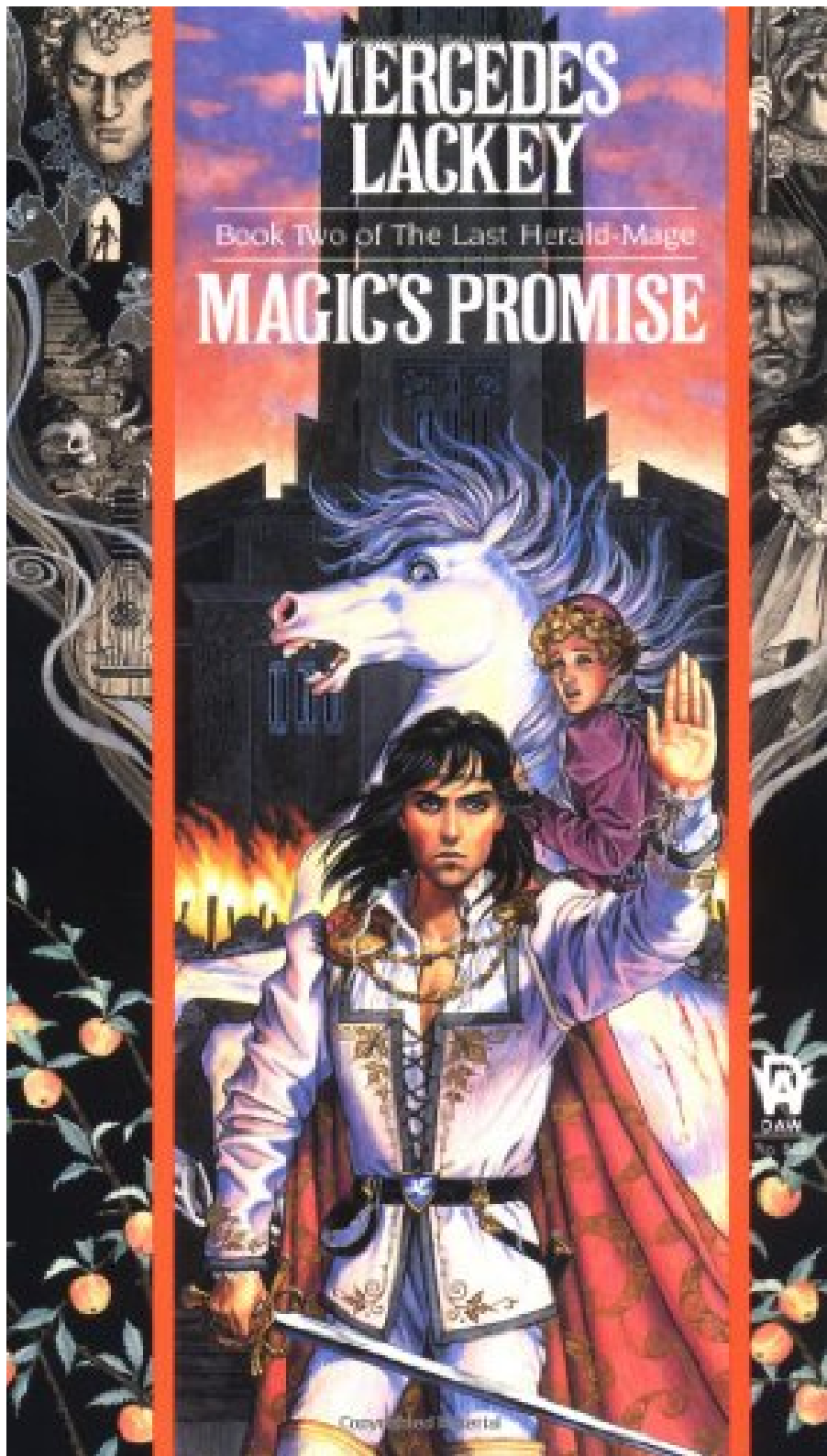


MAGIC'S PROMISE (THE LAST HERALD-MAGE SERIES, BOOK 2) BY MERCEDES LACKEY



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Review

Praise for series:

"Lackey has written another intensely wrought, finely detailed story of heroic victims struggling to do the best with their fate. Vanyel's magical strengths are countered by his very human insecurities." —VOYA

"Lackey's characterization, plotting, and wit are all of a high order. A real page-turner for any fantasy collection." —Booklist

"Emotionally tense and full of drama and magic." —Locus

"In Vanyel, [Lackey] has created her most empathetic male character to date, making our emotions run high as he meets his fate. And best of all, the very last plot twist is one of haunting beauty that will touch your heart." —RT Reviews

"In this trilogy, Lackey reaches an intensity she had only begun to achieve.... The story of Vanyel is darker than her earlier books, and the pace is unrelenting." —American Fantasy Magazine

About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds Of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com.

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It was like something out of his worst nightmares. . . .

A Herald, with a heavy carter's whip, beating the young Companion until his skin came away in strips and blood striped bright on the snowy hide, trying to separate him from his newly-Chosen boy.

Vanyel pulled on the power within him, feeling it leap, wild and undisciplined, as the other Herald staggered, prepared to lash out with the whip again. Flinging out his left hand, Van sent a lash of his own, a lash of lightning from his outstretched finger to the whipstock. The spark arced across the space between them with a crackle and the pungent smell of burning leather, and the dark, sallow-faced Herald dropped the whip with an exclamation of pain. Behind him, Yfandes was holding off the armymen with squeals, lashing hooves and bared teeth; faced with her anger, they were not inclined to come to the Herald's rescue.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" Vanyel thundered, letting the other feel his outrage, a wave of red anger. The older man backed up an involuntary pace, nursing his injured hand against his chest.

"Who are you to interfere—" he began, his face a caricature of thwarted authority.

"Herald-Mage Vanyel Ashkevron," Vanyel cut him off. "Called Demonsbane, called Shadowstalker, First Herald-Mage in Valdemar. I outrank you, Herald, and your damn fool actions tonight called me out of my bed and across the Border. You've exceeded your authority, and I'm ordering you to let this boy be. Who in hell are you?"

NOVELS BY MERCEDES LACKEY available from DAW Books:

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ARROW'S FLIGHT

ARROW'S FALL

THE LAST HERALD-MAGE

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THE GATES OF SLEEP
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THE WIZARD OF LONDON
RESERVED FOR THE CAT

UNNATURAL ISSUE
HOME FROM THE SEA
STEADFAST
BLOOD RED

And don't miss:

THE VALDEMAR COMPANION

Edited by John Helfers and Denise Little

Dedicated to:

Elizabeth (Betsy) Wollheim

Who said—"Go for it"

One

The blue leather saddlebags and a canvas pack, all bulging with filthy clothing and miscellaneous gear, landed in the corner of Vanyel's room with three dull thuds. The lute, still in its padded leather case, slithered over the back of one of the two overstuffed chairs and landed with a softer pumph, to rest in the cradle of the worn red seat cushion. Once safely there it sagged, leaning over sideways like a fat, drunken child. The dark leather lute case glowed dully in the mid-morning sun still coming in the single eastward-facing window. Two years of mistreatment had not marred the finish too much, although the case was scuffed here and there, and had been torn and remended with tiny, careful stitches along the belly.

Vanyel grimaced at the all-too-visible tear. Torn? No; no tear would be that even. Say cut, or slashed and it would be nearer the truth. Pray nobody else notices that.

Better the lute case than me . . . that came closer than I really want to think about. I hope Savil never gets a good look at it. She'd know what that meant, and she'd have a cat.

Herald-Mage Vanyel took the other chair gracelessly, dropping all his weight at once into the embrace of comfortable upholstered arms.

Home at last. Havens, I sound like the pack hitting the corner.

"O-o-oh." Vanyel leaned back, feeling every muscle in his body crying out with long-ignored aches and strains. His thoughts fumbled their way into his conscious mind through a fog of utter exhaustion. He wanted, more than anything, to close his gritty eyes. But he didn't dare, because the moment he did, he'd fall asleep.

Someday I'm going to remember I'm not sixteen anymore, and keep in mind that I can't stay up till all hours, then rise with the dawn, and not pay for it.

A few moments ago his Companion Yfandes had fallen asleep, standing up in the stable, while he was grooming her. They'd started out on this last leg of their journey long before dawn this morning, and had pushed their limits, eating up the last dregs of their strength just to get to the sanctuary of "home" the sooner.

Gods. If only I would never have to see the Karsite Border again.

No chance of that. Lord and Lady, if you love me, just give me enough time to get my wind back. That's all I ask. Time enough to feel like a human again, and not a killing machine.

The room smelled strongly of soap and the beeswax used to polish the furniture and wall paneling. He stretched, listening to his joints crack, then blinked at his surroundings.

Peculiar. Why doesn't this feel like home? He pondered for a moment, for it seemed to him that his modest, goldenoak-paneled quarters had the anonymous, overly-neat look of a room without a current occupant. I suppose that's only logical, he thought reluctantly. They haven't been occupied, much. I've been living out of my packs for the last year, and before that I was only here for a couple of weeks at a time at most. Gods.

It was a comfortable, warm—and quite average—room. Like any one of a dozen he'd tenanted lately, when he'd had the luxury of a guest room in some keep or other. Sparsely furnished with two chairs, a table, a desk and stool, and a wardrobe, a curtained, canopied bed in the corner. That bed was enormous—his one real indulgence: he tended to toss restlessly when—and if—he slept.

He smiled wryly, thinking how more than one person had assumed he'd wanted that particular bed for another reason entirely. They'd never believe it if I told them Savil gets more erotic exercise than I do. Oh, well. Maybe it's a good thing I don't have a lover; he'd wake up black and blue. Always assuming I didn't strangle him by accident during a nightmare.

But other than that bed, the room was rather plain. Only one window, and that one without much of a view. It certainly wasn't the suite he could have commanded—

But what good is a suite when I hardly see Haven, much less my own room?

He put his feet up on the low, scarred table between the chairs, in defiance of etiquette. He could have requisitioned a footstool—

But somehow I never think of it until I'm five leagues down the road headed out. There's never enough time for—for anything. Not since Elspeth died, anyway. And gods—please let me be wrong about Randle.

His eyes blurred; he shook his head to clear them. Only then did he see the pile of letters lying beside his feet, and groaned at the all-too-familiar seal on the uppermost one. The seal of Withen, Lord of Forst Reach and Vanyel's father.

Twenty-eight years old, and he still makes me feel fifteen, and in disgrace. Why me? he asked the gods, who did not choose to answer. He sighed again, and eyed the letter sourly. It was dauntingly thick.

Hellfire. It—and every other problem—can damned well wait until after I've had a bath. A bath, and something to eat that doesn't have mold on it, and something to drink besides boiled mud. Now, did I leave anything behind the last time I was here that was fit to wear?

He struggled to his feet and rummaged in the wardrobe beside his bed, finally emerging with a shirt and breeches of an old and faded blue that had once been deep sapphire. Thank the gods. Not Whites, and I won't be wearing Whites when I get home. It's going to be so nice to wear something that doesn't stain when you look at it. (Unfair, nagged his conscience—properly treated, the uniform of Heraldic Whites was so resistant to dirt and stains that the non-Heralds suspected magic. He ignored the insistent little mental voice.) Although I don't know what I'm going to do for uniforms. Dear Father would hardly have known his son, covered in mud, stubbled, ashes in his hair.

He emptied the canvas pack on the floor and rang for a page to come and take the mishandled uniforms away to be properly dealt with. They were in exceedingly sad shape; stained with grass and mud, and blood—some of it his own—some were cut and torn, and most were nearly worn-out.

He'd have taken one look and figured I'd been possessed. Not that the Karsites didn't try that, too. At least near-possession doesn't leave stains . . . not on uniforms, anyway. What am I going to do for uniforms? Oh, well—worry about that after my bath.

