

HORSEFEATHERS: A Stellark Saga, YA historical/sci fi/fantasy (work in progress):

Chapter One

"You'll live, Ian. Thanks be to the stars, or the Laird would have my head."

The resonant voice is familiar—who? Till he calls me Ian, I'm not sure who I am.

White-hot agony blazes across the back of my skull. Only an axe buried in my head could hurt this much. Add to that a hundred aches, all over me. I think I'm tied on the rump of a horse—my nose is buried in rippling muscles and the smell of a stable.

"Can ye manage the extra weight, Pegs?" Ah, that's Lyle. My thick-necked tutor, and jester to my father, the MacLeith. "Aye," he says, as though he'd paused for an answer. "Lower and slower will do."

We'd been chasing thieves. Or running from them, can't remember which. I force my eyes open. The black hide beneath me is not my grey mare, Ashley. Nor Lyle's bay gelding, Sirius. With a painful tip of my head, I see huge black feathers. A cape, most likely, thrown over us both. Odd—I don't recall Lyle owning a feathered cape. My eyes shut. I should say something to Lyle, but can't think what, or find my voice.

The horse breaks into a canter, then tips beneath me. Ropes lashed to the back of a saddle keep me from sliding off over his tail. I brace for a jump landing that never comes, and a gale-force wind lifts the cape. My eyes snap open—maybe I can tell if we're near the manor. Beyond the cape's edge is cloud-dimpled sky. Beneath the horse's hooves . . . Treetops?

One pine, towering above the others, flicks a cone in my face when a black hoof strikes its top a glancing blow. . . .