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TOUCHED BY MAGIC
Prologue & Chapter One
by Doranna

THE ENDING

Rethia sat at the edge of the meadow and arranged her morning harvest. Herbs and wild flowers, lichens and mosses--they all jumbled together in her basket despite her best efforts. The sorting was a game, and the hot midday sun brought out earthy scents as she organized the plants, making neat rows of color and shape in a never-ending process that pleased her six--but almost seven!--year-old's penchant for play.

The meadow was old pasture land gone poor, now thick with sturdy wild flowers and patches of briar, and the woods crowded close around it, offering refuge from the sun. Finally tiring of the game, Rethia stretched out on her stomach, lay her head down on her arms, and peered into the slat basket to admire the wilted results. The sun was well up, and the shade of the leafy maple beside her dappled her tunic, screening her just enough to keep the heat from becoming unpleasant.

Of course she fell asleep.

She woke to wild hoofbeats. Frightened, she pressed herself against the ground. The earth shook beneath her and the noise filled her ears, and though she should have crawled to safety in the woods, all she could do was quiver in front of her basket, her fright tinged with a trace of outrage. This was *her*

meadow, her sanctuary and playground. It was her *safe* place, where no bulls were kept nor horses pastured. Still the beasts ran, circling the meadow, whipping through the wiry, long-stemmed flowers and trampling the briars without heed. The dust they raised floated in the sunlight. When Rethia gathered the courage to peer through the thick fall of her light hair, all she could make out was flashing legs and leaping bodies--and all the while, the unmistakable tingle of magic coursed through her body.

Imperceptibly at first, the pounding diminished and the tickling magic intensified. The creatures were leaving, and a glimpse showed her they weren't just running away. They were bounding into the air and never landing. Disappearing. Vanishing in a flash of not-being. And when there was only one set of hoofbeats left, solid and deliberate and walking toward her, Rethia trembled with the knowledge that she was witnessing great magic in a world that was drifting free of such things, and forgot to be afraid of the beast itself.

The hooves stopped in front of her basket, strong round hooves with heavy-boned, clean-lined legs rising from them. Not a horse. She knew that even before she looked up to see the horn. The unicorn dropped a brown-glazed muzzle into her basket, its lips twitching as it lipped and explored the pungent herbs. It wrinkled its nose and snorted mightily, leaving the plants in complete disarray, half of them blown entirely out of the basket.

"Hey!" Rethia protested, forgetting her fear. She pulled herself upright and looked straight into the face of the unicorn, her deep blue gaze unflinching. It was a heavy-boned face, with ridges etched in darkest walnut instead of gleaming highlights, and with odd, icy eyes that abruptly reminded her that unicorns were not Tame. Wild magic, free always, of what man might intend or wish for it. When the beast did not react to her impudence, she lifted a small trembling hand to touch the thick, tangled mane and forelock, so long they

brushed her face even as the animal raised its head. It looked around the trampled, abandoned meadow, and blew out a huff of air. When it looked back down at her, its icy gaze warmed, catching the blue of her eyes, staining them with the reflection of its walnut features. It dropped its head to again accept her touch.

She had no idea it would be a trade.

TOUCHED BY MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

Reandn crouched at the base of a rocky outcrop, poking his finger in the damp blemish that showed through otherwise crisp brown and gold leaves. The print in the underlying dirt showed the pad and claw marks of a fox instead of the scuff from a child's soft boot, and he stood with a scowl. The boy Reandn sought was as lost as ever.

A single spatter of cold rain hit the ground, then another. Reandn regarded the marks dourly, and had to remind himself that the fostered Highborn's son had not started his unicorn hunt with the intention of rousting all three shifts of King's Keep Wolves for a boy hunt instead. Even the Hounds, internal security for the Keep, were out in the fitful weather, driven by the importance of this particular child. He came from the north, the Resiore valleys--and although he was ostensibly fostered here at King's Keep as a favor to his Highborn father, the arrangement was also a reminder to the Highborn of the remote Resiores, a message of their ties and fealty to King's Keep.

A gust of wind penetrated Reandn's wool jacket, and the cold rain hitting his cheek was mindful of snow. *Get moving*, he told himself. *Find the boy before he freezes to death.* But he'd only taken a step when he felt an odd tickle behind his jawbones, the one that had plagued him on and off since late summer. It felt like he had a sneeze caught in the wrong place, and he'd learned to ignore it.