The bathing room was at the other end of the long, wood-paneled, stone-floored hallway; at mid-morning there was no one in the hall, much less competing for the tubs and hot water. Vanyel made the long trudge in a half-daze, thinking only how good the hot water would feel. The last bath he'd had—except for the quick one at the inn last night—had been in a cold stream. A very cold stream. And with sand, not soap.

Once there, he shed his clothing and left it in a heap on the floor, filled the largest of the three wooden tubs from the copper boiler, and slid into the hot water with a sigh—

—and woke up with his arms draped over the edges and going numb, his head sagging down on his chest, and the water lukewarm and growing colder.

A hand gently touched his shoulder.

He knew without looking that it had to be a fellow Herald—if it hadn't been, if it had even been someone as innocuous as a strange page, Vanyel's tightly-strung nerves and battle-sharpened reflexes would have done the unforgivable. He'd have sent the intruder through the wall before he himself had even crawled out of the depths of sleep. Probably by nonmagical means, but—magical or nonmagical, he suddenly realized that he could easily hurt someone if he wasn't careful.

He shivered a little. I'm hair triggered. And that's not good.

“Unless you plan on turning into a fish-man,” Herald Tantras said, craning his head around the partition screening the tub from the rest of the bathing room and into Vanyel's view with cautious care, “you'd better get out of that tub. I'm surprised you didn't drown yourself.”

“So am I.” Vanyel blinked, tried to clear his head of cobwebs, and peered over his shoulder. “Where did you pop out of?”

“Heard you got back a couple of candlemarks ago, and I figured you'd head here first.” Tantras chuckled. “I know you and your baths. But I must admit I didn't expect to find you turning yourself into a raisin.”

The dark-haired, dusky Herald came around the side of the wooden partition with an armload of towels. Vanyel watched him with a half-smile of not-too-purely artistic appreciation; Tantras was as graceful and as handsome as a king stag in his prime. Not shay'a'chern, but a good friend, and that was all too rare.

And getting rarer, Vanyel thought soberly. Though, Havens, I haven't exactly had my fill of romantic companionship either, lately . . . well, celibacy isn't going to kill me. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Gods, I should apply for the priesthood.

There was concern in the older Herald's deep, soft eyes. “You don't look good, Van. I figured you'd be tired—but from the way you passed out here—it must have been worse out there than I thought.”

“It was bad,” Vanyel said shortly, reluctant to discuss the past year. Even for the most powerful Herald-Mage in the Circle, holding down the positions of five other Herald-Mages while they recovered from

magical attack, drainage, and shock was not a mission he wanted to think about for a long while, much less repeat. He soaped his hair, then ducked his head under the water to rinse it.

“So I heard. When I saw you playing dead in the tub, I sent a page up to your room with food and wine and sent another one off for some of my spare uniforms, since we’re about the same size.”

“Name the price, it’s yours,” Vanyel said gratefully, levering himself out of the tub with a groan and accepting the towel Tantras held out to him. “I have nothing worth wearing right now in the way of uniforms.”

“Lord and Lady—” the other Herald swore, looking at him with shock. “What have you been doing to yourself?”

Vanyel paused in his vigorous toweling, looked down, and was a little surprised himself at the evidence of damage. He’d always been lean—but now he was whipcord and bone and nothing else. Then there were the scars—knife and sword scars, a scoring of parallel claw marks on his chest where that demon had tried to remove his heart. Burn marks, too—he was striped from neck to knee with three thin, white lines where mage-lightning had gotten through his shields. And there were a few other scars that were souvenirs of his bout with a master of mage-fire.

“My job. Living on the edge. Trying to convince the Karsites that I was five Herald-Mages. Playing target.” He shrugged dismissively. “That’s all. Nothing any of you wouldn’t have done if you could have.”

“Gods, Van,” Tantras replied, with a hint of guilt. “You make me feel like a shirker. I hope to hell it was worth what you went through.”

Vanyel compressed his lips into a tight line. “I got the bastard that got Mardic and Donni. And you can spread that as official.”

Tantras closed his eyes for a moment, and bowed his head. “It was worth it,” he said faintly.

Vanyel nodded. “Worth every scar. I may have accomplished something else; that particular necromancer had a flock of pet demons and I turned them back on Karse when I killed him.” He smiled, or rather, stretched his mouth a little. “I hope it taught the Karsites a lesson. I hope they end up proscribing magic altogether on their side of the Border. If you can believe anything out of Karse, there’s rumor that they’re doing just that.”

Tantras looked up again. “Hard on the Gifted—” he ventured.

Vanyel didn’t answer. He was finding it very hard to feel sorry for anyone on the Karsite side of the Border at the moment. It was uncharitable, un-Heraldic, but until certain wounds healed—and not the physical ones—he was inclined to be uncharitable.

“There’s more silver in your hair, too,” Tantras observed, head to one side.

Vanyel made a face, just as glad of the change in subject. “Node-magic. Every time I tap into it, more of my roots go white. Moondance k’Treva was pure silver by the time he was my age; I guess I’m more resistant.” He smiled, it was faint, but a real smile this time. “One nice thing; all those white hairs give me respect I might not otherwise get!”

He finished drying himself and wrapped the towel around his waist. Tantras grimaced again—probably noting the knife wound on his back—and handed him another towel for his hair.

“You already paid that forfeit, by the way,” he said, plainly trying to lighten the conversation.

Vanyel stopped toweling off his hair and raised an eyebrow.

“You stood duty for me last Sovvan.”

Vanyel clamped down on the sudden ache of loss and shrugged again. You know you get depressed when you’re tired, fool. Don’t let it sink you. “Oh, that. Any time, Tran. You know I don’t like Sovvan-night celebrations, I can’t handle the memorial services, and I don’t like to be alone, either. Standing relay duty was as good as anything else to keep my mind off things.”

He was grateful when Tantras didn’t press the subject. “Think you can make it to your room all right?” the other asked. “I said you don’t look good; I mean it. Falling asleep in the tub like that—it makes me wonder if you’re going to pass out in the hall.”

Vanyel produced something more like a dry cough than a laugh. “It’s nothing about a week’s worth of sleep won’t cure,” he replied. “And I’m sorry I won’t be able to stand relay for you this year, but I have the Obligatory Familial Visit to discharge. I haven’t been home in—gods, four years. And even then I didn’t stay for more than a day or two. They’re going to want me to make the long stay I’ve been promising. There’s a letter from my father waiting for me that’s probably reminding me of just that fact.”

“Parents surely know how to load on the guilt, don’t they? Well, if you’re out of reach, Randale won’t find something for you to do—but is that going to be rest?” Tantras looked half-amused and half-worried. “I mean, Van, that family of yours—”

“They won’t come after me when I’m sleeping—which I fully intend to do a lot of.” He pulled on his old, clean clothing, reveling in the feel of clean, soft cloth against his skin, and started to gather up his things. “And the way I feel right now, I’d just as soon play hermit in my rooms when I get there—”

“Leave that stuff,” Tantras interrupted. “I’ll deal with it. You go wrap yourself around a decent meal. You don’t look like you’ve had one in months.”

“I haven’t. They don’t believe in worldly pleasures down there. Great proponents of mortification of the flesh for the good of the spirit.” Vanyel looked up in time to catch Tantras’ raised eyebrow. He made a tragic face. “I know what you’re thinking. That, too. Especially that. Gods. Do you have any idea what it was like, being surrounded by all those devastatingly handsome young men and not daring to so much as flirt with one?”

“Were the young ladies just as devastatingly attractive?” Tantras asked, grinning.

“I would say so—given that the subject’s fairly abstract for me.”

“Then I think I can imagine it. Remind me to avoid the Karsite Border at all costs.”

Vanyel found himself grinning back—another real smile, and from the heart. “Tran, gods—I’m glad to see you. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve been able to talk freely to someone? To joke, for Lady’s sake? Since I was around people who don’t wince away when I’m minus a few clothes?”

“Are you on about that again?” Tantras asked, incredulously. “Do you really think that people are nervous around you because you’re shaych?”

“I’m what?” Van asked, startled by the unfamiliar term.

“Shaych. Short for that Hawkbrother word you and Savil use. Don’t know where it came from, just seems like one day everybody was using it.” Tantras leaned back against the white-tiled wall of the bathing room, folding his arms across his chest in a deceptively lazy pose. “Maybe because you’re as prominent as you are. Can’t go around calling the most powerful Herald-Mage in the Circle a ‘pervert,’ after all.” He grinned. “He might turn you into a frog.”

Vanyel shook his head again. “Gods, I have been out of touch to miss that little bit of slang. Yes, of course because I’m shay’a’chern, why else would people look at me sideways?”

“Because you scare the hell out of them,” Tantras replied, his smile fading. “Because you are as powerful as you are; because you’re so quiet and so solitary, and they never know what you’re thinking. Havens, these days half the Heralds don’t even know you’re shaych; it’s the Mage-Gift that makes them look at you sideways. Not that anybody around here cares about your bedmates a quarter as much as you seem to think. They’re a lot more worried that—oh—a bird will crap on you and you’ll level the Palace.”

“Me?” Vanyel stared at him in disbelief.

“You. You’ve spent most of the last four or five years in combat zones. We know your reflexes are hypersensitive. Hellfire, that’s why I came in here to wake you up instead of sending a page. We know what you can do. Van, nobody I’ve ever heard of was able to take the place of five Herald-Mages by himself! And the very idea of one person having that much power at his beck and call scares most people witless!”

Vanyel was caught without a reply; he stared at Tantras with the towel hanging limply from his hands.

“I’m telling you the plain truth, Van. I wish you’d stop wincing away from people with no cause. It’s not your sexual preferences that scare them, it’s you. Level the Palace, hell—they know you could level Haven if you wanted to—”

Vanyel came out of his trance of astonishment. “What do they think I am?” he scoffed, picking up his filthy shirt.

“They don’t know; they haven’t the Mage-Gift and most of them weren’t trained around Herald-Mages. They hear stories, and they think of the Mage Wars—and they remember that once, before there was a Valdemar, there was a thriving land to the far south of us. Now the Dhorisha Plains are there—a very large, circular crater. No cities, no sign there ever was anything, not even two stones left standing. Nothing but grass and nomads. Van, leave that stuff; I’ll pick up after you.”

“But—” Vanyel began to object.

“Look, if you can spend most of a year substituting for five of us, then one of us can pick up after you once in a while.” Tantras took the wet towels away from him, cutting off his objections before he could make them. “Honestly, Van.”

“If you insist.” He wanted to touch Tantras’ mind to see if he really meant what he said. It seemed a fantastical notion.

But Tran had not invited, and a Herald did not intrude uninvited into another’s mind, not unless there was an overriding need to do so.

“Is . . . that how you feel?” he asked in a whisper.

“I’m not afraid of you, but let me tell you, I wouldn’t have your powers for any reward. I’m glad I’m just a

Herald and not a Herald-Mage, and I don't know how you survive it. So just let me spoil you a little, all right?"

Vanyel managed a weak smile, troubled by several things—including that “just a Herald” business. That implied a division between Heralds and Herald-Mages that made him very uneasy. “All right, old friend. Spoil me. I'm just tired enough to let you.”

The fog of weariness came between him and the corridor, and he was finding it all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. Lady, bless you for Tantras. There aren't many even among the Heralds I trained with that will accept what I am as easily as he does. Whether it's that I'm a Mage or that I'm fey—although I can't see why Mage-powers would frighten someone. We've had Herald-Mages since there was a Valdemar.

I wish he was as right about that as he thinks he is; I still think it's the other thing.

The stone was so cool and soothing to his feet; it eased the ache in them that was the legacy of too many hours—days—weeks—when he had slept fully clothed, ready to defend the Border in the blackest, bleakest hours of the night.

