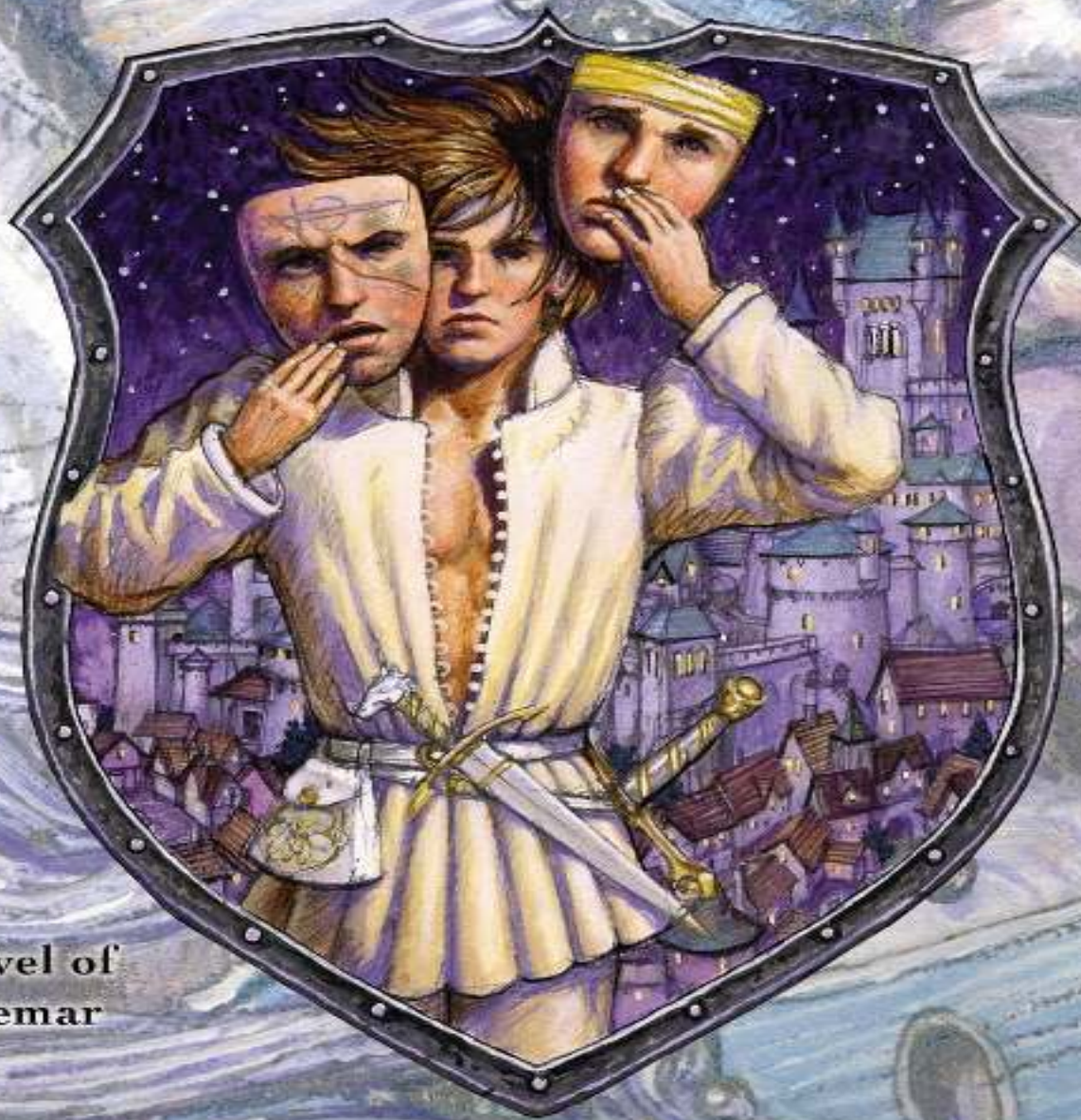


# MERCEDES LACKEY



A Novel of  
Valdemar

## CLOSER TO HOME

Book One of *The Herald Spy*

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# CLOSER TO HOME

THE HERALD SPY  
BOOK ONE

MERCEDES LACKEY



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*Dedicated to the memory of Shirley Dixon,  
the best mother-in-law on the planet.*

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# 1

The crow skimming the treetops with his mate cast an avid eye down to the ground below, looking for one last opportunity for a meal before taking to the branches for the night. It was about an hour to sunset, and although it was getting into autumn, the days here in the heart of Valdemar were still warm and the nights only pleasantly cool. Today had been perfect haying weather, cloudless, dry, and clear, and tonight was going to bring more of the same conditions. The crow approved of haying; it scared a lot of large and tasty insects and even rodents out where they were easy prey for a clever bird. It was certainly good weather for camping, which, it appeared, the owners of a most peculiar caravan were doing. The crow approved of camping, too, and headed in their direction. Caravans needed to be approached with caution, but sometimes there was food. Unwary toddlers could have their rusks snatched. There might be scraps or offal. Rarely, someone who appreciated crows might offer food freely!

*Amily chuckled at the crow's thoughts. She was enjoying riding along in his mind; it was purely a one-way excursion, as it was with all the animals whose eyes she used and whose thoughts she spied on. She hadn't told Mags about this Gift yet; she wanted to talk to someone at the Collegia who might have a better insight into it. It wasn't Animal Mindspeech. She couldn't control the creatures she spied on. At the moment it seemed of very little use, and she hadn't had it long.*

Such caravans as the one standing below the crow tended to be at one extreme or the other—either very drab and utilitarian, the sort of thing used to move goods from one place to another and not meant to attract attention, or the very opposite, gaudily painted and elaborately ornamented. This one was . . . neither one, nor the other. It had been painted a plain white, except for the carvings that ornamented the roofline and the doors, and the shutters that could be closed over the windows to protect them from a storm, which had been painted dark blue. But at one point it had surely been painted as gaudily as you please, for there were designs of flowers and vines bleeding through the white paint. Faintly, but definitely there. It looked as if several coats had been applied, too. The original must have been truly powerful paint.

*The caravan looked odd from this vantage. And the crow's eyes picked out a lot of details that Amily had missed. Maybe this Gift might be useful for scouting, or even spying, but how would you get the animal in question to go where you wanted, look at what you needed to see, or listen to what you wanted to hear? Amily supposed that you could just search for random creatures that were near what you wanted . . . but that could end in a lot of frustration.*

Two handsome horses of the vanner breed grazed, hobbled, beside it, as did two beautiful white beasts that no one in all of Valdemar would ever mistake for anything other than Companions.

*Well, that wasn't quite true. In the course of their Circuit, the six travelers had come across quite a few people who thought Companions were nothing more than white horses. Exceptionally trained white horses, but certainly no more than that. It irritated Mags and infuriated Jakyr, but Amily was used to people seeing only what they expected to see.*

The crow found this even more promising, as he circled. He knew these white horses. Their riders were never cruel, often kind, and always well fed enough to offer a bite or two to a crow. The only



question now was, did they like crows?

