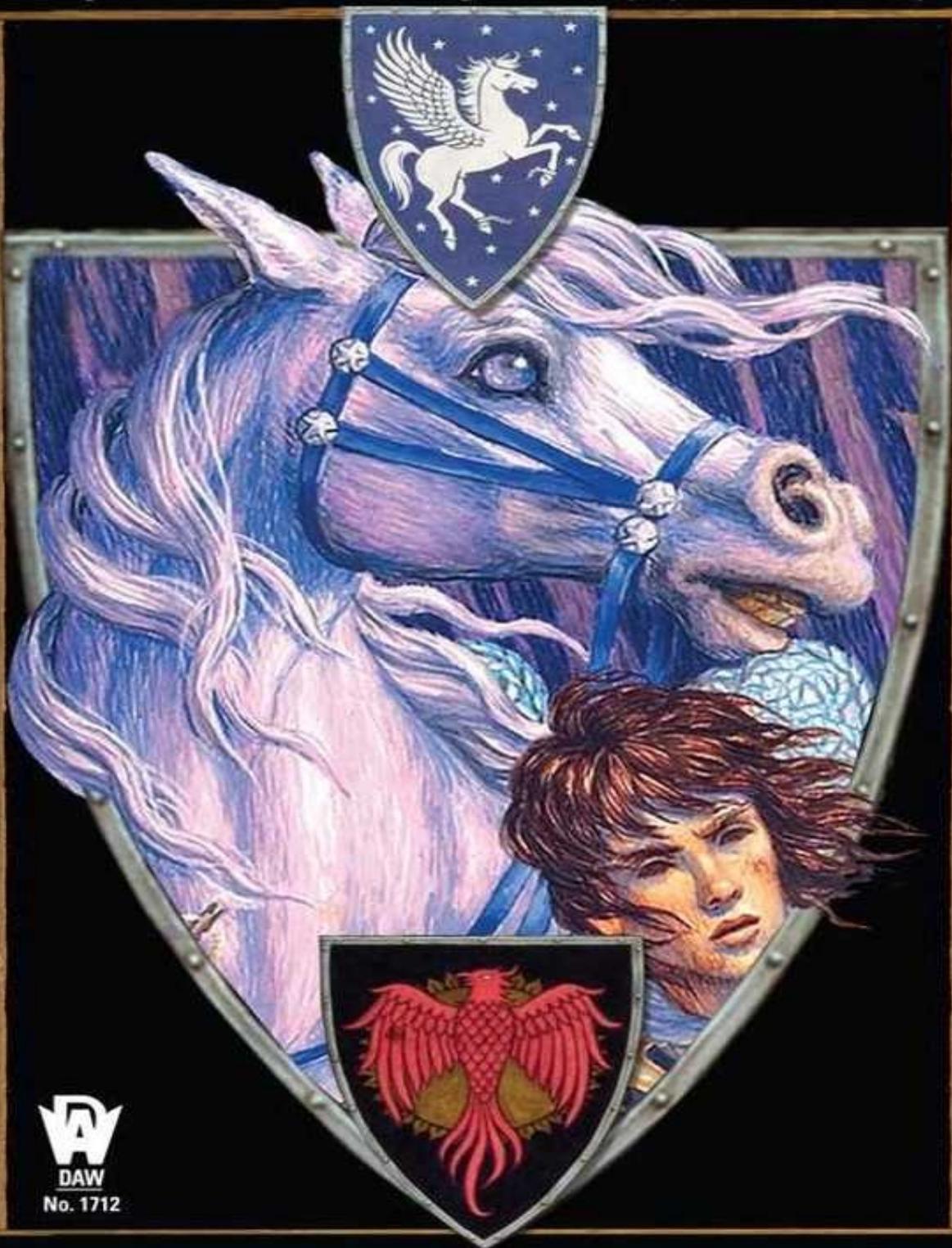


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Contents

[Raves for the Valdemar Anthologies](#)

[Titles by Mercedes Lackey](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Feathers in Need](#)

[Jennifer Brozek](#)

[The Highjorune Masque](#)

[Stephanie D. Shaver](#)

[Lost Song](#)

[Dylan Birtolo](#)

[Unresolved Consequences](#)

[Elizabeth A. Vaughan](#)

[Gifts of Rage and Despair](#)

[Ron Collins](#)

[A Bellowing of Bullfinches](#)

[Elisabeth Waters](#)

[She Chooses](#)

