

A HERALD'S RESCUE

by Mickey Zucker Reichert

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Dust motes swirled through the sunbeam glaring into the barn. By its light, Santar trapped the upturned right front hoof of the salt merchant's gelding between his muscular calves. "Hand me the pick." Blindly, he held out his right hand.

Santar's younger brother, Hosfin, slapped the tool into the proffered palm. "Do you see something?" He crowded in for a closer look, his tunic tickling Santar's bare arm, his shadow falling over the hoof.

"Think so," Santar grunted. "Got to get past all the crap first." Flipping the pick in a well-practiced motion, he gingerly hooked out chunks of road grime and straw. The sharp odor of manure rose momentarily over the sweet musk of horse. "Here." He touched the pick to a gray cobble shard lodged in the groove between forehoof and frog. He dug under the hard, sharp stone. The horse jerked its foot from his grasp, just as the pick lodged into position, and the movement sent the fragment flying. It struck the wooden wall with a ping, then tumbled to join the rest of the debris on the stable's earthen floor. Still clutching the pick, Santar scooped the hoof back upward to examine the damage. He discovered a light bruise but nothing that suggested serious swelling or infection. He stroked the injury with a gentle finger, and the horse calmed.

Hosfin's head obscured the hoof. "No wonder he was hopping and snorting."

"Yeah." Santar released the hoof and patted the horse's sticky flank. "Could have been a lot worse. Lucky beast."

"Lucky *man*," Hosfin corrected. He stepped back, skinny arms smeared with grime, sandy hair swept back and tied with a scrap of leather. "Don't think he could afford another horse by the look of him. Needs to learn to take better care of his valuables."

Santar's brown hair hung in shaggy disarray, in need of a cut. Horse work had honed his muscles: lugging grain bags and hay bales, exercising his charges, cleaning and grooming. He also had an almost inexplicable way with afflicted creatures that made his father's stables an exceptionally logical place for any traveler to board. They might find stables nearer their lodgings or destination, ones larger or with more modern construction, ones with fancier names or decor. But Santar's father prided himself on service, mostly provided by his seven sons and one daughter. Travelers who cared as much for their animals' comfort as their own tended to seek them out, including the occasional Herald from Valdemar. Santar especially loved their huge white mounts with their impeccable coats and strange, soft blue eyes. They seemed so docile and intelligent, their conformations so perfect, their intensity of attachment to their riders so mythically intense. The Heralds tended them so vigilantly, Santar rarely had the opportunity to do anything for them but stare.

A sharp whinny from the yard sent Santar's head jerking up so suddenly he nearly brained his brother. "Who's that?"

Hosfin's thin shoulders lifted, and he slouched from the stall. As Santar watched him move, he marveled at how his brother had grown just in the last few months, gaining the gawky, spindly proportions of an adolescent. Santar wondered if their eldest brother had looked at him the same way when he had turned fourteen three years ago.

Santar caught up to his brother at the door of the stable. The younger man stood as if frozen, the

door wedged against him. Alarmed, Santar pushed past Hosfin. "What is it?"

A handsome white stallion stood in the yard, coat shimmering silver in the late afternoon sunlight. Against his fine, pink hooves, the grass looked like crystalline emerald; and blue sky reflected from eyes full of wisdom. Santar shook his head to clear it, shocked to find the creature of his reverie come so abruptly to life. "It's...it's a Companion."

Hosfin finally spoke, but only to force out a single syllable. "Yes."

The Companion let out another trumpeting cry, this one seeming ten times louder without the sheltering walls of the stable. It cocked its head, one pale eye focusing directly on Santar.

Hosfin managed more words. "I've never seen one without a Herald on it."

Santar had, but only after the rider had negotiated its board. "Very odd." He held out a hand toward the animal and advanced with shy caution. If it wanted, the huge stallion could stomp him to a smear.

Head still tipped, the Companion watched Santar's approach. He had almost drawn near enough to touch it, when the stallion raised his muzzle in a blasting whinny.

Ears ringing, Santar jerked back, watching the animal prance a wild circle, then stop to snort and stare at him again. Cursing himself for his own sudden movement, he spoke softly and soothingly as he would to any horse, "What's wrong, boy?"

Still at the entrance to the stables, Hosfin said, "Maybe he's lost his Herald."