But this time it took him by surprise, moving up into his ears to hum with

an edge that was as jarring as listening to sharpened steel scrape against rock. He shook his head, hard--once, twice--

And suddenly realized he had hit the ground, had been so disoriented he'd fallen without even noticing. When the noise faded and the tickle as well, it left only Reandn, stunned, on his knees with the cold seeping through his trousers and an even colder realization clutching his chest.

It was getting worse. Whatever it was, it was getting worse. And he was a Wolf--Wolf *First*--and not someone who could afford odd, unpredictable fits of dizziness.

He wondered how long he could hide it from the other Wolves. He didn't even want to think about Adela's reaction--after ten years as his wife, she'd well understand immediately the danger he was putting himself in by continuing to ride patrol.

But life as Wolf First was what he knew. It was what he'd *earned*, fighting his way up from abandonment and life as a keep pot scrubber. The Wolves were the elite force that patrolled the area around King's Keep, just as the Hounds handled internal security, and the Foxes moved silently throughout the Keep--or anywhere else in Keland--without anyone quite knowing who they were.

Being a Wolf meant he didn't have to deal with the Highborn, who had as little tolerance for Reandn as he had for them. The Highborn--those born into lives of privilege and position--demanded respect they seldom earned and Reandn could not fake. They, in turn, seemed to regard him as threatening, no matter how benign his mood. Just as well he seldom made it to the main hall, but instead spent his shift supervising his patrol--the deep night patrol. Being Wolf First meant he was second in command, answering only to Saxe, the Pack Leader, and Prime Ethne. It would take a lot more than a few odd spells with his ears to wrench him away from it.

Carefully, one leg at a time, Reandn got to his feet. There was no vestige of dizziness, no oddness behind his jaws. He took a deep breath and set out down the faint deer trail he'd been following. A few more strides and he was deep in concentration again, dizzy spell forgotten as he scanned the thin golden-brown leaf layer--bounty from the stunted oaks and lean poplars that fought for a place among the dark green, bristle-needled pines that thrived here--for the slightest sign of recent disturbance.

The deer trail joined a main path that ran nearly parallel to the road, an informal trail created by both roadmen and the Wolf patrols that hunted, among other things, the roadmen. Reandn strode along it more briskly, his quick, practiced gaze searching the ground ahead. The boy, he knew, was likely to have been through here if he'd been heading for the clear waterhole the children called Unicorn Spring.

He stopped short. There, out of nowhere, there were boot prints--but those of an adult--a man--and not a child. Reandn's dark brows frowned over clear grey-blue eyes as he paced alongside the prints. They were evenly spaced, not too far apart, not too deep. Slow walking. They eventually met and mixed with hoofprints, a round platter-foot like those of the large pony the boy had ridden. The prints moved together a short distance, and Reandn slowed, unhappy with what he was seeing. If the boy had met an adult, he should be home by now--unless the adult was trouble.

Abruptly, the trail proved him right. Both sets of tracks veered to the side and ceased in the midst of an area so scuffled no amount of skill would decipher the story. The disturbance spilled into the woods, tearing through an area of baby pines whose damaged, spicy scent still hung sharp in the air, a teasing reminder that he was too late for whatever had happened here.

Reandn scowled at the inexplicable scene, and at the faint hum that made

him work his jaws without thinking. It was back, then. *Ignore it.* In the spitting rain, he paced the width and breadth of the disturbed sight, found nothing, and ranged outward, delving into the woods. Almost immediately he found a horseshoe, still bearing the six soft nails that had secured it to the pony's foot. A short distance away, essential to any unicorn hunt, was a metal halter, its carefully fashioned links almost buried in the leaves. He picked it up, hefting it thoughtfully in his hand. He had no doubt the boy was dead, and couldn't stop the next thought before it ran through his mind. *What if it had been Kavan?*

But it hadn't been, and he had a job to do. As much as he'd like to comb the area for some clue of exactly what had happened, right now that job meant getting back to the Keep, and reporting to Saxe. The boy was as found as he was going to get, and the only thing alive was the mystery of what had happened. Reandn gave the area one last glance, absently working his jaw, and turned his back to head for the Keep.

The Keep was built on a granite hillside, its grounds carefully leveled and, inside the tall stone keep wall, paved. The Keep itself was stone and wood, boards from the tall, plentiful pines of the area. It was built for defense, but placed deep inside the Northwest quadrant of Keland, where the risk from its neighbors--the smaller countries of Taffoa and Rolernia, all but inaccessible through rugged mountains on the west and north, and sea access from and south and east--was mitigated.