[Michele Lang](#)

[The Harvest](#)

[Kristin Schwengel](#)

[Before a River Runs Through It](#)

[Fiona Patton](#)

[Hertasi and Wyrsa and Magpies, Oh My!](#)

[Louisa Swann](#)

[A Fire in the Grass](#)

[Michael Z. Williamson and Jessica Schlenker](#)

[Never Alone](#)

[Dayle A. Dermatis](#)

[Down the Line](#)

[Brigid Collins](#)

[Ghosts of the Past](#)

[Angela Penrose](#)

[The Quiet Gift](#)

[Anthea Sharp](#)

[Healing Home](#)

[Kerrie L. Hughes](#)

[The Note](#)

[Phaedra Weldon](#)

[Vexed Vixen](#)

[Mercedes Lackey](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[About the Editor](#)

Crucible

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Feathers in Need

Jennifer Brozek

Running, stumbling, looking over her shoulder. Gasping for breath. Monster stalking nearer. Scrabbling at the tree, climbing, escaping. Shuddering with fear and pain. Free? No. It's coming back. Hunting. Must get higher! Must—

Still seeking escape, Hadara lunged out of her nest, clawing for higher ground. She tumbled forward, falling to the soft Vale earth. Before she gathered herself, realized she wasn't being hunted and there was no danger, Serta, one of the little *hertasi* who looked after k'Leysha Vale, was there.

"Hadara?" The little lizard stepped closer.

The gryphon tilted her head, listening to where Serta moved. It was well out of range. Hadara clambered back into her nest and resettled her wings, fluffing her tawny feathers. When she was still, she turned sightless eyes to Serta. "It was a nightmarre. I wasss being hunted by a monssster. The Pelagirrssss . . ."

"It's the fallen shield. Many things get in." Serta stepped closer, noisy for the silent and near invisible *hertasi*.

Hadara knew it was for her benefit. Part of her appreciated the courtesy. Part of her wanted to clack her beak at the little creature, coming within a whisker of the *hertasi* to show that, blind she may be, she was not incapable.

Instead, she sighed. "You'rrre rrrright. I musst be hearrring one of the ssmarrterr prrrey animalssss out therre."

"Soon. Soon. The shields will return. The Mage Storms are done. The Heartstone will be refilled."

"I know." Hadara crossed her claws before her and rested her chin upon them. It was logical, of course. A Pelagiris creature in danger. Her own strong Animal Mindspeech. *The sleeping mind sees much . . .*

Still, she couldn't help but think there was more to this nightmare.

•••

The next two nights were the same. Dreams of being hunted. Of being lost, hurt, and confused. Almost understanding what had happened, but having no time to think with the monster stalking her every step. More than once, Hadara woke in a wonder of looking down at clawed hands instead of gryphon's claws. Hands that could almost be human.

It didn't make sense. There was too much there to be a mere animal. Too much personality beneath the fear and confusion. She—it was a she—needed help. Hadara knew it, and that she was coming toward the Vale.

On the morning of the fourth day, Hadara found herself at the edge of the Vale, straining with all her senses to catch any scent or mind-call. She opened herself as much as she dared in an unprotected Vale on the edge of the Pelagiris. She had to be careful since most of the border guards and scouts were assisting the Shin'a'in back to the Dhorisha Plains. Each dream had gotten stronger and more vivid. Despite the loss of her sight, Hadara still dreamed in vision. For now. Calmwater had counseled her that such dreams would fade in time.

As if summoned by her thought, Calmwater stepped up to her side. The two of them stood in silence. Hadara wondered if he'd been sent by the *hertasi*.

"Tiron told me you'd not been to see them this morning. I fear you have spoiled them with your attentions. They've come to expect your presence."

The herds of *dyheli* that lived nearby were great friends. It had been days since she'd gone to visit with them. An unfortunate oversight, so soon after the Mage Storms.

Hadara fluffed her feathers, then let them lay smooth against her head once more. "I have been thinking."

"About your dreams?"

Lolling her mouth open in a smile, Hadara couldn't help herself or her sharp tone. "Do the *hertasi* ssspy for you or do they merrrely gossssip?"

"A little of both." Calmwater shifted his stance next to her.

She heard the beads woven through his long hair click against each other in harmony. She was not willing to play the waiting game today. "There iss something in trrrrouble out therre."

"Are you sure that it isn't your mind still seeking ways to find a cure for your affliction?"

