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WOLF JUSTICE
Chapter One
by Doranna Durgin

Teya dove behind a bush in panic as the enemy loosed one last volley from bow and sling, cringing as an arrow rattled through its bare outer branches. With a strangled but heartfelt squeak of fear, she flattened herself closer to the wet, leafy ground cover of late winter. *Ardriith keep me for her own--* With Arval's wizard to hide the Wolf patrol in an illusion of silence and invisibility, and Teya to keep the enemy wizard distracted, the outlaws should have been surrounded, should have been overwhelmed, should have been *defeated*, dammit! Anything but this. . . this. . . *massacre*.

Another arrow hit the tree beside her, imbedding inches into the wood with a solid thwack. Teya screamed, flinging her arms protectively around her head--as if it would do any good--and had the sudden feeling she'd wet herself--but as long as she'd been hugging the sodden leaves, couldn't tell for sure. When the hells had this gone so wrong? When she'd felt her wizard partner falter, bobbling the threads of the protection he'd woven for the Remote Wolf Patrol? When the first arrow had found its suddenly vulnerable mark, and the patrol wolves, caught exposed in the dip between two hills, had been rushed from above by the outlaw leader's men?

Or maybe their crushing defeat had begun the moment Teya realized their wizardly opponent was at least as strong as she, and her sudden sweat tingled on equally sudden goosebumps of fear. This wasn't her specialty, this sparring

with magic. She was expert at truth spells and detection spells, at the subtle forms of magical defense and at spinning her magic so quietly she caused no alarm in a citizenry just becoming used to having magic to spin. More than anything, she was adept at protecting others from the stir of magic her spells created, and it was this skill that had earned her the position of Patrol Wizard--not her ability to trade magical barbs of hate between two hills. Guilt settled around her as, across the battered slope, her comrades cried out in agonized death throes. And still she hid, because she'd barely been a yearling in her wolf training before magic's return snatched her away to wizardly schooling in Solace. No spell she could spin would help the dying patrol now, no physical bravado could turn the battle their way. . . it was way too late for that. Hide, hide and hope to live, that was her only choice. Hope the outlaws got tired and went to collect their own wounded while the surviving wolves dragged themselves away from defeat.

A tiny remaining shred of common sense broke through Teya's guilt. The true first step of this defeat had been taken by those in ultimate command of this patrol--the Wolf Leader, Saxe, and the Prime, Ethne, who coordinated Keland's armed forces of Wolf, Hound, Fox and Dragon--when they'd given Minor Arval the authority to remove Reandn from leadership for the duration of this assignment.

Reandn had fought this assignment, he'd railed against its heavy reliance on magic, as he always railed against magic, even hers. He wouldn't have let the minor's man position his wolves into such physical vulnerability, relying only on magic for their safety. Teya was certain of it, even though she didn't really understand the man, didn't really know him after only 6 months of service with him.

She wasn't even sure if she merely disliked him, or if she *intensely* disliked him.

But even Teya understood the reasons Saxe and Ethne had overridden his

objections. With the Resiores struggling more than ever against the yoke of Keland's sovereignty, and inner Keland still in social turmoil two years after magic's return, King's Keep needed Highborn support from minors like Arval. And they needed the confidence of Keland's people that the Keep could guide them safely through this chaotic time.

So when a wizard-driven band of ruthless outlaws started plundering Arval's hills, no wonder they had decided that a fully cooperative effort to destroy the band was more important than heeding Reandn's well-known aversion to magic, even law-enforcing magic.

No wonder she was in this mess.

Teya risked a peek through the outer branches of the bush. Downhill, there were only bodies, ill-concealed by the leafless trees. A gasp caught in her throat as she recognized Apalla, one of her closest friends, collapsed over the body of her partner, one hand loosely wrapped around the arrow that had killed her. To the side she discovered Sannat and Kessin, and below them, half-hidden in the trees, three other bodies in quick succession.

No one was moving. Teya slowly stood up, exposing herself to danger but aware only of the dread caught in her throat, feeling like a scream that had gotten trapped halfway out and that might just kill her when it exploded free. Her new vantage point revealed a number of other bodies in wolf colors, and one feebly thrashing form. "Oh, Tenaebra," she whimpered, but none of the sound made it past that trapped scream. "Oh, graces. . ."

