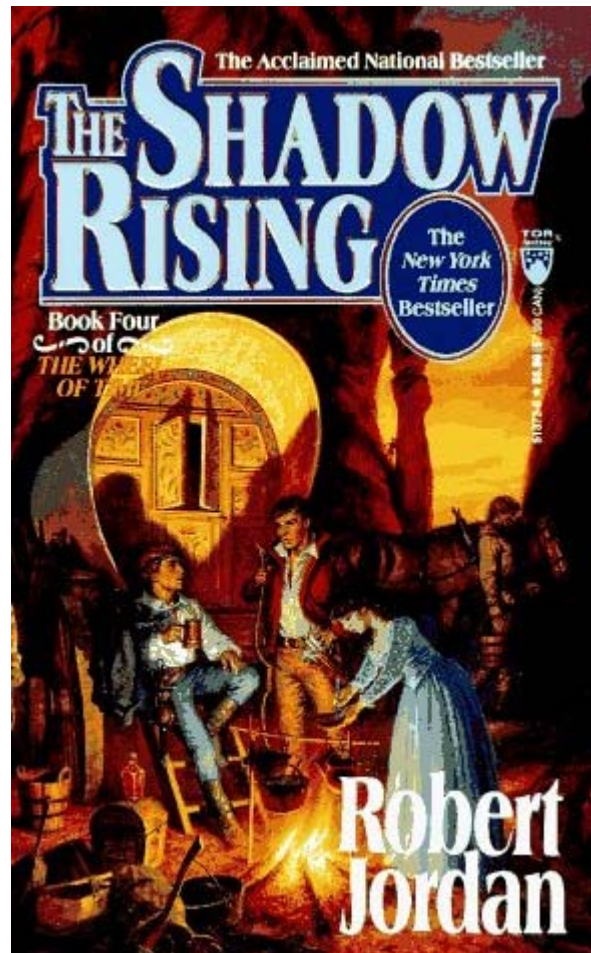


The Wheel of Time – Book 4 – The Shadow Rising

Robert Jordan



The Shadow shall rise across the world, and darken every land, even to the smallest corner, and there shall be neither Light nor safety. And he who shall be born of the Dawn, born of the Maiden, according to Prophecy, he shall stretch forth his hands to catch the Shadow, and the world shall scream in the pain of salvation. All Glory be to the Creator, and to the Light, and to he who shall be born again. May the Light save us from him.

- from Commentaries on the Karaethon Cycle

Sereine dar Shamelle Motara

Counsel-Sister to Comaelle, High Queen of Jaramide

(circa 325 AB, the Third Age)

Chapter 1 - Seeds of Shadow

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose on the great plain called the Caralain Grass. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning.

North and west the wind blew beneath early morning sun, over endless miles of rolling grass and far-scattered thickets, across the swift-flowing River Luan, past the broken-topped fang of Dragonmount, mountain of legend towering above the slow swells of the rolling plain, looming so high that clouds wreathed it less than halfway to the smoking peak. Dragonmount, where the Dragon had died-and with him, some said, the Age of Legends-where prophecy said he would be born again. Or had been. North and west, across the villages of Jualdhe and Darein and Alindaer, where bridges like stone lacework arched out to the Shining Walls, the great white walls of what many called the greatest city in the world. Tar Valon. A city just touched by the reaching shadow of Dragonmount each evening.

Within those walls Ogier-made buildings well over two thousand years old seemed to grow out of the ground rather than having been built, or to be the work of wind and water rather than that of even the fabled hands of Ogier stonemasons. Some suggested birds taking flight, or huge shells from distant seas. Soaring towers, flared or fluted or spiraled, stood connected by bridges hundreds of feet in the air, often without rails. Only those long in Tar Valon could avoid gaping like country folk who had never been off the farm.

Greatest of those towers, the White Tower dominated the city, gleaming like polished bone in the sun. The Wheel of Time turns around Tar Valon, so people said in the city, and Tar Valon turns around the Tower. The first sight travelers had of Tar Valon, before their horses came in view of the bridges, before their river boat captains sighted the island, was the Tower reflecting the sun like a beacon. Small wonder then that the great square surrounding the walled Tower grounds seemed smaller than it was under the massive Tower's gaze, the people in it dwindling to insects. Yet the White Tower could have been the smallest in Tar Valon, the fact that it was the heart of Aes Sedai power would still have overawed the island city.

Despite their numbers, the crowd did not come close to filling the square. Along the edges people jostled each other in a milling mass, all going about their day's business, but closer to the Tower grounds there were ever fewer people, until a band of bare paving stones at least fifty paces wide bordered the tall white walls. Aes Sedai were respected and more in Tar Valon, of course, and the Amyrlin Seat ruled the city as she ruled the Aes Sedai, but few wanted to be closer to Aes Sedai power than they had to. There was a difference between being proud of a grand fireplace in your hall and walking into the flames.

A very few did go closer, to the broad stairs that led up to the Tower itself, to the intricately carved doors wide enough for a dozen people abreast. Those doors stood open, welcoming. There were always some people in need of aid or an answer they thought only Aes Sedai could give, and they came from far as often as near, from Arafel and Ghealdan, from Saldaea and Illian. Many would find help or guidance inside, though often not what they had expected or hoped for.

Min kept the wide hood of her cloak pulled up, shadowing her face in its depths. In spite of the warmth of the day, the garment was light enough not to attract comment, not on a woman so obviously shy. And a good many people were shy when they went to the Tower. There was nothing about her to attract notice. Her dark hair was longer than when she was last in the Tower, though still not quite to her shoulders, and her dress, plain blue except for narrow bands of white Jaerecuz lace at neck and wrists, would have suited the daughter of a well-to-do farmer, wearing her feastday best to the Tower just like the other women approaching the wide stairs. Min hoped she looked the same, at least. She had to stop herself from staring at them to see if they walked or held themselves differently. I can do it, she told herself.

She had certainly not come all this way to turn back now. The dress was a good disguise. Those who remembered her in the Tower remembered a young woman with close-cropped hair, always in a boy's coat and breeches, never in a dress. It had to be a good disguise. She had no choice about what she was doing. Not really.

Her stomach fluttered the closer she came to the Tower, and she tightened her grip on the bundle clutched to her breast. Her usual clothes were in there, and her good boots, and all her possessions except the horse she had left at an inn not far from the square. With luck, she would be back on the gelding in a few hours, riding for the Ostrein Bridge and the road south.

She was not really looking forward to climbing onto a horse again so soon, not after weeks in the saddle with never a day's pause, but she longed to leave this place. She had never seen the White Tower as hospitable, and right now it seemed nearly as awful as the Dark One's prison at Shayol Ghul. Shivering, she wished she had not thought of the Dark One. I wonder if Moiraine thinks I came just because she asked me? The Light help me, acting like a fool girl. Doing fool things because of a fool man!

She mounted the stairs uneasily - each was deep enough to take two strides for her to reach the next - and unlike most of the others, she did not pause for an awed stare up the pale height of the Tower. She wanted this over.

Inside, archways almost surrounded the large, round entry hall, but the petitioners huddled in the middle of the chamber, shuffling together beneath a flat-domed ceiling. The pale stone floor had been worn and polished by countless nervous feet over the centuries. No one thought of anything except where they were, and why. A farmer and his wife in rough woolens, clutching each other's callused hands, rubbed shoulders with a merchant in velvet-slashed silks, a maid at her heels clutching a small worked-silver casket, no doubt her mistress's gift for the Tower. Elsewhere, the merchant would have stared down her nose at farm folk who brushed so close, and they might well have knuckled their foreheads and backed away apologizing. Not now. Not here.

There were few men among the petitioners, which was no surprise to Min. Most men were nervous around Aes Sedai. Everyone knew it had been male Aes Sedai, when there still had been male Aes Sedai, who were responsible for the Breaking of the World. Three thousand years had not dimmed that memory, even if time had altered many of the details. Children were still frightened by tales of men who could channel the One Power, men doomed to go mad from the Dark One's taint on saidin, the male half of the True Source. Worst was the story of Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, Lews Therin Kinslayer, who had begun the Breaking. For that matter, the stories frightened adults, too. Prophecy said the Dragon would be born again in mankind's greatest hour of need, to fight the Dark One in Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle, but that made little difference in how most people looked at any connection between men and the Power. Any Aes Sedai would hunt down a man who could channel, now; of the seven Ajahs, the Red did little else.

Of course, none of that had anything to do with seeking help from Aes Sedai, yet few men felt easy about being linked in any way to Aes Sedai and the Power. Few, that is, except Warders, but each Warder was bonded to an Aes Sedai; Warders could hardly be taken for the general run of men. There was a saying: "A man will cut off his own hand to get rid of a splinter before asking help from Aes Sedai." Women meant it as a comment on men's stubborn foolishness, but Min had heard some men say the loss of a hand might be the better decision.

She wondered what these people would do if they knew what she knew. Run screaming, perhaps. And if they knew her reason for being here, she might not survive to be taken up by the Tower guards and thrown into a cell. She did have friends in the Tower, but none with power or influence. If her purpose was discovered, it was much less likely that they could help her than that she would pull them to the gallows or the headsman behind her. That was saying she lived to be tried, of course; more likely her mouth would be stopped permanently long before a trial.

She told herself to stop thinking like that. I'll make it in, and I'll make it out. The Light burn Rand al'Thor for getting me into this!

Three or four Accepted, women Min's age or perhaps a little older, were circulating through the round room, speaking softly to the petitioners. Their white dresses had no decoration except for seven bands of color at the hem, one band for each Ajah. Now and again a novice, a still younger woman or girl all in white, came to lead someone deeper into the Tower. The petitioners always followed the novices with an odd mix of excited eagerness and foot-dragging reluctance.

Min's grip tightened on her bundle as one of the Accepted stopped in front of her. "The Light illumine you," the curly-haired woman said perfunctorily. "I am called Faolain. How may the Tower help you?"

Faolain's dark, round face held the patience of someone doing a tedious job when she would rather be doing something else. Studying, probably, from what Min knew of the Accepted. Learning to be Aes Sedai. Most important, however, was the lack of recognition in the Accepted's eyes; the two of them had met when Min was in the Tower before, though only briefly.

Just the same, Min lowered her face in assumed diffidence. It was not unnatural; a good many country folk did not really understand the great step up from Accepted to full Aes Sedai. Shielding her features behind the edge of her cloak, she looked away from Faolain.

"I have a question I must ask the Amyrlin Seat," she began, then cut off abruptly as three Aes Sedai stopped to look into the entry hall, two from one archway and one from another.

Accepted and novices curtsied when their rounds took them close to one of the Aes Sedai, but otherwise went on about their tasks, perhaps a trifle more briskly. That was all. Not so for the petitioners. They seemed to catch their breaths all together. Away from the White Tower, away from Tar Valon, they might simply have thought the Aes Sedai three women whose ages they could not guess, three women in the flush of their prime, yet with more maturity than their smooth cheeks suggested. In the Tower, though, there was no question. A woman who had worked very long with the One Power was not touched by time in the same way as other women. In the Tower, no one needed to see a golden Great Serpent ring to know an Aes Sedai.

A ripple of curtsies spread through the huddle, and jerky bows from the few men. Two or three people even fell to their knees. The rich merchant looked frightened; the farm couple at her side stared at legends come to life. How to deal with Aes Sedai was a matter of hearsay for most; it was unlikely that any here, except those who actually lived in Tar Valon, had seen an Aes Sedai before, and probably not even the Tar Valoners had been this close.

But it was not the Aes Sedai themselves that halted Min's tongue. Sometimes, not often, she saw things when she looked at people, images and auras that usually flared and were gone in moments. Occasionally she knew what they meant. It happened rarely, the knowing-much more rarely that the seeing, even-but when she knew, she was always right.

Unlike most others, Aes Sedai - and their Warders - always had images and auras, sometimes so many dancing and shifting that they made Min dizzy. The numbers made no difference in interpreting them, though; she knew what they meant for Aes Sedai as seldom as for anyone else. But this time she knew more than she wanted to, and it made her shiver.

A slender woman with black hair falling to her waist, the only one of the three she recognized - her name was Ananda; she was Yellow Ajah - wore a sickly brown halo, shriveled and split by rotting fissures that fell in and widened as they decayed. The small, fair-haired Aes Sedai beside Ananda was Green Ajah, by her green-fringed shawl. The White Flame of Tar Valon on it showed for a moment when she turned her back. And on her shoulder, as if nestled among the grape vines and flowering apple branches worked on her shawl, sat a human skull. A small woman's skull, picked clean and sun-bleached. The third, a plumply pretty woman halfway around the room, wore no shawl; most Aes Sedai did not except for ceremony. The lift of her chin and the set of her shoulders spoke of strength and pride. She seemed to be casting cool, blue eyes on the petitioners through a tattered curtain of blood, crimson streamers running down her face.

Blood and skull and halo faded away in the dance of images around the three, came and faded again. The petitioners stared in awe, seeing only three women who could touch the True Source and channel the One Power. No one but Min saw the rest. No one but Min knew those three women were going to die. All on the same day.

"The Amyrlin cannot see everyone," Faolain said with poorly hidden impatience. "Her next public audience is not for ten days. Tell me what you want, and I will arrange for you to see the sister who can best help you."

Min's eye flew to the bundle in her arms and stayed there, partly so she would not have to see again what she had already seen. All three of them! Light! What chance was there that three Aes Sedai would die on the same day? But she knew. She knew.

“I have the right to speak to the Amyrlin Seat. In person.” It was a right seldom demanded - who would dare? - but it existed. “Any woman has that right, and I ask it.”