Inside the keep walls, along with the stone-walled barns and the small formal garden, there was room for the crowded, wood-framed buildings that housed the unmarried Hounds and Wolves. The Foxes were who knows where, and the Dragons, Keland's armed troops, were bunked in a separate area, just north and uphill of the Keep.

South was the Keptown, almost a mile from the Keep itself, with thick

rocky woods filling the area between them. This was the most densely patrolled area, and it was where Reandn picked up the main road back to the Keep, walking past the horse and troop training grounds just outside the south walls and through the main entrance.

Saxe waited in the Wolf barracks ready room. Saxe, with his dark hair cut short, neat, never ruffled. Sturdier than Reandn, but not as tall, and always more deliberate, more thoughtful with his reactions. His manner and skill had earned him the position of Wolf Leader four years earlier, and Reandn, his former partner, had been his First ever since, in command of his own patrol and the other patrol leaders--only two others right now, as low a number as it had ever been.

Caleb, the long-boned, rusty-haired Hound First, stood with Saxe by the squat iron stove at the far end of the long room, where they both warmed their hands and appeared dissatisfied with the situation in general.

Reandn walked along the bench rows to join them at the stove. "How'd you manage to pull duty in here instead of out with the rest of your patrol?" he asked Caleb. For *this* search, both Wolves and Hounds were combing the woods.

Caleb shrugged, as if the situation had taken no maneuvering at all, which Reandn knew to be untrue. "I'm coordinating for the Hounds. Brant's with Ethne--" the Prime, who oversaw all the Keep security forces-- "trying to get the Hounds off the hook for this blunder. After all, it was one of your trainees who somehow let the boy out--Wace, right?"

Wace. One of Ser's Yearlings, a young man whose body's growth had outstripped his mind's. Stubborn at best, he took correction poorly and responsibility lightly. He was on training duty at the gate early that morning--all the Wolves trained to substitute at vital defense points of the keep--and had let the boy through without checking with the experienced

gateman backing him.

Saxe cleared his throat. "Best remember where you are, Caleb." *Wolf* barracks, no place for a Hound to get careless with his words, not even when they came from a friend. "Reandn, what's the news?"

Reandn held out a clinking handful of halter. "Found this in Second Sector East, not far from the strangest set of tracks I've hit in a long time. Got a shoe from the pony, too." He fished it out of his belt and dropped it on one of the long benches.

"You didn't track him down?" Saxe raised incredulous eyebrows.

"Nothing to track--trail just disappeared."

Saxe clearly didn't believe it, and Reandn shook his head. "Don't look at *me* like that, Saxe--go look at the tracks. If I were you I'd get our best tracker--who is it now, that old fellow in Faline's patrol?--and go see for yourself."

"I did hold him back from the search," Saxe admitted. "But I never expected to have to send him in after your work."

"And I never expected to run into anything like what I found," Reandn said, not hiding his concern. He unfastened his jacket ties and moved closer to the stove. "I don't think you're going to discover any answers out there, Saxe, top tracker or not. If we're lucky, we'll convince the Resiores the boy was killed by a hill cat."

"But he wasn't," Saxe said flatly.

"No."

Saxe eyed his First for a moment. The missing boy was an up-pass boy from the Resiores, an area of wide valleys replete with the resources rocky King's Keep didn't have. Up-pass, where the Highborn moved in their own separate circles, created their own cycles of social whims, and for the most part cared little what happened at King's Keep. Isolated by mountains, cut off from

the sea by formidable cliffs, and tied to the rest of Keland by one seasonal pass, the Resiores chafed at the chains that bound them to Keland, and to Keland's commerce and Highborn diversions.

Diversions like Tenaebra's Eve, the celebration building to a head at the Keep right now. The one last traditional fling before the goddess Tenaebra ascended in prominence over her sister Ardrith and began a harsh winter rule--and, for King Hawley and his advisors, a key point in relations with the Resiore folk.

It was not a good time to lose one of their children.

Finally Saxe gave a short nod. "All right. We'll have a look."

"It's right where you'd split off the road to go to Unicorn Spring," Reandn told him. "I'm going to grab some sleep or I'll be going into patrol tonight without any. For that matter, any of my patrol you can send back to the barracks would be appreciated."

"I'll recall them first thing," Saxe allowed.

"Too late for me," Caleb said mournfully. "Evening shift for Hound First."