*Amily chuckled silently. Of course she liked crows. Sometimes, before Bear had fixed her leg, crows had given her endless hours of amusement. They were among the first birds to come when she tossed bits of food, quickly learned not only to recognize that she wasn't a threat, but to recognize her even at a distance, and their antics made her laugh.*

The humans were camped some distance away from the road, and had followed a track between two sheep-meadows to get here. The van was parked beside a neat little building which anyone in Valdemar would recognize as a Waystation, but the four people from the caravan were not making use of it at the moment. The door was closed, with the bar on the outside still in place. There was a well, proper one, with a stone wall around it and a wooden canopy over it, with a wooden hatch to keep it clean when not in use. And they *had* made use of that, for the bucket suspended under the canopy was still wet. They were all sitting on rugs spread on the grass around a fire. It appeared that they had gotten their dinner elsewhere, perhaps at an inn further back down the road behind them, and had brought it along to enjoy *al fresco* here, for the little fire certainly wasn't serving any purpose other than to heat water for tea. Then again, given the young feast displayed on the rugs, there really was no need for a cooking fire now, and there were more than enough leftovers to serve for breakfast.

*As the crow circled, his mate following him cautiously, Amily became aware that he really was hungry, and it wasn't just corvid greed. She'd seen crows making off with their own body-weight in food and more, taking it elsewhere to cache it against a hungry day, but this fellow had a mostly-empty belly. She resolved to be generous.*

Most of the eating seemed to be over with, and letter-reading had begun while there was still light to read by.

*Not that the crow knew what "letter-reading" was. Amily was the one that recognized what they were all doing. Well, all of them but her. She was lying back on the blanket with her hands under the back of her head and her eyes closed. It was very odd seeing herself like this. It was not like looking in a mirror at all.*

The crow landed, his mate after him. His mate hung back, though; much more wary of humans than he was. One of the people—currently perusing one of a packet of letters—was a woman dressed in Bardic Scarlets. She looked to be of late middle-age, not yet starting to go gray, but just beginning to show character-lines in her face.

*Melita looks very imposing through a crow's eyes.*

A second, much younger woman, as quiet and brown as a sparrow, in fairly ordinary clothing (although her outfit featured breeches rather than a skirt), was lying on her back on the blanket, eyes closed.

*Definitely very odd to see myself like this. A little unsettling too.*

A third, a man in Herald Whites, about the same age as the first woman but with silver threading through the dark blond of his hair, was opening the last of his letters and gave a surprised chuckle when he saw the sealed envelope contained a second one.

*I think I'll pretend to be napping a little longer, this is very interesting.*

The fourth human, a young man, dark of eye and hair, but in gray clothing not unlike the Herald's was packing up the leftovers. The crow gave a tentative *caw*, and he looked up, grinned and tossed a generous chunk of cheese in the crow's direction, and a second toward the crow's mate.

Both birds seized the bounty, and flew off. The crow was very well pleased. That cheese was enough to fill his belly for the night, and give plenty of time in the morning to find the next meal.

*And I didn't have to be generous after all. Mags anticipated me!* Amily opened her eyes and sat up

ready to see what Herald Jakyr had found in his letter that was so amusing.

---

“Well, Mags,” Herald Jakyr said aloud, making Mags, who had been watching the crows fly off with half-grin on his face, look in his direction. “It seems someone found a clever way to track you down without giving you away.”

Mags bit off an exclamation and took the sealed envelope, ripping it almost in half in his haste to get at it. “How in—” Mags said, and then plunged into the content of the several thick sheets of vellum that had been inside. With an amused smile, Amily took over the clearing-up where he had left off.

“Huh. This ain’t from . . . anybody I know. But it’s in Bey’s tongue.” He looked over the letter, which had very little writing on it. Then his eyes widened, and he pulled a bit of burning branch out of the fire. Holding the flame carefully under the vellum, he warmed each page up . . . and like magic, as the others watched too, tiny, brown writing appeared between the few scrawled lines.

“Mags, if you know that secret—” Jakyr said, when he’d closed the mouth that had dropped open in surprise.

“Wouldn’t do us no good,” Mags said shortly. “Needs a fruit we ain’t got.” He perused the letter, while Amily picked up the envelope and tried the same trick with it. Her attempt yielded nothing.

“Well?” Bard Melita (or just “Lita” to most) asked after a moment, with evident impatience. “What is it then?”

“Hang on, it’s from Bey, and it’s in . . . well, it’s in Bey’s tongue. I have to translate it, then puzzle it out.” Mags’ brows were creased with concentration—and then, relaxed with relief. “Well, he says the coast is clear, more or less. Nobody from the Sleepgivers is going to be looking for me no more.”

“I assume there’s more to this than the ruse we were planning on?” Herald Jakyr asked.

Mags nodded. “All right, let me take this one bit at a time. The first thing he writes is that he obviously got home safe. He says, once he got back home, he came up with a pretty fine story about comin’ across the last of the lot that was supposed to be comin’ for me at the Bastion, interceptin’ him at the border to Karse.”

Jakyr nodded. “That’s a good, plausible story.”

“Bey’s clever that way.” Mags puzzled through the next part of the letter. “This’s why the letter’s so long, he’s got a mort of things to tell me. All right. He told them all the feller was caught by the Karsites, got wounded and was dyin’. Bey gave over his talisman to his pa to prove his tale.” Mags scratched his head and looked up with a half-smile of rueful admiration. “Reckon he must’ve pulled a couple off the bodies afore we all pitched ’em down the hole in the cave we was livin’ in. I shoulda thought of doin’ that.”

“You had more than a few things on your mind,” Jakyr reminded him. “You also had no idea whether or not they could prove dangerous after the wearer was dead; Bey would know better about that than you. And Bey was practically born in subterfuge.”

Mags shrugged. “Aye, well. So, Bey tells ’em all that this made-up feller told *Bey* that the bunch that was huntin’ us killed us all, an’ the Karsite demons killed the ones comin’ back to report it. He’s pretty pleased by the tale he spun, ’cause he says they all swallowed it, and they reckon to steer well clear of Karse from now on. They don’t know nothin’ about handlin’ their demons, he says, an’ there’s no reason no more t’ go that way. He says he also dropped hints that ‘Mags’ is as common a name hereabouts as say, ‘Daisy’ or ‘Rose’ or ‘Perry.’ So he says I can use the name I’m used to. So, that’s just the first bit. Give me a bit’f time . . .”

Bey wrote in a very florid style—and obliquely. It would probably take someone who had shared

both his memories and his experiences to get the full message, which was, without a doubt, exactly what he had intended.