This time, Hadara did clack her beak near him. "I am not helplessss. I am not a mewling crreature looking for ssssomething I will not find. I am capable. I am . . ." She paused, her beak hovering near his face, smelling his particular scent, ". . . not making thingsss up."

For a long moment, Calmwater said nothing as Hadara shifted her attention back to the strange forest beyond the Vale. "I understand all these things. I apologize for giving you the impression that I thought you incapable. Your strength of Animal Mindspeech is unrivaled—"

"Thanksss to my blindnessss," she interrupted. The bitterness in her voice startled her.

He continued without pause, "—and I wished to see if there is anything I may do for you."

"No." Hadara gouged the ground, tearing it with her wicked claws. Despite his protestations and his assurance that he did not believe her incapable, the first thing he did was ask to help her. Calmwater was wise, but, at the same time, he was as blind as she in some respects.

She listened to him leave without another word. Hadara bowed her head. Her blindness was difficult for many to accept. At times, even her. But it was the way of

things now. Despite it, she was not crazy. Something out there in the Pelagiris—something sentient—was in trouble.

“You were harsh.”

Serta’s scolding voice came from her left, and again irritation warred with pleasure. Hadara had not heard the *hertasi*. That meant that Serta hadn’t thought to treat her as an invalid this time.

She raised her beak high. “If I wasss, it wasss because he believed me addddlebrained.”

“Or petulant.”

Hadara turned her head to Serta. “Perrrhapsss. But I am not wrrrong.”

She would have said more, but the vision of running, of fear, of foliage streaming past her face, was there once more in overwhelming clarity. With it came the wordless cry for help. Hadara stumbled as the images of a headlong flight and the sensation of gasping for air assaulted her. She turned her head this way and that, trying to get a sense of where the creature was.

“Hadara?”

“It’sss back! Sssshe’s in trouble. It will get herrr this time!” Hadara pulled herself to her feet, feeling the panic of the animal in flight. “I have to help.”

“How?” Serta was at her side.

The answer came in the form of a familiar glade not too far from the Vale. Hadara knew it—not from the sight of it but from the plants within, the fallen logs, and the tree at its head.

“The glade of two logsss. Take me.” Hadara was already heading into the forest, her wings out and mantled so she could gauge where the trees were. The trail, while not an easy stroll, was not unfamiliar.

Serta scurried alongside her, near her front left leg. The two moved in unison down one of the worn forest paths. It was too slow. Images of a monstrous creature flashed before her. Black chitin armor on a wolfen back. Two snarling heads where only one should be. Five clawed legs. Snapping teeth came too close.

Hadara stumbled. Serta was there. There was little the *hertasi* could do except wait for the gryphon to get her feet. “Too ssslow. You have to help me. Guide me!” Hadara rose, bowed her head, and ran. All the while, confused imagery filled her mind. Now the view was one of height, looking down on the changed monster.

“Left!” Serta yelled as she kept pace. Hadara dodged left, bumping her right wing into a tree. “Left,” the *hertasi* instructed. “Left and then right. Big tree.”

Hadara did as she was told, remembering this path. She walked it on her own when she had time. Half-tripping over some roots, she gave a squawk, and the image in her mind turned from the monster trying to climb the tree toward the trail leading out of the glade.

:Help! Help me!:

The Animal Mindspeech was so strong it almost made Hadara fall again. Instead, she shook her head to clear it, then called with all her strength. *:I’m coming. I’m coming. Watch the monster. Watch where it goes.:*

Hadara and Serta burst into the glade. Hadara got a good look at what she and Serta looked like, running pell-mell into sight. The cry of a hawk in pain filled the air, and the image shifted to one of the monster’s heads clamped onto a human leg.

“Get help!” Hadara didn’t wait for Serta to answer. Instead, she screamed a battle cry and charged the creature in her mind’s eye. She used the flickering glade images to tell her where the monster was as she leapt. Landing on the back of the two-headed monster, Hadara could see what she looked like from the side as she tore flesh with beak and claw.

:*Gryphon . . . ?*:

:*Keep watching. I need your—*: Hadara didn’t get to finish the thought as the wolfen monster spun, throwing her from its back. She landed hard on her side. The snarling, slavering creature was on her before she could bounce to her feet.

It tried for her throat and face, but she kept the two heads from her with her front claws while raking its tender underbelly with her back claws. The chitin kept her from being effective. Hadara stabbed at one face with her beak, drawing blood. The other wolf head howled, and the gryphon threw the monster off her.