A rustle of noise splintered grief into terror. She whirled to face it, to the side that had been blinded by the very bush and tree she hid behind, and found herself gaping at the enemy. An outlaw, blood dripping from his hands and smeared in his untrimmed beard, his knife covered with--

Teya stood frozen in shock. The man grinned at her. "Giving 'em all the death stroke, I was. Didn't expect to find a whole one amongst you. Must be a magic-user, ey? All used up, are you?"

She just gaped at him, while a dim little voice in her head screamed *run*, you idiot, *run!* But she didn't have so much as a trickle of energy left even if she'd been quick-witted enough to use it. It wasn't until he reached for her, until his bloodied hand closed around her arm, that her body woke up and reacted. The scream, trapped in her throat so long, erupted at full volume, and she snatched at her belt for her knife, finally falling back to unfinished Wolf training.

He reacted before she had the weapon fully out of its sheath, pulling her downhill a step or two and then using the momentum to swing her against the tree. Teya braced herself for the impact, but felt herself slip through his bloodied grip; she crashed through the bush and whiplashed around the tree with her shoulder as the fulcrum. The joint gave way, and she cried out more at the sound of it than the pain, crumpling at the base of the tree. Dazed, she realized she'd dropped the knife, and frantically patted the ground around her.

His foot came down on her hand, pinning it; she whimpered as he shifted his full weight onto it. "Please. . ." she said, looking up at him. It seemed a very long way.

"I think we'll keep you," he said. "You've got just enough fight in you to make it fun."

Fear turned to horror. She tried to force her injured arm to move, to find that knife--and couldn't. She tried to muster the grit to fight him, at least to force him into killing her, and couldn't do that, either. As if he saw the conflict within her, he laughed.

But the laugh choked in the middle and turned into a grunt of amazement; awkwardly, he clawed at his own back. Teya jerked her hand free as he swayed, and scrabbled to get away from him. Still in utter lack of comprehension, he fell heavily and slid a short distance down the hill. Teya stared at the arrow protruding from his back and tried to understand it herself, for the fletching was undyed quill, the same as the outlaws had been using.

"Teya!" Dakina emerged from cover and scrambled along the hillside, limping badly and tossing an enemy bow aside. Relief washed over Teya along with the pain of her torn shoulder; she wasn't alone out here, not the only survivor. It seemed a good occasion to faint, and when the world grayed out, she didn't fight it.

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Reandn paced the length of the minor's great hall, scowling peevishly at the lavish use of wood and thinking just as peevishly that Arval would have done better, much better, to have thickened the walls of his keep with additional stone. He stopped and favored an ornate cornice with an especially grim look.

"Come now," Arval said from over his afternoon snack, his voice booming across the all but empty room. "What has my poor hall ever done to you?"

Reandn didn't respond, at least not outwardly. There was nothing wrong with the keep, he realized. Oh, it wasn't stone-bound King's Keep, with its thick defensive walls and towers, but it didn't need to be. And the wood was cheap enough, in this part of Keland.

No, his building anger was more properly aimed at the minor himself. "We should have heard something by now," he said, moving up to Arval's raised table. "You're sure that little keepmaster's apprentice can receive from your wizard?"

"He's not precise," Arval said, amiably enough, "but he manages the job."

Well he might be feeling amiable, given how quickly the Prime had jerked Reandn's authority over his patrol and handed it to Arval instead. *Amiable* was far from Reandn's reaction to it all. But Saxe had warned him to keep a tight rein on his mouth--Reandn could almost smile, remembering the look on Teya's reddened face when she'd had to relay that message--and Reandn, well aware of the Keep's need for Arval's confidence and support, had done his best to remain respectful.

It was getting harder by the moment. His patrol was out there under

someone else's command, and his wizard was paired with Arval's, under the orders of someone who knew little of her personal strengths and weaknesses. Tenaebra's Tits, he'd fought the idea of having a wizard in his patrol, even a fledgling one. But the Prime had insisted--and found him one who'd not only had a taste of Wolf training, but who excelled in shielding Reandn and his allergies from the very magic she worked. She bided by his rules and tried to hide her resentment at them, she never forgot to protect him when there was magic around, and she never ignored it when he felt the whisper of magic before she did.