That reminder brought bleaker thoughts. Every time he came back to Haven it was with the knowledge that there would be fewer familiar faces to greet him. So many friends gone—not that I ever had many to begin with. Lancir, Mardic and Donni, Regen, Dorilyn. Wulgra, Kat, Pretor. All gone. Not many left besides Tran. There's—Jays. Savil. Andy, and he's a Healer. Erdane, Breda, a couple of the other Bards. How can I be anything but solitary? Every year I'm more alone.

* * *

True to Tantras' promise, Vanyel found an overflowing plate waiting for him beside the pile of letters. It held a pair of meat pies, soft white cheese, and apples, and beside the generous plate of food was an equally generous pitcher of wine.

I'd better be careful with that stuff. I'm not used to it anymore, and I bet it'll go straight to my head.

He stifled a groan as he sagged down into the empty chair, poured a goblet of wine, then picked up the topmost letter. He broke the seal on it, gritted his teeth, and started in.

To Herald-Mage Vanyel from Lord Withen Ashkevron of Forst Reach: My dear Son—

Vanyel nearly dropped the letter in surprise, and reread the salutation to be certain that his eyes hadn't played tricks on him.

Great good gods. “My dear Son?” I haven't been “dear,” much less “Son” for—years! I wonder what happened—

He took a long breath and continued.

Though you might find it difficult to believe, I am pleased and grateful that you are going to be able to find the time for an extended visit home. Despite our differences, and some hard words between us, I am very proud of my Herald-Mage son. I may not care for some aspects of your life, but I respect your intelligence and good sense. I confess, Vanyel, that your old father has need of some of that good sense. I need your help in dealing with your brother Mekeal.

Vanyel nodded to himself with cynicism. Now we come to it.

He has made some excessively poor judgments since I turned over the management of some of the lands to him, but this spring he has outdone himself. He's taken the cattle—good, solid income-producing stock—off Long Meadow and installed sheep down there instead!

Vanyel chuckled. Whoever Withen had roped into being his scribe on this letter had reproduced his father's tones perfectly. He could feel the indignation rising from the page.

And as for that so-called "Shin'a'in warsteed" he bought—and a more ill-tempered, ill-favored beast I never saw—the less said, the better! All these years I spent in building up the Forst Reach line—and he'll undo it all with one unmanageable stud! I feel sure he'll listen to you; you're a Herald—the King himself trusts your judgment. The boy has me ready to throw him down the blamed well!

Vanyel shifted a little and reached for a wedge of cheese. This letter was proving to be a lot more enlightening than he'd had any reason to expect.

This is no time for Meke to be mucking about; not when there may be trouble across the Border. Maybe you remember that alliance marriage between Deveran Remoerdis of Lineas and Ylyna Mavelan of Baires? The one that brought a halt to the Linean-Baires war, and that brought that minstrel through here that you were so taken with as a boy? It doesn't seem to be working out. There've been rumors for years that the oldest child was a bastard—now Deveran seems to have given substance to those rumors; he's disinherited the boy in favor of the next in line. In some ways I can't blame him too much; even if the lad didn't look so much like his uncle—I've seen both the boy and the man, and the resemblance is uncanny—the rumors alone would have been enough to make his inheritance shaky. I wouldn't trust that entire Mavelan family, frankly. A pack of wizardly snakes, the lot of them, the only time they stop striking at each other is when they take on an outsider. I only thank the gods that they've stayed at each other's throats all this time. But there've been some nasty noises out of them about Tashir's disinheritance and if it gets to be more than noises, we may have trouble across the Border. Your brother is all fired up for a war, by the way. Gods, that is the last thing we need. I just thank the Lady that Randale had the good sense to send a plain Herald into Lineas as envoy, and not a Herald-Mage. A good solid Herald might be able to keep this from growing into another feud like the one the marriage was supposed to stop in the first place. The Lineans will certainly be far more inclined to listen to a plain Herald; they don't trust anything that smacks of wizardry, and given what the Mavelans did to them, who can blame them?

Vanyel bit his lip, the half-eaten scrap of cheese dangling forgotten from his fingers. Withen was showing a great deal more political astuteness than he'd ever given his father credit for. But this business in Lineas—

Please, he sent up a silent prayer. Not now—

It's evidently worrisome enough that Randale sent your sister Lissa and her Guard Company to keep a cross-Border eye on the Mavelans. You'd know what that would mean better than your old father, I think. If we're lucky and things stay calm, perhaps she can slip off for a few days' visit herself. I know you'd both like that. By the way—I hope you aren't planning on bringing any of your—friends—home with you, are you? You know it would upset your mother. You wouldn't want to upset your mother. By the hand of Radevel Ashkevron and my seal, Lord Withen Ashkevron.

Vanyel grimaced, dropped the letter back down on the table, and reached for the wine to take the bitter taste of those last words out of his mouth. He held the cool metal of the goblet to his forehead for a moment, an automatic reaction to a pain more emotional than physical.

:He doesn't mean to hurt, Chosen.: Yfandes' mindvoice touched the bitterness, but could not soothe it.

:Awake again, dearling? You should sleep—:

:Too much noise, she objected. :Equitation lessons, and I'm too tired to find a quiet corner of the Field. I'll just stand here by the stable and let the sun bake my sore muscles and wait for the babies to go away. Your father truly does not mean to hurt you.:

Vanyel sighed, and picked up a meat pie, nibbling the flaky crust listlessly. :I know that. It doesn't stop it from hurting. If I weren't so tired, it probably wouldn't hurt as much. If I weren't so tired, it might even be funny.: He swallowed another gulp of wine, painfully aware that even the simple act of chewing was becoming an effort. He put the pie down.

:You have nothing left, she stated. :No reserves at all.:

:That's ridiculous, love. It's just that last push we made. And if I haven't anything left, then neither have you—:

:Not true. I may be spent physically, but you are spent emotionally, magically, mentally. Chosen, beloved, you have not spared yourself since Elspeth Peacemaker died.:

:That's because nobody had a choice, he reminded her, reaching for a piece of cheese, but holding it up and staring at it, not eating it, seeing other times and places. :Everybody else has been pushed just as hard. The moment poor Randale took the throne that fragile peace she had made for us fell to pieces. We had no warning it was going to come to that. Mardic and Donni—:

The cold hand of grief choked his throat. The lifebonded couple who had been such steadfast friends and supporters to him had been two of the first victims of the Karsite attacks. He could feel the echo of his grief in the mourning of Yfandes' mind-voice.

:Poor children. Goddess hold them—:

:Fandes—at least they died together. I—could wish—: he cut off the thought before he could distress her. He contemplated the white wedge of cheese in his hand as if he had never seen anything like it, and then blinked, and began nibbling at it, trying to force the food around the knot of sorrow blocking his throat. He had to eat. He'd been surviving on handfuls of parched corn, dried fruit, and dried beef for too long. He had to get his strength back. It wouldn't be long before Randale would need him again. Well, all he really needed was a couple of weeks of steady meals and sleep. . . .

:You ask too much of yourself.:

:Who, me? Strange thoughts from a Companion. Who was it who used to keep nagging me about duty?: He tried to put a measure of humorous teasing into his own mindvoice, but it felt flat.

:But you cannot be twenty places at once, Chosen. You are no longer thinking clearly.:

The cheese had finally migrated inside him, and most of the lump in his throat was gone. He sighed and reached for the meat pie again. With enough wine to help, he might be able to get that down, too.

The trouble was, 'Fandes was right. For the past few months he'd been reduced to a level where he really wasn't thinking much at all—just concentrating on each step as it came, and trying to survive it. It had been like climbing a mountain at the end of a long and grueling race; just worrying about one handhold at a time. Not thinking about the possibility of falling, and not able to think about what he'd do when he got to the top. If he got to the top. If there was a top.

Stupid, Herald. Looking at the bark and never noticing the tree was about to fall on you.

The sun coming in his window had crept down off the chair and onto the floor, making a bright square on the brown braided rug. He chewed and swallowed methodically, not really tasting what he was eating, and stared at the glowing square, his mind going blank and numb.

:Randle uses you beyond your strength, because of the nodes,: Yfandes said accusingly, breaking into his near-trance. :You should say something. He'd stop if he realized what he was doing to you. If you were like other Heralds, unable to tap them—:

:If I were like other Heralds, the Karsites would be halfway to Haven now, instead of only holding the disputed lands,: he replied mildly. :Dearest, there is no choice. I lost my chance at choices a long time ago. Besides, I'm not as badly off as you think. All I need is a bit of rest and I'll be fine. We're damned lucky I can use the nodes—and that I don't need to rest to recharge.:

:Except that you must use your power to focus and control —:

He shook his head. :Beloved, I appreciate what you're telling me, but this isn't getting us anywhere. I have to do what I'm doing; I'm a Herald. It's what any of the others would do in my place. It's what 'Lendel—:

Grief—he fought it, clenching his hand hard on the arm of his chair as he willed his emotions into control. Control yourself, Herald. This is just because you're tired, it's maudlin, and it doesn't do you or anyone else any good.

:I could wish you were less alone.:

:Don't encourage me in self-pity, love. It's funny, isn't it?: he replied, his lips twitching involuntarily, though not with amusement. :Dear Father seems to think I've been seducing every susceptible young man from here to the Border, and I've been damned near celibate. The last was—when?: The weeks, the months, they all seemed to blur together into one long endurance trial. A brief moment of companionship, then a parting; inevitable, given his duties and Jonne's.

:Three years ago,: Yfandes supplied, immediately. :That rather sweet Guardsman.:

Vanyel remembered the person, though not the time.

“Hello. You're The Herald-Mage, aren't you?”

Vanyel looked up from the map he was studying, and smiled. He couldn't help it—the diffident, shy smile the Guardsman wore begged to be answered.

“Yes—are you—”

“Guardsman Jonne. Your guide. I was born not half a league from here.” The guileless expression, the tanned face and thatch of hair, the tiny net of humor lines about the thoughtful hazel eyes, all conspired to make Vanyel like this man immediately.

“Then you, friend Jonne, are the direct answer to my prayers,” he said.

Only later, when they were alone, did he learn what other prayers the Guardsman had an answer for—

:Jonne. Odd for such a tough fighter to be so diffident, even gentle. Though why he should have been shy,

when he was five years older and had twice my—uh—experience—:

:Your reputation, beloved. A living legend came down off his pedestal and looked to him for company.:
Yfandes sent him an image of a marble saint-statue hopping out of its niche and wriggling its eyebrows in a come-hither look. There was enough of a tired giggle in her mind-voice to get an equally tired chuckle out of him. But he sobered again almost immediately. :And that lasted how long? Two months? Three? Certainly not more.:

:You were busy—you had duties—both of you. It was your duties that parted you.:

MAGIC'S PROMISE (THE LAST HERALD-MAGE SERIES, BOOK 2) BY MERCEDES LACKEY PDF

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But for Vanyel, there can be no rest. Not when his Companion, Yfandes, receives a summons which can't be ignored—a desperate cry of a magical holocaust in the neighboring kingdom. Almost overwhelmed by the devastations they discover there, Herald-Mage and Companion must try to unravel this tragic mystery.

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About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds Of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com.

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It was like something out of his worst nightmares. . . .

A Herald, with a heavy carter's whip, beating the young Companion until his skin came away in strips and blood striped bright on the snowy hide, trying to separate him from his newly-Chosen boy.

Vanyel pulled on the power within him, feeling it leap, wild and undisciplined, as the other Herald staggered, prepared to lash out with the whip again. Flinging out his left hand, Van sent a lash of his own, a lash of lightning from his outstretched finger to the whipstock. The spark arced across the space between them with a crackle and the pungent smell of burning leather, and the dark, sallow-faced Herald dropped the whip with an exclamation of pain. Behind him, Yfandes was holding off the armsmen with squeals, lashing hooves and bared teeth; faced with her anger, they were not inclined to come to the Herald's rescue.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" Vanyel thundered, letting the other feel his outrage, a wave of red anger. The older man backed up an involuntary pace, nursing his injured hand against his chest.