“Do you think the Amyrlin Seat herself can see everyone who comes to the White Tower? Surely another Aes Sedai can help you.” Faolain gave heavy weight to the titles as if to overpower Min. “Now tell me what your question is about. And give me your name, so the novice will know who to come for.”

“My name is . . . Elmindreda.” Min winced in spite of herself. She had always hated the name, but the Amyrlin was one of the few people living who had ever heard it. If only she remembered. “I have the right to speak to the Amyrlin. And my question is for her alone. I have the right.”

The Accepted arched an eyebrow. “Elmindreda?” Her mouth twitched toward an amused smile. “And you claim your rights. Very well. I will send word to the Keeper of the Chronicles that you wish to see the Amyrlin Seat personally, Elmindreda.”

Min wanted to slap the woman for the way she emphasized “Elmindreda,” but instead she forced out a murmured “Thank you.”

“Do not thank me yet. No doubt it will be hours before the Keeper finds time to reply, and it will certainly be that you can ask your question at the Mother’s next public audience. Wait with patience. Elmindreda.” She gave Min a tight smile, almost a smirk, as she turned away.

Grinding her teeth, Min took her bundle to stand against the wall between two of the archways, where she tried to blend into the pale stonework. Trust no one, and avoid notice until you reach the Amyrlin, Moiraine had told her. Moiraine was one Aes Sedai she did trust. Most of the time. It was good advice in any case. All she had to do was reach the Amyrlin, and it would be over. She could don her own clothes again, see her friends, and leave. No more need for hiding.

She was relieved to see that the Aes Sedai had gone. Three Aes Sedai dying on one day. It was impossible; that was the only word. Yet it was going to happen. Nothing she said or did could change it-when she knew what an image meant, it happened-but she had to tell the Amyrlin about this. It might even be as important as the news she brought from Moiraine, though that was hard to believe.

Another Accepted came to replace one already there, and to Min’s eyes bars floated in front of her apple-cheeked face, like a cage. Sheriam, the Mistress of Novices, looked into the hall-after one glance, Min kept her gaze on the stone under her feet; Sheriam knew her all too well - and the red-haired Aes Sedai’s face seemed battered and bruised. It was only the viewing, of course, but Min still had to bite her lip to stifle a gasp. Sheriam, with her calm authority and sureness, was as indestructible as the Tower. Surely nothing could harm Sheriam. But something was going to.

An Aes Sedai unknown to Min, wearing the shawl of the Brown Ajah, accompanied a stout woman in finely woven red wool to the doors. The stout woman walked as lightly as a girl, face shining, almost laughing with pleasure. The Brown sister was smiling, too, but her aura faded like a guttering candle flame.

Death. Wounds, captivity, and death. To Min it might as well have been printed on a page.

She set her eyes on her feet. She did not want to see any more. Let her remember, she thought. She had not felt desperation at any time on her long ride from the Mountains of Mist, not even on the two occasions when someone tried to steal her horse, but she felt it now. Light, let her remember that bloody name.

“Mistress Elmindreda?”

Min gave a start. The black-haired novice who stood before her was barely old enough to be away from home, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, though she made a great effort at dignity. “Yes? I am That is my name.”

“I am Sahra. If you will come with me - ” Sahra’s piping voice took on a note of wonder - the Amyrlin Seat will see you in her study now.’

Min gave a sigh of relief and followed eagerly.

Her cloak's deep hood still hid her face, but it did not stop her seeing, and the more she saw, the more she grew eager to reach the Amyrlin. Few people walked the broad corridors that spiraled upward with their brightly colored floor tiles, and their wall hangings and golden lampstands - the Tower had been built to hold far greater numbers than it did now - but nearly everyone she saw as she climbed higher wore an image or aura that spoke to her of violence and danger.

Warders hurried by with barely a glance for the two women, men who moved like hunting wolves, their swords only an afterthought to their deadliness, but they seemed to have bloody faces, or gaping wounds. Swords and spears danced about their heads, threatening. Their auras flashed wildly, flickered on the knife edge of death. She saw dead men walking, knew they would die on the same day as the Aes Sedai in the entry hall, or at most a day later. Even some of the servants, men and women with the Flame of Tar Valon on their breasts, hurrying about their work, bore signs of violence. An Aes Sedai glimpsed down a side hallway appeared to have chains in the air around her, and another, crossing the corridor ahead of Min and her guide, seemed for most of those few strides to wear a silver collar around her neck. Min's breath caught at that; she wanted to scream.

"It can all be overwhelming to someone who's never seen it before," Sahra said, trying and failing to sound as if the Tower were as ordinary to her now as her home village. "But you are safe here. The Amyrlin Seat will make things right." Her voice squeaked when she mentioned the Amyrlin.

"Light, let her do just that," Min muttered. The novice gave her a smile that was meant to be soothing.

By the time they reached the hall outside the Amyrlin's study, Min's stomach was churning and she was treading almost on Sahra's heels. Only the need to pretend that she was a stranger had kept her from running ahead long since.

One of the doors to the Amyrlin's chambers opened, and a young man with red-gold hair came stalking out, nearly striding into Min and her escort. Tall and straight and strong in his blue coat thickly embroidered with gold on sleeves and collar, Gawyn of House Trakand, eldest son of Queen Morgase of Andor, looked every inch the proud young lord. A furious young lord. There was no time to drop her head; he was staring down into her hood, right into her face.

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed to slits of blue ice. "So you are back. Do you know where my sister and Egwene have gone?"

"They are not here?" Min forgot everything in a rising flood of panic. Before she knew what she was doing she had seized his sleeves, peering up at him urgently, and forced him back a step. "Gawyn, they started for the Tower months ago! Elayne and Egwene, and Nynaeve, too. With Verin Sedai and . . . Gawyn, I . . . I . . ."

"Calm yourself," he said, gently undoing her grip on his coat. "Light! I didn't mean to frighten you so. They arrived safely. And would not say a word of where they had been, or why. Not to me. I suppose there's scant hope you will?" She thought she kept her face straight, but he took one look and said, "I thought not. This place has more secrets than . . . They've vanished again. And Nynaeve, too." Nynaeve was almost an offhand addition; she might be one of Min's friends, but she meant nothing to him. His voice began to roughen once more, growing tighter by the second. "Again without a word. Not a word! Supposedly they're on a farm somewhere as penance for running away, but I cannot find out where. The Amyrlin won't give me a straight answer."

Min flinched; for a moment, streaks of dried blood had made his face a grim mask. It was like a double hammer blow. Her friends were gone - it had eased her coming to the Tower, knowing they were here - and Gawyn was going to be wounded on the day the Aes Sedai died.

Despite all she had seen since entering the Tower, despite her fear, none of it had really touched her personally until now. Disaster striking the Tower would spread far from Tar Valon, yet she was not of the Tower and never could be. But Gawyn was someone she knew, someone she liked, and he was going to be hurt more than the blood told, hurt somehow deeper than wounds to his flesh. It hit her that if catastrophe seized the Tower, not only distant Aes Sedai would be harmed, women she could never feel close to, but her friends as well. They were of the Tower.

In a way she was glad Egwene and the others were not there, glad she could not look at them and perhaps see signs of death. Yet she wanted to look, to be sure, to look at her friends and see nothing, or see that they would live. Where in the Light were they? Why had they gone? Knowing those three, she thought it possible that if Gawyn did not know where they were, it was because they did not want him to know. It could be that.

Suddenly she remembered where she was and why, and that she was not alone with Gawyn. Sahra seemed to have forgotten she was taking Min to the Amyrlin; she seemed to have forgotten everything but the young lord, making calf-eyes that he was not noticing. Even so, there was no use pretending any longer to be a stranger to the Tower. She was at the Amyrlin's door; nothing could stop her now.

"Gawyn, I don't know where they are, but if they are doing penance on a farm, they're probably all sweat, and mud to their hips, and you are the last one they will want to see them." She was not much easier about their absence than Gawyn was, in truth. Too much had happened, too much was happening, too much with ties to them, and to her. But it was not impossible they had been sent off for punishment. "You won't help them by making the Amyrlin angry."

"I don't know that they are on a farm. Or even alive. Why all this hiding and sidestepping if they're just pulling weeds? If anything happens to my sister . . . Or to Egwene. . . ." He frowned at the toes of his boots. "I am supposed to look after Elayne. How can I protect her when I don't know where she is?"

Min sighed. "Do you think she needs looking after? Either of them?" But if the Amyrlin had sent them somewhere, maybe they did. The Amyrlin was capable of sending a woman into a bear's den with nothing but a switch if it suited her purposes. And she would expect the woman to come back with a bearskin, or the bear on a leash, as instructed. But telling Gawyn that would only inflame his temper and his worries. "Gawyn, they have pledged to the Tower. They won't thank you for meddling."

"I know Elayne isn't a child," he said patiently, "even if she does bounce back and forth between running off like one and playing at being Aes Sedai. But she is my sister, and beyond that, she is Daughter-Heir of Andor. She'll be queen, after Mother. Andor needs her whole and safe to take the throne, not another Succession."

Playing at being Aes Sedai? Apparently he did not realize the extent of his sister's talent. The Daughter-Heirs of Andor had been sent to the Tower to train for as long as there had been an Andor, but Elayne was the first to have enough talent to be raised to Aes Sedai, and a powerful Aes Sedai at that. Very likely he also did not know Egwene was just as strong.

"So you will protect her whether she wants it or not?" She said it in a flat voice meant to let him know he was making a mistake, but he missed the warning and nodded agreement.

"That has been my duty since the day she was born. My blood shed before hers; my life given before hers. I took that oath when I could barely see over the side of her cradle; Gareth Bryne had to explain to me what it meant. I won't break it now. Andor needs her more than it needs me."

He spoke with a calm certainty, an acceptance of something natural and right, that sent chills through her. She had always thought of him as boyish, laughing and teasing, but now he was something alien. She thought the Creator must have been tired when it came time to make men; sometimes they hardly seemed human. "And Egwene? What oath did you take about her?"

His face did not change, but he shifted his feet warily. "I'm concerned about Egwene, of course. And Nynaeve. What happens to Elayne's companions might happen to Elayne. I assume they're still together; when they were here, I seldom saw one without the others."

"My mother always told me to marry a poor liar, and you qualify. Except that I think someone else has first claim."

"Some things are meant to be," he said quietly, "and some never can. Galad is heartsick because Egwene is gone." Galad was his half-brother, the pair of them sent to Tar Valon to train under the Warders. That was another Andoran

tradition. Galadedrid Damodred was a man who took doing the right thing to the point of a fault, as Min saw it, but Gawyn could see no wrong in him. And he would not speak his feelings for a woman Galad had set his heart on.

She wanted to shake him, shake some sense into him, but there was no time now. Not with the Amyrlin waiting, not with what she had to tell the Amyrlin waiting. Certainly not with Sahra standing there, calf-eyes or no calf-eyes. "Gawyn, I am summoned to the Amyrlin. Where can I find you, when she is done with me?"

"I will be in the practice yard. The only time I can stop worrying is when I am working the sword with Hammar." Hammar was a blademaster, and the Warder who taught the sword. "Most days I'm there until the sun sets."

"Good, then. I will come as soon as I can. And try to watch what you say. If you make the Amyrlin angry with you, Elayne and Egwene might share in it."

"That I cannot promise," he said firmly. "Something is wrong in the world. Civil war in Cairhien. The same and worse in Tarabon and Arad Doman. False Dragons. Troubles and rumors of troubles everywhere. I don't say the Tower is behind it, but even here things are not what they should be. Or what they seem. Elayne and Egwene vanishing isn't the whole of it. Still, they are the part that concerns me. I will find out where they are. And if they have been hurt . . . If they are dead . . ."

He scowled, and for an instant his face was that bloody mask again. More: a sword floated above his head, and a banner waved behind it. The long-hilted sword, like those most Warders used, had a heron engraved on its slightly curved blade, symbol of a blademaster, and Min could not say whether it belonged to Gawyn or threatened him. The banner bore Gawyn's sigil of the charging White Boar, but on a field of green rather than the red of Andor. Both sword and banner faded with the blood.

"Be careful, Gawyn." She meant it two ways. Careful of what he said, and careful in a way she could not explain, even to herself. "You must be very careful."

His eyes searched her face as if he had heard some of her deeper meaning. "I . . . will try," he said finally. He put on a grin, almost the grin she remembered, but the effort was plain. "I suppose I had better get myself back to the practice yard if I expect to keep up with Galad. I managed two out of five against Hammar this morning, but Galad actually won three, the last time he bothered to come to the yard." Suddenly he appeared to really see her for the first time, and his grin became genuine. "You ought to wear dresses more often. It's pretty on you. Remember, I will be there till sunset."

As he strode away with something very close to the dangerous grace of a Warder, Min realized she was smoothing the dress over her hip and stopped immediately. The Light burn all men!

Sahra exhaled as if she had been holding her breath. "He is very good-looking, isn't he?" she said dreamily. "Not as good-looking as Lord Galad, of course. And you really know him." It was half a question, but only half.

Min echoed the novice's sigh. The girl would talk with her friends in the novices' quarters. The son of a queen was a natural topic, especially when he was handsome and had an air about him like the hero in a gleeman's tale. A strange woman only made for more interesting speculation. Still, there was nothing to be done about it. At any rate, it could hardly cause any harm now.

"The Amyrlin Seat must be wondering why we haven't come," she said.