And she was in *his* patrol, dammit--like the regular Wolf pairs, she was his to protect from the little stupidities that kept an already dangerous job from being unnecessarily life-threatening. And the big stupidities, too, Reandn thought, shooting a covert glare at the table. He had no idea what Arval's final strategy had been. He knew only that the man had planned to use the wolves to snare a local magic-using outlaw while Teya and the minor's own wizard flung prodigious magic around to ensure the ultimate success of the mission. That's all it had taken to get his hackles up and ensure his initial refusal to cooperate.

Reandn knew better than to trust magic. As long as there was magic around, there was the potential that someone would try to use it against you, just as Ronsin had used it to kill his wife and son. And he'd learned quickly enough that the newest generation of wizards was only half-trained; even when they were using magic to help, it was almost bound to go awry and make things worse. Best to depend only on what the Wolves had always used--a quiet foot, a quick hand, and the wits they'd been blessed with.

They should have been back by now. Arval's wizard--Reandn had never even learned his name--should at least have sent word.

"Would you sit *down*?" Arval said, irritation creeping into his voice.
"You're upsetting my digestion."

Might do you some good, Reandn managed not to say, thinking of the man's

girth. Ah, well, there was a reason he'd rarely entered the main keep when he was Wolf First at King's Keep. Even when he'd kept his mouth shut, his opinions of some of the Highborn leaked out through the expression in his grey eyes.

He dropped of the dais and hooked the end of lower table bench with his ankle, pulling it out to sit as Arval asked--but ended up right back on his feet when he heard someone approaching the entrance at the far end of the hall. Arval shot a quick glare at him, snapping, "Sit--"

Reandn raised a hand that cut Arval off--from the pure effrontery of it, to judge by the strangled noise he made. By then the young keepmaster's apprentice was in the vast doorway, out of breath and struggling to maintain the appropriate dignity. "Meir!" he said, starting off well enough, though the rest of the words simply tumbled out of him. "One of the wolves to see you, meir, right now, she says, meir, and it don't look good, meir--"

Arval came to his feet, rounding the main table and coming off the platform with his heavy-footed stride. Reandn was way ahead of him, though he stopped short when Teya--why Teya, out of all of them?-- came up from behind the boy and around him, not waiting for permission to approach. She ignored Arval and fastened her eyes on Reandn aiming herself straight at him, stumbling on the way. She was bruised and battered, her torn clothes grimed with blood and dirt. She held her right arm protectively against her body, and winced at the sight of Reandn's hand reaching to steady her elbow. He let the hand drop.

"First," she said, and got stuck there, unable to do anything but hold his gaze, her light brown eyes full of so many unspeakable words that he got stuck there right along with her. "Reandn--"

Arval stepped up beside Reandn and demanded, "Where's Yanwr? What are you doing here?"

Yanwr. The other wizard. Reandn gave Teya a fraction of a nod and she

told Arval, "Yanwr's dead. I tried contacting the apprentice. . . I couldn't. So I came." She looked up at Reandn and her voice broke. "I'm the only one left who can ride, Reandn. Hells, I'm practically the only one--I mean, the rest are. . . most of them are--"

Reandn closed his eyes. *Dead*. They were dead. It didn't matter that she couldn't say it. He'd been on that hillside; he knew it. In his mind's eye he saw them there. In that instant, the grief that always lurked in him, the black chasm from Adela's death, loomed big enough to swallow him whole. His wolves were gone, led into death by Arval's man. *His* wolves, *his* responsibility--only Ethne had made it impossible to keep them out of magic's way.

He should have gone anyway. He should have done *something*, should have--

"What happened?" Arval demanded, barely garnering Reandn's attention. "Come *on*, woman! Tell me!"

"Seveyga sent them out ahead, down between the hills. . . they were supposed to outflank the outlaws, and Yanwr was supposed to keep them unseen." She stopped, and gulped a hesitation. Reandn didn't have to open his eyes, to look at her expression; he heard what she wasn't saying clearly enough: *because otherwise there was no cover at all*. Seveyga had trusted the magic, magic alone. "I was supposed to keep the outlaw wizard's attention, but he was strong--he was so strong. . . he felt what Yanwr was doing anyway, and he stripped the spell away." Her voice fell to a whisper. "They didn't have a chance, they were caught at the bottom of the hill--"

Her voice broke off in a cry of pain as Arval shouted, "You let the outlaw past your defenses? It's *your* fault?"

