "If you're apologizing for rescuing me," he said in a surprisingly clear voice, "I'll have Illysha tell Adele to hit you on the head as soon as she's within striking distance." He raised his lids just enough to peer at Kaylan.

Kaylan gave a small laugh, more from relief than at the weak joke. *The Healer did a better job on his tongue than I thought. I guess she realized he needed to talk with me, and we can't do that through Mindspeech.* "I was apologizing for drinking the willowbark tea I'm pretty sure they intended for you."

“There’s more where that came from,” Yarik said, letting his eyes fall shut again. “Fetch me a cup when you get a chance.”

“I think I’ve done about all the Fetching I can handle for one day.” Kaylan kissed Yarik’s fingers then laid his rough cheek against them.

Yarik ran his thumb along the stubble beneath Kaylan’s nose. “You need to shave.”

“And take a bath. And change into something . . . cleaner. And file my report. Oh, and I need to eat.” Kaylan nibbled at Yarik’s thumb.

Humor sparkled briefly in Yarik’s doe-like eyes as he opened them again. He pulled his hand out of Kaylan’s grip and fingered the silver arrow on his blood-stained uniform. “Rough ride?”

“Slept in the saddle,” Kaylan admitted. “Looks as if it’s a good thing I arrived when I did. A league or so out, I suddenly felt a desperate need to get back to you. Adele practically flew here. I think the Guard at the Privy Gate is still wondering what flashed past him. You feeling up to asking Illysha if they caught those thugs?”

Yarik’s gaze grew distant for a few heartbeats. He smiled at something his Companion said, then his eyes widened. “Adele, Illysha and some of the other Companions have them trapped in a hallway. Herald Keren, Dean Elcarth, Weaponsmaster Alberich—” He half sat up. “The Queen’s Own?” His shoulders abruptly sagged. “They’ll come for me next.”

“Why? I didn’t see what happened.” Kaylan unnecessarily adjusted Yarik’s blanket as he laid back down.

Yarik blushed. “While you were away, some first-year Bardic student took it into her head to write a ballad about you rescuing Tandi at the Snow Fox. Some poor word choices made it sound as if you . . . well, let’s just say I objected to those Blues singing it. And they objected to me objecting.”

Kaylan rubbed his right temple, wishing his headache would abate. “Where was Illysha?”

Yarik’s blush deepened. “Far out in the Companions’ Field, uh, enjoying the company of a young stallion, Terrill. She’d blocked me, but I couldn’t have called her anyway. The instant those Blues started pounding on me I completely forgot how to use my Mindspeech. It was like being back on the ship with the pirates.” He looked around the sterile room, a depressed expression gathering on his face. “Do you think I’m stuck here for the night, or will they let you take me back to our rooms?”

“You’ll probably turn some pretty colors for a few days, but the worst of the damage looks like it’s fixed. Feel any injuries I can’t see?”

“Just an ache in my chest at the thought that someone is going to take you away from me,” Yarik quipped, but his voice didn’t hold any humor.

Kaylan combed his fingers through Yarik’s curly, golden-brown hair. “I got back early. I’ll think they’ll let me stay for a couple of days.”

Yarik fingered the silver arrow on Kaylan’s uniform once more. “That’s all? I didn’t think they’d send you out again so soon.”

Kaylan reclaimed Yarik's hand. "They need me to ride, and we can't be sent out together until you finish your studies and do your Intern year. That's at least three more years from now. Maybe four."

"They won't let you be my mentor?" Yarik asked, alarm ringing in his voice as surely as the Death Bell tolled when a Herald died.

"No. I'm asking for one of my cousins to do it. Maybe Jorge. You know him, and he should be well enough by then."

Yarik began to tremble. "What if they extend my training by shipping me off somewhere for a year or two as punishment for what happened tonight? I've overheard some Trainees being threatened with that when they got in trouble. We couldn't keep in touch! You couldn't even visit me!" His eyes grew unfocussed as he listened to a voice Kaylan couldn't hear. "Illysha wants you to open the window."

Kaylan performed a rather impressive, though awkward, stretch so he could unlatch the window, raise the sash and throw open the shutters without pulling his hand away from Yarik.