"Which means you got your regular sleep last night," Reandn scoffed, roughly scrubbing his hand across his friend's head to destroy what little order there was to Caleb's rusty brown hair.

Caleb futilely tried to finger his hair back in place. "Like your trainee apparently got his, this morning."

"Wace is *Ser's* trainee--he's not in my patrol. For that matter, I hope Saxe lets him search the North sector all day. After this, I wonder if he'll ever scratch his way out of the litter. I'm not sure how he ever got *in*."

Caleb dismissed the shirker with a shrug. "What about the boy? What do you really think?" He snagged his jacket from the wall pegs and accompanied Reandn outside.

"What I found didn't make any sense to me," Reandn said. "A metal halter, one horseshoe and the biggest mess of tracks you've ever seen. That's all."

Caleb shrugged. "How about the obvious? The boy dropped the halter. The pony stepped on its own shoe and pulled it."

"A shoe gets torn off, it's twisted." Reandn said flatly, scrunching his shoulders against the cold raindrop that had somehow found its way down his neck. He stopped at the thick wooden door set in the base of the squat wizard's tower, where the overhand protected him from the drizzle. "I think I'm going to pretend you didn't imply I had missed the trail of a blundering pony."

"Never," Caleb quickly denied, looking askance at the wet sky as his rusty hair turned dark and limp. "Brant won't need me for another couple bells. I'm for the *Muzzled Fang*--how 'bout you?"

Reandn shook his head with a smile. "It's sleep for me," he said, thinking more about Adela than the bed. But as he reached for the door, it swung outward at him, and Kavan poked his head outside. At the sight of Reandn, his usually solemn little face brightened, and he ran the short distance between them. "Hey there," Reandn said, scooping Kavan up beneath the arms--at seven, Kavan was slight for his age--and taking in Kavan's quick hug before letting him slide to the ground again.

"Hey, Kavan," Caleb said, and the humor in his light blue eyes told Reandn his friend knew sleep now was out of the question, at least for the moment. "Good patrol tonight, Reandn," he said, reaching around Reandn to muss the boy's hair much as Reandn had recently done to him. "I'm off."

"Good patrol," Reandn said to his retreating back. Then he turned to Kavan. "What's got you out and about so early?"

Kavan didn't answer right away. Falling back into his pattern of quiet shyness, he pressed his face against Reandn's side instead. Six months earlier,

he'd arrived at King's Keep, assigned as an apprentice to Ronsin--the last King's Wizard in a world where there was no longer any magic. It was a gesture of respect to an old man whose avocation was a thing of the past, and if nothing else the boy would learn his letters and numbers. But Kavan turned out to be a pale, undersized orphan whose fears and timidity at first interfered with anything he might learn. And the wizard was so far removed from children he had no idea how to deal with the withdrawn boy.

But Adela did. Although her own role in the keep--a combination of overseeing the wizard's tower and doing low-level training of the Wolf patrol leaders' mounts--kept her more than busy, she stayed with Kavan as the boy learned Ronsin's routines and gained confidence in the simple tasks he was required to carry out. Adela could hardly resist--for the boy craved love and she and Reandn, childless after ten years of partnership, craved a child. She was twenty-seven, three years younger than Reandn, and they both knew better than to hope for their own any longer.

So they made Kavan their own. And now Reandn knew him well enough to do nothing more than rest his hand on top of the boy's head and wait, ignoring the spitting rain.

Finally Kavan murmured, "Dela said you had a new horse. She said it needed to be petted."

Ah, Willow. The four year-old gelding who was as uncertain of the world as Kavan, but was also as eager to please--as long as he didn't feel threatened. Making him comfortable in his new stable was Adela's priority. "She's right," Reandn said. "He feels like you did when you first arrived. Let's go see what we can do to make him happier."

He offered his hand to the boy, and Kavan took it with a confidence that made Reandn smile, and forget how tired he was.

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The third shift bells woke Reandn into the darkness of late evening, after putting off sleep until late afternoon. Adela had come to bed some time earlier, and was snuggled closely against him to ward off the chill of a night turned abruptly cold. Good. He hoped it would dig in and take hold--cold weather would dampen Tenaebra Eve mischief more surely than the evident Hounds, Wolves and Dragons, even if it would be necessary to patrol for drunken Highborn who had underestimated the danger outdoors and fallen asleep in the grip of cold and the potent Eve wines.