Reandn's eyes snapped open; his grief flared into temper. Arval had a cruel grip on Teya's injured arm, and she had gone grey, unable to do anything more than clutch at the pain. Reandn instantly clamped down hard on Arval's forearm, digging his fingers into the clenched muscle there. Voice low and

gravelly, he said, "You sent my wolves out to a slaughter."

Arval dropped Teya's arm and turned on Reandn, florid in his anger, shoving himself up close. "Your wolves were supposed to be the best!" His finger stabbed at the Wolf Pack patch on Reandn's shoulder, and at the lacings of rank below it. "They should have been able to handle these untrained outlaws!" *Jab, jab, jab* went the finger against Reandn's shoulder, hard enough so Reandn had to take a step back to maintain his balance.

Barely audible, Teya half-sobbed, "Oh, no, don't push--"

"And this wizard of yours! She left them wide open to outlaw magic!" *Jab, jab.* Reandn's face hardened, and his eyes grew dangerous. Saxe's remembered voice whispered restraint at him.

"No, *please* don't push hi--" Teya said, moving to put herself between Reandn and the minor.

Arval turned on her. "*You!*" he said, and gave her a shove. "Mind your place!"

Teya stumbled a step backwards, bounced off Reandn, and fell, sprawling awkwardly, crying in agony.

Saxe's imagined voice of restraint disappeared in the roar of Reandn's fury.

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"Danny," Saxe said--Saxe's very own voice, along with Saxe's very own self, magicked from King's Keep for the occasion, "you broke his *nose*."

Reandn didn't answer. He and Saxe were in the nicest of what might genteelly be called the Arval Keep holding cells. It was clean and not too clammy, and had a hole in the corner instead of an unemptied bucket. Reandn suspected there were other cells somewhere on the grounds, and that they were kept less fastidiously.

"*Reandn.*" Saxe leaned against the vertically barred cell door, his voice growing tight. Lines of fatigue etched around his eyes, and there was a

sprinkling of premature grey in his dark, short-cropped hair.

Reandn shrugged, his shoulders moving against the chill stone wall behind him. Remorselessness. His thumb rubbed across Adela's ring.

"Goddess damn, Reandn!" Saxe exploded, slamming the flat of his hand against the bars of the door. "When the *hells* are you going to learn you can't keep doing this sort of thing? It's not what Wolf Justice *means*."

Reandn growled, "He lived. Most of my patrol didn't."

"And are you going to come after me, next? It was my voice in Ethne's ear--*my* call to keep you out of this one."

"It was a mistake!" Reandn snapped at him. "How did you think I would react when you set me aside? Those were *my wolves*, Saxe, and you let Arval send them into slaughter!" He flung his words like a weapon, and they hit Saxe dead center.

The Wolf Leader's fatigue shifted into something more, and his eyes looked more haunted than angry. He rubbed a hand across his face and took a moment before meeting Reandn's gaze. His eyes held regret, and sorrow, and a certain resignation. "They're not your patrol anymore, Danny."

Reandn snorted. "No, they're mostly *dead*!" His anger turned into an anguished plea. "I haven't even *seen* them yet, Saxe--for Ardrith's sake get me out of here so I can *see* them, and see who's left alive."

"Dakina," Saxe said, absently rubbing the hand he'd slammed against the bars. "Teya, of course. Sahan should live, though he'll never work patrol again. Maybe Dreyfen. . . we don't know yet. Same for Maccus."

Reandn waited a moment for Saxe to continue before he realized that was the end of the list. *So few of them*. . . And suddenly he wasn't alone; he felt the soft whisper of a touch on his face, an equally soft whisper in his mind, murmuring comfort. *Adela*, drawn by his distress; how long had it been since he'd felt her presence? Closing his eyes, he set his jaw against the raw pain in his throat and after a minute was able to ask it out loud. "So few?" His voice

sounded every bit as raw as it felt.

Saxe nodded; he seemed to be searching for words and finally gave up, moving on to things more practical. Easier to talk about. "There hasn't been a loss this great in the history of the service. I'd really like to talk to Yanwr; it was his failed spell that exposed them all, and Teya isn't sure just what happened. But of course Yanwr's dead with the rest of them, so we may never know." He looked straight at Reandn and repeated, "They're not yours anymore."