Sahra came to herself with a wide-eyed start and a loud gulp. Seizing Min's sleeve with one hand, she jumped to open one of the doors, pulling Min behind her. The moment they were inside, the novice curtsied hastily and burst out in panic, "I've brought her, Leane Sedai. Mistress Elmindreda? The Amyrlin Seat wants to see her?"

The tall, coppery-skinned woman in the anteroom wore the hand-wide stole of the Keeper of the Chronicles, blue to show she had been raised from the Blue Ajah. Fists on hips, she waited for the girl to finish, then dismissed her with a dipped "Took you long enough, child. Back to your chores, now." Sahra bobbed another curtsy and scurried out as quickly as she had entered.

Min stood with her eyes on the floor, her hood still pulled up around her face. Blundering in front of Sahra had been bad enough-though at least the novice did not know her name-but Leane knew her better than anyone in the Tower except the Amyrlin. Min was sure it could make no difference now, but after what had happened in the hallway, she meant to hold to Moiraine's instructions until she was alone with the Amyrlin.

This time her precautions did no good. Leane took two steps, pushed back the hood, and grunted as if she had been poked in the stomach. Min raised her head and stared back defiantly, trying to pretend she had not been attempting to sneak past. Straight, dark hair only a little longer than her own framed the Keeper's face; the Aes Sedai's expression was a blend of surprise and displeasure at being surprised.

"So you are Elmindreda, are you?" Leant said briskly. She was always brisk. "I must say you look it more in that dress than in your usual . . . garb."

"Just Min, Leane Sedai, if you please." Min managed to keep her face straight, but it was difficult not to glare. The Keeper's voice had held too much amusement. If her mother had had to name her after someone in a story, why did it have to be a woman who seemed to spend most of her time sighing at men, when she was not inspiring them to compose songs about her eyes, or her smile?

"Very well. Min. I'll not ask where you've been, nor why you've come back in a dress, apparently wanting to ask a question of the Amyrlin. Not now, at least." Her face said she meant to ask later, though, and get answers. "I suppose the Mother knows who Elmindreda is? Of course. I should have known that when she said to send you straight in, and alone. The Light alone knows why she puts up with you." She broke off with a concerned frown. "What is the matter, girl? Are you ill?"

Min carefully blanked her face. "No. No, I am all right." For a moment the Keeper had been looking through a transparent mask of her own face, a screaming mask. "May I go in now, Leane Sedai?"

Leane studied her a moment longer, then jerked her head toward the inner chamber. "In with you." Min's leap to obey would have satisfied the hardest taskmistress.

The Amyrlin Seat's study had been occupied by many grand and powerful women over the centuries, and reminders of the fact filled the room, from the tall fireplace all of golden marble from Kandor, cold now, to the paneled walls of pale, oddly striped wood, iron hard yet carved in wondrous beasts and wildly feathered birds. Those panels had been brought from the mysterious lands beyond the Aiel Waste well over a thousand years ago, and the fireplace was more than twice as old. The polished redstone of the floor had come from the Mountains of Mist. High arched windows let onto a balcony. The iridescent stone framing the windows shone like pearls, and had been salvaged from the remains of a city sunk into the Sea of Storms by the Breaking of the World; no one had ever seen its like.

The current occupant, Suan Sanche, had been born a fisherman's daughter in Tear, though, and the furnishings she had chosen were simple, if well made and well polished. She sat in a stout chair behind a large table plain enough to have served a farmhouse. The only other chair in the room, just as plain and usually set off to one side, now stood in front of the table atop a small Tairen rug, simple in blue and brown and gold. Half a dozen books rested open on tall reading stands about the floor. That was all of it. A drawing hung above the fireplace: tiny fishing boats working among reeds in the Fingers of the Dragon, just as her father's boat had.

At first glance, despite her smooth Aes Sedai features, Suan Sanche herself looked as simple as her furnishings. She herself was sturdy, and handsome rather than beautiful, and the only bit of ostentation in her clothing was the broad stole of the Amyrlin Seat she wore, with one colored stripe for each of the seven Ajahs. Her age was indeterminate, as with any Aes Sedai; not even a hint of gray showed in her dark hair. But her sharp blue eyes brooked no nonsense, and her firm jaw spoke of the determination of the youngest woman ever to be chosen Amyrlin Seat. For over ten years Suan Sanche had been able to summon rulers, and the powerful, and they had come, even if they hated the White Tower and feared Aes Sedai.

As the Amyrlin strode around in front of the table, Min set down her bundle and began an awkward curtsy, muttering irritably under her breath at having to do so. Not that she wanted to be disrespectful - that did not even occur to one

facing a woman like Sivan Sanche - but the bow she usually would have made seemed foolish in a dress, and she had only a rough idea of how to curtsy.

Halfway down, with her skirts already spread, she froze like a crouching toad. Sivan Sanche was standing there as regal as any queen, and for a moment she was also lying on the floor, naked. Aside from her being in only her skin, there was something odd about the image, but it vanished before Min could say what. It was as strong a viewing as she had ever seen, and she had no idea what it meant.

“Seeing things again, are you?” the Amyrlin said. “Well, I can certainly make use of that ability of yours. I could have used it all the months you were gone. But we’ll not talk of that. What’s done is done. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” She smiled a tight smile. “But if you do it again, I’ll have your hide for gloves. Stand up, girl. Leane forces enough ceremony on me in a month to last any sensible woman a year. I don’t have time for it. Not these days. Now, what did you just see?”

Min straightened slowly. It was a relief to be back with someone who knew of her talent, even if it was the Amyrlin Seat herself. She did not have to hide what she saw from the Amyrlin. Far from it. “You were.... You weren’t wearing any clothes. I . . . I don’t know what it means, Mother.”

Sivan barked a short, mirthless laugh. “No doubt that I’ll take a lover. But I have no time for that, either. There’s no time for winking at the men when you’re busy bailing the boat.”

“Maybe,” Min said slowly. It could have meant that, though she doubted it. “I just do not know. But, Mother, I’ve been seeing things ever since I walked into the Tower. Something bad is going to happen, something terrible.”

She started with the Aes Sedai in the entry hall and told everything she had seen, as well as what everything meant, when she was sure. She held back what Gawyn had said, though, or most of it; it was no use telling him not to anger the Amyrlin if she did it for him. The rest she laid out as starkly as she had seen it. Some of her fear came out as she dredged it all up, seeing it all again; her voice shook before she was done.

The Amyrlin’s expression never changed. “So you spoke with young Gawyn,” she said when Min finished. “Well, I think I can convince him to keep quiet. And if I remember Sahra correctly, the girl could do with some time working in the country. She’ll spread no gossip hoeing a vegetable patch.”

“I don’t understand,” Min said. “Why should Gawyn keep quiet? About what? I told him nothing. And Sahra . . . ? Mother, perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. Aes Sedai and Warders are going to die. It has to mean a battle. And unless you send a lot of Aes Sedai and Warders off somewhere - and servants, too; I saw servants dead and injured, too - unless you do that, that battle will be here! In Tar Valon!”

“Did you see that?” The Amyrlin demanded. “A battle? Do you know, with your . . . your talent, or are you guessing?”

“What else could it be? At least four Aes Sedai are as good as dead. Mother, I’ve only laid eyes on nine of you since coming back, and four are going to die! And the Warders What else could it be?”

“More things than I like to think of,” Sivan said grimly. “When? How long before this . . . thing . . . occurs?”

Min shook her head. “I do not know. Most of it will happen in the space of a day, maybe two, but that could be tomorrow or a year from now. Or ten.”

“Let us pray for ten. If it comes tomorrow, there isn’t much I can do to stop it.”

Min grimaced. Only two Aes Sedai besides Sivan Sanche knew of what she could do: Moiraine, and Verin Mathwin, who had tried to study her talent. None of them knew how it worked any more than she did, except that it had nothing to do with the Power. Perhaps that was why only Moiraine seemed able to accept the fact that when she knew what a viewing meant, it happened.

“Maybe it’s the Whitecloaks, Mother. They were everywhere in Alindaer when I crossed the bridge.” She did not believe the Children of the Light had anything to do with what was coming, but she was reluctant to say what she believed. Believed, not knew; yet that was bad enough.

But the Amyrlin had begun shaking her head before she finished. “They would try something if they could, I’ve no doubt - they would love to strike at the Tower - but Eamon Valda won’t move openly without orders from the Lord Captain Commander, and Pedron Niall will not strike unless he thinks we’re injured. He knows our strength too well to be foolish. For a thousand years the Whitecloaks have been like that. Silverpike in the reeds, waiting for a hint of Aes Sedai blood in the water. But we’ve showed them none yet, nor will we, if I can help it.”

“Yet if Valda did try something on his own - ”

Siuana cut her off. “He has no more than five hundred men close to Tar Valon, girl. He sent the rest away weeks ago, to cause trouble elsewhere. The Shining Walls held off the Aiel. And Artur Hawkwing, too. Valda will never break into Tar Valon unless the city is already falling apart from the inside.” Her voice did not change as she went on. “You very much want me to believe the trouble will come from the Whitecloaks. Why?” There was no gentleness in her eyes.

“Because I want to believe it,” Min muttered. She licked her lips and spoke the words she did not want to say. “The silver collar I saw on that one Aes Sedai. Mother, it looked . . . It looked like one of the collars the . . . the Seanchan use to . . . to control women who can channel.” Her voice dwindled as Siuana’s mouth twisted with distaste.

“Filthy things,” the Amyrlin growled. “As well most people don’t believe a quarter of what they hear about the Seanchan. But there’s more chance of it being the Whitecloaks. If the Seanchan land again, anywhere, I will know it in days by pigeon, and it is a long way from the sea to Tar Valon. If they do reappear, I will have plenty of warning. No, I fear what you see is something far worse than the Seanchan. I fear it can only be the Black Ajah. Only a handful of us know about them, and I don’t relish what will happen when the knowledge becomes common, but they are the greatest immediate threat to the Tower.”

Min realized she was clutching her skirt so hard that her hands hurt; her mouth was dry as dust. The White Tower had always coldly denied the existence of a hidden Ajah, dedicated to the Dark One. The surest way to anger an Aes Sedai was merely to mention such a thing. For the Amyrlin Seat herself to give the Black Ajah reality so casually made Min’s spine turn to ice.

As if she had said nothing out of the ordinary, the Amyrlin went on. “But you didn’t come all this way just to do your viewings. What word from Moiraine? I know everything from Arad Doman to Tarabon is in chaos, to say the least.” That was saying the least, indeed; men supporting the Dragon Reborn were fighting those opposing him, and had turned both countries to civil war while they still fought each other for control of Almoth Plain. Siuana’s tone dismissed all that as a detail. “But I’ve heard nothing of Rand al’Thor for months. He is the focus of everything. Where is he? What does Moiraine have him doing? Sit, girl. Sit.” She gestured to the chair in front of the table.

Min approached the chair on wobbly legs and half fell into it. The Black Ajah! Oh, Light! Aes Sedai were supposed to stand for the Light. Even if she did not really trust them, there was always that. Aes Sedai, and all the power of the Aes Sedai, stood for the Light and against the Shadow. Only now it was not true any longer. She hardly heard herself say, “He’s on his way to Tear.”

“Tear! It’s Callandor, then. Moiraine means him to take the Sword That Cannot Be Touched out of the Stone of Tear. I swear I’ll hang her in the sun to dry! I will make her wish she were a novice again! He cannot be ready for that yet!”

“It was not . . .” Min stopped to dear her throat. “It was not Moiraine’s doing. Rand left in the middle of the night, by himself. The others followed, and Moiraine sent me to tell you. They could be in Tear by now. For all I know, he could have Callandor by now.”

“Burn him!” Siuana barked. “By now, he could be dead! I wish he had never heard a word of the Prophecies of the Dragon. If I could keep him from hearing another, I would.”

“But doesn’t he have to fulfill the Prophecies? I don’t understand.”

The Amyrlin leaned back against her table wearily. "As though anyone even understands most of them! The Prophecies aren't what makes him the Dragon Reborn; all that takes is for him to admit it, and he must have if he is going for Callandor. The Prophecies are meant to announce to the world who he is, to prepare him for what is coming, to prepare the world for it. If Moiraine can keep some control over him, she will guide him to the Prophecies we can be sure of-when he is ready to face them!-and for the rest, we trust that what he does is enough. We hope. For all I know, he has already fulfilled Prophecies none of us understands. The Light send it's enough."

"So you do mean to control him. He said you'd try to use him, but this is the first I've heard you admit it." Min felt cold inside. Angry, she added, "You haven't done such a good job of it so far, you and Moiraine."

Siu'an's tiredness seemed to slide from her shoulders. She straightened and stood looking down at Min. "You had best hope we can. Did you think we could just let him run about loose? Headstrong and stubborn, untrained, unprepared, maybe going mad already. Do you think we could trust to the Pattern, to his destiny, to keep him alive, like some story? This isn't a story, he isn't some invincible hero, and if his thread is snipped out of the Pattern, the Wheel of Time won't notice his going, and the Creator will produce no miracles to save us. If Moiraine cannot reef his sails, he very well may get himself killed, and where are we then? Where is the world? The Dark One's prison is failing. He will touch the world again; it is only a matter of time. If Rand al'Thor is not there to face him in the Last Battle, if the headstrong young fool gets himself killed first, the world is doomed. The War of the Power all over again, with no Lews Therin and his Hundred Companions. Then fire and shadow, forever." She stopped suddenly, peering at Min's face. "So that's the way the wind sets, is it? You and Rand. I did not expect this."