"Who are you to interfere—" he began, his face a caricature of thwarted authority.

“Herald-Mage Vanyel Ashkevron,” Vanyel cut him off. “Called Demonsbane, called Shadowstalker, First Herald-Mage in Valdemar. I outrank you, Herald, and your damn fool actions tonight called me out of my bed and across the Border. You’ve exceeded your authority, and I’m ordering you to let this boy be. Who in hell are you?”

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Edited by John Helfers and Denise Little

Dedicated to:

Elizabeth (Betsy) Wollheim

Who said—"Go for it"

One

The blue leather saddlebags and a canvas pack, all bulging with filthy clothing and miscellaneous gear, landed in the corner of Vanyel's room with three dull thuds. The lute, still in its padded leather case, slithered over the back of one of the two overstuffed chairs and landed with a softer pumph, to rest in the cradle of the worn red seat cushion. Once safely there it sagged, leaning over sideways like a fat, drunken child. The dark leather lute case glowed dully in the mid-morning sun still coming in the single eastward-facing window. Two years of mistreatment had not marred the finish too much, although the case was scuffed here and there, and had been torn and remended with tiny, careful stitches along the belly.

Vanyel grimaced at the all-too-visible tear. Torn? No; no tear would be that even. Say cut, or slashed and it would be nearer the truth. Pray nobody else notices that.

Better the lute case than me . . . that came closer than I really want to think about. I hope Savil never gets a good look at it. She'd know what that meant, and she'd have a cat.

Herald-Mage Vanyel took the other chair gracelessly, dropping all his weight at once into the embrace of comfortable upholstered arms.

Home at last. Havens, I sound like the pack hitting the corner.

“O-o-oh.” Vanyel leaned back, feeling every muscle in his body crying out with long-ignored aches and strains. His thoughts fumbled their way into his conscious mind through a fog of utter exhaustion. He wanted, more than anything, to close his gritty eyes. But he didn’t dare, because the moment he did, he’d fall asleep.

Someday I’m going to remember I’m not sixteen anymore, and keep in mind that I can’t stay up till all hours, then rise with the dawn, and not pay for it.

A few moments ago his Companion Yfandes had fallen asleep, standing up in the stable, while he was grooming her. They’d started out on this last leg of their journey long before dawn this morning, and had pushed their limits, eating up the last dregs of their strength just to get to the sanctuary of “home” the sooner.

Gods. If only I would never have to see the Karsite Border again.

No chance of that. Lord and Lady, if you love me, just give me enough time to get my wind back. That’s all I ask. Time enough to feel like a human again, and not a killing machine.

The room smelled strongly of soap and the beeswax used to polish the furniture and wall paneling. He stretched, listening to his joints crack, then blinked at his surroundings.

Peculiar. Why doesn’t this feel like home? He pondered for a moment, for it seemed to him that his modest, goldenoak-paneled quarters had the anonymous, overly-neat look of a room without a current occupant. I suppose that’s only logical, he thought reluctantly. They haven’t been occupied, much. I’ve been living out of my packs for the last year, and before that I was only here for a couple of weeks at a time at most. Gods.

It was a comfortable, warm—and quite average—room. Like any one of a dozen he’d tenanted lately, when he’d had the luxury of a guest room in some keep or other. Sparsely furnished with two chairs, a table, a desk and stool, and a wardrobe, a curtained, canopied bed in the corner. That bed was enormous—his one real indulgence: he tended to toss restlessly when—and if—he slept.

He smiled wryly, thinking how more than one person had assumed he’d wanted that particular bed for another reason entirely. They’d never believe it if I told them Savil gets more erotic exercise than I do. Oh, well. Maybe it’s a good thing I don’t have a lover; he’d wake up black and blue. Always assuming I didn’t strangle him by accident during a nightmare.

But other than that bed, the room was rather plain. Only one window, and that one without much of a view. It certainly wasn’t the suite he could have commanded—

But what good is a suite when I hardly see Haven, much less my own room?

He put his feet up on the low, scarred table between the chairs, in defiance of etiquette. He could have requisitioned a footstool—

But somehow I never think of it until I’m five leagues down the road headed out. There’s never enough time for—for anything. Not since Elspeth died, anyway. And gods—please let me be wrong about Randle.

His eyes blurred; he shook his head to clear them. Only then did he see the pile of letters lying beside his

feet, and groaned at the all-too-familiar seal on the uppermost one. The seal of Withen, Lord of Forst Reach and Vanyel's father.

Twenty-eight years old, and he still makes me feel fifteen, and in disgrace. Why me? he asked the gods, who did not choose to answer. He sighed again, and eyed the letter sourly. It was dauntingly thick.

Hellfire. It—and every other problem—can damned well wait until after I've had a bath. A bath, and something to eat that doesn't have mold on it, and something to drink besides boiled mud. Now, did I leave anything behind the last time I was here that was fit to wear?

He struggled to his feet and rummaged in the wardrobe beside his bed, finally emerging with a shirt and breeches of an old and faded blue that had once been deep sapphire. Thank the gods. Not Whites, and I won't be wearing Whites when I get home. It's going to be so nice to wear something that doesn't stain when you look at it. (Unfair, nagged his conscience—properly treated, the uniform of Heraldic Whites was so resistant to dirt and stains that the non-Heralds suspected magic. He ignored the insistent little mental voice.) Although I don't know what I'm going to do for uniforms. Dear Father would hardly have known his son, covered in mud, stubbled, ashes in his hair.

He emptied the canvas pack on the floor and rang for a page to come and take the mishandled uniforms away to be properly dealt with. They were in exceedingly sad shape; stained with grass and mud, and blood—some of it his own—some were cut and torn, and most were nearly worn-out.

He'd have taken one look and figured I'd been possessed. Not that the Karsites didn't try that, too. At least near-possession doesn't leave stains . . . not on uniforms, anyway. What am I going to do for uniforms? Oh, well—worry about that after my bath.

The bathing room was at the other end of the long, wood-paneled, stone-floored hallway; at mid-morning there was no one in the hall, much less competing for the tubs and hot water. Vanyel made the long trudge in a half-daze, thinking only how good the hot water would feel. The last bath he'd had—except for the quick one at the inn last night—had been in a cold stream. A very cold stream. And with sand, not soap.

Once there, he shed his clothing and left it in a heap on the floor, filled the largest of the three wooden tubs from the copper boiler, and slid into the hot water with a sigh—

—and woke up with his arms draped over the edges and going numb, his head sagging down on his chest, and the water lukewarm and growing colder.

A hand gently touched his shoulder.

He knew without looking that it had to be a fellow Herald—if it hadn't been, if it had even been someone as innocuous as a strange page, Vanyel's tightly-strung nerves and battle-sharpened reflexes would have done the unforgivable. He'd have sent the intruder through the wall before he himself had even crawled out of the depths of sleep. Probably by nonmagical means, but—magical or nonmagical, he suddenly realized that he could easily hurt someone if he wasn't careful.

He shivered a little. I'm hair triggered. And that's not good.

“Unless you plan on turning into a fish-man,” Herald Tantras said, craning his head around the partition screening the tub from the rest of the bathing room and into Vanyel's view with cautious care, “you'd better get out of that tub. I'm surprised you didn't drown yourself.”

“So am I.” Vanyel blinked, tried to clear his head of cobwebs, and peered over his shoulder. “Where did you pop out of?”

“Heard you got back a couple of candlemarks ago, and I figured you’d head here first.” Tantras chuckled. “I know you and your baths. But I must admit I didn’t expect to find you turning yourself into a raisin.”

The dark-haired, dusky Herald came around the side of the wooden partition with an armload of towels. Vanyel watched him with a half-smile of not-too-purely artistic appreciation; Tantras was as graceful and as handsome as a king stag in his prime. Not shay’a’chern, but a good friend, and that was all too rare.

And getting rarer, Vanyel thought soberly. Though, Havens, I haven’t exactly had my fill of romantic companionship either, lately . . . well, celibacy isn’t going to kill me. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Gods, I should apply for the priesthood.

There was concern in the older Herald’s deep, soft eyes. “You don’t look good, Van. I figured you’d be tired—but from the way you passed out here—it must have been worse out there than I thought.”

“It was bad,” Vanyel said shortly, reluctant to discuss the past year. Even for the most powerful Herald-Mage in the Circle, holding down the positions of five other Herald-Mages while they recovered from magical attack, drainage, and shock was not a mission he wanted to think about for a long while, much less repeat. He soaped his hair, then ducked his head under the water to rinse it.

“So I heard. When I saw you playing dead in the tub, I sent a page up to your room with food and wine and sent another one off for some of my spare uniforms, since we’re about the same size.”

“Name the price, it’s yours,” Vanyel said gratefully, levering himself out of the tub with a groan and accepting the towel Tantras held out to him. “I have nothing worth wearing right now in the way of uniforms.”

“Lord and Lady—” the other Herald swore, looking at him with shock. “What have you been doing to yourself?”

Vanyel paused in his vigorous toweling, looked down, and was a little surprised himself at the evidence of damage. He’d always been lean—but now he was whipcord and bone and nothing else. Then there were the scars—knife and sword scars, a scoring of parallel claw marks on his chest where that demon had tried to remove his heart. Burn marks, too—he was striped from neck to knee with three thin, white lines where mage-lightning had gotten through his shields. And there were a few other scars that were souvenirs of his bout with a master of mage-fire.

“My job. Living on the edge. Trying to convince the Karsites that I was five Herald-Mages. Playing target.” He shrugged dismissively. “That’s all. Nothing any of you wouldn’t have done if you could have.”

“Gods, Van,” Tantras replied, with a hint of guilt. “You make me feel like a shirker. I hope to hell it was worth what you went through.”

Vanyel compressed his lips into a tight line. “I got the bastard that got Mardic and Donni. And you can spread that as official.”

Tantras closed his eyes for a moment, and bowed his head. “It was worth it,” he said faintly.

Vanyel nodded. “Worth every scar. I may have accomplished something else; that particular necromancer had a flock of pet demons and I turned them back on Karse when I killed him.” He smiled, or rather,

stretched his mouth a little. “I hope it taught the Karsites a lesson. I hope they end up proscribing magic altogether on their side of the Border. If you can believe anything out of Karse, there’s rumor that they’re doing just that.”

Tantras looked up again. “Hard on the Gifted—” he ventured.

Vanyel didn’t answer. He was finding it very hard to feel sorry for anyone on the Karsite side of the Border at the moment. It was uncharitable, un-Heraldic, but until certain wounds healed—and not the physical ones—he was inclined to be uncharitable.

“There’s more silver in your hair, too,” Tantras observed, head to one side.

Vanyel made a face, just as glad of the change in subject. “Node-magic. Every time I tap into it, more of my roots go white. Moondance k’Treva was pure silver by the time he was my age; I guess I’m more resistant.” He smiled, it was faint, but a real smile this time. “One nice thing; all those white hairs give me respect I might not otherwise get!”

He finished drying himself and wrapped the towel around his waist. Tantras grimaced again—probably noting the knife wound on his back—and handed him another towel for his hair.

“You already paid that forfeit, by the way,” he said, plainly trying to lighten the conversation.

Vanyel stopped toweling off his hair and raised an eyebrow.

“You stood duty for me last Sovvan.”

Vanyel clamped down on the sudden ache of loss and shrugged again. You know you get depressed when you’re tired, fool. Don’t let it sink you. “Oh, that. Any time, Tran. You know I don’t like Sovvan-night celebrations, I can’t handle the memorial services, and I don’t like to be alone, either. Standing relay duty was as good as anything else to keep my mind off things.”

He was grateful when Tantras didn’t press the subject. “Think you can make it to your room all right?” the other asked. “I said you don’t look good; I mean it. Falling asleep in the tub like that—it makes me wonder if you’re going to pass out in the hall.”