“Well,” Mags continued, feeling once again that odd disconnect between the Bey he knew and rather liked, and the . . . entirely calculating and crafty fellow that he *also* knew, and didn’t much like. “He says his pa was kinda sickish when he left, and by the time he got back, the word about me bein’ dead and all kinda knocked him sideways. He says he got the feelin’ his pa was just holdin’ on to see if Bey had growed up enough to take over. So that pretty much settled him on doin’ what we talked about, him talkin’ to that girl he had in mind, an’ seein’ if he could count on her at his back an’ all.” He had to chuckle about the next part. “She called ’im a few choice kinds of an idiot, an’ kissed ’im, an’ he gets all coy about it, but seems like she’d been chasin’ after him all this time an’ he didn’ have the wit t’see it. So they go to his pa an’ get things all settled. Bey’s pa an’ her pa basically did everything but throw ’em at what passes fer a priest. An they ain’t been married but a month an’ his pa died.”

“That’s—terrible!” Amily exclaimed, as Lita shook her head. But Mags and Jakyr exchanged a little look, and Mags knew exactly what Jakyr was thinking—because he was thinking it himself. *I wonder how much Bey had a hand in seeing his pa off to the next world . . .*

It seemed Dallen was of the same mind. *:They are an entire nation—small, but a nation—of assassins. It seems perfectly likely to me.:*

In those memories he had shared with Bey, his cousin’s relationship with the head of the Sleepgivers, his father, had been . . . ambiguous. He absolutely respected the old man. He absolutely was loyal to him. But . . . there was no love there. That had been reserved entirely for Bey’s mother, who had died when he was a child. And Bey was ambitious. He had very definite ideas about steering the future of the Sleepgivers, plans that were unlikely to see fruition while his father was alive. *Would he have given an old, sick man a little help across the threshold of death?*

*:He had plenty of practice in doing just that,:* Dallen observed.

Mags sucked his lower lip thoughtfully, and decided to keep his thoughts on the matter between himself and Dallen. “Well, Bey says that between that tale he spun up, and that he’s now the head of the clan—” He raised an eyebrow.

“There is no longer anyone interested in verifying that cock-and-bull, far-too-convenient story he told,” Jakyr said dryly.

“Pretty much.” Mags shrugged. “The whole idea of lookin’ fer me was his Pa’s anyway. I’ve no doubt a lot of ’em thought it was daft, tryin’ to bring back someone that was raised a furriner. The more ’specially as they lost a *lot* of fellers tryin’ t’do it. Ended up with a costly contract with Karse they canceled, an’ that didn’t turn out well fer ’em, neither. Hell, prolly half the clan thinks Bey snuck off t’kill me his own self.”

“And without a doubt, the ones that think that admire him for it.” Jakyr reached for a pocket pie he had left warming on a stone next to the fire, as Mags cut a last slice of bread and piled ham and pickled onions on top of it, before Amily could pack the loaf and ham away.

“An’ if any of ’em hinted at it, he’d go all *shocked* like.” Mags took a big bite of his concoction. “Well, t’ get back t’ this letter, there’s some about how his gal is already workin’ on a baby. There’s lotta stuff just meant fer me, remindin’ me of stuff that should be in my head now. ’E said ’e waited a decent bit afore arrangin’ t’hand the letter off to someone that’d give it to a Shin’a’in horsetrader ’e got contact with.” He shook his head with admiration. “Wish’t I knew how ’e managed that. I didn’ know th’ Shin’a’in went that far.”

Jakyr shrugged. “You never know what a Shin’a’in is likely to do. They’ll go vast distances to

ensure that a horse is properly placed—and equally vast distances to take one back if they discover it hasn't been.”

Mags could only shake his head. “I dunno. I ain't run across any, jest some of their hand-work. All I know's what I read, which ain't much. Anyway, he says the horsetrader was t' pass it off to whoever's goin' north to Valdemar, and 'e's put you, Jakyr, as the one t' get the letter, 'cause ain't nobody down there knows who you are.”

“There is a lot more to that letter than that,” Jakyr pointed out. “You're barely half through it.”

Mags had to chuckle again. “Well . . . I gotta say, other than remindin' me of stuff I shoulda got from his mem'ries that 'e says I might well need, the rest of it is . . . Bey's woman has got him tied in knots. Well, like my pa was for my ma, if the stories he tol' me are right. The rest of the letter is him goin' on about her. He says she pretty much hung the moon an' the stars. An' she's no little flower either; he says 'she's better at close-quarters combat than I am!' Which, you'll reckon, means real damn good.”

“If she wants to keep her own children alive, I suspect she had better be,” Lita observed shrewdly.

“He says here, 'e told her the truth 'bout me. Huh.” Mag scratched his head, puzzled. “Wonder why.”

“Possibly because this way she knows, for certain, that he trusts her. And possibly because it reassures her that no unexpected competition is going to show up. Probably both,” Jakyr mused. He finished his pocket pie and poured hot water from the pot over the fire into the teapot. “Well! Who wants the Waystation? Because whoever wants to use it should probably open it up and give it a good airing before the sun goes down.”

“We'll take it, Jakyr,” said Amily, as she stowed the last of the food in a basket. “The wagon will probably be more comfortable, and we have younger bones.” She motioned to Mags to stay where he was, and got up to take down the bar and open the door. She walked with strength, and a just barely perceptible limp, now. But Mags was not about to let her do all the work by herself. The rest of the letter could wait. Lita stowed the leftovers in the caravan while they worked, and Jakyr fetched more water and took care of the Companions and vanners for the night.

Mags joined Amily, opening up the shutters, then the windows themselves, then fetching one of the featherbeds and some bedding as Lita passed them to him from the caravan. He made up a small fire in the fireplace, then fetched in water while Amily swept the place out; he'd have done the sweeping, but she snatched the broom out of his hand. With a laugh, he left her to it while he got the water.

Since they were officially off-circuit, they didn't *have* to stay at Waystations, but Lita got unexpectedly . . . prim . . . when they were at inns. She would insist on sharing a room with Amily, leaving him to share with Jakyr, which was not the way he would have preferred things. He reasoned that she was just trying to preserve Amily's reputation (or perhaps her own!) but it was rather annoying to say the least. So when Jakyr started suggesting, right after two such incidents, that they might just as well use the Waystations, he had agreed immediately, and Amily had sided with the two men. Whoever felt most like doing the work of turning the Station out slept in it; more often than not it was Amily and Mags. The wagon was more comfortable for sleeping, as Amily had said, but it was stuffier, and a bit claustrophobic even with Bear and Lena gone. In any event, it was certainly pleasant to have the privacy, no matter which of the two places they spent the night.

By the time they had everything arranged to their satisfaction, Lita and Jakyr were already in the caravan, and there were lights burning inside, making the little windows around the top glow. There was still enough twilight to see by, but just barely, and the breeze was turning cool enough to close up the Waystation windows again. Mags made sure the campfire was out, and returned to the Station,

where Amily had lit a lantern and arranged the bedding on the floor in front of the fire.

~~“We’ll be home this time tomorrow,” she said, as he stripped down and joined her in the blankets~~  
“I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Well . . . we haven’t had to be anyone but Mags and Amily while we’ve been gone,” she said, and sighed.

He realized immediately what she meant. “You’ll be th’ daughter of the King’s Own. I’ll be—well, not too many people are s’posed to know I’m ’is student, but I *will* be that lad what almost got kilt a couple’a times, an’ yer lad what intends t’ marry ye.” He held her close for a moment, but then moved just far enough away that he could look into her eyes. She looked worried. “An’ that’ll be th’ problem aye?”