A waxing moon lit the room just enough to navigate in without lighting a lamp--which meant there was enough light to lie there, snug under the covers, and simply look at Adela. During their years together, hard work had set some grey strands in her dark hair and the hint of lines around her mouth, and somehow they served only to make his eyes linger longer. He watched her for a moment, mentally tracing the night-blurred lines of her face--smooth, gentle features that blended roundly into one another, encompassing eyes set too widely for perfection and a mouth whose generous lower lip fit nicely above a barely clefted chin.

She'd given up a good position as Lady Cosette's attendant when they'd partnered, for it wasn't considered proper for young Highborn ladies to have married aides. But rather than dwell in town with the rest of the Packs' families, Adela had found a new, light-duty position with Ronsin--and then, when it became evident how well she worked with the young patrol mounts, she was assigned to the stable as well, where she and Reandn worked together.

It was a situation Reandn found eminently satisfying.

None of which made it any easier to remove Adela's arm from across his

chest and slide out of the warm bed. He turned to her, offering a gentle kiss to her forehead through the lace of loose hair that covered it--and froze as he pulled away. *Not again.*

But it was. He stiffened as the new noise scraped along his nerves, humming in through ears that weren't actually *hearing* anything. *Get used to it.* He fought it, trying to maintain awareness of balance and position, and almost missed Adela's sleepy voice.

"Reandn?"

He couldn't answer fast enough to keep her from brushing the hair out of her face and peering up at him through the darkness. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, finally forcing the words out past the interference in his head. It could be done, then--even if he *was* lying to the most important person in his life. "I'm having a hard time leaving this bed--and you--and going out into the cold."

"Graces, can't blame you for that," she murmured, settling back down.

No. But he could blame himself for the lie--and did.

Somehow after that it was easier to brave the cold of the night, and Reandn dressed quickly, slipping out to the short landing in the stairway that curved around the inside of the tower.

Candlelight was bouncing off the walls above him, flickering wildly with the movement of the man who carried it, and Reandn looked up in surprise. Ronsin was usually long to his bed by this time of night, and certainly not just then descending from his work room at the top of the tower to his small sleeping chamber above Reandn's own.

The old man was hardly robust; although Reandn seldom crossed paths with the wizard, he had a clear image in his mind of a man stooped with age,

giving the impression of frailty hidden beneath perpetually loose clothing, his thinning grey hair brushed back on his skull to skitter around his collar.

A door creaked, and the candlelight disappeared. Reandn found himself in the cold stone stairway, working his jaw against the discomfort in his ears and wondering, for an absurd moment, what the old man was up to. But he shook the odd mood off like a dog shaking off water, and went to brief his patrol.

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That night the frigid air settled around King's Keep, and it stayed there. During the two days Prime Ethne and King Hawley soothed the missing boy's grieving relatives--who had arrived for a celebration and discovered a funeral--the ice crept firmly to the center of the keep pond, a sure sign of miserable cold. The cold kept all factions of the king's forces too concerned with staying warm on patrol to cause trouble amongst themselves, another common Eve problem. Saxe became noticeably more cheerful despite the unexplained loss of the Resiore boy, and Reandn added yet another layer between his leather vest and wide-sleeved, wool-lined jacket and cloak.

Even so, at the morning debriefing of Tenaebra's Eve, Reandn detected definite undercurrents of boredom in his patrol; they expected more from a pre-Eve week, and even continued extra half-shifts, wariness after the mystery of the Resiore boy's disappearance, weren't enough to keep them occupied. He had dismissed them and was toying with the idea of sending them back on wide patrol rather than the tight Eve patrols when Caleb came into the ready room, stomping his feet and rubbing his arms. His face was wrapped in a scarf and the only real sign that Caleb was within lay in the rusty hair that escaped the red-dyed weave.

"Ah," Reandn groaned. "Get another scarf, or don't put that one so close to your hair. Looks awful."

"Does it?" Caleb asked cheerfully. "That's the advantage to being color-blind, I suppose. Though I didn't brave the cold to hear about it."

"Huh," Reandn said. "I didn't think you did. It takes something monumental to drag one of you Hounds away from your arduous duty inside that nice warm keep."

"You've got it all wrong," Caleb said, unwrapping the scarf enough to reveal a serious expression. "We're just so indispensable the Prime doesn't dare let us out."

Reandn laughed, short and loud. "I'm for breakfast, Caleb. You coming?"