Illysha thrust her head as far into the room as she could and regarded Yarik earnestly.

"Is Illysha angry with you?" Kaylan asked more calmly than he felt.

Yarik gave his head a slight shake. "No. The parents of those Blues are."

Kaylan arched his eyebrow. "Angrier than the Seneschal is about Companions charging up and down the Palace halls?"

Yarik snickered. “I wish I’d thought to watch that with my FarSight.” He sobered. “It might have made being punished easier.”

Illysha snorted.

“You’re right,” Yarik agreed to whatever her comment had been. He caught the look in Kaylan’s eyes and elaborated. “She says they’ll probably just chew me out and decide that being beat up is punishment enough. Maybe a few extra chor—”

The door clicked open and closed again.

A moment later a slender but far from frail woman, dressed in emerald green robes, perched on the far side of the bed.

“Ah, the redoubtable Master Paige!” Kaylan had met the Mindhealer when she’d talked him through some recurring nightmares after the battle in which King Sendar had fallen. A Trainee who’d been rushed into Whites, he’d been ordered to put his Fetching behind arrows launched at the Tedrels. He’d obeyed even though the action had made his soul crawl. Dozens of Tedrels had died because of his Gift, deaths that he even now wasn’t certain those particular soldiers deserved. He still didn’t much like picking up a bow, which had been his best weapon. But he was functional again, and that was what mattered. He hoped she could help Yarik the way she’d helped him

Paige winked at Kaylan, nodded a proper greeting to Ilysha, and turned her attention to her patient. She had high cheekbones and a straight nose that spoke of noble blood. The rosy tinge on her cheeks and lips had been placed there by nature rather than face paint. She was older than Kaylan, but age had not yet lined her face—except for traces at the corners of her mouth and eyes that

suggested she laughed a lot. Her slate blue, superbly intelligent eyes shone with a wisdom beyond her years. Her hair was gathered into a neat bun at the back of her head, a style that would have made her look very prudish if strands hadn't been escaping from it at random, giving her the matronly look of someone who, until moments before, had been hard at work scrubbing floors.

“What makes you think I haven't?” Amusement sparkled in her voice as she responded to something Yarik had said via Mindspeech.

Kaylan wondered briefly if the day would ever come when he wouldn't be jealous of those who had that Gift. As Paige had often pointed out to him, there were many others who were equally jealous of his Fetching Gift, particularly of its strength. That didn't stop him from feeling left out of the conversation when Mindspeakers were around. Apparently, he failed to keep his emotions as secret as he thought he did.

Paige flashed him a sympathetic look.

Damned Empath, Kaylan grumbled silently.

Paige crinkled her nose at Yarik. “A little Herald told me that his Companion told him that another Companion told her that another Companion told her that you're having a problem. Care to enlighten me before I get lost in a sea of pronouns and start calling everyone 'it'?”

Yarik eyed the Mindhealer a bit like a deer staring at a starving *kyree* even though she would have been hard put to look less threatening than she already did. He nearly fell off the bed as he tried to retreat onto Kaylan's lap.

Paige raised an eyebrow. “As much as I know you want to, I’m afraid you can’t actually climb inside his skin. He appears to be using it.”

Kaylan gently eased Yarik back onto the bed, shifting over to sit beside him. “You missed your calling, my dear Paige! They would have paid you a fortune to tell jokes on stage down at the Snow Fox!”

Paige favored Kaylan with a sly grin. “You apparently missed your calling as well. Your cousins tell me you were the best stable boy the Elderwoods ever bred. Why, I hear you could Fetch the manure all the way to whichever farmer’s field was in need of it. The Stallions were heartbroken when a mere mare whisked you away from them!”

Kaylan guffawed.

A slight smile formed on Yarik’s lips. “Illysha says you’d better not let Adele hear you say that,”

Paige took Yarik’s hand. “There. You see? Nothing scary in the immediate vicinity—except what’s inside your head. Now what would that be?”

Yarik lowered his eyes.

Paige tried again. “What don’t we know about that struck a chord in you tonight?”

Yarik remained silent.

“That song?” Paige suggested.

Yarik gaped at her.

Paige smiled. "I'll take that as a 'yes.' Why did it make you think your world was coming to an end?"