“Among others. I suppose it is just as well that I wasn’t Chosen after all.” She made a face. “Because then people would be expecting *me* to be the next King’s Own on top of all of that.”

Mags could think of something he would much rather be doing right now than discussing all of this, but . . . *We ain’t gonna do that until we talk about all of this.* “Aight,” he said, and let her relax and put her head on his chest. “So, you been part’f alla this fer a lot longer’n me. Lay it all out fer me.”

She was quiet, very quiet, which meant she was thinking hard. He watched the flames in the fireplace and listened to them crackle; caught the nearby hoot of an owl. *Funny how almost gettin’ killed makes a feller enjoy just . . . quiet times . . .*

“Well, taking one thing at a time,” Amily finally said, “There’s Father, all by himself. Without coming out and being . . .” he felt her cheek grow warm against his chest “. . . *blunt* about it, I made it as clear as I could in letters what we were to each other. He didn’t seem surprised.”

“He’d be pretty stupid if he was,” Mags said dryly, “And your Da don’t strike me as bein’ stupid.” *He* was a little surprised, though. He’d thought it was the sort of thing she would have wanted to say face to face. “Is that somethin’ that was better left fer writin’, though?”

She had to chuckle a little at that. “Well, when I’m telling him something I intend to do anyway, whether he likes it or not, I’ve always preferred to write to him about it, even when we were living in the same set of rooms.”

“Are you gonna do that with me?” Mags asked after a moment. “’Cause if it’s all the same to you I’d druther ye didn’t. I like talkin’ things over.”

“*You* are not my father, the King’s Own, and the King’s spy,” she pointed out. “Well, you’re the King’s spy but—”

“But not the King’s Own, who’s gonna have one set’f thoughts as jest Nikolas, one set as yer Da, and one set as th’ King’s Own,” Mags filled in for her. “I reckon ye’ve been balancin’ that fer all yer life, so ye know best.”

“Not always, but . . . well, I also didn’t want him to get it from Bear and Lena’s letters, or Jakyr’s or Lita’s.” She sighed. “Which, sooner or later, he probably would. I don’t know he was reading their letters to their friends before their friends got them, but in his position, he certainly could have been. Plus, I am sure at least Jakyr and possibly Lita had been ordered to report directly back to him.”

*Ugh. I can understand that but . . . oh, that’s a little uneasy-makin’.* *Am I gonna be readin’ peoples’ mail?* Why that seemed more intrusive than merely knowing their secrets, he couldn’t have told. Maybe it was because reading their mail seemed a lot like deliberately reading their thoughts. He could do that, too, but . . . it was wrong to do so, unless he was under direct orders. Well, probably the same went for mail-reading.

“I reckon I’m jest as glad I weren’t ordered to report back t’him,” he replied, deciding that, yes, if he had to, he would throttle down the feeling that he was doing something embarrassing and read other peoples’ mail, if ordered. Such orders would only be coming from the King or Nikolas after all, and if he couldn’t trust them, who could he trust? “Since ye didn’ say anythin’ I reckon he was all right with us?”

“He had to take the chance that *his* mail would be intercepted and read—not that I saw any signs of tampering—so he was a bit oblique, but yes.” She sighed again. “So that hurdle was jumped moons ago. Father the King’s Own, however . . . requires things of his daughter. I wasn’t going to bring all this up until later.”

He shrugged, ever so slightly, enough for her to feel it, not so much it would disturb her comfort. “Might’s well git it over.”

“Well, we were talking about getting married right away, and . . . he basically said that we were going to have to give people time to get used to the idea. And we were talking about doing the same thing that Bear and Lena did, and he made it very clear that no, we were going to have to—”

“Oh no,” he groaned. “Dammit, a big show was the *last* thing—”

“Well, we’re going to have to put one on,” she said. And she didn’t sound nearly as unhappy about it as Mags was.

*:Of course she isn’t, you dolt,: Dallen scolded him. :She’s been the little brown mouse in the corner all her life. Watching her friends in the wealthy and highborn get to sparkle and shine in love gowns, and be made much of, like the chief actresses in a popular play. And now, she will get to sparkle and shine and be made much of, herself.:*

*:But I make much of her!:* he protested.

“You’re talking with Dallen, aren’t you?” she asked. To his relief, she sounded amused.

“Uh. Yes?”

She giggled. “Don’t let me interrupt you. When you get quiet like that, I know he’s giving you a piece of his mind.”

“Uh . . . right . . .”

*:Oh yes. And only you and her father ever have. How did it feel to be the Kirball champion?:*

*:Uh . . . what?:* Where had *that* come from?

*:How did it feel to be the Kirball champion? You liked it, didn’t you? You liked people looking at you with admiration?:*

All right, now he saw what Dallen was getting at but—seriously? *:It was a stupid game? All right, maybe not a stupid game, I mean, we was learning about war and tactics and all but everybody else figgered it fer a game and—:*

*:And nothing. You enjoyed being made much of, and there’s nothing wrong with that. You didn’t let it go to your head. This is just exactly the same thing. Everyone wants that, at least once in their lives. You see?:*

And that was when he knew exactly what he should say. “Know what? I reckon that’ll be fun.”

She went very still. “You really mean that?”

He took a deep breath, and thought about how everyone looked forward to the Fairs and Festivals . . . and this would just be one more sort of Festival, right? Smaller, mostly for friends . . . *aye, well, alla th’ Collegia, pretty much but . . . friends, sure . . .* and why not? “Aye,” he said. “Who don’t like a party?” His arms tightened around her. “It’ll be great! Shoot, it’d be a damn shame t’throw away a good reason fer a shindig!”

She squirmed around in his arms and kissed him so enthusiastically he thought that the

conversation was over for a few moments . . . but then she broke it off, breathlessly. “You don’t mind that we’ll have to—you know—wait for a while?”

“I—uh—what?” It took him a *long* moment to drag his mind back to the fact that she wasn’t done yet. *Does Bey have to go through things like this? Do all fellers?*

“I don’t mean . . . not *be* together.” She flushed. “I mean, betrothed couples . . . it’s done all the time but . . . there’s supposed to be . . .”

“Huh?” Fortunately, there was something working in his head, because a moment later, a fragment from *somewhere*, Dallen, maybe, managed to shove itself into the front of his brain. “Oh . . . right. We can’t just do what we talked about, right. So there’s gotta be a buncha formal stuff.” He freed an arm so he could scratch his head in puzzlement. “I mean, I ain’t so up on what we need t’do. On’y weddin’s I ever saw was the Prince an’ Princess, an’ Bear and Lena’s, on’y I never actually saw the —”

“Father will probably tell us,” she pointed out, and then relaxed and giggled a little. “Father will probably talk to whoever it is that figures out what sort of Court etiquette has to be satisfied and hand us our orders. If he hasn’t got a handful of detailed instructions waiting for us now!”

Mags sighed. “He prolly does . . . on t’other hand, that’ll make it easier. Like a dance, I reckon. Jest foller the steps, an’ there ye are.”