"We *do* know what happened. Seveyga put them in an indefensible position and then counted on magic alone to keep them safe. You should have made Arval reveal the details of his strategy before you turned him loose with my wolves, Saxe, you should have kept him on a leash!"

"They're not your wolves anymore."

This time, Reandn heard him. *Not his*. . . He found the edge of the cell's rickety cot and sat, stunned, staring blankly at Saxe. Former partner. Wolf Leader. Friend?

Saxe didn't seem to be able to meet his eyes anymore. "Arval wanted you celled until you turn green with mold. Ethne and I managed to talk him down to dishonorable dismissal."

"Ethne's here?" Reandn said, though the shock of that barely left an impact after what he was certain he'd just heard.

Saxe nodded. "I could hate you for this, you know," he said, and Reandn looked at him in surprise, trying to match the words with the deep regret on his friend's face. "We trained together, we rose through the ranks together. . . hells, we've been in this so long together that I'm practically in the *habit* of saving your Wolf neck after you pull something politically stupid. But. . . I can't do it this time." He shook his head. "You *idiot*, you've forced me to oust the best partner I ever had!"

It had been years since they patrolled as partners, since they'd each risen to the rank where they commanded the patrols instead of participating in them.

But miles and years apart, they'd ever been tied to those days when they were paired in wolf patrols. Reandn cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "I . . . guess I . . ." *don't have any idea what to say, that's what.* He closed his mouth, tried to think about what it all meant, really *meant*, and failed.

Saxe said wearily, "You shouldn't have hit him, Danny."

Reandn tried to summon anger, and failed at that, too. He said simply, "Arval deserved what he got and *more*. Far more."

"That he did," Saxe agreed readily. "Oh, that he did. But sometimes we have to make trade-offs, Danny. Think about it. How are you going to protect them now?"

Elbows on knees, Reandn rested his face in his hands, suddenly recognizing where the bulk of his anger lay. He was their patrol leader. He should have marched them off the grounds of Arval Keep, orders or no; he should never have let them go out under Seveyga and Yanwr.

Saxe's voice was quiet. "Hindsight is a wonderful thing, Danny. This time, damn you, *learn* from it. I won't be around to smooth the ruffled feathers you cause. Not anymore."

Reandn's grim smile remained hidden. He knew what Saxe meant to say. *Hold your temper. Think before you act.* But what he'd actually said was something else entirely. Reandn would learn from hindsight, all right. The biggest mistake he'd made in this mess was in letting rank and politics override his instincts about what was best for the people he cared about.

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Teya sat on the floor in front of Dakina's sick bed, carefully keeping her own injured shoulder away from Dakina's badly wounded leg. Dakina slowly ran a brush through Teya's long, light brown hair, stopping to fuss at every little snarl she ran into. It had taken only moments for them to come to their new temporary arrangement, and now Teya ran foot-errands for Dakina, while Dakina did two-armed jobs for Teya. At least for a while.

In truth, Teya could almost certainly have brushed her hair one-handed, but there was something nurturing about the activity that comforted them both, and Ardrith knew they both needed comforting in this makeshift sick house, with the remnants of their patrol fighting for life around them.

Both women were from the eastern edge of Keland, a swampy land of hunters and fishers and a great many recipes for frog meat. Not to mention poisonous snakes and hidden spots of swamp sludge so soft and deep that few ever escaped its grip. The very land had a way of making one slow and careful, and prone to deciding one's decisions twice.

Teya a'Apa and Dakina a'Pael were years apart in age; Dakina had made her adjustments to the ways of King's Keep and its wolves several years before it had occurred to Teya that being a wolf meant learning to make the snap decisions of folk who fought and stalked their way through life. But it meant that they understood one another, and that when a fellow wolf did something particularly grating to their swampland sensibilities, they could roll their eyes at one another and not have to add a single word to make themselves understood.

Teya had been the best of the yearling trackers, but in her heart, she understood that she wouldn't have made it through final training, that she'd never have been able to rely on her own instantaneous reaction, or to trust it. That she'd been fortunate when the magic came along and swept her away to Solace for a new kind of training.