Min shook her head vigorously, felt her cheeks coloring. "Of course not! I was . . . It's the Last Battle. And the Dark One. Light, just thinking about the Dark One loose ought to be enough to freeze a Warder's marrow. And the Black Ajah -"

"Don't try to dissemble," the Amyrlin said sharply. "Do you think this is the first time I ever saw a woman afraid for her man's life? You might as well admit it."

Min squirmed on her chair. Siuan's eyes dug at her, knowing and impatient. "All right," she muttered finally, "I'll tell you all of it, and much good it does either of us. The first time I ever saw Rand, I saw three women's faces, and one of them was mine. I've never seen anything about myself before or since, but I knew what it meant. I was going to fall in love with him. All three of us were."

"Three. The other two. Who are they?"

Min gave her a bitter smile. "The faces were blurred; I don't know who they are."

"Nothing to say that he would love you in return?"

"Nothing! He has never looked at me twice. I think he sees me as . . . as a sister. So don't think you can use me as leash on him, because it will not work!"

"Yet you do love him."

"I don't have any choice." Min tried to make her voice less sullen. "I tried treating it as a joke, but I can't laugh anymore. You may not believe me, but when I know what it means, it happens."

The Amyrlin tapped a finger against her lips and looked at Min consideringly.

That look worried Min. She had not meant to make such a show of herself, nor to tell as much as she had. She had not told everything, but she knew she should have learned by now not to give an Aes Sedai a lever, even if she did of see how it could be used. Aes Sedai were skilled at finding ways. "Mother, I've delivered Moiraine's message, and I've told everything I know of what my viewings meant. There's no reason now I can't put on my own clothes and go."

"Go where?"

“Tear.” After talking with Gawyn, trying to make sure he did not do something foolish. She wished she dared ask where Egwene and the other two were, but if the Amyrlin would not tell Elayne’s brother, there was small chance she would tell Min.

And Suan Sanche still had that weighing look in her eyes. “Or wherever Rand is. I may be a fool, but I’m not the first woman to be a fool over a man.”

“The first to be a fool over the Dragon Reborn. It will be dangerous, being close to Rand al’Thor once the world finds out who he is, what he is. And if he now wields Callandor, the world will learn soon enough. Half will want to kill him anyway, as if by killing him they can stop the Last Battle, stop the Dark One from breaking free. A good many will die, close to him. It might be better for you to stay here.”

The Amyrlin sounded sympathetic, but Min did not believe it. She did not believe Suan Sanche was capable of sympathy. “I’ll take the risk; maybe I can help him. With what I see. It isn’t even as if the Tower would be that much safer, not so long as there is one Red sister here. They’ll see a man who can channel and forget the Last Battle, and the Prophecies of the Dragon.”

“So will many others,” Suan broke in calmly. “Old ways of thinking are hard to shed, for Aes Sedai as for anyone else.”

Min gave her a puzzled look. She seemed to be taking Min’s side of the thing now. “It is no secret I am friends with Egwene and Nynaeve, and no secret they’re from the same village as Rand. For the Red Ajah, that will be connection enough. When the Tower finds out what he is, I would probably be arrested before the day is out. So will Egwene and Nynaeve, if you don’t have them hidden away somewhere.”

“Then you mustn’t be recognized. You catch no fish if they see the net. I suggest you forget your coat and breeches for a time.” The Amyrlin smiled like a cat smiling at a mouse.

“What fish do you expect to catch with me?” Min asked in a faint voice. She thought she knew, and hoped desperately she was wrong.

Her hope did not stop the Amyrlin from saying, “The Black Ajah. Thirteen of them fled, but I fear some remain. I cannot be sure who I can trust; for a while I was afraid to trust anyone. You are no Darkfriend, I know, and your particular talent may just be some help. At the very least, you’ll be another trustworthy pair of eyes.”

“You’ve been planning this since I walked in, haven’t you? That’s why you want to keep Gawyn and Sahra quiet.” Anger built up inside Min like steam in a kettle. The woman said frog and expected people to jump. That they usually did just made it worse. She was no frog, no dancing puppet. “Is this what you did to Egwene and Elayne and Nynaeve? Send them off after the Black Ajah? I wouldn’t put it past you!”

“You tend your own nets, child, and let those girls tend theirs. As far as you are concerned, they are working penance on a farm. Do I make myself plain?”

That unwavering stare made Min shift on her chair. It was easy to defy the Amyrlin - until she started staring at you with those sharp, cold blue eyes. “Yes, Mother.” The meekness of her reply rankled, but a glance at the Amyrlin convinced her to let it lie. She plucked at the fine wool of her dress. “I suppose it won’t kill me to wear this a little longer.” Suddenly Suan looked amused; Min felt her hackles rising.

“I fear that won’t be enough. Min in a dress is still Min in a dress to anyone who looks close. You cannot always wear a cloak with the hood up. No, you must change everything that can be changed. For one thing, you will continue to go by Elmindreda. It is your name, after all.” Min winced. “Your hair is almost as long as Leane’s, long enough to put in curls. For the rest. . . . I never had any use for rouge and powder and paints, but Leane remembers the use of them.”

Min’s eyes had grown wider by the word since the mention of curls. “Oh, no,” she gasped.

”No one will take you for Min who wears breeches once Leane makes you into a perfect Elmindreda.”

“Oh, NO!”

“As to why you are staying in the Tower - a reason suitable for a fluttery young woman who looks and acts nothing at all like Min.” The Amyrlin frowned thoughtfully, ignoring Min’s efforts to break in. “Yes. I will let it be put about that Mistress Elmindreda managed to encourage two suitors to the point that she has to take shelter from them in the Tower until she can decide between them. A few women still claim sanctuary each year, and sometimes for reasons as silly.” Her face hardened, and her eyes sharpened. “If you’re still thinking of Tear, think again. Consider whether you can be of more help to Rand there, or here. If the Black Ajah brings the Tower down, or worse, gains control, he loses even the little help I can give. So. Are you a woman, or a lovesick girl?”

Trapped. Min could see it as plainly as a shackle on her leg. “Do you always get your way with people, Mother?”

The Amyrlin’s smile was even colder this time. “Usually, child. Usually.”

Shifting her red-fringed shawl, Elaida stared thoughtfully at the door to the Amyrlin’s study, through which the two young women had just vanished. The novice came back out almost immediately, took one look at Elaida’s face, and bleated like a frightened sheep. Elaida thought she recognized her, though she could not bring the girl’s name to mind. She had more important uses for her time than teaching wretched children.

“Your name?”

“Sahra, Elaida Sedai.” The girl’s reply was a breathless squeak. Elaida might have no interest in novices, but the novices knew her, and her reputation.

She remembered the girl now. A daydreamer with moderate ability who would never be of any real power. It was doubtful she knew anything more than Elaida had already seen and heard - or remembered much more than Gawyn’s smile, for that matter. A fool. Elaida flicked a dismissive hand.

The girl dropped a curtsy so deep her face almost touched the floor tiles, then fled at a dead run.

Elaida did not see her go. The Red sister had turned away, already forgetting the novice. As she swept down the corridor, not a line marred her smooth features, but her thoughts boiled furiously. She did not even notice the servants, the novices and Accepted, who scrambled out of her way, curtsying as she passed. Once she almost walked over a Brown sister with her nose in a sheaf of notes. The plump Brown jumped back with a startled squawk that Elaida did not hear.

Dress or no dress, she knew the young woman who had gone in to see the Amyrlin. Min, who had spent so much time with the Amyrlin on her first visit to the Tower, though for no reason anyone knew. Min, who was such close friends with Elayne, Egwene, and Nynaeve. The Amyrlin was hiding the whereabouts of those three. Elaida was sure of it. All reports that they were serving penance on a farm had come at third or fourth hand from Sivan Sanche, more than enough distance to hide any twisting of words to avoid an outright lie. Not to mention the fact that all Elaida’s considerable efforts to find this farm had yielded nothing.

“The Light burn her!” For a moment open anger painted her face. She was not sure whether she meant Sivan Sanche or the Daughter-Heir. Either would serve. A slender Accepted heard her, glanced at her face, and went as white as her own dress; Elaida strode by without seeing her.

Apart from everything else, it infuriated her that she could not find Elayne. Elaida had the Foretelling sometimes, the ability to foresee future events. If it came seldom and faintly, that was still more than any Aes Sedai had had since Gitara Moroso, dead now twenty years. The very first thing Elaida had ever Foretold, while still an Accepted - and had known enough even then to keep to herself - was that the Royal line of Andor would be the key to defeating the Dark One in the Last Battle. She had attached herself to Morgase as soon as it was clear Morgase would succeed to the

throne, had built her influence year by patient year. And now all her effort, all her sacrifice - she might have been Amyrlin herself had she not concentrated all her energies on Andor - might be for naught because Elayne had disappeared.

With an effort she forced her thoughts back to what was important now. Egwene and Nynaeve came from the same village as that strange young man, Rand al'Thor. And Min knew him as well, however much she had tried to hide the fact. Rand al'Thor lay at the heart of it.

Elaida had only seen him once, supposedly a shepherd from the Two Rivers, in Andor, but looking every inch the Aielman. The Foretelling had come to her at the sight of him. He was ta'veren, one of those rare individuals who, instead of being woven into the Pattern as the Wheel of Time chose, forced the Pattern to shape itself around them, for a time at least. And Elaida had seen chaos swirling around him, division and strife for Andor, perhaps for even more of the world. But Andor must be kept whole, whatever else happened; that first Foretelling had convinced her of that.

There were more threads, enough to snare Sivan in her own web. If the rumors were to be believed, there were three ta'veren, not just one. All three from the same village, this Emond's Field, and all three near the same age, odd enough to occasion a good deal of talk in the Tower. And on Sivan's journey to Shienar, near a year ago now, she had seen them, even talked with them. Rand al'Thor. Perrin Aybara. Matrim Cauthon. It was said to be mere happenstance. Just fortuitous chance. So it was said. Those who said it did not know what Elaida knew.

When Elaida saw the young al'Thor man, it had been Moiraine who spirited him away. Moiraine who had accompanied him, and the other two ta'veren, in Shienar. Moiraine Damodred, who had been Sivan Sanche's closest friend when they were novices together. Had Elaida been one to make wagers, she would have wagered that no one else in the Tower remembered that friendship. On the day they were raised Aes Sedai, at the end of the Aiel War, Sivan and Moiraine had walked away from one another and afterward behaved almost like strangers. But Elaida had been one of the Accepted over those two novices, had taught their lessons and chastised them for slacking at chores, and she remembered. She could hardly believe that their plot could stretch back so far-al'Thor could not have been born much before that-yet it was the last link to tie them all together. For her, it was enough.

Whatever Sivan was up to, she had to be stopped. Turmoil and chaos multiplied on every side. The Dark One was sure to break free - the very thought made Elaida shiver and wrap her shawl around her more tightly - and the Tower had to be aloof from mundane struggles to face that. The Tower had to be free to pull the strings to make the nations stand together, free of the troubles Rand al'Thor would bring. Somehow, he had to be stopped from destroying Andor.

She had told no one what she knew of al'Thor. She meant to deal with him quietly, if possible. The Hall of the Tower already spoke of watching, even guiding, these ta'veren; they would never agree to dispose of them, of the one in particular, as he must be disposed of. For the good of the Tower. For the good of the world.

She made a sound in her throat, close to a growl. Sivan had always been headstrong, even as a novice, had always thought much of herself for a poor fisherman's daughter, but how could she be fool enough to mix the Tower in this without telling the Hall? She knew what was coming as well as anyone. The only way it could be worse was if . . .

Abruptly Elaida stopped, staring at nothing. Could it be that this al'Thor could channel? Or one of the others? Most likely it would be al'Thor. No. Surely not. Not even Sivan would touch one of those. She could not. "Who knows what that woman could do?" she muttered. "She was never fit to be the Amyrlin Seat."

"Talking to yourself, Elaida? I know you Reds never have friends outside your own Ajah, but surely you have friends to talk to inside it."

Elaida turned her head to regard Alviarin. The swan-necked Aes Sedai stared back with the insufferable coolness that was a hallmark of the White Ajah. There was no love lost between Red and White; they had stood on opposite sides in the Hall of the Tower for a thousand years. White stood with Blue, and Sivan had been a Blue. But Whites prided themselves on dispassionate logic.

"Walk with me," Elaida said. Alviarin hesitated before falling in beside her.

At first the White sister arched a disparaging eyebrow at what Elaida had to say concerning Suan, but before the end she was frowning in concentration. "You have no proof of anything . . . improper," she said when Elaida finally fell silent.

"Not yet," Elaida said firmly. She permitted herself a tight smile when Alviarin nodded. It was a beginning. One way or another, Suan would be stopped before she could destroy the Tower.

Well hidden in a stand of tall leatherleaf above the north bank of the River Taren, Dain Bornhald tossed back his white cloak, with its flaring golden sun on the breast, and raised the stiff leather tube of a looking glass to his eye. A cloud of tiny bitemes buzzed around his face, but he ignored them. In the village of Taren Ferry, across the river, tall stone houses stood on high foundations against the floods that came every spring. Villagers hung out of windows or waited on stoops to stare at the thirty white-cloaked riders sitting their horses in burnished plate-and-mail. A delegation of village men and women were meeting with the horsemen. Rather, they were listening to Jaret Byar, from what Bornhald could see, which was much the best.

Bornhald could almost hear his father's voice. Let them think there it a chance, and some fool will try to take it. Then there's killing to do, and another fool will try to avenge the first, so there's more killing. Put the fear of the Light into them from the first, let them know no one will be harmed if they do as they're told, and you'll have no trouble.