*Too bad I ain’t so good at dancin’.*

He really, truly, did not want to think about what a complication this was going to bring to a situation that was *already* complicated. Because he was going to be going into Whites, which meant he’d be a Herald, which meant, instead of being a student, he’d actually have a job to do. A job he would be expected to turn up for. Heralds didn’t just laze about. And Heralds couldn’t go missing from their jobs, either. So his continued training, and his *work*, of being a clandestine agent, would have to be juggled along with the job.

At least Amily knew all about that sort of juggling, having watched her father do it for her entire life.

But further thought along those lines was shoved to the side. Amily had gone back to kissing him, and he was perfectly prepared to abandon *thinking* in favor of *feeling*, at least for a while.

Amily woke at dawn; she always woke at dawn. She had been relieved to discover that Mags was an early-riser too. This morning, though, she could tell he wasn’t awake yet, and the makeshift bed was, for once, so comfortable she didn’t feel like shifting yet. So she just curled up “spooned” against him and considered their homecoming.

On the one hand, it was annoying that, once again, being the daughter of the King’s Own was going to interfere with *her* life. On the other hand, she had long ago gotten over the notion that life was somehow supposed to be fair, and as *things interfering with her life* went, this one wasn’t too bad. She wasn’t one of the girls who’d dreamed about having an impressive wedding, nor really, had any of her friends been the sort who did, but she knew plenty of girls who came to Court, matchmaking parents in tow, who had apparently thought about nothing else for their entire lives. She had really just wanted to get married the way Lena and Bear had; quickly, quietly and privately.

But once again, it seemed that was the sort of thing that the daughter of the King’s Own just didn’t do. At least Mags was all right with that. And since both of them had good, stout senses of humor, and neither of them was likely to get at all stressed over things going wrong—which, they inevitably would—it would probably be a lot of fun. It would be a very good excuse to gather the friends together who had scattered across the face of Valdemar.

Anyway, according to her Father, it wouldn't, and couldn't, happen right away. So they wouldn't have to think about it for a while, and there would be time to make sure all the things that *would* go wrong got sorted out.

And somewhere, somehow, in all of that, she had to figure out this Gift she'd developed. *I wonder if it started when he began Mindspeaking at me.* Mags had a very rare Gift of Mindspeech. He could speak to and be heard by anyone at all, whether they had the Gift or not. *I wonder if . . . if when something like that happens, it can knock loose any Gift you might have and set it going, like a stuck wheel.* Gifts were one thing she *hadn't* studied.

Mags was very still when he slept; he hardly moved at all. Maybe that was a habit left over from his horrible childhood, when he and all the rest of the orphans had slept together in a heap all winter long for warmth. Being squirmy probably got you exiled to the edge of the pile. She thought about getting up, but before she could make her mind up about it, she sensed he had gone from sleep to waking.

"Mornin', sunshine," he said. "Reckon soonest started, soonest done, aye?"

"Aye," she agreed, and put away her thoughts, for now, in favor of doing.

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And so, for the third time in his life, Mags rode into Haven.

This time, he wasn't riding into the unknown. This time, he was not bringing more trouble with him.

This time, it really felt as if he was coming home.

The sight of Haven from afar, the irregular pool of buildings around the rise on which the Palace and Collegia were built, no longer struck him with awe or trepidation. They called it "the Hill," but from here, he could see it wasn't a hill, not as such. It was a gentle slope up to a higher level of the plain on which Haven stood. The river bisected the Palace grounds, separating the Palace and Collegia from Companion's Field, and then tumbled boisterously down to the town, and meandered through it and away.

Beyond the skirts of the city were farms spreading out all around, some with groves of fruit or nut trees, all of them with windbreaks of lines of trees planted along the hedges that marked the divisions into fields. There was no wild forest this near to Haven. But there were trees in plenty, and all of them were in autumn colors, though those colors were fading fast, and already some of the leaves were falling. Thrifty farmers were harvesting those leaves to heap up over their winter-hardy crops to protect them from the frost and winter cold. Mags wasn't anywhere near familiar enough with farming to know what crops could be kept—stored, really—right in the fields well into winter, but he knew there were some. Winter squashes, parsnips, and cabbages, he was certain of, because they made their appearance looking tasty and fresh all winter long in the markets. Out there in the fields, as they passed, there were farmers working, making mounds of leaves, brittle, aged straw and hay too old to use for fodder, weighing them down with a light layer of sand. They waved if they happened to look up and notice the Companions, but mostly they were too intent on their work to look up even for a moment. It wasn't as if the sight of Heralds and Companions was a novelty to anyone, this close to Haven.

Jakyr caught him eyeing the farmers; they exchanged a look, and Jakyr laughed.

"We'd all of us starve if we had to live on a farm. I have no idea what they're doing," the Herald said ruefully.

"Nor me. I'm a city girl," Lita said from the driver's bench of the caravan.

"I'm . . . mixed," Mags said. "I know every single sort of wild plant that can be eaten without



givin' yerself a bellyache. But I dunno how t'grow a blessed thing. An' I dunno how to store any of it neither. The mine kids ate whatever we could get our hands on an' never saved nothin'."

"Nobody can know everything," Jakyr said philosophically.

*:And it is highly unlikely you will ever have to pass yourself off as a farmhand,:* chuckled Dallen.

*:Intrigue of the sort you will have to investigate rarely takes place among the cabbages.:*

Well, that was true enough.

It was past time for the Harvest Fair, but Mags was not particularly disappointed. Truth to tell, he was of the mind that he was likely to be busy enough settling himself into his new duties and his new life without the distraction of a Fair.

*:Nikolas has plans,:* Dallen interjected.

*:I'm certain he does.:*

The air had that scent of old leaves and faint damp, tinged with woodsmoke, that Mags remembered even from his days as a mine-slave as the signature of autumn. Back then, the smell of ham and bacon curing had been a torment, but there had always been the chance that he would be able to get his hands on a scrap of meat or two, and there would be bones in the thin cabbage soup. And autumn meant nuts, if he could manage to get out into the woods while there was some light. So although autumn wasn't the "season of plenty" as far as his memories were concerned, it was, at least the season of being less hungry. . . .

Somehow, no matter how he prospered, those days of terrible want never really left him.

*But I can leave them, and think about what I have now,* he reminded himself, and resolutely brought his attention back to the present.

Every smoke-house within sight of the road was going—and Mags was very glad that they'd had a fine breakfast, or the faint hint of bacony-goodness on the wind would have probably driven him insane.

"I, for one, will be glad to get off the road at last," Lita said, as Amily joined her on the driver's bench, closing the little hatch door behind her.

"I think we all will," Amily agreed. "Are you going to go back to being the head of Bardic Collegium?"

Lita shrugged. "That's not for me to say," she replied. "I'll leave it up to the senior staff. But . . . chances are, they'll put me back in the hot seat."

Jakyr snorted. "There's not much chance that they won't, Lita. You were too good at your job."