Vanyel produced something more like a dry cough than a laugh. “It’s nothing about a week’s worth of sleep won’t cure,” he replied. “And I’m sorry I won’t be able to stand relay for you this year, but I have the Obligatory Familial Visit to discharge. I haven’t been home in—gods, four years. And even then I didn’t stay for more than a day or two. They’re going to want me to make the long stay I’ve been promising. There’s a letter from my father waiting for me that’s probably reminding me of just that fact.”

“Parents surely know how to load on the guilt, don’t they? Well, if you’re out of reach, Randle won’t find something for you to do—but is that going to be rest?” Tantras looked half-amused and half-worried. “I mean, Van, that family of yours—”

“They won’t come after me when I’m sleeping—which I fully intend to do a lot of.” He pulled on his old, clean clothing, reveling in the feel of clean, soft cloth against his skin, and started to gather up his things. “And the way I feel right now, I’d just as soon play hermit in my rooms when I get there—”

“Leave that stuff,” Tantras interrupted. “I’ll deal with it. You go wrap yourself around a decent meal. You don’t look like you’ve had one in months.”

“I haven’t. They don’t believe in worldly pleasures down there. Great proponents of mortification of the flesh for the good of the spirit.” Vanyel looked up in time to catch Tantras’ raised eyebrow. He made a tragic face. “I know what you’re thinking. That, too. Especially that. Gods. Do you have any idea what it was like, being surrounded by all those devastatingly handsome young men and not daring to so much as flirt with one?”

“Were the young ladies just as devastatingly attractive?” Tantras asked, grinning.

“I would say so—given that the subject’s fairly abstract for me.”

“Then I think I can imagine it. Remind me to avoid the Karsite Border at all costs.”

Vanyel found himself grinning back—another real smile, and from the heart. “Tran, gods—I’m glad to see you. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve been able to talk freely to someone? To joke, for Lady’s sake? Since I was around people who don’t wince away when I’m minus a few clothes?”

“Are you on about that again?” Tantras asked, incredulously. “Do you really think that people are nervous around you because you’re shaych?”

“I’m what?” Van asked, startled by the unfamiliar term.

“Shaych. Short for that Hawkbrother word you and Savil use. Don’t know where it came from, just seems like one day everybody was using it.” Tantras leaned back against the white-tiled wall of the bathing room, folding his arms across his chest in a deceptively lazy pose. “Maybe because you’re as prominent as you are. Can’t go around calling the most powerful Herald-Mage in the Circle a ‘pervert,’ after all.” He grinned. “He might turn you into a frog.”

Vanyel shook his head again. “Gods, I have been out of touch to miss that little bit of slang. Yes, of course because I’m shay’a’chern, why else would people look at me sideways?”

“Because you scare the hell out of them,” Tantras replied, his smile fading. “Because you are as powerful as you are; because you’re so quiet and so solitary, and they never know what you’re thinking. Havens, these days half the Heralds don’t even know you’re shaych; it’s the Mage-Gift that makes them look at you sideways. Not that anybody around here cares about your bedmates a quarter as much as you seem to think. They’re a lot more worried that—oh—a bird will crap on you and you’ll level the Palace.”

“Me?” Vanyel stared at him in disbelief.

“You. You’ve spent most of the last four or five years in combat zones. We know your reflexes are hypersensitive. Hellfire, that’s why I came in here to wake you up instead of sending a page. We know what you can do. Van, nobody I’ve ever heard of was able to take the place of five Herald-Mages by himself! And the very idea of one person having that much power at his beck and call scares most people witless!”

Vanyel was caught without a reply; he stared at Tantras with the towel hanging limply from his hands.

“I’m telling you the plain truth, Van. I wish you’d stop wincing away from people with no cause. It’s not your sexual preferences that scare them, it’s you. Level the Palace, hell—they know you could level Haven if you wanted to—”

Vanyel came out of his trance of astonishment. “What do they think I am?” he scoffed, picking up his filthy shirt.

“They don’t know; they haven’t the Mage-Gift and most of them weren’t trained around Herald-Mages. They hear stories, and they think of the Mage Wars—and they remember that once, before there was a Valdemar, there was a thriving land to the far south of us. Now the Dhorisha Plains are there—a very large, circular crater. No cities, no sign there ever was anything, not even two stones left standing. Nothing but grass and nomads. Van, leave that stuff; I’ll pick up after you.”

“But—” Vanyel began to object.

“Look, if you can spend most of a year substituting for five of us, then one of us can pick up after you once in a while.” Tantras took the wet towels away from him, cutting off his objections before he could make them. “Honestly, Van.”

“If you insist.” He wanted to touch Tantras’ mind to see if he really meant what he said. It seemed a fantastical notion.

But Tran had not invited, and a Herald did not intrude uninvited into another’s mind, not unless there was an overriding need to do so.

“Is . . . that how you feel?” he asked in a whisper.

“I’m not afraid of you, but let me tell you, I wouldn’t have your powers for any reward. I’m glad I’m just a Herald and not a Herald-Mage, and I don’t know how you survive it. So just let me spoil you a little, all right?”

Vanyel managed a weak smile, troubled by several things—including that “just a Herald” business. That implied a division between Heralds and Herald-Mages that made him very uneasy. “All right, old friend. Spoil me. I’m just tired enough to let you.”

The fog of weariness came between him and the corridor, and he was finding it all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. Lady, bless you for Tantras. There aren’t many even among the Heralds I trained with that will accept what I am as easily as he does. Whether it’s that I’m a Mage or that I’m fey—although I can’t see why Mage-powers would frighten someone. We’ve had Herald-Mages since there was a Valdemar.

I wish he was as right about that as he thinks he is; I still think it’s the other thing.

The stone was so cool and soothing to his feet; it eased the ache in them that was the legacy of too many hours—days—weeks—when he had slept fully clothed, ready to defend the Border in the blackest, bleakest hours of the night.

That reminder brought bleaker thoughts. Every time he came back to Haven it was with the knowledge that there would be fewer familiar faces to greet him. So many friends gone—not that I ever had many to begin with. Lancir, Mardic and Donni, Regen, Dorilyn. Wulgra, Kat, Pretor. All gone. Not many left besides Tran. There’s—Jays. Savil. Andy, and he’s a Healer. Erdane, Breda, a couple of the other Bards. How can I be anything but solitary? Every year I’m more alone.

* * *

True to Tantras’ promise, Vanyel found an overflowing plate waiting for him beside the pile of letters. It held a pair of meat pies, soft white cheese, and apples, and beside the generous plate of food was an equally generous pitcher of wine.

I’d better be careful with that stuff. I’m not used to it anymore, and I bet it’ll go straight to my head.

He stifled a groan as he sagged down into the empty chair, poured a goblet of wine, then picked up the topmost letter. He broke the seal on it, gritted his teeth, and started in.

To Herald-Mage Vanyel from Lord Withen Ashkevron of Forst Reach: My dear Son—

Vanyel nearly dropped the letter in surprise, and reread the salutation to be certain that his eyes hadn't played tricks on him.

Great good gods. "My dear Son?" I haven't been "dear," much less "Son" for—years! I wonder what happened—

He took a long breath and continued.

Though you might find it difficult to believe, I am pleased and grateful that you are going to be able to find the time for an extended visit home. Despite our differences, and some hard words between us, I am very proud of my Herald-Mage son. I may not care for some aspects of your life, but I respect your intelligence and good sense. I confess, Vanyel, that your old father has need of some of that good sense. I need your help in dealing with your brother Mekeal.

Vanyel nodded to himself with cynicism. Now we come to it.

He has made some excessively poor judgments since I turned over the management of some of the lands to him, but this spring he has outdone himself. He's taken the cattle—good, solid income-producing stock—off Long Meadow and installed sheep down there instead!

Vanyel chuckled. Whoever Withen had roped into being his scribe on this letter had reproduced his father's tones perfectly. He could feel the indignation rising from the page.

And as for that so-called "Shin'a'in warsteed" he bought—and a more ill-tempered, ill-favored beast I never saw—the less said, the better! All these years I spent in building up the Forst Reach line—and he'll undo it all with one unmanageable stud! I feel sure he'll listen to you; you're a Herald—the King himself trusts your judgment. The boy has me ready to throw him down the blamed well!

Vanyel shifted a little and reached for a wedge of cheese. This letter was proving to be a lot more enlightening than he'd had any reason to expect.

This is no time for Meke to be mucking about; not when there may be trouble across the Border. Maybe you remember that alliance marriage between Deveran Remoerdis of Lineas and Ylyna Mavelan of Baires? The one that brought a halt to the Linean-Baires war, and that brought that minstrel through here that you were so taken with as a boy? It doesn't seem to be working out. There've been rumors for years that the oldest child was a bastard—now Deveran seems to have given substance to those rumors; he's disinherited the boy in favor of the next in line. In some ways I can't blame him too much; even if the lad didn't look so much like his uncle—I've seen both the boy and the man, and the resemblance is uncanny—the rumors alone would have been enough to make his inheritance shaky. I wouldn't trust that entire Mavelan family, frankly. A pack of wizardly snakes, the lot of them, the only time they stop striking at each other is when they take on an outsider. I only thank the gods that they've stayed at each other's throats all this time. But there've been some nasty noises out of them about Tashir's disinheritance and if it gets to be more than noises, we may have trouble across the Border. Your brother is all fired up for a war, by the way. Gods, that is the last thing we need. I just thank the Lady that Randale had the good sense to send a plain Herald into Lineas as envoy, and not a Herald-Mage. A good solid Herald might be able to keep this from growing into another feud like the one the marriage was supposed to stop in the first place. The Lineans will certainly be far more inclined

to listen to a plain Herald; they don't trust anything that smacks of wizardry, and given what the Mavelans did to them, who can blame them?

Vanyel bit his lip, the half-eaten scrap of cheese dangling forgotten from his fingers. Withen was showing a great deal more political astuteness than he'd ever given his father credit for. But this business in Lineas—

Please, he sent up a silent prayer. Not now—

It's evidently worrisome enough that Randale sent your sister Lissa and her Guard Company to keep a cross-Border eye on the Mavelans. You'd know what that would mean better than your old father, I think. If we're lucky and things stay calm, perhaps she can slip off for a few days' visit herself. I know you'd both like that. By the way—I hope you aren't planning on bringing any of your—friends—home with you, are you? You know it would upset your mother. You wouldn't want to upset your mother. By the hand of Radevel Ashkevron and my seal, Lord Withen Ashkevron.

Vanyel grimaced, dropped the letter back down on the table, and reached for the wine to take the bitter taste of those last words out of his mouth. He held the cool metal of the goblet to his forehead for a moment, an automatic reaction to a pain more emotional than physical.

:He doesn't mean to hurt, Chosen.: Yfandes' mindvoice touched the bitterness, but could not soothe it.

:Awake again, dearling? You should sleep—:

:Too much noise., she objected. :Equitation lessons, and I'm too tired to find a quiet corner of the Field. I'll just stand here by the stable and let the sun bake my sore muscles and wait for the babies to go away. Your father truly does not mean to hurt you.:

Vanyel sighed, and picked up a meat pie, nibbling the flaky crust listlessly. :I know that. It doesn't stop it from hurting. If I weren't so tired, it probably wouldn't hurt as much. If I weren't so tired, it might even be funny.: He swallowed another gulp of wine, painfully aware that even the simple act of chewing was becoming an effort. He put the pie down.

:You have nothing left., she stated. :No reserves at all.:

:That's ridiculous, love. It's just that last push we made. And if I haven't anything left, then neither have you—:

:Not true. I may be spent physically, but you are spent emotionally, magically, mentally. Chosen, beloved, you have not spared yourself since Elspeth Peacemaker died.:

:That's because nobody had a choice., he reminded her, reaching for a piece of cheese, but holding it up and staring at it, not eating it, seeing other times and places. :Everybody else has been pushed just as hard. The moment poor Randale took the throne that fragile peace she had made for us fell to pieces. We had no warning it was going to come to that. Mardic and Donni—:

The cold hand of grief choked his throat. The lifebonded couple who had been such steadfast friends and supporters to him had been two of the first victims of the Karsite attacks. He could feel the echo of his grief in the mourning of Yfandes' mind-voice.