"Can't," Caleb shook his head with true regret. "We really do have a lot of last minute plans to finalize, with all those Highborn who're gonna stay inside to keep their toes warm. Makes your job easier, I know, but doesn't do much for the Hounds. I really came to see if you were going to be there tonight."

"Don't know, Caleb." Reandn hooked his jacket from the wall peg and shrugged into it. "Dela's going; whether I make it depends on how things are going with patrols. They might need me out there early."

"Think about it, Dan," Caleb said, one of the few who ever used Reandn's nickname. "I doubt Saxe's said anything, since he knows how you feel about hanging around a Highborn crowd, but tensions have been running high among the Highborn--especially since we lost that boy to the, er, hill cat. Ethne's encouraging any of the off-duty patrol folk--Hound *and* Wolf--to be in attendance. Eve is open to townsfolk, too, so it's not like you'll stick out."

Reandn eyed him askance, and Caleb responded with a shrug.

"Well, so you *don't* blend into that kind of crowd. We could still use you." He hesitated. "I'd feel better if we had a few First-level folk around."

It was as close to an actual request that Caleb would come. Reandn tightened the jacket ties and flung his cloak over one shoulder. "I'll do my best," he allowed. "Already promised Dela that much."

Caleb grinned at him. "Good," he said. "See you there." And he wrapped his offensive red scarf back around his face and left, the grin on his face making it perfectly clear he knew just how horrible the color looked against his hair, color blind or not.

Adela looked forward to the goddess Eve Celebrations. She was more devout than Reandn, who figured Tenaebra already had him marked for some sort of violent death, given the way his life had started and now the path it had taken. But Adela--Kavan in tow--gave Tenaebra her due, and then twice weekly visited the Ardrite faith house to pay homage, in search of a long, peaceful life and a quiet, painless death.

So after a day of overseeing the farrier at work on his three mounts and the irascible Willow, and very little time for sleep, Reandn found himself standing outside Elyn's door, waiting for Adela. Elyn, several years younger than Adela, had nonetheless turned out to be a good friend--and more than that, she was the same dress size. Although she was betrothed, she was attending Lady Cosette until the marriage, and her wardrobe was full of celebration dresses. Adela was with in, fussing with some last minute adjustment to her borrowed clothing--or so Reandn had gathered from the muffled, giggle-interrupted reply to his knock.

He would be all but invisible next to her, he knew, in nothing more exciting than his most recently issued uniform. Knowing the Great Hall would be stuffy with bodies, Reandn restricted himself to one loose-sleeved, sturdy broadcloth shirt under the leather vest that bore the laced pattern of his Pack, Patrol, and rank. The trousers he pulled on were new and stiff, and the soft half-

chaps meant to protect his legs from brush and equine sweat were unused. Though all the guests at the celebration would be unarmed, Reandn had thoughtfully tucked away his boot knife. On an occasion like this its obvious hilt could be a subtle--or not so subtle--reminder to the rowdy young men that they should behave.

"Are you ready? We're coming out!" Adela called from within Elyn's tiny room--Reandn often wondered how the two of them managed to dress in there at once--and he stepped aside so they could come out into the corridor and be properly admired. They burst out of the room, a splash of color and scent against the dim stone of the keep.

"A stunningly beautiful pair, as always, my ladies," Reandn told them, bringing his lightly fisted hand to the base of his throat in a Wolf salute.

Adela told him, "That's what you always say," but she was smiling.

"It's always true," Reandn said; reasonably, he thought. And it was. The current fashion was a closely tailored bodice over a full skirt, covered with a gauze weight, long-sleeved tunic with just enough tailoring and strategically placed slashes to give hints of the shape beneath. Adela wore deep sky blue edged with black, and it brought out the natural blush of her face against the black of her hair--and Reandn knew the shape beneath the blouse of the tunic. "Are you sure you want to go to this celebration?" he asked, assuming an innocent air. "I think I remember something in our room that needs taking care of."

"*You*," Elyn said dryly, sweeping past him in a rustle of deep green skirts, flipping her long blond hair over her shoulder. "*We're* dancing."

Adela merely gave him a sly smile and held out her hand, which Reandn took as they trailed Elyn to the great hall. At the wide-arched entrance, he hesitated; imminently faced with frolicking Highborn, he recalled Caleb's

concerns. "Dela," he started.

"I know. They're likely to be rowdy tonight, and you're going to be doing as much crowd patrolling as you are dancing with me." She gave him a quick smile. "Just you keep an eye out, in case one of them happens to forget I'm married."