The two circled each other—then the image was gone, replaced with foliage. “No! Keep watching!” Hadara cried, even as she was bowled over by the monster she couldn’t see anymore. Snapping jaws bit deep into her chest. As the image returned to the fight, the gryphon had just enough time to block the wolfen claws before they tore into her underbelly.

Then the fight came close as the creature she’d come to rescue in turn rescued her by stabbing the wolfen creature in the hindquarters. The dagger—a human dagger—struck deep into the monster’s haunch. It kicked out at the creature, knocking her back but allowing Hadara to roll the monster off her.

:*Keep watching it. Please! I can’t see it if you don’t.*: Hadara threw the Animal Mindspeech toward what she now thought to be a mutated *tervardi*.

Wordless surprise and understanding flooded Hadara’s mind. Then, with a foresight she wouldn’t have thought of, the *tervardi* moved toward the gryphon but kept her eyes on the monster. Suddenly, it was as if Hadara were seeing it with her own eyes. She mantled her wings and screamed a challenge at the monster.

As she moved, circling, the *tervardi* moved with her to keep the view consistent. The wolfen creature charged. Hadara met the charge with raking claws and slashing beak, keeping it away from the injured *tervardi*.

Then a colorful streak of red-tailed hawk ripped fur from the back of one of the wolf heads, and a woman in red and green dove at the side of the monster with biting blades. Her hair, cut short in the style of scouts and warriors, was as red as blood. It was Crimsonstrike, Calmwater’s lifemate. Moments later, Nightclaw and Summerfire were there, and the monster had no chance.

The image of the fight cut off as the *tervardi* pressed her face to Hadara’s neck, sobbing in bird cries and babbled Animal Mindspeech. *:I was caught in the storm. It hurt so much. Then I was lost, confused, and the monster found me. It killed my horse. My poor Rune. It hunted me for days. I don’t understand what’s happened to me.:*

All Hadara could do was fold her wings and one claw about the distressed *tervardi*. She chirped soothing tones. *:It’s over. It’s over now. Shhhh.:*

But Hadara knew it was far from over. She could smell hawk on the *tervardi*. And human. Something terrible had happened, but she didn’t understand what until she heard Crimsonstrike murmur, “Change-Child.”

• • •

By the time the group returned to k'Leysha Vale, the *hertasi* had already created a space next to Hadara's nest for the Change-Child. Hadara had pried the girl's name out of her. It was one that made all who heard look closer at her: Kitha shena Tale'sedrin.

No one could part Kitha from Hadara's side. After the first attempt ended in panic and Hadara flaring in protective anger, no one tried. They left the two alone with Serta lurking on the edges, waiting to be needed.

Kitha whistled, then chirped, each sound more distressed than the last.

:*Shh, Kitha. You're safe.*:

:*Why can't I speak? Why does everything look different? My hands have claws.*

What's wrong with me?:

Hadara was silent for a moment before she spoke. "I don't know. I cannot see you. I'm blind."

Kitha's mind stilled. Then she sent, *:But you can speak like this and with your voice.*:

"Yesss. But, when I speak mind to mind with you, I'm using Animal Mindsspeech." Hadara tilted her head. Kitha did not respond. "I thought you might be terrrvardi. But, you are Ssshin'a'in. I smell hawk on you, but . . ."

Kitha stood, her hand on Hadara's wing. *:Change-Child. What does this mean?:*

Hadara stood by her and realized how small Kitha was. Not much taller than an adolescent Kaled'a'in. "Lend me your eyes. I will take you to one of the pools. Therrre we may see what we see."

She did not need to see to guide the girl to the pool. But after moons of darkness, she was hungry for color and sight. There was the familiar mental touch that Hadara accepted. With the ease of slipping on a cuff, images blossomed in her mind. She was looking at herself. Her tawny mottled feathers, her white, sightless eyes, her yellow beak and white crest feathers. In Kitha's eyes, she was beautiful.

"Put your hand on my neck and look forward. I will show you."

Kitha did as she was told. *:Change-Child?:* she prompted.