His jaw tightened at the thought of his father, dead now. He was going to do something about that, and soon. He was sure only Byar knew why he had leaped to accept this command, aimed at an all-but-forgotten district in the hinterlands of

Andor, and Byar would hold his tongue. Byar had been as dedicated to Dain's father as a hound, and he had transferred all that loyalty to Dain. Bornhald had had no hesitation in naming Byar second under him when Eamon Valda gave him the command.

Byar turned his horse and rode back onto the ferry. Immediately the ferrymen cast off and began hauling the barge across by means of a heavy rope slung over the swiftly flowing water. Byar glanced at the men at the rope; they eyed him nervously as they tramped the length of the barge, then trotted back to take up the cable again. It all looked good.

"Lord Bornhald?"

Bornhald lowered the looking glass and turned his head. The hard-faced man who had appeared at his shoulder stood rigid, staring straight ahead from under a conical helmet. Even after the hard journey from Tar Valon - and Bornhald had pressed every mile - his armor shone as brightly as his snowy cloak with its golden sunburst.

"Yes, Child Ivon?"

"Hundredman Farran sent me, my Lord. It's the Tinkers. Ordeith was talking to three of them, my Lord, and now none of the three can be found."

"Blood and ashes!" Bornhald spun on his bootheel and strode back into the trees, Ivon at his heels.

Out of sight of the river, white-cloaked horsemen clogged the spaces between leatherleaves and pines, lances held with casual familiarity or bows laid across their pommels. The horses stamped their hooves impatiently and flicked their tails. The

riders waited more stolidly; this would not be their first-river crossing into strange territory, and this time no one would be trying to stop them.

In a large clearing beyond the mounted men stood a caravan of the Tuatha'an, the Traveling People. Tinkers. Nearly a hundred horse-drawn wagons, like small, boxy houses on wheels, made an eye-jarring blend of colors, red and green and yellow and every hue imaginable in combinations only a Tinker's eye could like. The people themselves wore

clothes that made their wagons look dull. They sat on the ground in a large cluster, eyeing the mounted men with an oddly calm unease; the thin crying of a child was swiftly comforted by its mother. Nearby, dead mastiffs made a mound already buzzing with flies. Tinkers would not raise a hand even to defend themselves, and the dogs had been mostly show, but Bornhald had not been willing to take a chance.

Six men were all he had thought necessary to watch Tinkers. Even with stiff faces, they looked embarrassed. None glanced at the seventh man sitting a horse near the wagons, a bony little man with a big nose, in a dark gray coat that looked too big for him despite the fineness of its cut. Farran, a bearded boulder of a man yet light on his feet for all his height and width, stood glaring at all seven equally. The hundredman pressed a gauntleted hand to his heart in salute but left all talking to Bornhald.

“A word with you, Master Ordeith,” Bornhald said quietly. The bony man cocked his head, looking at Bornhald for a long moment before dismounting. Farran growled, but Bornhald kept his voice low. “Three of the Tinkers cannot be found, Master Ordeith. Did you perhaps put your own suggestion into practice?” The first words out of Ordeith’s mouth when he saw the Tinkers had been “Kill them. They’re of no use.” Bornhald had killed his share of men, but he had never matched the casualness with which the little man had spoken.

Ordeith rubbed a finger along the side of his large nose. “Now, why would I be killing them? And after you ripped me so for just suggesting it.” His Lugarder accent was heavy today; it came and went without him seeming to notice, another thing about the man that disturbed Bornhald.

“Then you allowed them to escape, yes?”

“Well, as to that, I did take a few of them off where I could see what they knew. Undisturbed, you see.”

“What they knew? What under the Light could Tinkers know of use to us?”

“There’s no way of telling until you ask, now is there?” Ordeith said. “I didn’t hurt any of them much, and I told them to get themselves back to the wagons. Who would be thinking they’d have the nerve to run away with so many of your men about?”

Bornhald realized he was grinding his teeth. His orders had been to make the best time possible to meet this odd fellow, who would have more orders for him. Bornhald liked none of it, though both sets of orders bore the seal and signature of Pedron Niall, Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light.

Too much had been left unsaid, including Ordeith’s exact status. The little man was there to advise Bornhald, and Bornhald was to cooperate with Ordeith. Whether Ordeith was under his command had been left vague, and he did not like the strong implication that he should heed the fellow’s advice. Even the reason for sending so many of the Children into this backwater had been vague. To root out Darkfriends, of course, and spread the Light; that went without saying. But close to half a legion on Andoran soil without permission - the order risked much if word of it reached the Queen in Caemlyn. Too much to be balanced by the few answers Bornhald had been given.

It all came back to Ordeith. Bornhald did not understand how the Lord Captain Commander could trust this man, with his sly grins and his black moods and his haughty stares so you could never be sure what kind of man you were talking to. Not to mention his accent changing in the middle of a sentence. The fifty Children who had accompanied Ordeith were as sullen and frowning a lot as Bornhald had ever seen. He thought Ordeith must have picked them himself to have so many sour scowls, and it said something of the man that he would choose that sort. Even his name, Ordeith, meant “wormwood” in the Old Tongue. Still, Bornhald had his own reasons for wanting to be where he was. He would cooperate with the man, since he had to. But only as much as he had to.

“Master Ordeith,” he said in a carefully level tone, “this ferry is the only way in or out of the Two Rivers district.” That was not quite the truth. According to the map he had, there was no way across the Taren except here, and the upper reaches of the Manetherendrelle, bordering the region on the south, had no fords. To the east lay bogs and swamps. Even so, there must be a way out westward, across the Mountains of Mist, though his map stopped at the edge of the range. At best, however, it would be a hard crossing that many of his men might not survive, and he did not intend to let Ordeith know of even that small chance. “When it is time to leave, if I find Andoran soldiers holding this bank, you

will ride with the first to cross. You will find it interesting to see at close hand the difficulty of forcing a way across a river this wide, yes?"

"This is your first command, is it not?" Ordeith's voice held a hint of mockery.

"This may be part of Andor on the map, but Caemlyn has not sent a tax collector this far west in generations. Even if those three talk, who will believe three Tinkers? If you think the danger is too great, remember whose seal is on your orders."

Farran glanced at Bornhald, half reached for his sword. Bornhald shook his head slightly, and Farran let his hand fall. "I mean to cross the river, Master Ordeith. I will cross if the next word I hear is that Gareth Bryne and the Queen's Guards will be here by sundown."

"Of course," Ordeith said, suddenly soothing. "There will be as much glory here as at Tar Valon, I assure you." His deep, dark eyes took a glazed look, stared at something in the distance. "There are things in Tar Valon I want, too."

Bornhald shook his head. And I must cooperate with him.

Jaret Byar drew up and swung down from his saddle beside Farran. As tall as the hundredman, Byar was a long-faced man with dark, deep-set eyes. He looked as if every ounce of fat had been boiled off of him. "The village is secured, my Lord. Lucellin is making certain no one slips off. They nearly soiled themselves when I mentioned Darkfriends. None in their village, they say. The folk futher south are the Darkfriend kind, though, they say."

"Further south, is it?" Bornhald said briskly. "We shall see. Put three hundreds across the river, Byar. Farran's first. The rest to follow after the Tinkers cross. And make sure no more of them get away, yes?"

"We will scour the Two Rivers," Ordeith broke in. His narrow face was twisted; saliva bubbled at his lips. "We will flay them, and flay them, and sear their souls! I promised him! He'll come to me, now! He will come!"

Bornhald nodded for Byar and Farran to carry out his commands. A madman, he thought. The Lord Captain Commander has tied me to a madman. But at least I will find my path to Perrin of the Two Rivers. Whatever it takes, I will avenge my father!

From a colonnaded terrace on a hilltop, the High Lady Suroth looked across the wide, lopsided bowl of Cantorin Harbor. The shaven sides of her scalp left a wide crest of black hair that fell down her back. Her hands rested lightly on a smooth stone balustrade as white as her pristine gown with its hundreds of pleats. There was a faint rhythmic clicking as she unconsciously drummed her fingers with their inch-long nails, the first two on each hand lacquered blue.

A slight breeze blew off of the Aryth Ocean, carrying more than a hint of salt in its coolness. Two young women kneeling against the wall behind the High Lady held white-plumed fans ready if the breeze should fail. Two more women and four young men completed the line of crouching figures waiting to serve. Barefoot, all eight wore sheer robes, to please the High Lady's aesthetic senses with the dean lines of their limbs and the grace of their motions. At the moment Suroth truly did not see the servants, no more than one saw furniture.

She saw the six Deathwatch Guards at either end of the colonnade, though, stiff as statues with their black-tasseled spears and black-lacquered shields. They symbolized her triumph, and her danger. The Deathwatch Guard served only the Empress and her chosen representatives, and they would kill or die with equal fervor, whichever was necessary. There was a saying: "On the heights, the paths are paved with daggers."

Her fingernails clicked on the stone balustrade. How thin was the razor's edge she walked.

Vessels of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, filled the inner harbor behind the seawall, even the largest looking too narrow for their length. Cut rigging made their yards and booms slant at crazy angles. Their decks were empty, their crews ashore and under guard, as were any in these islands who had the skill to sail the open sea. Great, bluff-bowed

Seanchan ships by the score lay in the outer harbor, and anchored off the harbor mouth. One, its ribbed sails bellied with wind, escorted a swarm of small fishing boats back toward the island port. If the smaller craft scattered, some of them might escape, but the Seanchan ship carried a damane, and one demonstration of a damane's power had quelled any such thoughts. The charred, shattered hulk of the Sea Folk ship still lay on a mudflat near the harbor mouth.

How long she would manage to keep Sea Folk elsewhere - and the accursed mainlanders - from learning that she held these islands, Suroth did not know. It will be long enough, she told herself. It must be long enough.

She had worked something of a miracle in rallying most of the Seanchan forces after the debacle the High Lord Turak had led them to. All but a handful of the vessels that had escaped from Falme lay under her control, and no one questioned her right to command the Hailene, the Forerunners. If her miracle held, no one on the mainland suspected they were here. Waiting to take back the lands the Empress had sent them to reclaim, waiting to achieve the Corenne, the Return. Her agents already scouted the way. There would be no need to return to the Court of the Nine Moons and apologize to the Empress for a failure not even hers.

The thought of having to apologize to the Empress sent a tremor through her. Such an apology was always humiliating, and usually painful, but what made her shiver was the chance of being denied death at the end, of being forced to continue as if nothing had occurred while everyone, common as well as the Blood, knew her degradation. A handsome young serving man sprang to her side, bearing a pale green robe worked in brilliantly plumaged birds-of-delight. She held her arms out for the garment and noticed him no more than a clod of dirt beside her velvet slipper.

To escape that apology, she must retake what had been lost a thousand years ago. And to do that, she must deal with this man who, her mainland agents told her, claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. If I cannot find a way to deal with him, the displeasure of the Empress will be the least of my worries.

Turning smoothly, she entered the long room fronting the terrace, its outer wall all doors and tall windows to catch the breezes. The pale wood of the walls, smooth and glistening like satin, pleased Suroth, but she had removed the furnishings of the old owner, the former Atha'an Miere governor of Cantorin, and replaced them with a few tall screens, most painted with birds or flowers. Two were different. One showed a great spotted cat of the Sen T'jore, as large as a pony, the other a black mountain eagle, crest erect like a pale crown and snowy-tipped wings spread to their full seven feet. Such screens were considered vulgar, but Suroth liked animals. Unable to bring her menagerie with her across the Aryth Ocean, she had had the screens made to depict her two favorites. She had never taken kindly to being balked in anything.

Three women awaited her as she had left them, two kneeling, one lying prostrate on the bare, polished floor, patterned in inlays of light and dark wood. The kneeling women wore the dark blue dresses of sul'dam, red panels embroidered with forked silver lightning on the breast and on the sides of their skirts. One of the two, Alwhin, a sharp-faced, blue-eyed woman with a perpetual glower, had the left side of her head shaved. The rest of her hair hung to her shoulder in a light brown braid.

Suroth's mouth tightened momentarily at the sight of Alwhin. No sul'dam had ever before been raised to the so'jhin, the hereditary upper servants of the Blood, much less to a Voice of the Blood. Yet there had been reasons in Alwhin's case.

Alwhin knew too much.

Still, it was to the woman lying facedown, all in plain dark gray, that Suroth directed her attention. A wide collar of silvery metal encircled the woman's neck, connected by a shining leash to a bracelet of the same material on the wrist of the second sul'dam, Taisa. By means of leash and collar, the a'dam, Taisa could control the gray-clad woman. And she had to be controlled. She was damane, a woman who could channel, and thus too dangerous to be allowed to run loose. Memories of the Armies of the Night were still strong in Seanchan a thousand years after their destruction.

Suroth's eyes flickered uneasily to the two sul'dam. She no longer trusted any sul'dam, and yet she had no choice but to trust them. No one else could control the damane, and without the damane . . . The very concept was unthinkable. The power of Seanchan, the very power of the Crystal Throne, was built on controlled damane.

There were too many things about which Suroth had no choice to suit her. Such as Alwhin, who watched as if she had been so'jhin all of her life. No. As if she were of the Blood itself, and knelt because she chose to.

“Pura.” The damane had had another name when she was one of the hated Aes Sedai, before falling into Seanchan hands, but Suroth neither knew what it had been nor cared. The gray-clad woman tensed, but did not raise her head; her training had been particularly harsh. “I will ask again, Pura. How does the White Tower control this man who calls himself the Dragon Reborn?”