He scowled at her, which was what she wanted. "No one," he warned, "had better be that bold." Then he kissed her in plain sight of anyone in the Hall, which was also what she wanted, and let her move off with Elyn while he stepped aside of the entrance and surveyed the Hall.

Automatically, his gaze ticked off the Hounds, finding them scattered around the entrances and heavily peppered at the back end of the colorfully decorated Hall, next to the raised platform from which King Hawley, his Queen, and their toddler son would preside. The balcony along the back end of the room, strung with banners and a huge tapestry of the goddess Tenaebra--warmly dressed and surrounded by the fruits of the fall, crossed sword and knife in each corner as a reminder of her power--stretched over the throne dias. There were a few Hounds there as well, made less conspicuous than Reandn in tailored, slashed-sleeve shirts and tunics that blended with the crowd. Only the proliferation of certain color combinations made it clear that these men and women were on duty; Reandn's Wolf uniform was much more practical, designed for patrol and looking like just what it was.

Movement from behind Reandn captured his attention and he caught a glimpse of rusty hair. "Caleb," he said, without turning around.

"Ah," Caleb said in a disappointed greeting. "I'll catch you out one of these days, Reandn."

"The day you do, I'll join the Hounds," Reandn responded.

"Then best for us if I don't," Caleb rejoined without hesitation. He stepped

up beside Reandn to consider the growing crowd, wincing slightly as one of the musicians made a slip on his pipes. "They'll be dancing soon," he said. "That's good. The Keepmaster always wants them plied with plenty of wine before the dance tunes begin, so they won't be so shy about getting out there. Myself, I think the practice causes more trouble than it's worth. Gets the young rowdies all full of glee and no outlet for it."

Reandn thought about Adela and glowered.

"Where's Dela?" Caleb said, as if he could read his friend's mind. "Ah, there. And you let her out there unescorted looking like that? Shame, Reandn."

"She's with Elyn," Reandn said, almost a growl. "And I'll be with her soon enough."

Caleb grinned at him, no doubt pleased at getting a rise from his friend. "I'm grateful you're here, Reandn. Go dance with her now, before it gets too crowded."

It was already plenty crowded, but Reandn went. The musicians had found their stride and the dances began in earnest--first the complicated group steps that Reandn's feet had never followed very well, but it amused him to try, and then the more loosely structured couples dances. By then Adela was ready for a rest and something to drink; Reandn escorted her to the food tables, made sure there were no troublemakers in sight--although frankly he felt Adela could fend well for herself--and went to prowl the edges of the hall. His obvious uniform took some of the wild out of the young men's eyes as he passed the small groups that might have been building themselves up to trouble.

But the stuffy air, redolent with the odor of food, humanity, and clashing perfumes, became unexpectedly overwhelming. Reandn drifted to the darker recesses of the Hall, watching the interplay of the Highborn, staying out of the way of couples that had chosen the darker areas for a few whispered

endearments--and realizing it was not the air at all. It was his ears, humming with such wicked subtlety that the music had obscured the sound, leaving him only with a distinct unease.

Damn. He closed his eyes against sudden dizziness. Fresh air, quiet--he suddenly yearned for it. With only a quick glance to find Adela involved in conversation, her expression animated and her color high, he escaped the Hall by way of the tower that rounded off the back corner, climbing to the level of the curtain wall.

Breathing deeply, moving resolutely, Reandn walked the short length of the wall to the arch over the pond, trailing smokey breath behind him. Above the arch keystone, the dizziness eased, despite the underlying noise in his head. Relieved, he leaned against the cold stone to watch two slightly drunken young men try to navigate the frozen pond, slipping and sliding and laughing loudly at their own clumsy endeavors, mimicking their own blue-on-silver shadows in the moonlight. They slid under the arch and back, traveling beneath the stone in an unimpeded echo of sound.

The cold was just beginning to penetrate the warmth he'd carried with him from the hall when he spotted a patch of darkness in the sleek ice, at the artificially deepened edge where the children swam in the summer. After only a moment's hesitation, Reandn swung his leg over the inside wall and searched for the snow-slick footstones he knew were there. The skaters had wandered off into the courtyard and he was alone when he inspected the thin skim on the recently broached ice.

If someone had fallen through, it was far too late to save them. Grimly, he returned to the revelry to search out Caleb.