Knowing the girl would not be put off, Hadara stepped onto the well-tended pathways, leading Kitha to one of the nearby still pools. *:A Change-Child is one who has been changed by magic. If you were Shin'a'in, you are now something more. I do not know what. You may have been caught in a Change Circle.:* She paused for a few long moments as they approached the pool. *:Look into the pool so I may see.:*

Hadara sat as Kitha leaned over the still water and gasped the soft *chirr* of a bird. Reflected was a small creature: part human, part bird. She had no human hair left; instead, her head was covered in the mottled feathers of a young red-tailed hawk from brow to neck. The left side of her face from cheekbone to brow had the feathered face and golden eye of a bird. Her right half was of a lovely young woman with a green eye the Tale'sedrin were famous for. Her nose and mouth were a blend of beak and lip. From her strong chin down to her neck was human, but Hadara could see feathers peeking out over Kitha's shoulders.

Kitha slapped at the water with a cry of denial, then ran from the still pool. Darkness descended once more for Hadara. She contemplated what this meant for the

girl, but she did not follow. She had something else to do. Raising her head, she asked, “How long have you been therrrrre?”

Calmwater stepped forward with silent steps. “Long enough to see what I needed to see.”

“Can sssshe be healed?”

The adept was silent for longer than Hadara liked. “No. Were the Heartstone full, it would’ve been possible to help her in some small way, but now, no. Perhaps not ever, because of the nature of the change. Our far-ranging scouts found a Change Circle. I fear the longer Kitha is like this, the harder it will be to reverse when the magic returns.”

Hadara murred in thought. “K’Leysssha Vale . . . ?” she asked.

“Will accept her as one of their own.” Calmwater’s voice was firm. “We are the best place for her now. We understand magic and Change-Children. If she went back to the Shin’a’in, they’d only send her here.”

• • •

Hadara returned to her nest and found Kitha there. She moved with slow, careful steps until she circled the Change-Child with her warm bulk. Kitha remained stiff and unyielding for thirty heartbeats. Then she turned and threw herself against Hadara’s side, wailing with hawklike cries of despair. Hadara did nothing more than let the Change-Child sob her broken heart out and hum a soothing, soft tune within her mind.

Little by little, sobs shifted into tears and hiccups that subsided into the cuddle of the exhausted. Hadara was almost asleep when Kitha shifted and asked, *:How did you become blind?:*

The question should not have startled her, but it did. Hadara shivered her feathers in memory, then smoothed them over. “It wasss an accident. It wasss my own fault.”

:Tell me in here? With words and images?:

:As you wish.:

Kitha turned over and settled against Hadara’s side.

Hadara sent her the image of long travels and new places. Of Mage Portals and floating Kaled’a’in sleds. Many gryphons flew while *hertasi* rode and the *tervardi*, *dyheli*, and Kaled’a’in walked. There was a rest spot in a castle ruins. Hadara frolicked among the rocks until she found a sparkling gem on the ground. She eyed it with curiosity, then turned it over with a claw. Instead of flipping over like a normal jewel, the brightest, burning light seared into Hadara’s brain. It was the last thing she’d seen until now.

Kitha sat up. *:It was a trap?:*

:A trap. An alarm. Something left over from a long time ago.:

:They could not fix your eyes?:

:No, Kitha. It was magic burn. There was nothing anyone could do, even when there was enough magic in the world. Now . . . :

:Now there is no magic . . . : Kitha’s mental voice was soft with realization. *:I cannot be helped.:*

Hadara covered her with a wing. “No. Not rrrright now. Not until the Hearrrtsstone is full once morrrre. Even then, it isss not a sssure thing.” She could smell the salt tears

coursing down Kitha's face. "But be not afrraid. You have a home here. The Kaled'a'in alrrready acccept you as you arrre. You arrre sssstill wanted. I will be herre for you."

Kitha did not answer. She lay back against Hadara's side, allowing the gryphon to shelter her.

• • •

:I cannot stay. I have a duty to perform.:

Now that Kitha had had time to calm down and to think, Hadara found the young woman to be bright and stubborn in the face of everything. "But I've alrrready made cccertain you had a home. I—"

Kitha moved to Hadara's side. *:Thank you. I am so grateful. But I must complete my mission. I must. I am a courier. I have a message to return from the White Winds Mage, Quenten of Bolthaven, to give to Terek shena Tale'sedrin. This is something I cannot fail in.:*

"The Ssshin'a'in werre evacuated during the Mage Sstormssss. They will not be wherrre they once werre. Only now they rrrreturn from the Valesss to the Dhorrisssha Plainssss."