It seemed unlikely. Santar believed the Companions chose the best and brightest, and the Herald/Companion bond was unbreakable. Needing something to say to the horse, however, Santar repeated, "Have you lost your Herald, boy?"

The horse bobbed his head savagely and pawed the ground. He whirled, stepped, then looked back at Santar over his shoulder.

The gesture was unmistakable.

Hosfin explained the obvious. "He wants you to follow him."

"Yes." Santar studied the horse. Only one scenario made sense to him. "Is your Herald...in need...of help?"

The Companion's head whipped up and down so hard he had to make himself dizzy. He pranced forward and back, still staring at Santar.

Terror shocked through Santar. He wiped his grimy hands on his tunic. "All right. Let me just gather a search party." He considered aloud. "We'll need a doctor, a few strong men, a—"

The Companion spun suddenly and charged at Santar.

"Hey!" Santar ran toward the barn. Hosfin ducked behind the door.

Santar had barely managed two steps when the stallion's head slammed his side, bowling him to the ground. "Hey!" he shouted again, throwing up his hands to protect his head from the heavy hooves. Huge, flat teeth closed over his tunic, hefting him into the air.

Santar bit back a scream, which would only further upset the horse. Instead, he launched into a steady patter in a calm voice meant to compose both of them. "Easy now, boy. Nothing to get riled about." He hid fear behind a tone deliberately pitched to rescue self and animal from panic. He felt himself lifted, tossed. Air sang through his ears, then he landed on his belly across the horse's withers. It did not wait for him to settle before galloping away from the village.

For an instant, horror overwhelmed logic. Stunned silent, Santar could only feel each wild hoof fall jar through his body. Instinct awakened first and he scrambled to a sitting position, grasping a hold on the

streaming, white mane. The smooth precision of the Companion's run thrilled through him. He had ridden many horses in his day but none with the silken grace of this stallion. Every stride seemed to flow into the next, and his body cycled like liquid through every movement. Finally, the last of Santar's fear slipped away, replaced by exhilaration.

Hesitantly, Santar stroked a neck as soft as velvet, glazed with sweat. The familiar perfume of horse musk filled his nose, and the mane striped his knuckles like bleached twine. "All right, boy. I get it. Your Herald is in immediate trouble."

The Companion nickered, a clear indication that Santar had properly interpreted his actions.

"What good's my getting there fast if I don't have any supplies or expertise to help him?"

This time, the horse gave no reply, the road through the surrounding farmland unscrolling beneath his hooves. Apparently, the horse found Santar adequate enough to save his Herald. The stable boy hoped Hosfin would have the sense to call for help. Perhaps they could mass a group to follow him, hopefully one that included men with healing knowledge and strength.

As the Companion's long strides ate up a mile, Santar caught sight of farmers too far away to hear his call. Suddenly, it occurred to him where the Companion was headed. Not toward the river. Recent rains had swollen the waters past their banks and well over the ford. Santar glanced around the stallion's neck. They approached the river at breakneck speed, and Santar knew it had surged to well above his head. "Stop!" he shouted.

To Santar's surprise, the horse obeyed. It drew up with a suddenness that should have sent him flying, but that motion proved as fluid as every other. Instead, they came to an effortless halt just a few steps in front of the flooded fording. Uncertain of his next chance, Santar dismounted.

The Companion made a mournful sound deep in his throat. He plunged toward the water, then looked longingly at Santar. He lunged forward again, this time splashing at the edges of the pool.

Though it was against his better judgment, Santar approached the Companion. "I know you're intelligent, and you can understand me."

The horse pawed the ground furiously, attention beyond the water where the road continued eastward through the Tangled Forest. Santar had only gone this far a few times, and then only in the company of his father and brothers. The sun already lay well behind him. Unless the Herald lay just past the ford, they would wind up in the woods at night, never a pleasant prospect even in broad daylight on the well-traveled path. Demons owned the forest nights, ready to steal the soul of any man foolish enough to wander into their realm.

Santar continued, "It might take a few more seconds to gather a party, but it'll be well worth the trouble to save your—"

The Companion bellowed out an impatient sound, then slammed a hoof into the river, splashing muddy droplets in all directions.

Santar bit his lip, trusting the Companion's judgment. He knew the bond between Companion and Herald surpassed anything he would ever understand. *This horse came to me for help, and I'm going to give it. I'm not going to let another man die for my fear.* "All right. Let's go." Catching a handful of mane, he dragged himself to the stallion's withers again.