Yarik bit on his swollen lip.

Illysha apparently said something because Yarik abruptly pulled his hand away from Paige, curled against Kaylan and broke into tears. "I started . . . the fight!"

Paige arched her eyebrow. "And how, exactly, did you do that?"

"I told them . . . to stop singing . . . that song!" Yarik sobbed.

"And you backed up your perfectly reasonable request with your fists?" Paige asked.

"No!" Yarik sniffled and angrily wiped the tears from his face. "They started shoving me around, and I—I just went limp and sent my mind elsewhere like I used to do when the pirates . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Ah!" Kaylan said as things suddenly started to make sense. "That's why I felt an urgent need to get back to you!"

"Why wouldn't someone with your background freeze?" Paige asked, ignoring Kaylan.

"I'll never finish my training until that stops!" Yarik roared. "I can't go out with Kaylan until I'm in Whites, and he can't stay here. He has no Mindspeech, so we can't keep in touch that way. I—" The rest of his words were lost as he buried his face against Kaylan's breast.

Illysha gave Kaylan a pleading look.

Kaylan wrapped his arms securely around Yarik and leaned his cheek against his head. "I'm not going anywhere right now."

"Not until we get you sorted, he won't." Paige concurred. She rose. "I'm told your boots survived, and someone's working on cleaning them. I'll send for a new uniform for you and a clean one for Kaylan. He can help you dress and get you back to your room. Once there, I want him to brew you the packet of tea I'm going to give him. Drink as much of it as you can, and then sleep. I'll get you out of your classes for the next couple of days so you can spend that time together. Okay?"

Yarik, who'd calmed down a bit during her mundane instructions, dried his eyes on Kaylan's sleeve. "Okay."

Paige gave an authoritative nod and left as efficiently as she'd arrived.

* * *

Yarik hesitated outside his door. Adele had found a groom to tend to her so Kaylan could stay with him. Only Dean Elcarth had come to question him about the fight, and that hadn't gone too badly. Punishment chores until Midwinter and a warning not to take on bullies by himself. They'd used the Healers' bathing room to wash up. Kaylan had shaved and then helped Yarik dress in borrowed Greys before donning one of the dark grey uniforms he wore when teaching at the Collegium. Master Paige had handed Kaylan a packet of tea and released Yarik into his care. Illysha had met them and carried Yarik over to the dorm with Kaylan walking beside him and steadying him on her back. But now they were at the door to

his room, and he was afraid to open it. *What if he doesn't like what I've done?*

:Don't worry, Chosen!: Illysha's voice reassured him from wherever she'd gotten off to. *:You've worked so hard. I'm sure he'll love it.:*

"Here. Let me get it." Kaylan opened the door, ushered Yarik inside, and closed the door quickly behind them.

Yarik limped across the darkened room and turned up the flame on the lantern on his foot chest, which now resided to the left of the curtained window. His wardrobe still stood against the wall beside the door, but the rest of the room had undergone a transformation. He'd pushed Kaylan's bed beside his and shear-lashed the legs together to keep them from pulling apart. He'd cross-stitched the sheets into something like a sail so they'd fit across the mattresses, and Kaylan's bright blue comforter lay atop them. Both of their pillows were arranged neatly at the head.

Kaylan regarded the room with a puzzled look on his face. "Where's the rest of the furniture?"

Yarik made his way over to the secret door that connected their rooms. He entered Kaylan's part of the suite, crossed to the fireplace and stoked the carefully banked fire. He straightened and risked a look at Kaylan, who still stood in the doorway.

Kaylan's wardrobe remained beside the hallway door, but his foot chest now served as a bench against the wall opposite the fireplace. Shelves with Yarik's school books stood next to it. Their desks faced each other under the window so they could take advantage of the light while they worked during the day. He'd moved Kaylan's dark blue upholstered armchair in front of the wardrobe, creating a circle of seating options for guests.

As if we could possibly have any guests, Yarik thought miserably.

“I love it,” Kaylan said in an uncertain voice as he stepped into the center of the magnificent blue rug that covered his wooden floor.

“But?” Yarik prompted.