:Be that as it may, I must go. A courier who cannot find her home clan is no Shin'a'in. I must do this. On my honor and the honor of my family.:

Hadara nuzzled Kitha's head feathers, at a loss. She did not want Kitha to leave. It was more than the fact that the girl could share her vision. She could not explain it. The fact that Kitha was insisting spoke of something more. Finally, she asked, "What arrren't you ssssayin?"

Kitha opened her sight once more as she opened her wounded heart. *:I am not full Shin'a'in. I am half-Shin'a'in. The well-known Kerowyn is my great-aunt. Her brother, Landon, is my grandfather. I grew up in Jkatha, but the strength of my ancestors runs through my veins. My mother, though she loved my Shin'a'in father, refused life on the Plains. I, like all my family, had the opportunity to spend summers there . . . and to choose my family when I turned fourteen. I'd chosen to be a courier, as I knew what it was to traverse the cities and to live on the Plains. This last trip . . . it was to be my proving ground.:*

:Proving ground for what?:

:My ability to be the courier my Clan and Family needed. From the Plains to Rethwellan and back. My first solo job. It is my duty to make it back home and prove that their teaching was not in vain. No matter what I look like now.:

Hadara felt Kitha's determination, her hope, and the encroaching despair. She radiated warmth, love, and support. "You cannot sssspeak."

Kitha flexed her clawed fingers. *:I can still write. I will learn the silent language.:* "They will sssend you back herre. The Ssshin'a'in do not deal in magic."

:But they will know I survived. A three-moon trip became five, but I still survived. They taught me well.: Kitha paused and leaned against Hadara. *:I will need to write to my mother and let her know what happened as well. I cannot start a new life as I am until I deal with what I once was.:*

Hadara hugged Kitha close, her own heart breaking. She could not stop Kitha from fulfilling what she saw as her duty.

• • •

“No. Absolutely not. We cannot allow you to leave, Kitha.”

Calmwater’s voice put Hadara on edge. She could feel Kitha’s agitation as the Change-Child sounded an annoyed cry.

Hadara translated for the small group. “Ssshe sssayssss that you cannot keep herrr captive in the Vale. Sssshe will go with or without yourrrr perrrmissssion.”

“Does she not understand that—?”

Kitha cut off Calmwater with another sharp shriek. Hadara felt her move until Kitha stood under her beak. *:Translate for me?:*

:Yes. Of course.: Hadara spoke the words as Kitha fed them to her. “Do not ssspeak about me as if I am not herrrre or too sssstupid to underrrrssstand. I may not have the ability to ssssspeak, but I am as able as the rrrrest of you.” Hadara clacked her beak for emphasis, imagining the fierce look on Kitha’s face.

“Yes. Of course. I apologize.” Calmwater gazed directly at Kitha. From Hadara’s point of view, it was as if he were staring at her breast feathers. “Please understand that while we Kaled’a’in can accept you as you are now, the Tale’sedrin will not. Your family in Jkatha will not.”

“I do not need them to acccccept me. I need them to acccccept that I completed this misssssion. What happenss then, I will deal with then. I will not borrrrrrow trrrrouble.”

Crimsonstrike spoke. “You are willing to risk your life to make a point?”

Hadara did not speak for Kitha, and Kitha did not respond.

“Kitha shena Tale’sedrin, as one who saved your life, you owe me an answer.”

Hadara and Kitha winced as one. Kitha nodded as Hadara answered. “Yess. I am willing to rrrrissk myssself to make a point. I have a duty to my Clan. Even if that Clan will no longer accccept me, theirrrr teaching was ssssound. They could not protect me from the Mage Ssstorrrmss. I will go to them with or without your perrmissssion.”

Crimsonstrike nodded, giving Kitha a half-smile. “As stubborn as a Shin’a’in.”

“How will you get them to listen to you before they cut you down? You have no voice.” Calmwater sounded more and more frustrated.

“I am of the Clan of the Hawk. I am parrrrt hawk. They will wait.”

“You are a Change-Child!”

“Ssshe will not be alone. I will be with herrr.” Hadara was suddenly looking at herself, at her beak from the underside. She gave Kitha an open-mouthed grin. Now that Hadara understood what she needed to do to soothe her own heart, she couldn’t contain her joy. *:You need me. I need you. We can do this together. We won’t be alone.:*

:You would come with me? I’d hoped but I didn’t want to ask. You’re . . . :

:If you say blind, I’m going to rap you on the head with my beak.:

“You are blind! It cannot be helped. I forbid you to go!” Calmwater stood. “I will not allow you to harm yourself again—”

Crimsonstrike put a hand on her lifemate's arm. She gazed at the pair before her. "Perhaps there is more than one proving ground here. It has been five moons since Hadara was blinded. The same length of time as Kitha's journey. Perhaps, the Star-Eyed has plans for these two."