The damane moved her head a fraction, enough to shoot a frightened look at Taisa. If her answer was displeasing, the sul'dam could make her feel pain without raising a finger, by means of the a'dam. “The Tower would not try to control a false Dragon, High Lady,” Pura said breathily. “They would capture him, and gentle him.”

Taisa looked an indignant question at the High Lady. The answer had avoided Suroth's query, had perhaps even implied that one of the Blood had spoken untruth. Suroth gave a slight shake of her head, the merest sideways motion - she had no wish to wait while the damane recovered from punishment - and Taisa bowed her head in acquiescence.

“Once again, Pura, what do you know of Aes Sedai . . .” Suroth's mouth twisted at being defiled with that name; Alwhin gave a grunt of distaste “. . . Aes Sedai aiding this man? I warn you. Our soldiers fought women of the Tower, women channeling the Power, at Falme, so do not attempt to deny it.”

“Pura . . . Pura does not know, High Lady.” There was urgency in the damane's voice, and uncertainty; she darted another wide-eyed glance at Taisa. It was dear that she wanted desperately to be believed. “Perhaps.... Perhaps the Amyrlin, or the Hall of the Tower No, they would not. Pura does not know, High Lady.”

“The man can channel,” Suroth said curtly. The woman on the floor moaned, though she had heard the same words from Suroth before. Saying it again made

Suroth's stomach knot, but she allowed nothing to show on her face. Little of what had happened at Falme had been the work of women channeling; damane could sense that, and the sul'dam wearing the bracelet always knew what her damane felt. That meant it had to have been the work of the man. It also meant he was incredibly powerful. So powerful that Suroth had once or twice found herself wondering, growing queasy, whether he might really be the Dragon Reborn. That cannot be, she told herself firmly. In any case, it made no difference to her plans. “It is impossible to believe that even the White Tower would allow such a man to walk free. How do they control him?”

The damane lay there silently, face to the floor, shoulders shaking, weeping.

“Answer the High Lady!” Taisa said sharply. Taisa did not move, but Pura gasped, flinching as if struck across the hips. A blow delivered through the a'dam.

“P-Pura does not kn-know.” The damane stretched out a hesitant hand as though to touch Suroth's foot. “Please. Pura has learned to obey. Pura speaks only the truth. Please do not punish Pura.”

Suroth stepped back smoothly, letting none of her irritation show. That she should be forced to move by a damane. That she could almost be touched by one who could channel. She felt a need to bathe, as if the touch had actually landed.

Taisa's dark eyes bulged in outrage at the damane's effrontery; her cheeks were scarlet with shame that this should happen while she wore the woman's bracelet. She seemed torn between prostrating herself beside the damane to beg forgiveness and punishing the woman then and there. Alwhin stared a thin-lipped contempt, every line of her face saying that such things did not happen when she wore a bracelet.

Suroth raised one finger a fraction, making a small gesture every so'jhin knew from childhood, a simple dismissal.

Alwhin hesitated before interpreting it, then tried to cover her slip by rounding harshly on Taisa. “Take this . . . creature from the presence of the High Lady Suroth. And when you have punished her, go to Surela and tell her that you control your charges as if you had never worn the bracelet before. Tell her that you are to be - ”

Suroth shut Alwhin's voice from her mind. None of that had been her command except the dismissal, but quarrels between sul'dam were beneath her notice. She wished she knew whether Pura was managing to hide something. Her agents reported claims that the women of the White Tower could not lie. It had not been possible to force Pura to tell even a simple lie, to say that a white scarf was black, yet that was not enough to be conclusive. Some might accept the tears of the damane, her protests of inability whatever the sul'dam did, but none who did would have risen to lead the Return. Pura might have some reservoir of will left, might be clever enough to try using the belief that she was incapable of lying. None of the women collared on the mainland were fully obedient, trustworthy, not like the damane brought from Seanchan. None of them truly accepted what they were, as Seanchan damane did. Who could say what secrets might hide in one who had called herself Aes Sedai?

Not for the first time Suroth wished she had the other Aes Sedai who had been captured on Toman Head. With two to question, there would have been a better chance to catch lies and evasions. It was a useless wish. The other could be dead, drowned at sea, or on display at the Court of the Nine Moons. Some of the ships Suroth had failed to gather in must have managed the journey back across the ocean, and one might well have carried the woman.

She herself had sent a ship carrying carefully crafted reports, nearly half a year ago now, as soon as she had solidified her control of the Forerunners, with a captain and crew from families that had served hers since Luthair Paendrag had proclaimed himself Emperor, nearly a thousand years ago. Dispatching the ship had been a gamble, for the Empress might send back someone to take Suroth's place. Not sending the vessel would have been a greater, though; only utter and crushing victory could have saved her then. Perhaps not even that. So the Empress knew of Falme, knew of Turak's disaster and Suroth's intention to go on. But what did she think of that knowledge, and what was she doing about it? That was a greater concern than any damane, whatever she had been before collaring.

Yet the Empress did not know everything. The worst could not be entrusted to any messenger, no matter how loyal. It would only be passed from Suroth's lips directly to the ear of the Empress, and Suroth had taken pains to keep it so. Only four still lived who knew the secret, and two of those would never speak of it to anyone, not of their own volition. Only three deaths can hold it more tightly.

Suroth did not realize she had murmured the last aloud until Alwhin said, "And yet the High Lady needs all three alive." The woman had a properly humble suppleness to her stance, even to the trick of downcast eyes that still managed to watch for any sign from Suroth. Her voice was humble, too. "Who can say, High Lady, what the Empress - may she live forever! - might do if she learned of an attempt to keep such knowledge from her?"

Instead of answering, Suroth made the tiny dismissing gesture once more. Again Alwhin hesitated - this time it had to be simple reluctance to leave; the woman rose above herself! - before bowing deeply and backing out of Suroth's presence.

With an effort Suroth found calmness. The sul'dam and the other two were a problem she could not solve now, but patience was a necessity for the Blood. Those who lacked it were likely to end in the Tower of Ravens.

On the terrace, kneeling servants leaned forward a hair in readiness as she appeared again. The soldiers maintained their watch to see she was undisturbed. Suroth took up her place before the balustrade, this time staring out to sea, toward the mainland hundreds of miles to the east.

To be the one who successfully led the Forerunners, who began the Return, would bring much honor. Perhaps even adoption into the family of the Empress, though that was an honor not without complications. To also be the one who captured this Dragon, whether false or real, along with the means of controlling his incredible power

But if - when - I take him, do I give him to the Empress? That is the question.

Her long nails began to click again on the wide stone rail.

Chapter 2 - Whirlpools in the Pattern

Inland the hot night wind blew, north across the vast delta called the Fingers of the Dragon, a winding maze of waterways broad and narrow, some choked with knifegrass. Vast plains of reeds separated dusters of low islands forested with spider-rooted trees seen nowhere else. Eventually the delta gave way to its source, the River Erinin, the river's great width spotted with the lights of small boats lantern-fishing. Boats and lights bobbed wildly, sudden and unexpected, and some older men muttered of evil things passing in the night. Young men laughed, but they hauled the nets more vigorously, too, eager to be home and out of the dark. The stories said evil could not cross your threshold unless you invited it in. That was what the stories said. But out in the darkness. . . .

The last tang of salt had vanished by the time the wind reached the great city of Tear, hard by the river, where tile-roofed inns and shops shouldered against tall, towered palaces gleaming in the moonlight. Yet no palace was half so tall as the massive bulk, almost a mountain, that stretched from city's heart to water's edge. The Stone of Tear, fortress of legend, the oldest stronghold of mankind, erected in the last days of the Breaking of the World. While nations and empires rose and fell, were replaced and fell anew, the Stone stood. It was the rock on which armies had broken spears and swords and hearts for three thousand years. And in all that time it had never fallen to invading arms. Until now.

The streets of the city, the taverns and inns, were all but empty in the muggy darkness, people keeping cautiously within their own walls. Who held the Stone was lord of Tear, city and nation. That was the way it had always been, and the people of Tear accepted it always. By daylight they would cheer their new lord with enthusiasm as they had cheered the old; by night they huddled together, shivering despite the heat when the wind howled across their rooftops like a thousand keening mourners.

Strange new hopes danced in their heads, hopes none in Tear had dared for a hundred generations, hopes mixed with fears as old as the Breaking.

The wind lashed the long, white banner catching the moon above the Stone as if trying to rip it away. Along its length marched a sinuous figure like a legged serpent, golden-maned like a lion, scaled in scarlet and gold, seeming to ride the wind. Banner of prophecy, hoped for and dreaded. Banner of the Dragon. The Dragon Reborn. Harbinger of the world's salvation, and herald of a new Breaking to come. As if outraged at such defiance, the wind dashed itself against the hard walls of the Stone. The Dragon banner floated, unheeding in the night, awaiting greater storms.

In a room more than halfway up the Stone's southern face, Perrin sat on the chest at the foot of his canopied bed and watched the dark-haired young woman pacing up and down. There was a trace of wariness in his golden eyes. Usually Faile bantered with him, maybe poked a little gentle fun at his deliberate ways; tonight she had not said ten words since coming through the door. He could smell the rose petals that had been folded into her clothes after cleaning, and the scent that was just her. And in the hint of clean perspiration, he smelled nervousness. Faile almost never showed nerves. Wondering why she did now set an itch between his shoulders that had nothing to do with the night's heat. Her narrow, divided skirts made a soft whisk-whisk-whisk with her strides.

He scratched his two-week growth of beard irritably. It was even curlier than the hair on his head. It was also hot. For the hundredth time he thought of shaving.

"It suits you," Faile said suddenly, stopping in her tracks.

Uncomfortably, he shrugged shoulders heavy from long hours working at a forge. She did that sometimes, seemed to know what he was thinking. "It itches," he muttered, and wished he had spoken more forcefully. It was his beard; he could shave it off any time he wanted.

She studied him, her head tilted to one side. Her bold nose and high cheekbones made it seem a fierce study, a contrast to the soft voice in which she said, "It looks right on you."

Perrin sighed, and shrugged again. She had not asked him to keep the beard, and she would not. Yet he knew he was going to put off shaving again. He wondered how his friend Mat would handle this situation. Probably with a pinch and a kiss and some remark that made her laugh until he brought her around to his way of thinking. But Perrin knew he did

not have Mat's way with the girls. Mat would never find himself sweating behind a beard just because a woman thought he should have hair on his face. Unless, maybe, the woman was Faile. Perrin suspected that her father must deeply regret her leaving home, and not just because she was his daughter. He was the biggest fur trader in Saldaea, so she claimed, and Perrin could see her getting the price she wanted every time.

"Something is troubling you, Faile, and it isn't my beard. What is it?"

Her expression became guarded. She looked everywhere but at him, making a contemptuous survey of the room's furnishings.

Carvings of leopards and lions, stooping hawks and hunting scenes decorated everything from the tall wardrobe and bedposts as thick as his leg to the padded bench in front of the cold marble fireplace. Some of the animals had garnet eyes.

He had tried to convince the majhere that he wanted a simple room, but she did not seem to understand. Not that she was stupid or slow. The majhere commanded an army of servants greater in numbers than the Defenders of the Stone; whoever commanded the Stone, whoever held its walls, she saw to the day-to-day matters that let everything function. But she looked at the world through Tairen eyes. Despite his clothes, he must be more than the young countryman he seemed, because commoners were never housed in the Stone—save for Defenders and servants, of course. Beyond that, he was one of Rand's party, a friend or a follower or in any case close to the Dragon Reborn in some way. To the majhere, that set him on a level with a Lord of the Land at the very least, if not a High Lord. She had been scandalized enough at putting him in here, without even a sitting room; he thought she might have fainted if he had insisted on an even plainer chamber. If there were such things short of the servants' quarters, or the Defenders'. At least nothing here was gilded except the candlesticks.

Faile's opinions, though, were not his. "You should have better than this. You deserve it. You can wager your last copper that Mat has better."

"Mat likes gaudy things," he said simply.

"You do not stand up for yourself."

He did not comment. It was not his rooms that made her smell of unease, any more than his beard.

After a moment, she said, "The Lord Dragon seems to have lost interest in you. All his time is taken by the High Lords, now."

The itch between his shoulders worsened; he knew what was troubling her now. He tried to make his voice light. "The Lord Dragon? You sound like a Tairen. His name is Rand."

"He's your friend, Perrin Aybara, not mine. If a man like that has friends." She drew a deep breath and went on in a more moderate tone. "I have been thinking about leaving the Stone. Leaving Tear. I don't think Moiraine would try to stop me. News of . . . of Rand has been leaving the city for two weeks, now. She can't think to keep him secret any longer."

He only just stopped another sigh. "I don't think she will, either. If anything, I think she considers you a complication. She will probably give you money to see you on your way."

Planting fists on hips, she moved to stare down at him. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say? That I want you to stay?" The anger in his own voice startled him. He was angry with himself, not her. Angry because he had not seen this coming, angry because he could not see how to deal with it. He liked being able to think things through. It was easy to hurt people without meaning to when you were hasty. He'd done that now. Her dark eyes were large with shock. He tried to smooth his words. "I do want you to stay, Faile, but maybe you should leave. I know you're no coward, but the Dragon Reborn, the Forsaken . . ." Not that anywhere was

really safe - not for long, not now - yet there were safer places than the Stone. For a while, anyway. Not that he was stupid enough to put it to her that way.