:Poor children. Goddess hold them—:

:Fandes—at least they died together. I—could wish—: he cut off the thought before he could distress her.

He contemplated the white wedge of cheese in his hand as if he had never seen anything like it, and then blinked, and began nibbling at it, trying to force the food around the knot of sorrow blocking his throat. He had to eat. He'd been surviving on handfuls of parched corn, dried fruit, and dried beef for too long. He had to get his strength back. It wouldn't be long before Randle would need him again. Well, all he really needed was a couple of weeks of steady meals and sleep. . . .

:You ask too much of yourself.:

:Who, me? Strange thoughts from a Companion. Who was it who used to keep nagging me about duty?: He tried to put a measure of humorous teasing into his own mindvoice, but it felt flat.

:But you cannot be twenty places at once, Chosen. You are no longer thinking clearly.:

The cheese had finally migrated inside him, and most of the lump in his throat was gone. He sighed and reached for the meat pie again. With enough wine to help, he might be able to get that down, too.

The trouble was, 'Fandes was right. For the past few months he'd been reduced to a level where he really wasn't thinking much at all—just concentrating on each step as it came, and trying to survive it. It had been like climbing a mountain at the end of a long and grueling race; just worrying about one handhold at a time. Not thinking about the possibility of falling, and not able to think about what he'd do when he got to the top. If he got to the top. If there was a top.

Stupid, Herald. Looking at the bark and never noticing the tree was about to fall on you.

The sun coming in his window had crept down off the chair and onto the floor, making a bright square on the brown braided rug. He chewed and swallowed methodically, not really tasting what he was eating, and stared at the glowing square, his mind going blank and numb.

:Randle uses you beyond your strength, because of the nodes,: Yfandes said accusingly, breaking into his near-trance. :You should say something. He'd stop if he realized what he was doing to you. If you were like other Heralds, unable to tap them—:

:If I were like other Heralds, the Karsites would be halfway to Haven now, instead of only holding the disputed lands,: he replied mildly. :Dearest, there is no choice. I lost my chance at choices a long time ago. Besides, I'm not as badly off as you think. All I need is a bit of rest and I'll be fine. We're damned lucky I can use the nodes—and that I don't need to rest to recharge.:

:Except that you must use your power to focus and control —:

He shook his head. :Beloved, I appreciate what you're telling me, but this isn't getting us anywhere. I have to do what I'm doing; I'm a Herald. It's what any of the others would do in my place. It's what 'Lendel—:

Grief—he fought it, clenching his hand hard on the arm of his chair as he willed his emotions into control. Control yourself, Herald. This is just because you're tired, it's maudlin, and it doesn't do you or anyone else any good.

:I could wish you were less alone.:

:Don't encourage me in self-pity, love. It's funny, isn't it?: he replied, his lips twitching involuntarily, though not with amusement. :Dear Father seems to think I've been seducing every susceptible young man from here to the Border, and I've been damned near celibate. The last was—when?: The weeks, the months, they all seemed to blur together into one long endurance trial. A brief moment of companionship, then a parting;

inevitable, given his duties and Jonne's.

:Three years ago,: Yfandes supplied, immediately. :That rather sweet Guardsman.:

Vanyel remembered the person, though not the time.

“Hello. You're The Herald-Mage, aren't you?”

Vanyel looked up from the map he was studying, and smiled. He couldn't help it—the diffident, shy smile the Guardsman wore begged to be answered.

“Yes—are you—”

“Guardsman Jonne. Your guide. I was born not half a league from here.” The guileless expression, the tanned face and thatch of hair, the tiny net of humor lines about the thoughtful hazel eyes, all conspired to make Vanyel like this man immediately.

“Then you, friend Jonne, are the direct answer to my prayers,” he said.

Only later, when they were alone, did he learn what other prayers the Guardsman had an answer for—

:Jonne. Odd for such a tough fighter to be so diffident, even gentle. Though why he should have been shy, when he was five years older and had twice my—uh—experience—:

:Your reputation, beloved. A living legend came down off his pedestal and looked to him for company.: Yfandes sent him an image of a marble saint-statue hopping out of its niche and wriggling its eyebrows in a come-hither look. There was enough of a tired giggle in her mind-voice to get an equally tired chuckle out of him. But he sobered again almost immediately. :And that lasted how long? Two months? Three? Certainly not more.:

:You were busy—you had duties—both of you. It was your duties that parted you.:

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By Deborah

This book was boring, mindless drivel. More than Half of the book was the Hero well into middle age worrying about his sexuality. Another quarter was about children's love life and only 1/4 of it was about the plot of what happens to a Mage who was a supposed legend and another trying to destroy him. And that part was so thrown together it was very hard to follow the pieces of the story that Mercedes Lackey tried to bring to an end. I won't buy another one of these books. THE first two of this series at least tried to follow some coherent end, this did not.

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The Last Heral Mage series is one of my all-time favorite stories. The love story is beautiful and sad. I don't remember how many times this series made me cry. My husband started to read it but was very disappointed with the subject matter (the first person narrated homosexual relationship of the major character) and almost wouldn't read anymore of Mercedes Lackey's books, but, she is such an excellent writer that he has read most

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By Niki

I went straight into Magic Promise after Magic Pawn. Magic Promise is just as spell binding. Not because of the fantasy aspects or the magic because I have read more imaginative ones. It is the protagonist, Vanyel, who imprisons me. I admit I am in love with this beautiful character. Twelve years after Magic Pawn, Vanyel is now a great herald-mage held in awe by all. Yet he remains sad and so much alone that my heart goes out to him. His struggles with his sexual preference, his attempt to make peace with his father and the arms master who tortured him during his boyhood and the loss of his soul mate 12 years ago which continues to haunt him is touching and beautifully told. Vanyel's pain as he conjures up his soul mate by magic because he misses him so much and Vanyel's final acceptance of his death is just heart rending. Vanyel facing Death, who gave him the choice to live to fight and protect those he loves or final peace and release from pain and sufferings towards the end of Magic Promise just tugs at my heart. Still Magic Promise has its light and tender moments provided by the unique bond and love between Vanyel and his Companion. Because of Vanyel I have added Lackey to my list of must read writers.

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"In this trilogy, Lackey reaches an intensity she had only begun to achieve.... The story of Vanyel is darker than her earlier books, and the pace is unrelenting." —American Fantasy Magazine

About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds Of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com.

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It was like something out of his worst nightmares. . . .

A Herald, with a heavy carter's whip, beating the young Companion until his skin came away in strips and blood striped bright on the snowy hide, trying to separate him from his newly-Chosen boy.

Vanyel pulled on the power within him, feeling it leap, wild and undisciplined, as the other Herald staggered, prepared to lash out with the whip again. Flinging out his left hand, Van sent a lash of his own, a lash of lightning from his outstretched finger to the whipstock. The spark arced across the space between them with a crackle and the pungent smell of burning leather, and the dark, sallow-faced Herald dropped the whip with an exclamation of pain. Behind him, Yfandes was holding off the armsmen with squeals, lashing hooves and bared teeth; faced with her anger, they were not inclined to come to the Herald's rescue.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" Vanyel thundered, letting the other feel his outrage, a wave of red anger. The older man backed up an involuntary pace, nursing his injured hand against his chest.

"Who are you to interfere—" he began, his face a caricature of thwarted authority.

"Herald-Mage Vanyel Ashkevron," Vanyel cut him off. "Called Demonsbane, called Shadowstalker, First Herald-Mage in Valdemar. I outrank you, Herald, and your damn fool actions tonight called me out of my bed and across the Border. You've exceeded your authority, and I'm ordering you to let this boy be. Who in hell are you?"

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Edited by John Helfers and Denise Little

Dedicated to:

Elizabeth (Betsy) Wollheim

Who said—"Go for it"

One

The blue leather saddlebags and a canvas pack, all bulging with filthy clothing and miscellaneous gear, landed in the corner of Vanyel's room with three dull thuds. The lute, still in its padded leather case, slithered over the back of one of the two overstuffed chairs and landed with a softer pumph, to rest in the cradle of the worn red seat cushion. Once safely there it sagged, leaning over sideways like a fat, drunken child. The dark leather lute case glowed dully in the mid-morning sun still coming in the single eastward-facing window. Two years of mistreatment had not marred the finish too much, although the case was scuffed here and there, and had been torn and remended with tiny, careful stitches along the belly.

Vanyel grimaced at the all-too-visible tear. Torn? No; no tear would be that even. Say cut, or slashed and it would be nearer the truth. Pray nobody else notices that.

Better the lute case than me . . . that came closer than I really want to think about. I hope Savil never gets a good look at it. She'd know what that meant, and she'd have a cat.

Herald-Mage Vanyel took the other chair gracelessly, dropping all his weight at once into the embrace of comfortable upholstered arms.

Home at last. Havens, I sound like the pack hitting the corner.

"O-o-oh." Vanyel leaned back, feeling every muscle in his body crying out with long-ignored aches and strains. His thoughts fumbled their way into his conscious mind through a fog of utter exhaustion. He wanted, more than anything, to close his gritty eyes. But he didn't dare, because the moment he did, he'd fall asleep.

Someday I'm going to remember I'm not sixteen anymore, and keep in mind that I can't stay up till all hours, then rise with the dawn, and not pay for it.

A few moments ago his Companion Yfandes had fallen asleep, standing up in the stable, while he was grooming her. They'd started out on this last leg of their journey long before dawn this morning, and had pushed their limits, eating up the last dregs of their strength just to get to the sanctuary of "home" the sooner.

Gods. If only I would never have to see the Karsite Border again.

No chance of that. Lord and Lady, if you love me, just give me enough time to get my wind back. That's all I ask. Time enough to feel like a human again, and not a killing machine.

The room smelled strongly of soap and the beeswax used to polish the furniture and wall paneling. He stretched, listening to his joints crack, then blinked at his surroundings.

Peculiar. Why doesn't this feel like home? He pondered for a moment, for it seemed to him that his modest, goldenoak-paneled quarters had the anonymous, overly-neat look of a room without a current occupant. I suppose that's only logical, he thought reluctantly. They haven't been occupied, much. I've been living out of my packs for the last year, and before that I was only here for a couple of weeks at a time at most. Gods.

It was a comfortable, warm—and quite average—room. Like any one of a dozen he'd tenanted lately, when he'd had the luxury of a guest room in some keep or other. Sparsely furnished with two chairs, a table, a desk and stool, and a wardrobe, a curtained, canopied bed in the corner. That bed was enormous—his one real indulgence: he tended to toss restlessly when—and if—he slept.

He smiled wryly, thinking how more than one person had assumed he'd wanted that particular bed for another reason entirely. They'd never believe it if I told them Savil gets more erotic exercise than I do. Oh, well. Maybe it's a good thing I don't have a lover; he'd wake up black and blue. Always assuming I didn't strangle him by accident during a nightmare.

But other than that bed, the room was rather plain. Only one window, and that one without much of a view. It certainly wasn't the suite he could have commanded—

But what good is a suite when I hardly see Haven, much less my own room?

He put his feet up on the low, scarred table between the chairs, in defiance of etiquette. He could have requisitioned a footstool—

But somehow I never think of it until I'm five leagues down the road headed out. There's never enough time for—for anything. Not since Elspeth died, anyway. And gods—please let me be wrong about Randle.

His eyes blurred; he shook his head to clear them. Only then did he see the pile of letters lying beside his feet, and groaned at the all-too-familiar seal on the uppermost one. The seal of Withen, Lord of Forst Reach and Vanyel's father.

Twenty-eight years old, and he still makes me feel fifteen, and in disgrace. Why me? he asked the gods, who did not choose to answer. He sighed again, and eyed the letter sourly. It was dauntingly thick.