Hadara raised her beak. "Perrrhapsss. But I cannot, and will not, allow Kitha to go alone. I may borrrrow herrr eyesss. Sssshe may borrow my voice. We are two of a kind. We complement each other."

Kitha whistled in approval. Then Hadara spoke for her. "Yesss. We complement each otherrr. I will be herrr eyesss. Sssshe will be my voice when therre are those too . . . blind . . . to understand what has happened."

Crimsonstrike stood and leaned over to Calmwater. There was a long, silent moment when nothing could be heard except for the Vale noises around them. Then Calmwater nodded. "It seems I cannot stop you. I can, however, request that you return here should things go awry."

:He can request that all he wants.: Kitha mind-muttered to Hadara.

:It will be good to prove him wrong,: the gryphon replied. *:And to prove that both of us can do this, together.:*

The Highjorune Masque

Stephanie D. Shaver

She'd been calling herself Bree ever since she came to Highjorune eight months ago. She'd spent two of those months waiting for a Herald to rescue her.

And in the meantime—she worked. And sang.

Today she swept ashes. Highjorune had enough people to warrant a soapmaker, and soap needed lye, and lye needed lots of ashes. It didn't pay well, but it let her go to many places without anyone noticing.

And where she went, she took her songs with her.

She walked a fine line between outing herself and being unobtrusive. Whenever she had to go to the Crown of Lineas, she made damn sure that Ferrin, the inn's resident Bard, was nowhere to be seen when she sang. If he heard her, he'd know. And if he knew, he'd probably kill her.

But—fine line. She needed to watch him without him knowing she watched. So she went back to the Crown, over and over, and she risked her little songs. Songs about Sendar and Selenay, songs about the good Valdemar had done. After all, if she had to cross thin ice, she might as well dance.

"Morning, Bree," Ystell, the Crown's cook, said cheerfully. Her face looked as though she'd caught a battle-ax with her forehead—mainly because she had. She'd even kept the ax after dispatching the mercenary responsible and mounted it over the hearth in the Crown's kitchen as a subtle reminder to food critics of *whose* food they quibbled with.

Not that Ystell was anything but the embodiment of kindness. Bree liked only a handful of Highjoruners, and Ystell numbered on that list. Along with the soapmakers, Skarron and Dredre, and Orenn, the Crown's hostler, plus a half-dozen others who'd been nothing but kind to her, a stranger from the outside.

"Morning, Miss Cook," Bree replied, answering to her assumed name without hesitation. She'd been filled with intense melancholy the first time she'd realized that she'd stopped listening for her real name. She'd written three songs off the deep sadness.

A small body hurtled through the back door and flung itself at the cook, who carried on as if she hadn't been ambushed by a toddler. "Suze," she said to the child, "you need to wait for breakfast."

"But Miss Cook," she replied, with perfect toddler logic, "I'm hungry *now*."

The cook's eye twinkled, and her skillful hands moved slightly. A scrap of baked-off pie dough, glazed with honey and spices, magically appeared in Suze's hand. The child took discreet bites, beaming at her benefactor.

"You need to wait, wait, wait," Bree said, putting a little song into the words, drawing Suze over to the fire. The child had a round face, dark curls, and serious gray eyes. Her father, the inn's newest hostler, had started working at the Crown a month ago. He was a widower, or so Bree assumed, because when she'd asked Suze where her mama was, the child had replied with perfect seriousness, "The Havens."

Then Suze had grabbed a handful of Bree's ashes. Hilarity had, unfortunately, ensued.

Today, she seemed to respect the buckets of ash, as much because her hand was sticky with honey-crust as having been told numerous times they were "no touch."

"How are you this morning, Suze?" she asked.

"Hungry." She finished the last of her pie dough and licked her fingers clean.

"Well, I hear breakfast is soon." Bree stood up, hauling her buckets with her.

"Ystell, I'm off."

"Take care, love. Come back for supper, if you care. We more than owe you."

