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# Oath of Fealty



*Par Elizabeth Moon*  
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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #380913 dans eBooksPubli le: 2010-03-11Sorti le: 2010-03-16Format: Ebook Kindle

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Elizabeth Moon's Kings of the North.For the first time in nearly twenty years, Elizabeth Moon returns to the thrilling realm of her superb Deed of Paksenarrion trilogy.Thanks to Pakss courage, the long-vanished heir to the half-elven kingdom of Lyonya has been revealed as Kieri Phelan, a formidable mercenary who earned a titleand enemiesin the neighboring kingdom of Tsaia, where Prince Mikeli suddenly faces the threat of a coup. Acting swiftly, Mikeli strikes at the powerful family behind the attack: the Verrakaien, magelords steeped in death and evil.

Mikelis survival and that of Tsai depend on the only Verrakai whose magery is not tainted with innocent blood. Two kings stand at a pivotal point in the history of their worlds. For dark forces are gathering against them, knit in a secret conspiracy more sinister and far more ancient than they can imagine.

Chapter One  
Verella  
A small boy clambered from a cellar wall into an alley. He picked his way through the trash along the wall to a nearby street, walked quickly to the next turning, went left, then right. The street widened a little; the people he passed wore warmer clothes. He ducked into an alcove and pulled off the ragged jacket that had concealed his own unpatched shirt and tunic, folded the ragged one into a tidy bundle, and tucked it under his arm. Now he moved at a steady jog into the wealthier part of the city, nearer the palace. Finally he turned in to a gap between buildings, found the trapdoor he sought, and went belowground again. In the cellar of a tall house within a few minutes of the palace gates, he gave a coded knock. A hard-faced man with a spiked billet opened the door. "What d'you want, rat?" the man asked. "For Duke Verrakai's hand only," the boy said. "From the Horned Chain." "I'll take him," another man said, stepping out of looming shadows. He wore the red and black of Liart, and the horned chain was about his neck. "Come, boy." Shaking with fear, the boy followed, up stairs and along a corridor, to a room where another man, in Verrakai blue and silver, sat writing at a table by a fire. "I am Duke Verrakai. You have a message for me: give it." The boy seemed to choke, and then, in a deep voice not his own, spoke the words Liart's priest had bade him say. "The man is free, and his companions; the paladin is ours. Without her aid, he can be taken. He must not reach Lyonya alive." "He will not," Duke Verrakai said. "Is there more?" The boy dug into his tunic and pulled out a folded paper; Verrakai took it and read it. "Well," he said, with a glance at the man in red and black. "It seems we must return this boy with our answer." He wrote on the reverse of the message, folded it, and handed it to the boy. "Go the way you came, swiftly." Less than a half-glass later, a man in Verrakai blue rode out the south gates of Verella and turned east on the river road. Later, after the turn of night, Kieri Phelan, newly revealed king of Lyonya, also rode through the gates, with an escort of the Royal Guard.

Duke's Stronghold, North Marches, seven days later  
Jandelir Arcolin, senior captain of Duke Phelan's Company, rested his forearms on the top of the stronghold walls, where he had the best view to the south. On one side of the road to Duke's East, Stammel was putting his own cohort through an intricate marching drill. On the other, the junior sergeant of the recruit cohort supervised a sword drill with wooden blades. Beyond, the trees along the stream showed the first soft golds and oranges of ripening buds, though it would be hands of days yet before the fruit trees bloomed. Old snow still lay knee-deep against the north wall. He heard steps behind him, and turned. Cracolnya, captain of the mixed cohort, came up onto the walkway with him. "Are you putting down roots up here?" he asked. Arcolin shook his head. "Hoping for a courier. We should have heard something by now. At least the weather's lifted. Though not for long." He tipped his head to the northwest, where a line of dark clouds just showed over the hills. "Your worry won't bring the Duke faster," Cracolnya said. He turned his back on the view south and leaned against the parapet. "I wonder what we'll do this year." "I don't know." Arcolin glanced down at the courtyard below, to be sure their inquisitive visitors, merchant-agents from Vonja, weren't in earshot. "He said not to take any contracts until he got back; I suggested they go to Verella and talk to him, but they were afraid of missing him on the way." "What are they offering?" "A one-cohort contract to protect farmlands and roads from brigands. I told them we'd need two for that--" "At least. Better the whole Company, or you're without reliable archery. Or were they planning to assign their militia to help?" "No. From what they said, they disbanded half the militia. Trade's down. But what do you think the Council will say? With the trouble this past winter, the Duke can't say it's entirely safe here. Yet--we have to do something. This land won't support so many soldiers year-round." Cracolnya leaned over the parapet, watching the recruit cohort. "We've got to do something with those recruits, too. They signed up to fight, and all we've done with them is train . . . and he's taken their final oaths: they'll be due regular pay soon." "He'll think of something." Arcolin looked again at the line of clouds along the western horizon. Buds or no buds, another winter storm was coming. "He always does. But if he doesn't come soon, we won't get the good quarters in Valdaire." He looked south again, sighing, then stiffened. "Someone's coming!" A single horseman, carrying the Company pennant, moving fast on the road from Duke's East. Not the Duke, who would have an escort. "Should I announce it, sir?" the sentry asked. "No. It's just a messenger." Unfortunately. They needed the Duke. Arcolin turned and made his way down to the courtyard with Cracolnya at his heels. "I'll tell the stable," Cracolnya said, turning away. Arcolin moved to the gate, where he could watch the messenger approach. Whatever the message might be, it was urgent enough for the rider to keep his mount at a steady canter, trotting only the last few yards to the gate and then halting his mount to salute the sentry before riding in. Arcolin recognized Sef, a private in Dorrin's