"Well . . . there's a little bit of politics involved. And more than a bit of reluctance on my part." She freed a hand to rub it across her eyes. "It would be a lot easier to just go back to being a senior instructor." She glanced sideways at Jakyr, who was wearing a rueful expression. "And just what are you thinking?"

"That it would be a lot easier to go be a senior instructor, because the last year taught me that I am nowhere near as young as I thought I was," he said, which startled Lita so much she unbalanced for a moment. He laughed at her. "What?" he demanded.

The vanners looked over their shoulders at her in bewilderment and stopped dead in the road. She chirruped to them and slapped their backs with the reins to get them going again.

"You?" she said.

He leveled a look at her. "Who was the one that was going on about second chances?"

She flushed, and looked away. Mags glanced at Amily, who just gave a little shrug.

*:Don't ask me, I wasn't privy to the conversation,:* Dallen declared.

Mags feigned shock. *:What! Gossip you don't know? Inconceivable!:*

Dallen snorted.

“And anyway, the Healers are probably going to insist that an old man like me needs more time to recover from getting perforated like a pincushion than I’ve had,” he pointed out. “A couple of seasons as an instructor should tell us if I can change my roving ways without going insane.”

“Going?” Lita said under her breath—but loud enough so everyone could hear.

Jakyr just chuckled—which was a very different reaction to the one he would have displayed on the journey out.

*:Do you—:* Mags asked Dallen, tentatively.

*:I am not in the business of predicting the success or failure of romances,:* Dallen said dryly.

Each time they topped a hill, the city was a little nearer. Mags judged they would probably reach the outskirts a bit after noon. It was going to be very strange to be at the Collegium again, but without Lena and Bear around. But it was going to be equally strange to be there and not be going to classes. . . .

On the other hand, that was going to be something of a relief as well. No more worrying about passing or failing something. No more studying! Well, not formal studying, anyway. He’d have to learn about things, surely, but he wouldn’t be facing an examination at the end of it.

*:No, but if you don’t master what you are studying, you might face something a lot more serious than merely failing an examination,:* Dallen pointed out.

*:Thank you, Master Wet Blanket,:* he retorted.

*:I live to serve.:*

It was *his* turn to snort.

“Well, I cannot wait for a proper hot bath, one I can just wallow in until the water turns cold,” Amily laughed. “And since we’ll be arriving before there is any sort of stampede for the bathing rooms, that is the very first thing I intend to get.”

“That’s my biggest complaint, I think, next to hard beds,” Lita agreed. “Even when there is a bathing house in a village, or a bathing area in an inn, you never get to soak as long as you want because there is always someone tapping her foot and waiting for you to get out of the water.”

“My featherbed. Meals I don’t have to cook. Firewood I don’t have to cut. Hot baths whenever I want them . . .” Amily sighed. “It’s good to be back.”

“Aye,” Mags agreed, as they neared the edges of the city itself. “’Tis.”

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## 2

To Mags' strangely mingled relief and disappointment, there was no one waiting to greet them as they came in through the side gate mostly used by Heralds. Part of him had been dreading that there would be a crowd gathered, and part of him had hoped there would be. But in fact, there was no one waiting at all. And . . . really, why should there be? By this time, most, if not all, of the Trainees who were about his age were in the Field themselves, having gotten their Whites, and now paired with a senior Herald to supervise their first months of work according to the new training system. He knew all of that from the letters they had all picked up at Guard-posts on their circuit, many of which had been from those same friends. There were people here still, teachers mostly, who knew him well—but this time of day was right in the middle of classes. He wouldn't want to disrupt classes just because he and Amily had turned up again.

And at the same time, it was a relief, because right at this moment, Mags just wanted to get settled in and not be fussed over.

All four of them already had their personal belongings packed in two bags each; not their clothing which after so many months on the road was going to need a serious laundering, and in some cases, mending, before it was fit to wear again, but everything that was *not* clothing. When Lita pulled the caravan up to the stables, grooms came to take charge, and servants came to discover what was to go where.

*Servants.* . . . It was going to take some time to get used to this . . . he was a Herald now. Servants came and did things for him.

*I'd better get used to it quickly. If I have to fit in with the wealthy or the highborn, I can't slip and go to do something for myself.*

"Deal with the sorting out, Mags, would you?" Jakyr asked, and without waiting for a reply, he picked up one of his two bags and went around to the other side of the wagon. While Mags was sorting out what went where and with whom with the grooms and servants, Jakyr and Lita both vanished, and the grooms took the wagon and vanners away, leaving him with Amily and their bags.

"Well," he said, feeling suddenly very awkward. "I s'ppose you need to be getting back to your rooms—"

"Ah—" she said, a little awkwardly. "Father . . ."

And now he felt exceedingly stupid. Maybe *he* didn't have anyone who should be breaking off what they were doing to greet him but—

"Right, right!" he said hastily. "You go. Catch up with me somewhere later—"

"I'll meet you at your room in a candlemark or so," she said, and grinned. "After Father and I finish, I want a bath, and I expect you do, too."

He had to chuckle at that. "Reckon I need one too. Right. Meet you at m'room."

Another servant had showed up at this point, and at Amily's direction, picked up her bags and followed her, leaving Mags to take his own and head for the stables, with Dallen following like some sort of enormous dog.

*:Nothing like some sort of enormous dog, thank you very much.:* With an indignant snort, Dallen

trotted on ahead and put *himself* into the hands of a groom that appeared as if he had been summoned: *You go get that bath. You were right. You need it.*

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Rather than taking offense, Mags just chuckled, opened the door to his stable room, and chucked his bags onto the bed. Then he blinked and stared. The room had . . . changed. It was still *his* room, because those were his books on the table and in the bookcase, but someone had been in here, vastly improving it. There was a brand new wardrobe up against the wall, instead of a chest for his clothing, and a brand new, larger bed with a big goosedown comforter on it. He raised an eyebrow at that, but the bed he'd been using *was* an old one, very much due for replacement.

It certainly did look as if someone had been hard at work in here. There were four chairs and a real table, and there was a padded bench with a padded back and two more chairs arranged in a group so people could sit and talk. The walls had been whitewashed, making things much lighter. Someone had also checked all the glazing on the window and re-puttied it, sealing it well against leaks and drafts, added shutters on the inside to be closed against the winter cold, and put up two sets of curtains—a heavy one, and a lighter one, presumably to let breezes in come summer. There were new rugs on the floor, and one of them was even made of sheepskin with the wool on, which would be nice for sprawling on. And, of course, that handsome new wardrobe.

He opened the wardrobe, and as he had expected, there were Whites in his size waiting for him. No disguises of course; those had been either stored down in Haven, or, if common enough, in the chest for his personal clothing. He raised the lid, and satisfied himself that nothing had been removed or disturbed—except that all of his Trainee Grays were gone. *Someone else is gonna get those nice sets of highborn Grays I got loaned*, he thought with a little regret. But, then again . . . he was a Herald now, and *all* Heralds had Dress Whites. There was probably something just as fancy waiting in the wardrobe.