Kaylan scratched his ear. “Isn’t this going to be a little awkward to explain when someone inspects your room to see if you’re keeping it tidy?”

Yarik jutted out his chin. “Someone has already been in your room to get your uniform, and no one asked where your bed was.”

Kaylan rubbed his temple. “But why change everything around?”

“You haven’t heard that song yet.” Yarik sank into the armchair and stared at the fire. “I figured there was no point pretending anymore when half the students in the Collegium are humming that vile thing behind our backs.”

Kaylan spread his hands, gesturing at the room. “You do realize that this is twice the space that Herald Keren has.”

“It’s not as if I’m taking up more room in the dorm or you are occupying more space in the Heralds’ Wing!” Yarik argued. “We just happen to live next to each other!”

“You’re right,” Kaylan soothed. He surveyed the sitting room again. “It must’ve taken you quite a while to do all this. Maybe I can help you shift my wardrobe into the bedroom once you get feeling better. We can use the foot chest in here to store clothes from the wrong season. Which desk is mine?”

Yarik pointed at the one furthest from the fire. “I left everything just like you had it. I only changed the desk’s position,” he said petulantly.

Kaylan tousled Yarik’s hair. “No need to be so defensive, little pirate! I just need to write out my report. As soon as I finish, we can take advantage of that beautiful bed you’ve created.” He used a rush to transfer flame from the fireplace to the oil lamp on his desk, then carefully extinguished the twig and returned it to its holder. He placed the tea packet on Yarik’s desk, sat in his own chair and angled a piece of parchment in front of him. He picked up his quill, dipped it in the jar of ink, and carefully started penning his report.

Yarik watched him work through half-lidded eyes. He felt nauseous, and he ached all over. *It’s going to be worse in the morning.* It always was. He’d been beaten enough times by the pirates to know that. He desperately wanted to crawl into their bed and fall asleep, but he was terrified that Kaylan would disappear if he did.

Kaylan finished, dusted the sheet to set the ink, carried the report across the room, opened his door, and handed the parchment to a page who was waiting outside. He returned with a pot of hot water and two teacups. He set his treasures on his desk and brewed the tea. He filled one cup, carried it over to Yarik and watched him drink it. He returned the cup to the desk. “Come on, little pirate. Curling up under a comforter with you is going to warm me up more than any cup of tea.” Kaylan helped him to his feet.

Yarik allowed himself a smile. *Well, if this is a dream, it’s one I hope I don’t wake up from until Kaylan’s back—even if I do feel like I’ve been keelhauled.* He leaned against Kaylan and let himself be guided into the bedroom they finally shared.

* * *

“He’s asleep. I don’t know how long he’ll stay that way, though. He’s an emotional wreck.” Kaylan, once more in his dark grey uniform, sat on one end of a brown leather sofa, staring suspiciously at the clear, odorless liquid in the crystal glass Paige had handed him. *She must know I have a splitting headache. Did she put anything in it?* His stomach had growled audibly upon his arrival, which immediately sent Paige in search of food and drink. She’d returned with a small platter of fruit, bread and cheese, two glasses, and a decanter filled with something that looked like water. He’d devoured the food, wondering if she had the slightest idea how long it had been since he’d eaten something he could actually call a “meal.” There’s a reason Heralds are so thin.

“It should be for at least a few candlemarks. I added some Valerian root to the tea,” Paige confessed. “I hope you didn’t sample any of it.”

“I figured you’d do something like that, so I stayed clear.”

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt you to dink some of it when you get back. You look like something a Plains Cat dragged in.”

They were in her quarters, which were about as sterile as one of the sickrooms. The neatly-made bed was covered with an air castle-pattern quilt in shades of green. A mahogany chest sat at its foot, and a matching wardrobe stood against the wall. A desk, spotless save for the now crumb-covered tray and partially empty decanter, and a utilitarian chair were centered beneath a window shuttered against the chill night air. A candle marked to show the time gave off a slight lavender scent as it burned steadily atop a shallow dish. A fire glowed behind the glass insert in the front of her immaculate

wood-burning stove. Someone had methodically stacked wood in the box beside it.

“I suppose I do.” Kaylan sipped at his drink and raised an eyebrow when he discovered it was alcohol.