Bree stopped briefly to claim her cloak from the peg by the door. She kept her head down as she walked outside, past the bake-oven and the stables, passing Suze's father, Attikas, as she went. The bearded hostler had a similar eyes-downcast way of walking, and they mumbled greetings to one another as they passed. Past him in the stables, she saw Eel the stableboy sweeping out stalls. As a nickname, Eel more than suited his clammy skin and greasy hair. It didn't help that he clung to Ferrin like . . . well, more a leech than an eel. Either way, she liked him slightly more than Ferrin, which was to say: not at all.

Dinner with the Lord Buffoon and his lickspittle? she thought as she turned down the street toward the soapworks. *I think not.*

And then she heard it: the impossible clip-clop-chime of Companion hooves.

She froze, clinging to her bucket handles.

Herald, she thought. *Oh, gods, finally.*

Two Companions came around the corner. One mare, one stallion.

Two unbridled, unsaddled Companions.

Bree's heart sank.

They had drawn a small crowd of children and young adults, expressing open curiosity. Bree stepped aside to let them and their entourage pass. The Companions turned into the Crown's courtyard and approached Eel, who screamed and jumped backward, slamming up against the back of the stall he'd been sweeping.

Both Companions flattened their ears. The mare snapped at the air. The stallion gave her a reproving look, but the moment her teeth clapped down, Eel's screaming stopped. She snorted, then pointed with her nose to the stalls.

Ystell appeared around a corner, berating Eel for his rudeness. *She* at least knew what riderless Companions far from Haven meant—a Choosing, most likely. The cook led the Companions to the widest stalls in the stable, talking to them as she would a paying guest. The crowd dispersed gradually, and Bree went with them.

No Heralds doesn't mean no hope. With every step, she could feel her bitterness fading. *Companions can Mindtalk.*

Bree realized then what she must do.
I'm going to have to have dinner with Lord Buffoon.

• • •

Ystell brightened when Bree stepped into the kitchen. “Bright Lady!” she exclaimed. “You’ve finally come to dinner!”

Bree inhaled the aroma of rosemary and deeply browned onions as she hung up her cloak. Supper for the staff came after the dinner service but before the Bard’s performance. The staff filtered in by singles and pairs. Attikas arrived with his daughter, who spun a silver-and-blue top on the table while they waited for dinner. The pot-scrubbers and maids came in next, followed by Orenn and Eel.

Last came the innkeeper, Sharlot, practically draped over Ferrin and laughing obsequiously at some joke he’d just told.

“I’m telling you, dearest,” he said to her, continuing his jest, “you ought to send a bill to Selenay.”

Sharlot giggled. “Oh, stop.”

Ystell set a marvelous collection of cottage pies, bacon pies, and cheese-and-onion pies on the table. Everyone served themselves, with Ferrin pouncing first.

“Why not?” he continued, helping himself to slabs of both cheese-and-onion and cottage pie. “They’re eating *your* hay, taking up *your* stalls. Did Selenay ask *your* permission to house them in *your* inn?”

“I’m sure you’ll get a chit to put toward taxes,” Orenn said. “And it’s *Queen* Selenay, Ferrin.”

Ferrin met Orenn’s gaze with a smile. “So it is, Orenn. Silly me. I keep forgetting she’s my Queen.”

Eel and Sharlot snickered.

His voice took on a treachery wickedness. “Highjorune didn’t used to be part of Valdemar. Maybe it needs to remember that. Don’t you agree, Orenn?”

Bree felt a pressure building against her skull with his every word, as if someone were pouring honey over her head. Beside her, Orenn nodded. “I . . . I guess . . . I mean, Highjorune used to be part of Lineas . . . a long time ago . . . but. . . .”

“See?” Ferrin said, voice a velvet purr. “It’s not such a stretch.”

“Not a stretch,” Orenn agreed, echoing him.

The pressure on Bree’s head receded. Orenn blinked, then picked up his fork and stared at it as if he didn’t know what to do with it. A moment later, he started eating again. Ferrin watched, smirking.

Bree felt sick. *He’s making people dance to his Gift.*

Ferrin shoveled food in his mouth, and at least some of the tension drained away while he stuffed pie into the hole in his face. Bree poked at her own serving, suddenly lacking an appetite.

“Daddy,” Suze said, her high child’s voice cutting through the clatter of dinner, “more sheeypud?”

“Sheeypud?” Ystell said, confused. “You mean the cottage pie?”

Attikas flushed. “We call it ‘sheepy pudding’.”

“Sheeypud?” Ferrin howled the words. “Gods above! What are you, Holderkin?”