Hellfire. It—and every other problem—can damned well wait until after I've had a bath. A bath, and something to eat that doesn't have mold on it, and something to drink besides boiled mud. Now, did I leave anything behind the last time I was here that was fit to wear?

He struggled to his feet and rummaged in the wardrobe beside his bed, finally emerging with a shirt and breeches of an old and faded blue that had once been deep sapphire. Thank the gods. Not Whites, and I won't be wearing Whites when I get home. It's going to be so nice to wear something that doesn't stain when you look at it. (Unfair, nagged his conscience—properly treated, the uniform of Heraldic Whites was so resistant to dirt and stains that the non-Heralds suspected magic. He ignored the insistent little mental voice.) Although I don't know what I'm going to do for uniforms. Dear Father would hardly have known his son, covered in mud, stubbled, ashes in his hair.

He emptied the canvas pack on the floor and rang for a page to come and take the mishandled uniforms away to be properly dealt with. They were in exceedingly sad shape; stained with grass and mud, and blood—some of it his own—some were cut and torn, and most were nearly worn-out.

He'd have taken one look and figured I'd been possessed. Not that the Karsites didn't try that, too. At least near-possession doesn't leave stains . . . not on uniforms, anyway. What am I going to do for uniforms? Oh,

well—worry about that after my bath.

The bathing room was at the other end of the long, wood-paneled, stone-floored hallway; at mid-morning there was no one in the hall, much less competing for the tubs and hot water. Vanyel made the long trudge in a half-daze, thinking only how good the hot water would feel. The last bath he'd had—except for the quick one at the inn last night—had been in a cold stream. A very cold stream. And with sand, not soap.

Once there, he shed his clothing and left it in a heap on the floor, filled the largest of the three wooden tubs from the copper boiler, and slid into the hot water with a sigh—

—and woke up with his arms draped over the edges and going numb, his head sagging down on his chest, and the water lukewarm and growing colder.

A hand gently touched his shoulder.

He knew without looking that it had to be a fellow Herald—if it hadn't been, if it had even been someone as innocuous as a strange page, Vanyel's tightly-strung nerves and battle-sharpened reflexes would have done the unforgivable. He'd have sent the intruder through the wall before he himself had even crawled out of the depths of sleep. Probably by nonmagical means, but—magical or nonmagical, he suddenly realized that he could easily hurt someone if he wasn't careful.

He shivered a little. I'm hair triggered. And that's not good.

“Unless you plan on turning into a fish-man,” Herald Tantras said, craning his head around the partition screening the tub from the rest of the bathing room and into Vanyel's view with cautious care, “you'd better get out of that tub. I'm surprised you didn't drown yourself.”

“So am I.” Vanyel blinked, tried to clear his head of cobwebs, and peered over his shoulder. “Where did you pop out of?”

“Heard you got back a couple of candlemarks ago, and I figured you'd head here first.” Tantras chuckled. “I know you and your baths. But I must admit I didn't expect to find you turning yourself into a raisin.”

The dark-haired, dusky Herald came around the side of the wooden partition with an armload of towels. Vanyel watched him with a half-smile of not-too-purely artistic appreciation; Tantras was as graceful and as handsome as a king stag in his prime. Not shay'a'chern, but a good friend, and that was all too rare.

And getting rarer, Vanyel thought soberly. Though, Havens, I haven't exactly had my fill of romantic companionship either, lately . . . well, celibacy isn't going to kill me. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Gods, I should apply for the priesthood.

There was concern in the older Herald's deep, soft eyes. “You don't look good, Van. I figured you'd be tired—but from the way you passed out here—it must have been worse out there than I thought.”

“It was bad,” Vanyel said shortly, reluctant to discuss the past year. Even for the most powerful Herald-Mage in the Circle, holding down the positions of five other Herald-Mages while they recovered from magical attack, drainage, and shock was not a mission he wanted to think about for a long while, much less repeat. He soaped his hair, then ducked his head under the water to rinse it.

“So I heard. When I saw you playing dead in the tub, I sent a page up to your room with food and wine and sent another one off for some of my spare uniforms, since we're about the same size.”

“Name the price, it’s yours,” Vanyel said gratefully, levering himself out of the tub with a groan and accepting the towel Tantras held out to him. “I have nothing worth wearing right now in the way of uniforms.”

“Lord and Lady—” the other Herald swore, looking at him with shock. “What have you been doing to yourself?”

Vanyel paused in his vigorous toweling, looked down, and was a little surprised himself at the evidence of damage. He’d always been lean—but now he was whipcord and bone and nothing else. Then there were the scars—knife and sword scars, a scoring of parallel claw marks on his chest where that demon had tried to remove his heart. Burn marks, too—he was striped from neck to knee with three thin, white lines where mage-lightning had gotten through his shields. And there were a few other scars that were souvenirs of his bout with a master of mage-fire.

“My job. Living on the edge. Trying to convince the Karsites that I was five Herald-Mages. Playing target.” He shrugged dismissively. “That’s all. Nothing any of you wouldn’t have done if you could have.”

“Gods, Van,” Tantras replied, with a hint of guilt. “You make me feel like a shirker. I hope to hell it was worth what you went through.”

Vanyel compressed his lips into a tight line. “I got the bastard that got Mardic and Donni. And you can spread that as official.”

Tantras closed his eyes for a moment, and bowed his head. “It was worth it,” he said faintly.

Vanyel nodded. “Worth every scar. I may have accomplished something else; that particular necromancer had a flock of pet demons and I turned them back on Karse when I killed him.” He smiled, or rather, stretched his mouth a little. “I hope it taught the Karsites a lesson. I hope they end up proscribing magic altogether on their side of the Border. If you can believe anything out of Karse, there’s rumor that they’re doing just that.”

Tantras looked up again. “Hard on the Gifted—” he ventured.

Vanyel didn’t answer. He was finding it very hard to feel sorry for anyone on the Karsite side of the Border at the moment. It was uncharitable, un-Heraldic, but until certain wounds healed—and not the physical ones—he was inclined to be uncharitable.

“There’s more silver in your hair, too,” Tantras observed, head to one side.

Vanyel made a face, just as glad of the change in subject. “Node-magic. Every time I tap into it, more of my roots go white. Moondance k’Treva was pure silver by the time he was my age; I guess I’m more resistant.” He smiled, it was faint, but a real smile this time. “One nice thing; all those white hairs give me respect I might not otherwise get!”

He finished drying himself and wrapped the towel around his waist. Tantras grimaced again—probably noting the knife wound on his back—and handed him another towel for his hair.

“You already paid that forfeit, by the way,” he said, plainly trying to lighten the conversation.

Vanyel stopped toweling off his hair and raised an eyebrow.

“You stood duty for me last Sovvan.”

Vanyel clamped down on the sudden ache of loss and shrugged again. You know you get depressed when you're tired, fool. Don't let it sink you. "Oh, that. Any time, Tran. You know I don't like Sovvan-night celebrations, I can't handle the memorial services, and I don't like to be alone, either. Standing relay duty was as good as anything else to keep my mind off things."

He was grateful when Tantras didn't press the subject. "Think you can make it to your room all right?" the other asked. "I said you don't look good; I mean it. Falling asleep in the tub like that—it makes me wonder if you're going to pass out in the hall."

Vanyel produced something more like a dry cough than a laugh. "It's nothing about a week's worth of sleep won't cure," he replied. "And I'm sorry I won't be able to stand relay for you this year, but I have the Obligatory Familial Visit to discharge. I haven't been home in—gods, four years. And even then I didn't stay for more than a day or two. They're going to want me to make the long stay I've been promising. There's a letter from my father waiting for me that's probably reminding me of just that fact."

"Parents surely know how to load on the guilt, don't they? Well, if you're out of reach, Randale won't find something for you to do—but is that going to be rest?" Tantras looked half-amused and half-worried. "I mean, Van, that family of yours—"

"They won't come after me when I'm sleeping—which I fully intend to do a lot of." He pulled on his old, clean clothing, reveling in the feel of clean, soft cloth against his skin, and started to gather up his things. "And the way I feel right now, I'd just as soon play hermit in my rooms when I get there—"

"Leave that stuff," Tantras interrupted. "I'll deal with it. You go wrap yourself around a decent meal. You don't look like you've had one in months."

"I haven't. They don't believe in worldly pleasures down there. Great proponents of mortification of the flesh for the good of the spirit." Vanyel looked up in time to catch Tantras' raised eyebrow. He made a tragic face. "I know what you're thinking. That, too. Especially that. Gods. Do you have any idea what it was like, being surrounded by all those devastatingly handsome young men and not daring to so much as flirt with one?"

"Were the young ladies just as devastatingly attractive?" Tantras asked, grinning.

"I would say so—given that the subject's fairly abstract for me."

"Then I think I can imagine it. Remind me to avoid the Karsite Border at all costs."

Vanyel found himself grinning back—another real smile, and from the heart. "Tran, gods—I'm glad to see you. Do you know how long it's been since I've been able to talk freely to someone? To joke, for Lady's sake? Since I was around people who don't wince away when I'm minus a few clothes?"

"Are you on about that again?" Tantras asked, incredulously. "Do you really think that people are nervous around you because you're shaych?"

"I'm what?" Van asked, startled by the unfamiliar term.

"Shaych. Short for that Hawkbrother word you and Savil use. Don't know where it came from, just seems like one day everybody was using it." Tantras leaned back against the white-tiled wall of the bathing room, folding his arms across his chest in a deceptively lazy pose. "Maybe because you're as prominent as you are. Can't go around calling the most powerful Herald-Mage in the Circle a 'pervert,' after all." He grinned. "He

might turn you into a frog.”

Vanyel shook his head again. “Gods, I have been out of touch to miss that little bit of slang. Yes, of course because I’m shay’a’chern, why else would people look at me sideways?”

“Because you scare the hell out of them,” Tantras replied, his smile fading. “Because you are as powerful as you are; because you’re so quiet and so solitary, and they never know what you’re thinking. Havens, these days half the Heralds don’t even know you’re shaych; it’s the Mage-Gift that makes them look at you sideways. Not that anybody around here cares about your bedmates a quarter as much as you seem to think. They’re a lot more worried that—oh—a bird will crap on you and you’ll level the Palace.”

“Me?” Vanyel stared at him in disbelief.

“You. You’ve spent most of the last four or five years in combat zones. We know your reflexes are hypersensitive. Hellfire, that’s why I came in here to wake you up instead of sending a page. We know what you can do. Van, nobody I’ve ever heard of was able to take the place of five Herald-Mages by himself! And the very idea of one person having that much power at his beck and call scares most people witless!”

Vanyel was caught without a reply; he stared at Tantras with the towel hanging limply from his hands.

“I’m telling you the plain truth, Van. I wish you’d stop wincing away from people with no cause. It’s not your sexual preferences that scare them, it’s you. Level the Palace, hell—they know you could level Haven if you wanted to—”

Vanyel came out of his trance of astonishment. “What do they think I am?” he scoffed, picking up his filthy shirt.

“They don’t know; they haven’t the Mage-Gift and most of them weren’t trained around Herald-Mages. They hear stories, and they think of the Mage Wars—and they remember that once, before there was a Valdemar, there was a thriving land to the far south of us. Now the Dhorisha Plains are there—a very large, circular crater. No cities, no sign there ever was anything, not even two stones left standing. Nothing but grass and nomads. Van, leave that stuff; I’ll pick up after you.”

“But—” Vanyel began to object.

“Look, if you can spend most of a year substituting for five of us, then one of us can pick up after you once in a while.” Tantras took the wet towels away from him, cutting off his objections before he could make them. “Honestly, Van.”

“If you insist.” He wanted to touch Tantras’ mind to see if he really meant what he said. It seemed a fantastical notion.