Paige grinned from where she sat almost primly in her desk chair. “We use it as a base for some of our concoctions. You looked as if you needed a drink, but I didn’t think you should return to Yarik smelling like ale. He might think you’d gone out on the town without him.”

“I don’t think I’m going much of anywhere without him anytime soon.” Kaylan lounged against the cushioned back of the sofa and took a larger swallow. “It’s so much worse than we thought. If I could have just gotten through this assignment without anything bad happening to him—“

“But you didn’t,” Paige said.

Always observing the obvious! Kaylan sighed. “Moons of work getting him to have confidence in himself, and those bullies destroy everything in mere heartbeats.” He swirled the liquid slowly in his glass, studying the patterns created by the faceted crystal in the firelight. “Now what?”

Paige sampled her drink. “We start over. Do you remember what to do?”

Kaylan rolled his eyes. “How could I forget? Small, normal errands: going to look for a cloak I’ve accidentally left somewhere that I can’t remember so I can’t Fetch it, running for snacks or tea, pretending to forget where I put a curry comb when I groom Adele. Gradually decrease the time between errands and increase the time I spend on

them—He’s going to expect me to use Fetching on most of that stuff now that he knows what I can do.”

Paige nodded. “So, you need to get more creative. Start tutoring him again. You’re helping him to get through his studies faster, only you have to search for things while he keeps reading or writing. You need Myste’s help finding a specific book. There’s not enough pumice to scrape writing from palimpsests for him to work on. Become as thirsty as if you’ve been out in the Dorisha Plains for a se’ennight to explain why you keep leaving to refill the water pitcher and visit the bathing room. Certainly, you can figure out how to Fetch things away when he isn’t looking so you have an excuse to go after them.”

“He’s frightened, not stupid,” Kaylan reminded her. “I might get away with that stuff once or twice, but he’s eventually going to figure out what I’m doing, and he’s going to want to know why.”

Paige silently conceded the point. “I’ll talk to Alberich about doing extra weapons work with him, teaching him how not to freeze. Kris can work with him on his Mindspeech so he can use it under duress. By the Crone’s crooked teeth, I wish we could get him to make some friends!”

Kaylan finished his drink and poured himself another one.

“Be careful with that,” Paige cautioned. “It’s stronger than you think.”

Kaylan accepted the warning with a toast. “I can barely get him to order his own food when I take him to the Snow Fox. He answers teachers and classmates when spoken to, but he doesn’t start any conversations unless Illysha insists he translate for her. I’m

stunned he said anything to those Blues about that song. Is it really that bad? I still haven't heard it."

A wicked gleam shone in Paige's eyes. "You'll never forget it once you do. I'm surprised Yarik didn't snap over it sooner. It truly is awful. Bardic should take that student's mandolin away and insist that she learn to play the flute or something else that doesn't require words!" She stared over his head at what he knew was a perfectly blank wall. "You two go to the Snow Fox a lot. Is there anyone down there we could get him to spend time with—without you?"

Kaylan considered the question carefully. "There's Tandi, the girl I saved. Illysha really likes her. Yarik thinks she has some sort of Gift for working with horses. Or at least with Companions."

"Is she needed at the tavern all day or could she spend the afternoons up here? Yarik could go get her and take her back at suppertime."

Kaylan's mouth fell open. "He'll talk with her coming and going. She loves Illysha, and she's very sweet. How could they not become friends?" He drained his glass and set it beside the decanter. "My dear Paige, you're a genius! I should find a Bardic student to write a song about you!" He scrambled to his feet and fled from the room before she could find something unbreakable to throw at him. He grinned as he loped back to the Herald's Wing. It felt good to be back among friends. He wished for the day Yarik would know that feeling as well.

* * *

Yarik sat with his back against the wall at his favorite table in the Snow Fox, barely touching his vulpine noodles and white cheese sauce. His face was still bruised and scratched, and a haunted look clouded his dark brown eyes. He hadn't felt like leaving their suite, but Kaylan wanted to go out, so he came with him. He'd found himself cleaning bathing rooms and polishing candle sconces in addition to his usual chores in the laundry. It reminded him far too much of life on the ship, but it would only be until Midwinter. It could have been for a year.