Adela met him in a rush of whirling skirts, with Elyn on her heels. "You left at the most important part, Danny," she said breathlessly, and he wondered

if she'd been searching since he'd slipped out.

"I was about to say the same," added a dry voice beside him, where Caleb suddenly stood, face flushed as brightly as Adela's, though with effort instead of excitement. "That's a Wolf for you--always off sniffing around when you need them the most."

"What happened?" Reandn asked, not a little befuddled by his reception. The celebration was in a pause as musicians changed places, and it all looked normal enough to him.

"An Up-pass Minor's son took umbrage at one of our locals, is all," Caleb said, rolling his eyes slightly; Reandn knew why. The Minors wielded a lot of power in their own territories, and always tried to prove it when they came to the Keep. "We got them separated quick enough, but our local boy's a real scrapper and the Minor's son..." he grimaced. "Well, he lost. He's in with the Prime and the Keepmaster right now, pulling rank and trying to get the local a stiff penalty."

"Who started it?" Reandn asked sensibly.

"That's not what I meant," Adela objected almost simultaneously. She gave Caleb a startled glance, but gestured for him to continue.

"Sorry, Dela," he said. "It doesn't matter who started it, Reandn, not to some of these Highborn. I sure wish you'd been here, though. He was all fists and too slick to get a hand on. You're used to that kind of scrapping."

Reandn gave his friend a warning glance. Caleb knew well enough he had little love of his struggling days in the kitchen, and even less love of reminders. "Go check the pond, Caleb. Looks like someone's fallen through."

"Tenaebra's ti--" Caleb started explosively, but stopped in mid-course with a quick glance at Adela. "I mean, just what we need. I'll go have a look at it. Better put out an alert to see if anyone's missing--not that even half this bunch is

sober enough to consider present."

"Thought you'd be interested," Reandn said, placing his hand over Adela's on his upper arm and giving it a squeeze. "I've got to go, Dela--probably be late for patrol as it is. Come walk with me a ways."

She readily took his arm, and matched his leisurely pace out of the hall. "You missed Ronsin's appearance," she said, when they were far enough away to talk quietly. "You missed his magic!"

"There isn't any magic," he said, perhaps a trifle too patiently.

"He made colors in flame, Danny," she said, irritation sparking behind that excitement. "He took a torch and made it burn the most glorious colors. I'm so sorry Kavan missed it."

"There're powders that'll do as much," Reandn said, shaking his head.

She made a face. "I know everyone else thinks so, but--this wasn't powders! Danny, I work with this man. I saw the look on his face and there *were no powders*. Ronsin worked real magic tonight."

Reandn shook his head. "No such thing anymore. No more dragons, no more spells. Last unicorn was seen when I was a boy." It was more than no more dragons or spells, though--thinking of the trouble with the Resiores, he was forced to realize that. At one time, in full magic, King's Keep extended its influence throughout all of Keland with unquestioned authority. If trouble started, the current king had known immediately through magical resources, and reacted instantly. Now, trouble could brew for weeks--or longer--before King's Keep knew about it, even with the extensive Fox placements. And it was even longer before the response took effect.

Losing magic had changed the way Keland needed to be managed, and King's Keep hadn't quite caught on. The king--the current monarch's father--and his advisors had withdrawn the forces they could no longer easily communicate

with, as if no one quite realized the rest of Keland needed that presence in order to maintain the Keep's influence.

"Reandn, listen to me!" Adela's sharp tone surprised him, and brought him right back to the conversation he'd already dismissed. "I saw what I saw. He may be a little soft in the head, but he would never stoop to using powders."

"He'd do anything to get back some of the prestige he used to have," Reandn said. "Even if it meant thinking up a new way to cheat with powders." He held up a hand as she drew breath to protest, her deep brown eyes flashing irritation. "No--I'm sorry. Compromise. I'll believe *you* believe in what you saw--and you understand that I can't believe it without seeing it."

"Fair enough," she said, although he could tell she wasn't entirely happy with it. They stopped, preparing to separate. "You be careful out there tonight--and don't freeze off any important parts!"

"I'll do my best," he assured her. "And when I get back, maybe I'll wake you up and prove it."

A sly expression crept over her face, part of the game. "I dare you," she said. She gave him a quick, hard kiss, and left him with a whirl of blue material, her tightly-fitting bodice peeking out from the loose tunic. Reandn would have sworn she'd planned it that way. He watched her walked back down the hall and shook his head with a smile. *Patrol*, he thought. *Keep your mind on patrol.*

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