Without a moment's hesitation, the Companion sprang into the ford.

Cold pinpoints of water splashed Santar's face and arms, and his legs seemed suddenly plunged in ice. He wound his hands into the Companion's mane, gripping desperately, as the water surged and sucked around them, threatening to drag him from the stallion's back. He watched a massive branch swirling wildly in the current, lost to his sight in moments. The understanding of true danger finally reached him. Having thought only of the bare possibility of demons, he had not considered how much the horse

would struggle in the current, how dire the swim, that the churning current could pluck him like a twig from the animal's back and send him helplessly spinning to his doom. Though an able swimmer, he could never win against such a force.

Apparently immersed in the swim, the Companion paid the man on his back no notice, though Santar's death grip on his neck had to have become burdensome. The water slapped and tugged at Santar's sod-den clothing, threatening a hold that he gradually winched tighter. Focused on his grip, Santar put his trust wholly in the Companion, blindly depending on him to bring them safely ashore and never once considering that the stallion's strength, too, might fail. It was a Companion, the most clever and competent animal alive and used to having a human wholly reliant upon it. *Not wholly reliant*, Santar reminded himself. *We're talking about Heralds here, plenty capable and talented in their own right.* Only then, Santar thought to worry that his own puny normalness might disrupt the tenuous balance, that the horse might count on him to perform with the ability of a Herald. *We're dead!* By the time the idea materialized, the Companion gave a mighty surge that hauled both of them from the water.

Glad to find himself on dry land, Santar leaped from the horse and wrapped his arms around the nearest tree. *We made it!* Gradually, the doubts raised by his earlier thoughts intruded. The torrent had carried them far enough downstream that he could no longer find the road. The horizon cut a crescent from the lowest edge of sun, giving the woods a gray-orange cast that seemed supernatural. Over the bubble of water, he could hear a softly rising chorus of bugs punctuated by other, unidentifiable sounds. Demons. Santar shivered in his soaked clothing and looked to the Companion.

The horse pawed the ground, clearly anxious. He nudged Santar toward the woods.

Santar swallowed his fear. *A Herald's life depends on me. On us.* He appreciated the company, though it had dragged him here in the first place. He remembered how the stallion had given him the chance to back out at the fording. He had chosen to continue to save a man's life. To trust the horse's instincts meant believing time of the essence. For the Companion to opt for speed, over preparation and skill, had to mean the Herald lay close to death. The horse, he felt certain, would know.

Though the urge to remount prodded strongly, Santar resisted. In the dark forest, he could see and lead safely better than any horse. He only wished he had had time to grab a lantern, or even just a tinderbox as the forest supplied plenty of torches and kindling. He pushed through the underbrush, tense as an over-wound lute string, the horse moving quietly at his heels. The woods smelled of damp moss and pungent berries, close and green. Branches swept across his face, stinging; and he tried to hold them aside for his larger companion. A whirring sound appeared and disappeared at intervals, grinding at his nerves. An owl cut loose above his head, sending him skittering forward in a rush. *Stop it. Stay calm.* Accustomed to regular horses, Santar tried to maintain the appearance of self-control. The animal might sense his fear, and a panicked horse became a deadly and unpredictable weapon.

Forcing himself to appear calm gradually resulted in a true inner peace. Santar surrendered himself to the mission. For whatever reason, the Companion had chosen him to rescue the Herald, an enormous responsibility. At first, he had believed it sheer coincidence, but he discarded that thought. Companions had a good people sense. It could have approached anyone else in the town, or his brother, but had selected him. Whether Santar saw the quality in himself or not, the Companion had; and he would not betray the stallion's trust nor the life of its Herald.

The animal's nose poked Santar's right side, steering him leftward. The moist nostrils tickled the inner part of Santar's elbow, and he could not help smiling through his fear. He allowed the horse to steer him in this manner, blazing a trail through the Tangled Forest that anticipated deadfalls, brush too thick to penetrate, and trees packed too closely for a large horse to squeeze around. A gray glaze descended around them, deepening the forest shadows to unsettling darkness. The black flies and mosquitoes swarmed in a biting cloud that followed their every movement. Chilled, Santar wished his tunic at least had sleeves.