Reandn's ability to act and react so swiftly set her back each time she saw it, and reminded her of her failure to do the same. If she'd been faster on the hill, could she somehow have stopped the slaughter? All she remembered was feeling confused and battered with visual and magical input. She was, deep down, certain that if it had been Reandn wielding the magic that day, the patrol would have survived.

Then she snorted. Reandn, wielding magic. Now *there* was a likely

thought.

"What?" Dakina asked. She'd separated Teya's hair into sections and was placing them here and there, as if experimenting with how she wanted to braid it today.

"Just thinking," Teya said. "Just. . . thinking."

"I try not to do that," Dakina said dryly. "At least for now." She pulled the hair up high on the back of Teya's head and began braiding it from there.

"Ribbons. We need ribbons, don't you think?"

Teya snorted. "The pairs would laugh me right out of the patrol."

"Maybe. It'd give them something to laugh *about*, at least."

"Maybe we *do* need ribbons."

From the doorway of the small shed, Reandn said, "I'll see to it."

Both women jumped. "Ow, *ow*," Teya complained as Dakina twisted around, taking her hands--and Teya's hair--with her.

"Sorry," Dakina muttered. "I wish I knew how he can be so damned *quiet*."

"It balances out the rest of the time, when you can't possibly ignore him," Teya muttered back.

Dakina swiftly finished off the braid as Reandn came inside the roughly finished outbuilding, and Teya's first glance at him inspired another, more narrow-eyed examination of her patrol leader. Fatigued, unshaven, the short, thick scar along the angle of his jaw standing out more than ever. He'd obviously slept in his clothes, and his hair, its length recently cut to a much shorter style, had fallen into place without the benefit of brush or comb. It was to his eyes she looked when she was trying to gauge his mood, the grey eyes that were so compelling beneath the contrast of dark brows against dark blond hair.

This time, she couldn't read them. Neither, to judge by Dakina's look, could she. And the others. . . well, Sahan was asleep, dosed into a stupor by Arval's healer. With any luck he'd stay that way for awhile; his mangled arm kept him in agony otherwise. Dreyfen and Maccus were unconscious, fighting

for their lives. A young woman sat between them; not the healer, but a sensitive--someone without much power to wield magic, but enough perception to sit vigil, and to call the healer if anything went wrong. At the moment she was watching Reandn, her expression guarded.

Reandn nodded at her, and moved a few steps closer to the wounded men, regarding them silently for a moment. She shouldn't be watching him, Teya thought, she should give him a little privacy. But she watched anyway, thinking at first that he was callous and unreacting, and then seeing how his thumb worried the the plain woman's ring on the little finger of the same hand. His dead wife's ring, his worry stone. The thing that always gave him away. His breath caught in his throat, just like hers had done so often in the last day.

That's all it had been. One day.

When he turned back to the women, Teya suddenly realized how weary he looked. Not just tired, but worn down, almost. . . defeated. He shifted his jaw sideways ever so slightly, an ear-popping gesture--the unconscious habit that meant the magic was troubling him. She wanted to say something to him, *anything*. . . and her mind remained blank and uncooperative.

After all, what could she say? Nothing but the same hollow words she'd tried on herself, and she wasn't used to casual conversation with him at all.

"They'll get you out of here soon," Reandn said, as if he hadn't been breaking an awkward silence, but had been in the middle of a conversation all along. "As soon as the men are strong enough to take the wizard's road, you'll be sent to King's Keep, where you'll stay somewhere better than an emptied storage shed."

"King's Keep?" Dakina said carefully. "What about. . ." She trailed off and looked at Teya, who looked at what was left of their patrol and finished asking the question.

"What about the remote? Are we being disbanded?"

"Arval already managed that, I think," Reandn said, and his face

hardened. "If you heal well enough, you'll be put back in the remote. Saxe'll save a place for you, and they're going to be adding a second remote to the Maurant-King's Keep road as well. You'll get priority for placements in either of them." He eyed Teya. "I've been told you'll be going to Solace for a while."

Teya glanced up at Dakina, feeling herself close down into cautiousness. "That's good, I suppose. I can learn a lot while I heal." It wasn't like they'd pronounced her a fully trained wizard when she'd left the school there, after all--they'd been quite clear that she'd been chosen for her particular strengths, and that she'd be expected to continue schooling at every opportunity. "But. . . will you. . . want me back?"