But she did not appear to care how he put it. "Stay? The Light illumine me! Anything is better than sitting here like a boulder, but . . ." She knelt gracefully in front of him, resting her hands on his knees. "Perrin. I do not like wondering when one of the Forsaken is going to walk around the corner in front of me, and I do not like wondering when the Dragon Reborn is going to kill us all. He did it back in the Breaking, after all. Killed everyone dose to him."

"Rand isn't Lews Therin Kinslayer," Perrin protested. "I mean, he is the Dragon Reborn, but he isn't . . . he wouldn't. . . ." He trailed off, not knowing how to finish. Rand was Lews Therin Telamon reborn; that was what being the Dragon Reborn meant. But did it mean Rand was doomed to Lews Therin's fate? Not just going mad - any man who channeled had that fate in front of him, and then a rotting death - but killing everyone who cared for him?

"I have been talking to Bain and Chiad, Perrin."

That was no surprise. She spent considerable time with the Aiel women. The friendship made some trouble for her, but she seemed to like the Aiel women as much as she despised the Stone's Tairen noblewomen. But he saw no connection to what they were talking about, and he said so.

"They say Moiraine sometimes asks where you are. Or Mat. Don't you see? She would not have to do that if she could watch you with the Power."

"Watch me with the Power?" he said faintly. He had never even considered that.

"She cannot. Come with me, Perrin. We can be twenty miles across the river before she misses us."

"I can't," he said miserably. He tried diverting her with a kiss, but she leaped to her feet and backed away so fast he nearly fell on his face. There was no point going after her. She had her arms crossed beneath her breasts like a barrier.

"Don't tell me you are that afraid of her. I know she is Aes Sedai, and she has all of you dancing when she twitches the strings. Perhaps she has the . . . Rand . . . so tied he cannot get loose, and the Light knows Egwene and Elayne, and even Nynaeve, don't want to, but you can break her cords if you try."

"It has nothing to do with Moiraine. It's what I have to do. I - "

She cut him short. "Don't you dare hand me any of that hairy-chested drivel about a man having to do his duty. I know duty as well as you, and you have no duty here. You may be ta'veren, even if I don't see it, but he is the Dragon Reborn, not you."

"Will you listen?" he shouted, glaring, and she jumped. He had never shouted at her before, not like that. She raised her chin and shifted her shoulders, but she did not say anything. He went on. "I think I am part of Rand's destiny, somehow. Mat, too. I think he can't do what he has to unless we do our part, as well. That is the duty. How can I walk away if it might mean Rand will fail?"

"Might?" There was a hint of demand in her voice, but only a hint. He wondered if he could make himself shout at her more often. "Did Moiraine tell you this, Perrin? You should know by now to listen closely to what an Aes Sedai says."

"I worked it out for myself. I think ta'veren are pulled toward each other. Or maybe Rand pulls us, Mat and me both. He's supposed to be the strongest ta'veren since Artur Hawkwing, maybe since the Breaking. Mat won't even admit he's ta'veren, but however he tries to get away, he always ends up drawn back to Rand. Loial says he has never heard of three ta'veren, all the same age and all from the same place."

Faile sniffed loudly. "Loial does not know everything. He isn't very old for an Ogier."

“He’s past ninety,” Perrin said defensively, and she gave him a tight smile. For an Ogier, ninety years was not much older than Perrin. Or maybe younger. He did not know much about Ogier. In any case, Loial had read more books than Perrin had ever seen or even heard of; sometimes he thought Loial had read every book ever printed.

“And he knows more than you or I do. He believes maybe I have the right of it. And so does Moiraine. No, I haven’t asked her, but why else does she keep a watch on me? Did you think she wanted me to make her a kitchen knife?”

She was silent for a moment, and when she spoke it was in sympathetic tones. “Poor Perrin. I left Saldaea to find adventure, and now that I’m in the heart of one, the greatest since the Breaking, all I want is to go somewhere else. You just want to be a blacksmith, and you’re going to end up in the stories whether you want it or not.”

He looked away, though the scent of her still filled his head. He did not think he was likely to have any stories told about him, not unless his secret spread a long way beyond the few who knew already. Faile thought she knew everything about him, but she was wrong.

An axe and a hammer leaned against the wall opposite him, each plain and functional, with a haft as long as his forearm. The axe was a wicked half-moon blade balanced by a thick spike, meant for violence. With the hammer he could make things, had made things, at a forge. The hammerhead weighed more than twice as much as the axe blade, but it was the axe that felt heavier by far every time he picked it up. With the axe, he had . . . He scowled, not wanting to think about that. She was right. All he wanted was to be a blacksmith, to go home, and see his family again, and work at the smithy. But it was not to be; he knew that.

He got to his feet long enough to pick up the hammer, then sat back down. There was something comforting in holding it. “Master Luhhan always says you can’t walk away from what has to be done.” He hurried on, realizing that was a little too dose to what she had called hairy-chested drivel. “He’s the blacksmith back home, the man I was apprenticed to. I’ve told you about him.”

To his surprise, she did not take the opportunity to point out his near echo. In fact, she said nothing, only looked at him, waiting for something. After a moment it came to him.

“Are you leaving, then?” he asked.

She stood up, brushing her skirt. For a long moment she kept silent, as if deciding on her answer. “I do not know,” she said finally. “This is a fine mess you’ve put me in.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“Well, if you don’t know, I am certainly not going to tell you.”

Scratching his beard again, he stared at the hammer in his other hand. Mat would probably know exactly what she meant. Or even old Thom Merrilin. The white-haired gleeman claimed no one understood women, but when he came out of his tiny room in the belly of the Stone he soon had half a dozen girls young enough to be his granddaughters sighing and listening to him play the harp and tell of grand adventure and romance. Faile was the only woman Perrin wanted, but sometimes he felt like a fish trying to understand a bird.

He knew she wanted him to ask. He knew that much. She might or might not tell him, but he was supposed to ask. Stubbornly he kept his mouth shut. This time he meant to wait her out.

Outside in the darkness, a cock crowed.

Faile shivered and hugged herself. “My nurse used to say that meant a death coming. Not that I believe it, of course.”

He opened his mouth to agree it was foolishness, though he shivered, too, but his head whipped around at a grating sound and a thump. The axe had toppled to the floor. He only had time to frown, wondering what could have made it fall, when it shifted again, untouched, then leaped straight for him.

He swung the hammer without thought. Metal ringing on metal drowned Faile's scream; the axe flew across the room, bounced off the far wall, and darted back at him, blade first. He thought every hair on his body was trying to stand on end.

As the axe sped by her, Faile lunged forward and grabbed the haft with both hands. It twisted in her grip, slashing toward her wide-eyed face. Barely in time Perrin leaped up, dropping the hammer to seize the axe, just keeping the half-moon blade from her flesh. He thought he would die if the axe - his axe-harmed her. He jerked it away from her so hard that the heavy spike nearly stabbed him in the chest. It would have been a fair trade, to stop the axe from hurting her, but with a sinking feeling he began to think it might not be possible.

The weapon thrashed like a thing alive, a thing with a malevolent will. It wanted Perrin-he knew that as if it had shouted at him-but it fought with cunning. When he pulled the axe away from Faile, it used his own movement to hack at him; when he forced it from himself, it tried to reach her, as if it knew that would make him stop pushing. No matter how hard he held the haft, it spun in his hands, threatening with spike or curved blade. Already his hands ached from the effort, and his thick arms strained, muscles tight. Sweat rolled down his face. He was not sure how much longer it would be before the axe fought free of his grip. This was all madness, pure madness, with no time to think.

"Get out," he muttered through gritted teeth. "Get out of the room, Faile!"

Her face was bloodless pale, but she shook her head and wrestled with the axe. "No! I will not leave you!"

"It will kill both of us!"

She shook her head again.

Growling in his throat, he let go of the axe with one hand-his arm quivered with holding the thing one-handed; the twisting haft burned his palm - and thrust Faile away. She yelped as he wrestled her to the door. Ignoring her shouts and her fists pounding at him, he held her against the wall with a shoulder until he could pull the door open and shove her into the hallway.

Slamming the door behind her, he put his back against it, sliding the latch home with his hip as he seized the axe with both hands again. The heavy blade, gleaming and sharp, trembled within inches of his face. Laboriously, he pushed it out to arm's length. Faile's muted shouts penetrated the thick door, and he could feel her beating on it, but he was barely conscious of her. His yellow eyes seemed to shine, as if they reflected every scrap of light in the room.

"Just you and me, now," he snarled at the axe. "Blood and ashes, how I hate you!" Inside, a part of him came close to hysterical laughter. Rand it the one who's supposed to go mad, and here I am, talking to an axe! Rand! Burn him!

Teeth bared with effort, he forced the axe back a full step from the door. The weapon vibrated, fighting to reach flesh; he could almost taste its thirst for his blood. With a roar he suddenly pulled the curved blade toward him, threw himself back. Had the axe truly been alive, he was sure he would have heard a cry of triumph as it flashed toward his head. At the last instant, he twisted, driving the axe past himself. With a heavy thunk the blade buried itself in the door.

He felt the life - he could not think what else to call it-go out of the imprisoned weapon. Slowly, he took his hands away. The axe stayed where it was, only steel and wood again. The door seemed a good place to leave it for now, though. He wiped sweat from his face with a shaking hand. Madness. Madness walks wherever Rand is.

Abruptly he realized he could no longer hear Faile's shouts, or her pounding. Throwing back the latch, he hastily pulled the door open. A gleaming arc of steel stuck through the thick wood on the outside, shining in the light of wide-spaced lamps along the tapestry-hung hallway.

Faile stood there, hands raised, frozen in the act of beating on the door. Eyes wide and wondering, she touched the tip of her nose. "Another inch," she said faintly, "and . . ."

With a sudden start, she flung herself on him, hugging him fiercely, raining kisses on his neck and beard between incoherent murmurs. Just as quickly, she pushed back, running anxious hands over his chest and arms. "Are you hurt? Are you injured? Did it . . . ?"

"I'm all right," he told her. "But are you? I did not mean to frighten you."

She peered up at him. "Truly? You are not hurt in any way?"

"Completely unhurt. I - " Her full-armed slap made his head ring like hammer on anvil.

"You great hairy lummo! I thought you were dead! I was afraid it had killed you! I thought-!" She cut off as he caught her second slap in midswing.

"Please don't do that again," he said quietly. The smarting imprint of her hand burned on his cheek, and he thought his jaw would ache the rest of the night.

He gripped her wrist as gently as he would have a bird, but though she struggled to pull free, his hand did not budge an inch. Compared to swinging a hammer all day at the forge, holding her was no effort at all, even after his fight against the axe. Abruptly she seemed to decide to ignore his grip and stared him in the eye; neither dark nor golden eyes blinked. "I could have helped you. You had no right - "

"I had every right," he said firmly. "You could not have helped. If you had stayed, we'd both be dead. I couldn't have fought - not the way I had to - and kept you safe, too." She opened her mouth, but he raised his voice and went on. "I know you hate the word. I'll try my best not to treat you like porcelain, but if you ask me to watch you die, I will tie you like a lamb for market and send you off to Mistress Luhhan. She won't stand for any such nonsense."

Tonguing a tooth and wondering if it was loose, he almost wished he could see Faile trying to ride roughshod over Alsbet Luhhan. The blacksmith's wife kept her husband in line with scarcely more effort than she needed for her house. Even Nynaeve had been careful of her sharp tongue around Mistress Luhhan. The tooth still held tight, he decided.

Faile laughed suddenly, a low, throaty laugh. "You would, too, wouldn't you? Don't think you would not dance with the Dark One if you tried, though."

Perrin was so startled he let go of her. He could not see any real difference between what he had just said and what he had said before, but the one had made her blaze up, while this she took . . . fondly. Not that he was certain the threat to kill him was entirely a joke. Faile carried knives hidden about her person, and she knew how to use them.

She rubbed her wrist ostentatiously and muttered something under her breath. He caught the words "hairy ox," and promised himself he would shave every last whisker of that fool beard. He would.

Aloud, she said, "The axe. That was him, wasn't it? The Dragon Reborn, trying to kill us."

"It must have been Rand." He emphasized the name. He did not like thinking of Rand the other way. He preferred remembering the Rand he had grown up with in Emond's Field. "Not trying to kill us, though. Not him."

She gave him a wry smile, more a grimace. "If he was not trying, I hope he never does."

"I don't know what he was doing. But I mean to tell him to stop it, and right now. "

"I don't know why I care for a man who worries so about his own safety," she murmured.

He frowned at her quizzically, wondering what she meant, but she only tucked her arm through his. He was still wondering as they started off through the Stone. The axe he left where it was; stuck in the door, it would not harm anyone.

Teeth clamped on a long-stemmed pipe, Mat opened his coat a bit more and tried to concentrate on the cards lying facedown in front of him, and on the coins spilled in the middle of the table. He had had the bright red coat made to an Andoran pattern, of the best wool, with golden embroidery scrolling around the cuffs and long collar, but day by day he was reminded how much farther south Tear lay than Andor. Sweat ran down his face, and plastered the shirt to his back.

None of his companions around the table appeared to notice the heat at all, despite coats that looked even heavier than his, with fat, swollen sleeves, all padded silks and brocades and satin stripes. Two men in red-and-gold livery kept the gamblers' silver cups full of wine and proffered shining silver trays of olives and cheeses and nuts. The heat did not seem to affect the servants, either, though now and again one of them yawned behind his hand when he thought no one was looking. The night was not young.

Mat refrained from lifting his cards to check them again. They would not have changed. Three rulers, the highest cards in three of the five suits, were already good enough to win most hands.