Kaylan sat beside rather than across from him so they could both see the stage. Having finished his meal, he was nursing a mug of mulled cider.

The entertainers had been swapping out all night, with some acts proving to be better than others. A young man in the rust-colored tunic of a Bardic trainee replaced a juggler who'd had trouble catching brightly colored balls and talking at the same time, whether by accident or on purpose Yarik couldn't tell. The result had been a great deal of laughter, and the man had received a decent amount of tips as he left the stage. The Bardic student tuned his mandolin and surveyed the crowd. He flashed a wicked grin in their direction. "We have a special guest tonight!" the student proclaimed. "The inspiration for one of the most popular ballads at Bardic these days. Herald Kaylan!"

Yarik gripped Kaylan's thigh beneath the table. "Oh, no . . ."

Without pausing to strike an opening chord, the trainee launched into his song, twisting each possibly suggestive word as he came to it.

One afternoon Herald Kaylan came in

Inquiring for his Lady.

"With no tack on head nor back

We'll ride forth on Companions."

"Dance on air with me, my bonny white steed.

Show the Greys how fast we can fly.

I'll ride all day and I'll ride all night

"Til I catch that evil bad guy."

He rode down the Hill and through Haven's streets

Past many a glow'ring Companion

And they did say that saw him go,

"Herald Kaylan he is coming."

He rode east and he rode west

All in and out of pine groves

Until he jumped the Terilee,

Cold and wet and mighty.

Why did you leave the Collegium?

Why did you pass the Blue Guards?

Was it a lark to cross the park?

Hey, here comes Herald Kaylan!

He rode down the Hill and through Haven's streets
Past many a glow'ring Companion
And they did say that saw him go,
"Herald Kaylan he is coming."

Watch out for that goose feather bed
Along with sheets of linen!
Pots, jewels and cloth, toys, manure, and broth
All fly from Herald Kaylan!

His mare kicks in the tack room door
While he from hay arises.
After a brawl he lands on a minstrel's hands
And saves a fair young lassie.

He rode down the Hill and through Haven's streets
Past many a glow'ring Companion
And they did say that saw him go,
"Herald Kaylan he is coming."

By the last line everyone in the room was bellowing along with the trainee, and Yarik's face had turned as red at the beetroot soup,

garnished with heavy cream and blue basil, that Kaylan had just consumed.

“I warned you it was horrible,” Yarik whispered.

Stone-faced, Kaylan rose, set his mug down on the table, and dropped a handful of coins next to it without counting them. He wove his way through the crowd.

“Kaylan!” Yarik followed hard on his heels.

As soon as Kaylan was in the shadows on the other side of the courtyard, he bent over, his hands on his thighs, his shoulders shuddering.

Yarik placed his hand on his back. “Are you okay?”

Kaylan straightened enough so Yarik could see that he was laughing. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. “Did one of my cousins pay someone to write that? Who was it? Jay? Bae? Rai?”

Yarik frowned. “You aren’t upset?”

“Of course, I’m upset! That’s the point!” Kaylan straightened and rapped Yarik atop the head the way Adele was wont to do with him when he was being particularly thick. “It’s a joke, little pirate! That song’s too awful for anyone to have composed it by accident!”

“A joke?” Understanding settled into the pit of Yarik’s stomach like a stone. His eyes grew wide. “I got beat up, risked being separated from you, and have extra chores until Midwinter all because I couldn’t figure out something was a joke?” Before Kaylan could reply he took off toward the stable.

“Yarik!” Kaylan yelled as he chased after him.

Yarik burst into the box stall reserved for Companions, scattering children in all directions. He wanted to be away from there as fast

as possible. He grabbed Illysha's saddle from where it hung on a rack and tried to fling it onto her.

Illysha shouldered the saddle aside and promptly lay down. She rolled onto her back and stuck all four of her legs in the air like a dog playing dead.

"Get up!" Yarik roared.

Adele blocked the entrance to the stall, either to keep Yarik in or the children out. Or both.

Kaylan barreled into the stable. "Yarik!"

Yarik kicked at Illysha. "Get up!"

Kaylan ducked under Adele's neck and grabbed Yarik from behind. "Stop it! That's your Companion!"