There--it had happened again. Another swift expression that Teya just couldn't decipher, abruptly replaced with a layer of the assertiveness Reandn usually projected.

"Teya, what happened was not your fault," he said, an edge to his voice. "Have any of Arval's people said anything to you? Because if they have--" he stopped suddenly, ducked his head for a swift if fleeting grin, and finished, "Well, I guess I won't break any more noses. But I *will* have Saxe set a guard on you all. In fact, I think I'll do it regardless. There's no need for Arval's people to have access to you, aside from the healer."

Teya just frowned at him, trying to understand the undercurrent of his expressions. There was something going on here that she didn't know about, and it was as if she didn't quite know him anymore--or as if he didn't quite know himself.

He watched her for a moment, and said, "I couldn't get here any sooner. It's taken since yesterday evening to get things settled with Arval."

Yesterday evening. That's when Saxe and Ethne had arrived, Teya knew. They'd come to talk to her, and had asked her the details of what had happened--which had turned out to be a good thing, because she could tell from their faces that what she was saying was considerably different from Arval's

report. She said, "Saxe told us it might be a while before you made it here."

He relaxed a touch. Relief. Now *that*, she could recognize. "I've given the patrol's personal gear to Saxe. He'll make sure it goes to the right families, along with the commendation pay you all earned. Tomorrow. . ." he hesitated only an instant here, but Teya knew what was coming. "Tomorrow in the main hall, there'll be a ceremony honoring our dead. I'll make sure you get there if you want to, but. . . I won't be there. Obvious reasons. Saxe and I are holding Binding come nightfall, a private one. If you want to come. . ."

"Oh, yes," said Dakina.

"Yes," Teya whispered. She couldn't care less about Arval's empty ceremony. But she wanted to light a torch for each of her fallen pack members, to be part of the ritual that came after any encounter where the Wolves lost more than one pack member--the Binding. However many torches there were, they'd end up bound together, an offering to Tenaebra. If the goddess listened, then it would be that much easier for the fallen Wolves to find one another in the many layers of Tenaebra's heavens.

Wolves seldom went to Ardrith's heavens. Ardrith gathered the souls released by old age and disease, and left those who died in violence to her sister.

Reandn looked away from them. It was a deliberate evasion, and Teya felt her old exasperations with him coming to the fore. He wasn't telling them something, and she was halfway to blurting out a demand to hear it. He said, "After the Binding. . . I'm going to up Little Wisdom. We've all decided it's best if I don't stay on here."

"But what about those outlaws?" Dakina asked. "We took a bite out of 'em, but nothing that'll stop them."

Reandn shook his head. "Not our problem anymore. If Arval is smart, he'll ask Solace for help--that's what he should have done in the first place. Cut the wizard out of that crew, and the rest'll be as easy to nail as any band that's gotten too predictable."

"We could have done it," Teya muttered, smarting a bit over that one. Either he was saying he hadn't trusted her to handle them from the start, or he was saying the remote wasn't up to handling wizards in the first place.

Dakina looked at her, puzzled. "Of course we could have done it. If the man had just let us go in there like we always do, with you checking it out for us and Reandn calling the orders."

He gave Dakina what might have been a grateful look. "Keep that in mind," he said. "What happened out there wasn't your fault, either of you."

He'd said that before. Teya looked back to his eyes, still trying to decipher what she saw there. On impulse, she said, "It wasn't yours, either."

That got a reaction. His shoulders drew back, his expression shuttered down, and all he left to her was the slight gathering of his eyebrows--the edges of anger. She'd overstepped the bounds of rank with that one, and Teya waited for cold, quick words that would tell her so. She'd certainly heard them often enough, and usually over the use of her magic.

He said nothing. He eyed the three unconscious men again, and then deliberately turned away, walking by the two women without saying anything. Dakina touched Teya's shoulder, catching her eye for a minute and familiar shrug. *Don't mind him.*

To Teya's surprise, Reandn stopped in the doorway and turned back to them, hesitating. Then he offered them a Wolf salute, his closed fist just touching the base of his throat. Teya returned it without thinking, as did Dakina beside her, and by then Reandn was gone.

Teya suddenly found herself wondering about all the unspoken words of the last moments, realizing just how many there had been. She wondered just what Reandn wasn't telling them.

And she wondered why she suddenly had the impulse to label that look in his eyes as *loneliness*.

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