As the night wore on, Santar battled exhaustion. He had worked a full day in the stables since sunrise, hauling bags and bales, cleaning stalls, wrangling horses; and he had missed the evening meal. The bugs and the cold seemed to drain his vitality along with his blood. Yet, the Companion steered him ever onward with delicate nudges that displayed need but forced nothing. Santar wished for supplies but refused to bemoan them. Somewhere out there, an injured man needed him. *Or woman*, Santar reminded himself. *The Heralds*, he remembered, *come in both varieties*.

The journey continued as fatigue became a leaden weight across Santar's shoulders. He longed to sit for just a few moments. His eyes glided shut, and he forced them open in time to avoid walking into a towering oak. Worries about demons receded, replaced by a solid fight against the sleep that threatened to overwhelm him. Just putting one foot ahead of the other became an all-encompassing battle. Only the realization of a life dependent on his own kept him going. He found himself blundering into dead-ends and copses, uncertain how he had gotten there. He forced himself onward, every step a victory, and hoped he would catch a second wind when he finally reached the ailing Herald.

Suddenly, the stallion gave Santar a hard nudge that drove him to his knees. Moonlight glared into his eyes, blindingly bright after the vast expanse of dark forest. In front of him lay a craggy mountain that seemed to touch the very sky. Santar closed and opened his eyes, but the towering monstrosity remained, a dozen others beyond it. Groaning, Santar staggered to his feet and willed himself forward, preparing to climb.

The Companion gave Santar another abrupt nudge that, once again, dropped him to his knees. Rocks stabbed into flesh, and a trickle of blood stained his britches. Pained, tired, irritated, he turned on the horse. "I'm going, already. I'm going!"

The Companion nickered, pawing up divots of muddy weeds. He tossed his head.

Santar glanced ahead, only then noticing the dark mouth of a cave etched against the rocky cliffs. Suddenly the horse's intention became clear. "He's in there?"

The horse whinnied, head bobbing.

Santar felt a warm wash of relief that he would not have to fight his way up the mountains, tempered by the realization that he would have to enter a dark cave alone and without a light. The stallion could never fit inside, which made sense. If he could, he would have scooped up the Herald and assisted or carried him to safety rather than dragged some stable boy through demon-infested forest and high water to the Herald. Santar sucked in a deep breath, releasing it in a slow hiss. "All right. I'm going in." He rose and picked his way to the entrance, staring into the black interior. "Any chance you could help me find my way around inside?"

The Companion nickered.

"Didn't think so," Santar mumbled. He returned his gaze to the cave, seeing only as far as the moonlight could penetrate. It did not show him much. "Let me gather some weeds or pebbles, first. Something to drop and follow back out."

The Companion shook his head wildly, silver mane flying.

A stranger's voice touched Santar's mind then: *I will guide you.*

Startled, Santar whirled. "Who? Who...?"

:Come. I'll guide you.

The Herald. Santar had heard that Heralds had unusual powers, but it still took him inordinately long to figure out the obvious. "Can you hear me as well?"

No response. The voice gained a touch of urgency. *:Please come. Quickly.*

"I'm coming," Santar promised. If this Herald was like those he had met, he would maintain grace

under pressure, which meant he probably needed help a lot more than he would admit. Santar secretly wondered if he could do anything worthwhile to assist. He did have a way with horses and their wounds, but he had never tried his skills on humans. Nevertheless, he plunged into the cave.

The leathery flap of wings filled Santar's hearing, and the air became pungent with guano. A clotted mass of bats hurtled from the cave, wings beating furiously. Startled, Santar dropped to the floor, ears filled with the smack and cut of their wild flight. Silence followed, eerie with menace. Though glad the bats had gone, Santar could not help filling the intensity of the quiet darkness with unseen demons.

:Take your first left,: the voice ordered.

Shocked from his own thoughts, Santar obeyed gratefully. He hoped the Herald would stay with him in spirit. He felt so much braver with a companion, even a disembodied, faceless one. *:All right.:* Santar concentrated on the thought, though the other gave no indication he received the message.

Santar veered leftward, keeping a hand lightly against each damp, musty wall. Better to glide his fingers through something disgusting than to risk losing his way.

:Skip the next opening to the left, then the one to the right.:

Santar obeyed, passing up both opportunities to turn.