cohort."Captain," Sef said, after he dismounted and handed the reins to one of the recruits on stable duty. "I have urgent news." "Into the barracks," Arcolin said. Through the opening to the Duke's courtyard, he could see the two merchants hurrying toward them, but merchants were not allowed in the barracks. He led the way, and turned in to the little room where the sergeants kept the cohort records and brewed sib on their own hearth. "What is it? Is the Duke coming? How far behind you is he?" "No sir, he's not coming, and you won't believe--but I should give you this first." Sef took a message tube from his tunic and handed it over. Arcolin glanced at the hearth. "See if there's any sib left, or brew yourself some; you've had a long ride. And if I know Stammel, he's got a roll hidden away somewhere." "Thank you, sir." Sef turned to the hearth, stirred the fire, and dipped a can of water from the barrel, setting it to heat. Arcolin unrolled the message. A smaller wrapped packet fell out; he put it aside. There, in the Duke's hand--with a postscript by Dorrin, he saw at a glance--he found what he had never imagined. Kieri Phelan revealed as the rightful king of Lyonya--Paksenarrion had discovered it, come to Tsaia to find him--Tammarion's sword had been his sword all along, elf-made for him, and it had declared him. Arcolin glanced at Sef, who was stirring roots and herbs into the can. "Did you see this yourself? Were you in Verella with the Duke?" "No, Captain. I was with the reserve troop. Captain Selfer come up from Verella, him and the horse both near knackered, and said the best rider must go fast as could be to the stronghold." Sef swallowed. "He thought it would be only two days, maybe, but that fog came in. I couldn't go more than a foot pace, mostly leading the horse. It's taken me twice as long as it should have, three days and this morning." "I'm not surprised," Arcolin said. "We had thick fog for days, up here; you did well, Sef." He read on, while Sef stirred the can of sib, struggling to make sense of what had happened. His mind snagged on Paksenarrion--once in his cohort. I must go, and leave her in torment, Kieri had written. Otherwise her torment is meaningless. Yet it is a stain on my honor. You will rule in my stead until the Regency Council confirms a new lord. I recommended you, but do not know what they will do. This letter and my signet ring will prove your identity and authority. Arcolin unwrapped the smaller packet and found the Duke's ring. Not one of the copies he lent to his captains on occasion to do business for him, but the original, the one he himself wore. Dorrin's postscript was brief. She was going with Kieri, on his orders; her cohort would follow. She feared more attacks on the Duke--scratched out to read King--on the road east. She did not know when she might return; it would depend upon his need. Arcolin rolled the pages and slid them back into the tube. "Well. You will have traveled ahead of any word of his passage to the east--" He tried to estimate where Kieri might be, where Dorrin might be, seven days on a road he himself had never traveled. Impossible. "Right, Captain." Sef stirred the can again, sniffed it. "Want some sib, sir?" "No thanks. Go ahead." Sef took a mug down from the rack and poured one for himself as he talked. "Captain Selfer said Captain Dorrin expected his cohort to catch up with the Duke before the Lyonya border. Wish I was with them--" He took a swallow of hot sib. "I'm--I must admit I'm shocked . . . amazed . . . I don't know what to think," Arcolin said. "Our Duke a king--all the rest--" Remembering Paks as a recruit, a novice . . . the steady, reliable soldier she'd become . . . why she left, and when . . . the rumors . . . and then her return. He squeezed his eyes hard against tears, at the thought of her in Liart's hands, shook his head, and looked again at Sef. "You've done very well, Sef. Go tell the cooks to give you a hot meal, and I'll get Stammel to find you a place to sleep undisturbed." Sef saluted, then carefully rinsed the can and set it to dry before going out. Arcolin followed him, wondering if he'd have to explain to the Vonja agents before he found Stammel. Instead, Stammel met him at the gate. Arcolin smiled. "Your good instincts again, Sergeant." "My insatiable curiosity, Captain. News from the Duke could always be marching orders." "It's strange news indeed, and I'm not sure what will happen now," Arcolin said. "The courier was Sef of Dorrin's cohort--he needs a quiet bed to sleep; he was three days in thick fog between here and the south border. I sent him to the mess hall." "I'll see to it, Captain." "I need to talk to the other captains before I spread the news," Arcolin said. "I can tell you this--nothing will be the same." "It never is," Stammel said. "That's why we like it. Your leave, Captain." "Go ahead," Arcolin said, thinking again how lucky he was to have Stammel as senior sergeant. He found Cracolnya in the stables, talking fodder with the quartermaster. "And I don't know where more hay's coming from, this time of year," the quartermaster said. "Nobody's got enough stored; it's not to be bought, not at any price, and I know the Duke wouldn't want us to take from the farmers' stock." Arcolin made a motion with his head, and Cracolnya nodded. To the quartermaster he said, "A messenger's come from the Duke; maybe an order to move out--that would help." "I hope so," the quartermaster said gloomily. He spat into a corner. "I can't be sure . . ." Arcolin led the way down the aisle between rows of tie stalls to the box stalls at the end, empty now but for his and Cracolnya's mounts. "What is it? You look--strange." "I should. You must read it yourself." He handed over the message tube; Cracolnya