Yarik dropped the saddle and struggled to free himself. "I can't do anything right! I'm dumber than dirt! I can't figure out what to do with myself when I'm alone because someone's always been telling me what to do! I didn't ask before changing our rooms around because I never thought anyone except you would notice! And now I hardly have any time to spend alone with you because I don't know a joke when I hear one!"

Illysha rolled to her side and got to her feet. She thrust her nose at him. *:Chosen.:*

Yarik pushed her away. "I shouldn't have lived! The pirates should have killed me along with everyone else!"

"That's enough!" Kaylan hefted Yarik over his shoulder.

Adele stepped aside and let Kaylan pass with his burden.

Yarik banged on Kaylan's back with his fists as he carried him out into the courtyard. "Put me down!"

“Gladly!”

Yarik gasped as Kaylan dumped him in the water trough beside the stable. He stared at the icy water that surrounded him, unable to comprehend what it was. He’d suffered such treatment a thousand times, but he’d never expected to experience it at Kaylan’s hands.

Adele and Illysha emerged from the stable, standing shoulder to shoulder.

“Are you quite through?” Kaylan demanded.

Yarik blinked up at Kaylan’s impassive face.

Kaylan put his fists on his hips. “Well?”

Fury replaced his shock. Yarik clambered out of the trough and rounded on Kaylan. “Why did you do that?”

Kaylan picked him up and deposited him in the trough again.

Yarik spluttered. “Why?” He scrambled out of the water again. “I hate you!”

Kaylan flung him back into the trough yet again.

Yarik hadn’t felt Kaylan’s physical touch that time, and he suspected he’d used his Fetching without thinking about it. He only does that when he’s really, really upset. He got to his feet more cautiously this time and stepped meekly out of the trough. He stood shivering in the crisp night air as he waited for Kaylan to explain.

Kaylan rocked back slightly on his heels. “That’s better. Now apologize to Illysha.”

:Chosen, you don’t nee–:

“I’m sorry, Illysha,” Yarik apologized, not really understanding what he was apologizing for. He just didn’t want to make Kaylan any angrier than he already was.

Illysha stepped forward and bumped him in his chest with her nose. *:You were just lashing out at anything within striking distance. I forgive you. Anyone can have a bad day, and you’ve had a bad se’ennight.:*

Yarik hugged her neck. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I didn’t know what I was doing. I—“

:Hush, Chosen.: Illysha bent her head around him in something resembling a hug. She uncoiled and shoved him toward Kaylan.

Yarik stumbled to a stop, folded his arms across his chest and stared at the ground. “I wasn’t trying to hurt her. I was trying to run away, and she wouldn’t help me because everyone I need is right here.”

Kaylan cocked his head in the way that always made Yarik’s heart flop. “Run away?”

Adele stepped forward and struck Kaylan on the top of his head with her nose.

“Ow!” Kaylan frowned at his mare. “What was that for?”

Adele glared at him.

Kaylan’s mouth fell open, and he gaped at Yarik. “Oh, little pirate! I’m sorry! I’m no better than those bullies!”

Yarik rushed forward and embraced him. “Yes, you are. You acted out of love, not hate. I needed someone to bring me to my senses.”

Kaylan wrapped his arms around Yarik. “That’s no excuse. I’m sorry.”

A girl dressed in a homespun shirt and woolen vest with matching trousers stepped out from behind Adele. The cap of a stable boy crowned her shock of brown curls, and the muck-covered shoes of a stable boy protected her feet. She held out a warm, dry horse blanket. "Here."

Yarik recognized Tandi's voice. Gone was the playful child she'd been when he'd first met her. "Thanks," he said in a gruff voice. He took the blanket from her, and Kaylan helped him wrap himself in it. "I'm sorry," he apologized to her. *I wonder if she's ever seen Heralds quarrel before.* "I'm having a bad day."