:Now go right.:

Santar did as the other suggested, still scraping the stone with his fingers. Though worried to interrupt the concentration of the one he sought, he tried tentatively, *:Can you understand me, too?:*

:Yes,: the other sent. *:Go right again.:*

Santar did so. *:My name is Santar.:*

:Orrin. Skip the next right, then go right again. Careful, it's a tight fit.:

Orrin was not kidding. Santar found himself suddenly entering a narrowing that seemed impassable. If he became wedged, they would both die in the dark, dank interior. *:Orrin, I can't fit.:*

:You'll fit. Trust me.:

Santar had to keep reminding himself that he spoke with a Herald, one who desperately needed his help for survival. The idea that he might become stuck fast grew into obsession. Santar realized he alone could make that judgment: the Herald could not know the size of the man who had come for him. *:I can't make it, Orrin. I'm sorry.:*

:Do what you must.: Simple words, brave words, from one who had just condemned himself to death.

Santar knew he had to try. He could not banish his fear, but he could choose to ignore it. He sucked in a deep breath, then let it out fully, tightening his muscles and huddling into the smallest area he could manage. Then, he forced himself into the opening.

The rock crushed in on him, tearing furrows of skin from his chest and arms. He closed his eyes, trying to trick his senses into believing this deliberate act was the source of the darkness. He felt pinched, squeezed in all directions. Crushed empty, his lungs spasmed, seeking air. Panic trickled through him, sending his wits scattering. He forced himself onward, gathering his thoughts and binding them together into one solid goal—the rescue of a stranger for whom he had already risked so much.

Then, suddenly, the pressure disappeared. Santar popped into a cavern that seemed enormous after the constriction that had nearly held him fast. *:I'm coming,:* he sent. *:You were right. I made it through.:* His tunic had torn and now hung in two rags from his shoulders. Though irritating, he did not remove them. He might need the fabric to cushion some other movement or to use as bandages. For a moment he wondered how he would get back, especially towing another man. He brushed the thought aside. First, he had to find that injured Herald.

When Orrin made no reply, Santar forced conversation. He had once seen a Healer do the same thing, keep his patient talking to assure he did not lose consciousness. Obligated to respond, the wounded man had had little choice but to attend the questions, no matter how silly or obvious the answers, which kept his mind working, awake, and focused. *:Your Companion brought me here.:*

The Herald did not seem impressed.

:I'd guessed that. Next right, please.:

Undeterred, Santar continued. *:A remarkably handsome creature, in addition to being loyal and intelligent.:*

:Best there is.: Orrin's voice itself seemed to smile, distracted from the pain. *:I'm very lucky.:*

:What's his name?: Santar took the indicated right and suddenly found himself bathed in moonlight. Though still night, the contrast with the depthless cave interior seemed blinding. He blinked several times, gradually taking in the spray of stars across the blue-gray sky, the skeletal hulks of trees waving in the wind, and the snarl of weeds and bushes that defined the Tangled Forest.

The Companion lifted his head and looked worriedly in Santar's direction.

"Oh, no!" Filled with a tense mixture of alarm and despair, Santar dropped to a crouch. *:I messed up. I lost you.:* Santar whirled, rushing back into the cave. *:I've gone in a circle. I'm sorry. You'll have to start over.:*

:The Companion's name...is Orrin.:

Santar froze. *:Orrin. But that's your—:* Shoulders drawn up to his ears, he turned slowly to confront the stallion. *:You?:*

The horse nodded. *:Yes.:*

Santar could only stare incredulously. "Why?"

:I needed to know you were up to the job, someone who can push himself to his limits, who will do so for the good of a sick or injured stranger.:

:Why?: Even as he asked the question, Santar understood the answer. *:Your Herald—:*

:My Herald.: Orrin repeated, then added, *:is you. I Choose you.:*

"Me?" The reply was startled from Santar. *:Me.:* he repeated internally. *:Herald Santar?:* He shook his head to awaken himself from what had to be a dream, then looked into the blue eyes of the very real, dazzlingly gorgeous white stallion in front of him. He had aspired to owning a horse half this fine, and now he had a Companion as a lifelong friend, so much more than a possession or a mount.

"Thank you," Santar breathed. "Thank you for Choosing me."

Orrin lunged like a striking snake, caught Santar's britches, and hurled him into the air. Santar barely managed to twist before he found himself, once again, unceremoniously dumped, belly first, astride the Companion. *:Come on.:* the horse sent. *:Let's go home.:* Turning toward Valdemar, he trotted into the forest.

Mounted on "the best there is," Santar scrambled onto the stallion's withers and forgot to worry about demons.