opened it, unrolled the message, and started to read. Arcolin's roan ambler moved up to the front of the stall and nudged him; he rubbed the velvety muzzle absently while watching Cracolnya's face. "I--I don't know what to think," Cracolnya said, when he'd finished. "He's a king? In Lyonya? How did that happen?" "I don't know more than this." "They have a king already," Cracolnya said. "What's he think about it?" "You missed a bit," Arcolin said. "He stuck it in between lines. Their king died without an heir. Paks was there--that's where she went when she left here. She felt called to find the heir." He ran a hand over his head. "But--what do we do now? He wants troops out guarding the Pargunese border; he thinks they might use this as an excuse to attack." "Scouts haven't said anything." "No. And this about a contract. You know what he said before he went south; he expected to take the Company south. But only one cohort?" He shook his head. "You know the Vonjans. They'll want twice the work for half the pay." "One cohort out, with pack mules, would ease the fodder situation," Cracolnya said. "Two would be better, if you can talk them into it." "What about protection here, though?" Arcolin said. "He's worried about the Pargunese, and the south border. A cohort each way, plus mine in the south, will nearly empty the stronghold. And we'll have to use the recruits, until Dorrin comes back." However long that might be. Cracolnya shrugged. "This recruit cohort's the best-trained we've ever had. They can garrison this; I can split mine between east and south. Or, the recruits can do their first real route march and take the southern end--we haven't had trouble with either of the neighboring domains, barring the odd thief, since Count Halar's father died." "That's a good idea, about using the recruits to garrison down there if needed," Arcolin said. "But first, I need to tell the Company about the Duke." "Maybe we should wait until we hear from Chaya," Cracolnya said. "Just in case." "In case--" "He was attacked once. Suppose Verrakai raised a large force against him?" "He's got Dorrin's cohort." "He's got Dorrin's cohort on the way, but what if they don't get there in time? He could be killed. Something could go wrong in Lyonya." "I don't--" Arcolin took two steps forward, turned, then took two steps back, avoiding the thought of Kieri Phelan dead. Instead, he said, "We have to tell the troops something--they have to know he's not coming back." "He left it to you," Cracolnya said. "But if you want my advice--" Arcolin nodded. "Then," Cracolnya went on, "make us a contract, and tell the Company that, and then tell them what you've heard, that it's all we know." "Ask the quartermaster how many beasts he can feed until spring grass," Arcolin said. Cracolnya looked smug. "I already know. Twelve." Arcolin looked down the rows of tie stalls, mostly full. "Better get moving, then." He left Cracolnya in the stable and headed back to the officers' quarters and offices. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* No one writes fantasy quite like Moon. *The Miami Herald* Sheer delight . . . an engrossing new adventure. *Anne McCaffrey* Oath of Fealty is the best kind of fantasy: familiar but complex, with substance behind the accomplished style. *Contra Costa Times* Well-crafted storytelling . . . hard to put down. *SF Site*