"You, little pirate, are having a bad se'nnight," Kaylan said, unknowingly echoing Illysha's words. He guided Yarik back into the stable. "You aren't the first Herald to come to the Collegium from a horrid background, and you won't be the last. No one is expecting you to be perfect. I love the rooms. And I won't let anyone take me away from you until you're ready. Neither will Illysha, Adele nor Paige." He waited for Illysha to join them in the box stall, then set about saddling her for Yarik. "I'm rather flattered that you tried to stand up for my honor. I don't want you to try that on your own again, though. If I'm not around, talk with Dean Elcarth or a teacher or one of my cousins or Master Paige. I truly prefer to find you in one piece when I get back from wherever I've gone off to—even if it's just to the latrine." He winked.

Yarik blushed.

"Come here." Kaylan wrapped him firmly in his arms again. "We're partners. I love you. We'll get you sorted. I promise."

Yarik returned the hug, placing his ear against Kaylan's chest so he could listen to his heart beat.

Tandi snuck into the stall with Illysha's bridle and slid it onto her.

Adele, already saddled and bridled, followed her into the stall. She nickered at Illysha.

For a moment, as Yarik looked at the Companions, he thought he saw Illysha as a young woman, dressed in old-fashioned Whites, who looked enough like Kaylan to be one of his cousins. Beside her was another Herald, in similar Whites, her short blonde curls perfectly suited to her sassy stance. The image quickly faded, leaving the Companions staring back at him, Illysha staid and patient, and Adele coming as close to grinning as any equine could. He belatedly noticed that the children had yet again braided the mares' manes and tails in complicated patterns.

Tandi started to leave the stall.

"Thank you, Tandi," Yarik said.

Tandi stared at the worn toes of her leather shoes. "It's no trouble. I love taking care of them."

Illysha stomped her foot. *:Can I keep her?:*

Yarik chuckled. "I'm pretty sure she's needed here."

Kalan narrowed his eyes. "I don't know what Illysha said, but if she asked if Tandi could come up to the Collegium in the afternoons to help around the stables, I'm pretty sure we can work something out—as long as she's back here in time to help with the dinner crowd."

Tandi blinked at Kaylan. "Really?"

Kaylan nodded. "I'll set it up. Maybe Yarik can trade his current extra chores for shuttling you back and forth to the Palace. Would you like that?"

"Very much!" Tandi crowed, doing her best not to bounce. And failing.

“So would I!” Yarik said a little too fervently.

Kaylan laughed. “Stay here. I’ll get our cloaks. Tandi, come with me. Let’s settle this right now.” He strode off, Tandi in tow.

“You could just Fetch them!” Yarik called after him.

“I’ve done enough Fetching for one day!” Kaylan shouted back as they vanished into the tavern.

Illysha and Adele pressed close to Yarik, warming him with their body heat.

Yarik scratched behind Illysha’s ear. “I’m going to get you wet on the way home.”

:You can make it up to me with a warm mash. Then I want you to find a hot bath and take a long soak. Maybe Kaylan can join you.:

Yarik sighed. “Not in public.”

The tavern door banged shut. Kaylan, carrying their cloaks, danced across the courtyard, singing softly to himself, “Herald Kaylan he is coming!”

“Come faster, will you? I’m freezing!” Yarik called, only half in jest.

Kaylan laughed and trotted into the stable. He tossed his dark grey woolen cloak over Illysha’s neck, saddle and back. “No need for m’lady to get wet just because your Chosen needed to cool off.”

Illysha’s eyes twinkled. *:Tell him “Thank you.”:*

“She says ‘Thank you,’” Yarik dutifully repeated.

Kaylan gave her a bow, then wrapped Yarik in his light grey cloak. He hefted him onto Illysha’s back. “Hold on!”

Yarik quickly gave up trying to find Illysha’s reins and gripped her saddle bow as tightly as he could with the woolen cloth in the way.

Kaylan swung into Adele's saddle.

Adele took off almost before Kaylan's feet were in the stirrups.

Illysha charged after her.

Yarik noted the disapproving looks from people on the street as they hurtled by. *:He really needs to stop doing this. Someone is going to complain to the Watch.:*

:And what are they going to say?: Illysha asked. *:That an Arrow of the Queen rides too fast?:*

:Maybe he'd slow down if I threatened to find that Bardic student and have her write another song about him.:

In reply to something Illysha said, Adele dropped back beside her. The two mares fell into step and pranced toward the Collegium as their two Heralds shrugged and regarded each other with identical twinkles in their eyes.