He looked again at the waiting Whites, and suddenly became uncomfortably aware of the fact that compared with the ones in the wardrobe, the uniform he was wearing was . . . a bit dingy. And a bit shabby. And Dallen was right, he was a bit dingy and shabby as well . . . just thinking about it made him begin to feel a bit itchy.

And that was all it took for him to seize a new set of clothing and everything that went with it and head for the bathing room.

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Either Amily and her father had had quite a long talk, or she must have made good on her pledge to soak until the water turned cold, because he was clean, clothed, and back at his room, rearranging things to suit himself, when she arrived just as the dinner bell was ringing at the Collegium. “Do I still eat with the Trainees?” he wondered aloud, as she paused in the doorway to look with surprise at his changed quarters.

“If you want,” she said. “It’s up to you. Father does once in a while. When he is not eating with the Court, which is what he mostly does because he’s King’s Own, he eats in our rooms because he needs the quiet. But Father is a special case. Heralds between circuits can eat with the Court, in the Collegium dining hall, or in their rooms, or go down to inns in Haven. It really all depends on what they feel like at the time. There’s no rules about it.”

“Oh, that’s too much to think about,” he said with a laugh, as she made a face at him. “What do you want to do? Though I think I’d rather not eat with the Court, if I am supposed to be keeping myself quiet and not be noticed.”

She linked arms with him and pulled him toward the door. “We still have friends who are Trainees and I expect they’d like to see us,” she pointed out as he pulled the door shut behind them. Moving

quietly, they passed by Dallen's stall on their way out. Mags had to chuckle; Dallen was fast asleep, with a little bit of hay sticking out of the corner of his mouth. It was oddly endearing.

*Wish I could fall asleep that easily.*

The weather was still outstanding, and as they neared Herald's Collegium, Mags sniffed appreciatively. It smelled as if tonight was a batter-fried fish night, something they rarely got at inns and never made for themselves. "Oh! Fried fish!" Amily said with glee as she recognized the scent, and hurried her steps, tugging at his arm.

*I guess things went good with her Da. . . .* That was a profound relief.

Not that he wasn't completely certain that if Nikolas had disapproved of him and Amily being together he would have heard about it a *long* time ago. But . . . well . . . there was always that little bit of doubt. Because if there was anything that Mags was good at, it was doubt.

As it happened, it was Amily who had a great many friends still at the three Collegia, and not Mags—but Mags didn't actually mind, though it was *just* a little melancholy to sit down at the familiar tables and not have Bear and Lena to one side of him. Still, within moments all of Amily's acquaintances had taken him as one of their number, not minding the Whites at all, and he found their chatter vastly entertaining. It was relaxing to *not* have to be analyzing everything the people around him said, matching it to their tone of voice, and trying to figure out if they had some sort of hidden agenda.

Amily's friends all wanted to know how Bear and Lena were, expressing some envy that they had gotten what one of the Bardic Trainees described as "The softest job *ever!*" And Mags was happy to tell them that this posting was going to be a very nice position for both of them.

"A *Baron*," the lad said, sighing. "I mean, she deserves it. But . . . a *Baron*. Did you see the castle?"

"Manor," Amily corrected with a laugh. "Yes, we did. Baron Burns—and isn't that alliterative?—has a manor that's almost the size of the Palace, I think. He's rather imposing to look at, tall and very very dignified, but very easy in his ways. Lena is his new Court Bard, so she'll be doing whatever it is that Court Bards do—"

"Direct and rehearse the other musicians, write new pieces when the Baron wants them, perform," the boy—Rendall? Yes that was it—supplied. "Likely she'll be asked to play for the Baron's wife and her ladies every day. And if she doesn't perform herself, she'll be responsible for the music at supper every night, and if there's any dancing or anything after."

"That sounds like a lot of work," Amily said approvingly, as another friend, anxious to give them proper welcome home, went to the serving hatch herself and brought back a heaping platter of fried fish so fresh it was smoking, and put it down on the table. Mags knew better than to snatch with his fingers when the fish was that hot; he used a pair of forks to fill his plate and Amily's with the hot fish, steamed greens, and fresh rolls.

"Well, it don't seem like work when you're doing what you *want* to be doing," Rendall said. "You know?"

"I reckon you're gonna make a good Bard," Mags said, as he blew on a piece of fish to cool it down. It occurred to him then, that maybe he shouldn't be worrying so much about what he was going to do now that he was a full Herald. If nothing else, he was going to be doing what he *wanted* to be doing.

*Sure beats chipping sparklies out of rocks.*

"Well, I, uh," Rendall said, blushing so hard it showed through his tan. "Thanks?"

Mags couldn't speak just then as he had a mouth full of luscious fish. He just nodded. "You're

welcome,” Amily said warmly, with an amused glance at Mags.

Their table began to fill up with people Mags certainly would consider his *friends*, even if they weren’t as close as the folks who had been on his Kirball team, or Bear and Lena. Before he was halfway through his first plate of fish, it was starting to feel like a homecoming after all.

He had always liked this room, anyway. It was big, without being pretentious. Plain wooden walls and floor, one wall with enough plain glazed windows to allow plenty of light in the daytime. Boasting a high ceiling with exposed rafters, full of plain wooden tables and benches, with a few wooden chairs. It was a room that held a lot of good memories for him. He looked up and down the table at the mix of uniforms, and the cheerful faces, and knew why he was here.

These, too, were his friends, his brothers and sisters. This was where he belonged.

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It wasn’t possible to just slip away, not when you were the center of attention at an impromptu party, so Mags and Amily went the other direction, bidding a sort of formal goodnight to everyone still at the table.

“Tired already?” someone laughed.

“Matty, we’ve been on th’road for most of a year,” Mags said, with exaggerated patience. “We’ve been sleepin’ in Waystations or bunks in a wagon. What d’you think?”

Matty laughed, and everyone else took it in good part; the group broke up, then, and once Mags and Amily got out into the hallway, he said what was *really* on his mind.

“I reckon it’s about time to track down your Da.” They both knew that Herald Nikolas would not have broken into his duties for anyone but his beloved daughter; his protégé could certainly wait for a more opportune time. But now dinner was about to be served for the Court, and that was not a “duty” as such. If they didn’t make themselves available to Nikolas, he would surely come looking for them.

Amily’s lips twitched a little nervously. “You’re right. We might as well go to Herald’s Wing. Have Dallen tell Rolan where we are, I suppose.”

*:Already done,:* Dallen said sleepily. *:Rolan says Nikolas will be there shortly.:*

They left the Collegium through the doors that connected it to the Herald’s Wing, where Heralds all had at least a little room for the times when they were not actually out on circuit. Most of them were out so much that the rooms were half or a quarter of the size of Mags’ stable room and Spartan indeed, except, perhaps, for the quality of the bed. But the King’s Own lived here full time, and had a suite of rooms that included separate accommodations for his daughter, and were situated nearest to the guarded door that led to the Palace proper.

When they arrived there, they discovered that someone had ordered wine to be brought, with three cups. On a little table near one of three chairs that had been grouped together stood the pitcher, the cups beside it, and water beading up on its side. Mags raised an eyebrow at Amily when they saw that she just shrugged. They took seats, and waited.