But Tran had not invited, and a Herald did not intrude uninvited into another’s mind, not unless there was an overriding need to do so.

“Is . . . that how you feel?” he asked in a whisper.

“I’m not afraid of you, but let me tell you, I wouldn’t have your powers for any reward. I’m glad I’m just a Herald and not a Herald-Mage, and I don’t know how you survive it. So just let me spoil you a little, all right?”

Vanyel managed a weak smile, troubled by several things—including that “just a Herald” business. That

implied a division between Heralds and Herald-Mages that made him very uneasy. “All right, old friend. Spoil me. I’m just tired enough to let you.”

The fog of weariness came between him and the corridor, and he was finding it all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. Lady, bless you for Tantras. There aren’t many even among the Heralds I trained with that will accept what I am as easily as he does. Whether it’s that I’m a Mage or that I’m fey—although I can’t see why Mage-powers would frighten someone. We’ve had Herald-Mages since there was a Valdemar.

I wish he was as right about that as he thinks he is; I still think it’s the other thing.

The stone was so cool and soothing to his feet; it eased the ache in them that was the legacy of too many hours—days—weeks—when he had slept fully clothed, ready to defend the Border in the blackest, bleakest hours of the night.

That reminder brought bleaker thoughts. Every time he came back to Haven it was with the knowledge that there would be fewer familiar faces to greet him. So many friends gone—not that I ever had many to begin with. Lancir, Mardic and Donni, Regen, Dorilyn. Wulgra, Kat, Pretor. All gone. Not many left besides Tran. There’s—Jays. Savil. Andy, and he’s a Healer. Erdane, Breda, a couple of the other Bards. How can I be anything but solitary? Every year I’m more alone.

* * *

True to Tantras’ promise, Vanyel found an overflowing plate waiting for him beside the pile of letters. It held a pair of meat pies, soft white cheese, and apples, and beside the generous plate of food was an equally generous pitcher of wine.

I’d better be careful with that stuff. I’m not used to it anymore, and I bet it’ll go straight to my head.

He stifled a groan as he sagged down into the empty chair, poured a goblet of wine, then picked up the topmost letter. He broke the seal on it, gritted his teeth, and started in.

To Herald-Mage Vanyel from Lord Withen Ashkevron of Forst Reach: My dear Son—

Vanyel nearly dropped the letter in surprise, and reread the salutation to be certain that his eyes hadn’t played tricks on him.

Great good gods. “My dear Son?” I haven’t been “dear,” much less “Son” for—years! I wonder what happened—

He took a long breath and continued.

Though you might find it difficult to believe, I am pleased and grateful that you are going to be able to find the time for an extended visit home. Despite our differences, and some hard words between us, I am very proud of my Herald-Mage son. I may not care for some aspects of your life, but I respect your intelligence and good sense. I confess, Vanyel, that your old father has need of some of that good sense. I need your help in dealing with your brother Mekeal.

Vanyel nodded to himself with cynicism. Now we come to it.

He has made some excessively poor judgments since I turned over the management of some of the lands to him, but this spring he has outdone himself. He’s taken the cattle—good, solid income-producing stock—off Long Meadow and installed sheep down there instead!

Vanyel chuckled. Whoever Withen had roped into being his scribe on this letter had reproduced his father's tones perfectly. He could feel the indignation rising from the page.

And as for that so-called "Shin'a'in warsteed" he bought—and a more ill-tempered, ill-favored beast I never saw—the less said, the better! All these years I spent in building up the Forst Reach line—and he'll undo it all with one unmanageable stud! I feel sure he'll listen to you; you're a Herald—the King himself trusts your judgment. The boy has me ready to throw him down the blamed well!

Vanyel shifted a little and reached for a wedge of cheese. This letter was proving to be a lot more enlightening than he'd had any reason to expect.

This is no time for Meke to be mucking about; not when there may be trouble across the Border. Maybe you remember that alliance marriage between Deveran Remoerdis of Lineas and Ylyna Mavelan of Baires? The one that brought a halt to the Linean-Baires war, and that brought that minstrel through here that you were so taken with as a boy? It doesn't seem to be working out. There've been rumors for years that the oldest child was a bastard—now Deveran seems to have given substance to those rumors; he's disinherited the boy in favor of the next in line. In some ways I can't blame him too much; even if the lad didn't look so much like his uncle—I've seen both the boy and the man, and the resemblance is uncanny—the rumors alone would have been enough to make his inheritance shaky. I wouldn't trust that entire Mavelan family, frankly. A pack of wizardly snakes, the lot of them, the only time they stop striking at each other is when they take on an outsider. I only thank the gods that they've stayed at each other's throats all this time. But there've been some nasty noises out of them about Tashir's disinheritance and if it gets to be more than noises, we may have trouble across the Border. Your brother is all fired up for a war, by the way. Gods, that is the last thing we need. I just thank the Lady that Randale had the good sense to send a plain Herald into Lineas as envoy, and not a Herald-Mage. A good solid Herald might be able to keep this from growing into another feud like the one the marriage was supposed to stop in the first place. The Lineans will certainly be far more inclined to listen to a plain Herald; they don't trust anything that smacks of wizardry, and given what the Mavelans did to them, who can blame them?

Vanyel bit his lip, the half-eaten scrap of cheese dangling forgotten from his fingers. Withen was showing a great deal more political astuteness than he'd ever given his father credit for. But this business in Lineas—

Please, he sent up a silent prayer. Not now—

It's evidently worrisome enough that Randale sent your sister Lissa and her Guard Company to keep a cross-Border eye on the Mavelans. You'd know what that would mean better than your old father, I think. If we're lucky and things stay calm, perhaps she can slip off for a few days' visit herself. I know you'd both like that. By the way—I hope you aren't planning on bringing any of your—friends—home with you, are you? You know it would upset your mother. You wouldn't want to upset your mother. By the hand of Radevel Ashkevron and my seal, Lord Withen Ashkevron.

Vanyel grimaced, dropped the letter back down on the table, and reached for the wine to take the bitter taste of those last words out of his mouth. He held the cool metal of the goblet to his forehead for a moment, an automatic reaction to a pain more emotional than physical.

:He doesn't mean to hurt, Chosen.: Yfandes' mindvoice touched the bitterness, but could not soothe it.

:Awake again, dearling? You should sleep—:

:Too much noise, she objected. :Equitation lessons, and I'm too tired to find a quiet corner of the Field. I'll just stand here by the stable and let the sun bake my sore muscles and wait for the babies to go away. Your

father truly does not mean to hurt you.:

Vanyel sighed, and picked up a meat pie, nibbling the flaky crust listlessly. :I know that. It doesn't stop it from hurting. If I weren't so tired, it probably wouldn't hurt as much. If I weren't so tired, it might even be funny.: He swallowed another gulp of wine, painfully aware that even the simple act of chewing was becoming an effort. He put the pie down.

:You have nothing left,; she stated. :No reserves at all.:

:That's ridiculous, love. It's just that last push we made. And if I haven't anything left, then neither have you—:

:Not true. I may be spent physically, but you are spent emotionally, magically, mentally. Chosen, beloved, you have not spared yourself since Elspeth Peacemaker died.:

:That's because nobody had a choice,; he reminded her, reaching for a piece of cheese, but holding it up and staring at it, not eating it, seeing other times and places. :Everybody else has been pushed just as hard. The moment poor Randale took the throne that fragile peace she had made for us fell to pieces. We had no warning it was going to come to that. Mardic and Donni—:

The cold hand of grief choked his throat. The lifebonded couple who had been such steadfast friends and supporters to him had been two of the first victims of the Karsite attacks. He could feel the echo of his grief in the mourning of Yfandes' mind-voice.

:Poor children. Goddess hold them—:

:Fandes—at least they died together. I—could wish—: he cut off the thought before he could distress her. He contemplated the white wedge of cheese in his hand as if he had never seen anything like it, and then blinked, and began nibbling at it, trying to force the food around the knot of sorrow blocking his throat. He had to eat. He'd been surviving on handfuls of parched corn, dried fruit, and dried beef for too long. He had to get his strength back. It wouldn't be long before Randale would need him again. Well, all he really needed was a couple of weeks of steady meals and sleep. . . .

:You ask too much of yourself.:

:Who, me? Strange thoughts from a Companion. Who was it who used to keep nagging me about duty?: He tried to put a measure of humorous teasing into his own mindvoice, but it felt flat.

:But you cannot be twenty places at once, Chosen. You are no longer thinking clearly.:

The cheese had finally migrated inside him, and most of the lump in his throat was gone. He sighed and reached for the meat pie again. With enough wine to help, he might be able to get that down, too.

The trouble was, 'Fandes was right. For the past few months he'd been reduced to a level where he really wasn't thinking much at all—just concentrating on each step as it came, and trying to survive it. It had been like climbing a mountain at the end of a long and grueling race; just worrying about one handhold at a time. Not thinking about the possibility of falling, and not able to think about what he'd do when he got to the top. If he got to the top. If there was a top.

Stupid, Herald. Looking at the bark and never noticing the tree was about to fall on you.

The sun coming in his window had crept down off the chair and onto the floor, making a bright square on the

brown braided rug. He chewed and swallowed methodically, not really tasting what he was eating, and stared at the glowing square, his mind going blank and numb.

:Randal uses you beyond your strength, because of the nodes,: Yfandes said accusingly, breaking into his near-trance. :You should say something. He'd stop if he realized what he was doing to you. If you were like other Heralds, unable to tap them—:

:If I were like other Heralds, the Karsites would be halfway to Haven now, instead of only holding the disputed lands,: he replied mildly. :Dearest, there is no choice. I lost my chance at choices a long time ago. Besides, I'm not as badly off as you think. All I need is a bit of rest and I'll be fine. We're damned lucky I can use the nodes—and that I don't need to rest to recharge.:

:Except that you must use your power to focus and control —:

He shook his head. :Beloved, I appreciate what you're telling me, but this isn't getting us anywhere. I have to do what I'm doing; I'm a Herald. It's what any of the others would do in my place. It's what 'Lendel—:

Grief—he fought it, clenching his hand hard on the arm of his chair as he willed his emotions into control. Control yourself, Herald. This is just because you're tired, it's maudlin, and it doesn't do you or anyone else any good.

:I could wish you were less alone.:

:Don't encourage me in self-pity, love. It's funny, isn't it?: he replied, his lips twitching involuntarily, though not with amusement. :Dear Father seems to think I've been seducing every susceptible young man from here to the Border, and I've been damned near celibate. The last was—when?: The weeks, the months, they all seemed to blur together into one long endurance trial. A brief moment of companionship, then a parting; inevitable, given his duties and Jonne's.

:Three years ago,: Yfandes supplied, immediately. :That rather sweet Guardsman.:

Vanyel remembered the person, though not the time.

“Hello. You're The Herald-Mage, aren't you?”

Vanyel looked up from the map he was studying, and smiled. He couldn't help it—the diffident, shy smile the Guardsman wore begged to be answered.

“Yes—are you—”

“Guardsman Jonne. Your guide. I was born not half a league from here.” The guileless expression, the tanned face and thatch of hair, the tiny net of humor lines about the thoughtful hazel eyes, all conspired to make Vanyel like this man immediately.

“Then you, friend Jonne, are the direct answer to my prayers,” he said.

Only later, when they were alone, did he learn what other prayers the Guardsman had an answer for—

:Jonne. Odd for such a tough fighter to be so diffident, even gentle. Though why he should have been shy, when he was five years older and had twice my—uh—experience—:

:Your reputation, beloved. A living legend came down off his pedestal and looked to him for company.:

Yfandes sent him an image of a marble saint-statue hopping out of its niche and wriggling its eyebrows in a come-hither look. There was enough of a tired giggle in her mind-voice to get an equally tired chuckle out of him. But he sobered again almost immediately. :And that lasted how long? Two months? Three? Certainly not more.:

:You were busy—you had duties—both of you. It was your duties that parted you.:

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