What could have quickly become an awkward moment never had a chance to devolve. Nikolas himself pushed open the door within moments of their sitting down. They both got to their feet immediately, but he motioned to them to sit again. Quickly pouring wine for all three, Nikolas handed them cups, then took his own and dropped into his chair.

“Politics,” he said in tones of disgust. “I’d rather be Willy the Weasel cheating my customers than sit through another interminable debate about nothing that matters.”

Mags had to chuckle. “I see nothin’s changed.”

“Oh, everything has changed,” Nikolas replied, and took a long, slow drink of his wine. “Now that people are reasonably sure that the King or the Prince are not about to be murdered in their beds by

shadowy assassins with uncanny abilities, they are now free to act like the self-centered fools they are.” He grimaced. “Arguing over every last penny that comes out of their pockets in taxes, and arguing even more if it goes to something that doesn’t directly benefit them. Idiots. Fortunately the last thing the King needs me for is handling these . . . people. But I still have to listen to them.” He took another long drink of the wine. “Welcome back, Mags. I am very tired of having to be in two places at once. You could not have come back at a better time.”

“Yessir,” Mags said, diffidently. He wasn’t certain what else to say. Fortunately Nikolas took that problem right away from him.

“First of all, you needn’t stare at me as if you think I am likely to challenge you over the honor of my daughter,” the King’s Own said dryly. “Assuming that my dainty darling didn’t rip my face off for being an overbearing father, I’ve had a year to get used to the idea that she isn’t my little girl anymore, that she was never *my* little girl in the sense that I could control anything she set her mind to do. I just want you two to promise me two things.”

“Yessir!” Mags said immediately, before Nikolas could even make his requests. He was so relieved that Amily’s father was not taking this situation . . . poorly . . . that he would have promised just about anything.

Nikolas laughed. “Just be discreet, and I’d prefer you didn’t actually *get married* for at least a year.”

Since that was the very opposite of what Mags had expected the Herald would say, all that Mags could do was gape at him. It was Amily who frowned, and asked, more than a bit sharply, “*Why?* Or rather, why shouldn’t we?”

Nikolas sighed. “As always, my dearest, there is nothing that happens in our lives without political ramifications. The Prince and Princess have only been wed for a year. I’d like it to be two before anyone connected to the Throne has even the quietest of weddings. Then there is the personal consideration. I know you two have been through very trying and dangerous times together. I’d like to make sure your love affair can bear the boring and tedious times as well.”

Mags blinked. He hadn’t thought of that. It was a good point.

Amily looked rebellious for just a flash, but then, she shook her head. “I was going to argue, but dammit, Father, you’re right. I’ve seen couples just turn . . . sour on each other when things were quiet and boring. Oh! Why do you always have to be right?”

“I’m not always, but I’m flattered you think I am,” Nikolas said dryly. “Bear in mind that adversity can have the same effect, but that’s usually financial adversity. . . .”

He left unsaid the obvious fact that no Herald would ever have to suffer financial adversity. Not while the country was ruled the way it was.

And if things changed that drastically, well, Mags didn’t think there would *be* a Valdemar anymore.

Nikolas leaned back, his arms draped along the back and sides of the chair. “I know you two were concerned about, well, a father’s inevitable reaction to the two of you pairing up, and you were correct to be concerned. It’s a rather atavistic tendency of fathers to be overprotective of their daughters. But I had most of a year to cram my instincts down into a box and sit on them, and most of a year to remind myself daily that my daughter was intelligent, shrewd, and that I certainly did not *own* her.”

Mags chuckled weakly. So far, he had barely wet his mouth with the wine, and only because his mouth was so dry with nervousness.

“I really don’t have anyone to ‘blame’ but myself, seeing as I shoved you two together so much you would either have conceived a terrible hatred for each other, or the inevitable opposite.” Nikolas

smiled crookedly. “I got used to the fact that my poor crippled little girl was neither crippled nor little anymore, and she *certainly* didn’t need anyone’s pity. And I had a year to look over the young bucks court and decide that I would probably attempt to kill half of them if they even *looked* at her, and she’d kill the other half before I got a chance to.”

Amily was startled into a giggle.

“Then I reminded myself that although I had no objection and every trust in a young Herald, a young Herald—all except you, Mags—was going to be out in the Field most of his life, and that was no life for Amily. And so, gradually, I managed to reconcile myself to this, then even come to appreciate it. And here we are, painlessly sitting down together, and this time it is me telling you I’d like you to delay, just to be sure . . . but only delay the wedding.” He sighed. “I remember being your age. Let’s just leave it at that. Be discreet.”

Amily made a mocking face at her father. “Honestly, Father, I think we have *some* self-control!”

“All right then, lecture over. Now, assignments. You are both old enough to take on fully adult responsibilities. Amily, you are officially attached to the Royal Chronicler. You made great progress in the Heraldic Archives, which fortunately has not been completely undone in your absence. Put it back in order, then do whatever the Royal Chronicler wants you to do.” He smiled a little. “Now that the weather is turning, that won’t be a hardship; you’ll find yourself very glad to be snug in the Archives while poor Mags trudges about the city in all weathers. Mags, I want you to start establishing several personas. Things you can drop into at a moment’s notice, without attracting attention. I don’t have anything in particular that I want you to investigate at the moment, though that is likely to change at a moment’s notice, so it is best to get things in place now. Just establish things you can slip into and out of and keep your ear to the ground.”

Mags nodded. He already had some ideas there. It would be easy enough to impersonate a beggar again, for instance, and people looked right past beggars most of the time. “Is the pawn shop still in business?” he asked.

“Yes, and that will be one of your personas; I’ve been Willy the Weasel for as long as I have been doing what I do, and you’ve already got the Weasel’s nephew well established. Use your own discretion about what else you establish, and let me know what you’ve done. If you need money for anything, come to me and I’ll arrange it.”

Mags straightened a little, and nodded. So, this was quite, quite serious now. Nikolas hadn’t stipulated any budget; that meant that he was free to spend as much as he needed to. “Anything else I should be doing?” he asked.

“Well, obviously you have to have an official position as well as the clandestine one, so you’ll be assigned as a Herald down in the City, attached to the Guard. *They* know that your investigations will take you off on cases that are not theirs, and they will expect you to have to excuse yourself most of the time. I worked with this exact Guardpost back before I became King’s Own, and one of my best agents is one of their number. In fact, you know them, you’ve brought them pawned articles in the past.”

Mags brightened a little at that; he did know them, and, more to the point, they knew him.

“I’ll start right away, sir,” he said immediately.

Nikolas nodded. “Good.” He handed Mags a peculiar copper coin; it wasn’t Valdemaran, but Mags wasn’t familiar enough with coinage to know where it was from. “You’ll get your assignment paperwork tomorrow; when you get it, ride down there, and give them this along with the mandate. They’ll know what it means.”

Mags stowed the coin in his belt-pouch, and finally took a real swallow of his wine. *Straight back*



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