He would have been more comfortable dicing; there was seldom a deck of cards to be found in the places he usually gambled, where silver changed hands in fifty different dice games, but these young Tairen lordlings would rather wear rags than play at dice. Peasants tossed dice, though they were careful not to say so in his hearing. It was not his temper they feared, but who they thought his friends were. This game called chop was what they played, hour after hour, night after night, using cards hand-painted and lacquered by a man in the city who had been made well-to-do by these fellows and others like them. Only women or horses could draw them away, but neither for long.

Still, he had picked up the game quickly enough, and if his luck was not as good as it was with dice, it would do. A fat purse lay beside his cards, and another even fatter rested in his pocket. A fortune, he would have thought once, back in Emond's Field, enough to live the rest of his life in luxury. His ideas of luxury had changed since leaving the Two Rivers. The young lords kept their coin in careless, shining piles, but some old habits he had no intention of changing. In the taverns and inns it was sometimes necessary to depart quickly. Especially if his luck was really with him.

When he had enough to keep himself as he wanted, he would leave the Stone just as quickly. Before Moiraine knew what he was thinking. He would have been days gone by now, if he had had his way. It was just that there was gold to be had here. One night at this table could earn him more than a week of dicing in taverns. If only his luck would catch.

He put on a small frown and puffed worriedly at his pipe, to look unsure whether his cards were good enough to go on with. Two of the young lords had pipes in their teeth, too, but silver-worked, with amber bits. In the hot, still air, their perfumed tabac smelled like a fire in a lady's dressing chamber. Not that Mat had ever been in a lady's dressing chamber. An illness that nearly killed him had left his memory as full of holes as the best lace, yet he was sure he would have remembered that. Not even the Dark One would be mean enough to make me forget that.

"Sea Folk ship docked today," Reimon muttered around his pipe. The broad--shouldered young lord's beard was oiled and trimmed to a neat point. That was the latest fashion among the younger lords, and Reimon chased the latest fashions as assiduously as he chased women. Which was only a little less diligently than he gambled. He tossed a silver crown onto the pile in the middle of the table for another card. "A raker. Fastest ships there are, rakers, so they say. Outrun the wind, they say. I would like to see that. Burn my soul, but I would." He did not bother to look at the card he was dealt; he never did until he had a full five.

The plump, pink-cheeked man between Reimon and Mat gave an amused chuckle. "You want to see the ship, Reimon? You mean the girls, do you not? The women. Exotic Sea Folk beauties, with their rings and baubles and swaying walks, eh?" He put in a crown and took his card, grimacing when he peeked at it. That meant nothing; going by his face, Edorion's cards were always low and mismatched. He won more than he lost, though. "Well, perhaps my luck will be better with the Sea Folk girls."

The dealer, tall and slender on Mat's other side, with a pointed beard even more darkly luxuriant than Reimon's, laid a finger alongside his nose. "You think to be lucky with those, Edorion? The way they keep to themselves, you'll be

lucky to catch a whiff of their perfume.” He made a wafting gesture, inhaling deeply with a sigh, and the other lordlings laughed, even Edorion.

A plain-faced youth named Estean laughed loudest of all, scrubbing a hand through lank hair that kept falling over his forehead. Replace his fine yellow coat with drab wool, and he could have passed for a farmer, instead of the son of a High Lord with the richest estates in Tear and in his own right the wealthiest man at the table. He had also drunk much more wine than any of the others.

Swaying across the man next to him, a foppish fellow named Baran who always seemed to be looking down his sharp nose, Estean poked the dealer with a none too steady finger. Baran leaned back, twisting his mouth around his pipestem as if he feared Estean might throw up.

“That’s good, Carlomin,” Estean gurgled. “You think so too, don’t you, Baran? Edorion won’t get a sniff. If he wants to try his luck . . . take a gamble . . . he ought to go after the Aiel wenches, like Mat, here. All those spears and knives. Burn my soul. Like asking a lion to dance.” Dead silence dropped around the table. Estean laughed on alone, then blinked and scrubbed fingers through his hair again. “What’s the matter? Did I say something? Oh! Oh, yes. Them.”

Mat barely stopped a scowl. The fool had to bring up the Aiel. The only worse subject would have been Aes Sedai; they would almost rather have Aiel walking the corridors, staring down any Tairen who got in their way, than even one Aes Sedai, and these men thought they had four, at least. He fingered an Andoran silver crown from his purse on the table and pushed it into the pot. Carlomin dealt out the card slowly.

Mat lifted it carefully with a thumbnail, and did not let himself so much as blink. The Ruler of Cups, a High Lord of Tear. The rulers in a deck varied according to the land where the cards were made, with the nation’s own ruler always as Ruler of Cups, the highest suit. These cards were old. He had already seen new decks with Rand’s face or something like it on the Ruler of Cups, complete with the Dragon banner. Rand the ruler of Tear; that still seemed ludicrous enough to make him want to pinch himself. Rand was a shepherd, a good fellow to have fun with when he was not going all over-serious and responsible. Rand the Dragon Reborn, now; that told him he was a stone fool to be sitting there, where Moiraine could put her hand on him whenever she wanted, waiting to see what Rand would do next. Maybe Thom Merrilin would go with him. Or Perrin. Only, Thom seemed to be settling into the Stone as if he never meant to leave, and Perrin was not going anywhere unless Faile crooked a finger. Well, Mat was ready to travel alone, if need be.

Yet there was silver in the middle of the table and gold in front of the lordlings, and if he was dealt the fifth ruler, there was no hand in chop could beat him. Not that he really needed it. Suddenly he could feel luck tickling his mind. Not tingling as it did with the dice, of course, but he was already certain no one was going to beat four rulers. The Tairens had been betting wildly all night, the price of ten farms crossing the table on the quickest hands.

But Carlomin was staring at the deck of cards in his hand instead of buying his fourth, and Baran was puffing his pipe furiously and stacking the coins in front of him as if ready to stuff them into his pockets. Reimon wore a scowl behind his beard, and Edorion was frowning at his nails. Only Estean appeared unaffected; he grinned uncertainly around the table, perhaps already forgetting what he had said. They usually managed to put some sort of good face on the situation if the Aiel came up, but the hour was late, and the wine had flowed freely.

Mat scoured his mind for a way to keep them and their gold from walking away from his cards. One glance at their faces was enough to tell him that simply changing the subject would not be enough. But there was another way. If he made them laugh at the Aiel Is it worth making them laugh at me, too? Chewing his pipestem, he tried to think of something else.

Baran picked up a stack of gold in each hand and moved to stick them in his pockets.

“I might just try these Sea Folk women,” Mat said quickly, taking his pipe to gesture with. “Odd things happen when you chase Aiel girls. Very odd. Like the game they call Maidens’ Kiss.” He had their attention, but Baran had not put down the coins, and Carlomin still showed no sign of buying a card.

Estean gave a drunken guffaw. "Kiss you with steel in your ribs, I suppose. Maidens of the Spear, you see. Steel. Spear in your ribs. Burn my soul." No one else laughed. But they were listening.

"Not quite." Mat managed a grin. Burn me, I've told this much. I might as well tell the rest. "Rhuarc said if I wanted to get along with the Maidens, I should ask them how to play Maidens' Kiss. He said that was the best way to get to know them." It still sounded like one of the kissing games back home, like Kiss the Daisies. He had never considered the Aiel clan chief a man to play tricks. He would be wavier the next time. He made an effort to improve the grin. "So I went along to Bain and . . ." Reimon frowned impatiently. None of them knew any Aiel's name but Rhuarc, and none of them wanted to. Mat dropped the names and hurried on ". . . went along dumb as a bull-goose fool, and asked them to show me." He should have suspected something from the wide smiles that had bloomed on their faces. Like cats who had been asked to dance by a mouse. "Before I knew what was happening, I had a fistful of spears around my neck like a collar. I could have shaved myself with one sneeze."

The others around the table exploded in laughter, from Reimon's wheezing to Estean's wine-soaked bray.

Mat left them to it. He could almost feel the spearpoints again, pricking if he so much as twitched a finger. Bain, laughing all the while, had told him she had never heard of a man actually asking to play Maidens' Kiss.

Carlomin stroked his beard and spoke into Mat's hesitation. "You cannot stop there. Go on. When was this? Two nights ago, I'll wager. When you didn't come for the game, and no one knew where you were."

"I was playing stones with Thom Merrillin that night," Mat said quickly. "This was days ago." He was glad he could lie with a straight face. "They each took a kiss. That's all. If she thought it was a good kiss, they eased up with the spears. If not, they pushed a little harder; to encourage, you might say. That was all. I'll tell you this; I got nicked less than I do shaving."

He stuck his pipe back between his teeth. If they wanted to know more, they could go ask to play the game themselves. He almost hoped some of them were fool enough. Bloody Aiel women and their bloody spears. He had not made it to his own bed until daybreak.

"It would be more than enough for me," Carlomin said dryly. "The Light burn my soul if it would not." He tossed a silver crown into the center of the table and dealt himself another card. "Maidens' Kiss." He shook with mirth, and another ripple of laughter ran around the table.

Baran bought his fifth card, and Estean fumbled a coin from the heap scattered in front of him, peering at it to see what it was. They would not stop now.

"Savages," Baran muttered around his pipe. "Ignorant savages. That is all they are, burn my soul. Live in caves, out in the Waste. In caves! No one but a savage could live in the Waste."

Reimon nodded. "At least they serve the Lord Dragon. I would take a hundred Defenders and clean them out of the Stone, if not for that." Baran and Carlomin growled fierce agreement.

It was no effort for Mat to keep his face straight. He had heard much the same before. Boasting was easy when no one expected you to carry through. A hundred Defenders? Even if Rand stood aside for some reason, the few hundred Aiel holding the Stone could probably keep it against any army Tear could raise. Not that they seemed to want the Stone, really. Mat suspected they were only there because Rand was. He did not think any of these lordlings had figured that out - they tried to ignore the Aiel as much as possible - but he doubted it would make them feel any better.

"Mat." Estean fanned his cards out in one hand, rearranging them as if he could not decide what order they were meant to go in. "Mat, you will speak to the Lord Dragon, won't you?"

"About what?" Mat asked cautiously. Too many of these Tairens knew he and Rand had grown up together to suit him, and they seemed to think he was arm in arm with Rand whenever he was out of their sight. None of them would have gone near his own brother if he could channel. He did not know why they thought him a bigger fool.

“Didn’t I say?” The plain-faced man squinted at his cards and scratched his head, then brightened. “Oh, yes. His proclamation, Mat. The Lord Dragon’s. His last one. Where he said commoners had the right to call lords before a magistrate. Who ever heard of a lord being summoned to a magistrate? And for peasants!”

Mat’s hand tightened on his purse until the coins inside grated together. “It would be a shame,” he said quietly, “if you were tried and judged just for having your way with a fisherman’s daughter whatever she wanted, or for having some farmer beaten for splashing mud on your cloak.”

The others shifted uneasily, catching his mood, but Estean nodded, head bobbing so it seemed about to fall off. “Exactly. Though it wouldn’t come to that, of course. A lord being tried before a magistrate? Of course not. Not really.” He laughed drunkenly at his cards. “No fishermen’s daughters. Smell of fish, you see, however you have them washed. A plump farm girl is best.”

Mat told himself he was there to gamble. He told himself to ignore the fool’s blather, reminded himself of how much gold he could take out of Estean’s purse. His tongue did not listen, though. “Who knows what it might come to? Hangings, maybe.”

Edorion gave him a sidelong look, guarded and uneasy. “Do we have to talk about . . . about commoners, Estean? What about old Astoril’s daughters? Have you decided which you’ll marry yet?”

“What? Oh. Oh, I’ll flip a coin, I suppose.” Estean frowned at his cards, shifted one, and frowned again. “Medore has two or three pretty maids. Perhaps Medore.”

Mat took a long drink from his silver winecup to keep from hitting the man in his farmer’s face. He was still on his first cup; the two servants had given up trying to add more. If he hit Estean, none of them would lift a hand to stop him. Not even Estean. Because he was the Lord Dragon’s friend. He wished he was in a tavern somewhere out in the city, where some dockman might question his luck and only a quick tongue, or quick feet, or quick hands would see him leave with a whole skin. Now that war a fool thought.

Edorion glanced at Mat again, measuring his mood. “I heard a rumor today. I hear the Lord Dragon is taking us to war with Illian.”

Mat gagged on his wine. “War?” he spluttered.

“War,” Reimon agreed happily around his pipestem.

“Are you certain?” Carlomin said, and Baran added, “I’ve heard no rumors.”

“I heard it just today, from three or four tongues.” Edorion seemed to be absorbed in his cards. “Who can say how true it is?”

“It must be true,” Reimon said. “With the Lord Dragon to lead us, holding Callandor, we’ll not even have to fight. He will scatter their armies, and we will march straight into Illian. Too bad, in a way. Burn my soul if it isn’t. I would like a chance to match swords with the Illianers.”

“You’ll get no chance with the Lord Dragon leading,” Baran said. “They will fall on their knees as soon as they see the Dragon banner.”

“And if they do not,” Carlomin added with a laugh, “the Lord Dragon will blast them with lightning where they stand.”

“Illian first,” Reimon said. “And then. . . . Then we’ll conquer the world for the Lord Dragon. You tell him I said so, Mat. The whole world.”

Mat shook his head. A month gone, they would have been horrified by even the idea of a man who could channel, a man doomed to go mad and die horribly. Now they were ready to follow Rand into battle, and trust his power to win for them. Trust the Power, though it was not likely they would put it that way. Yet he supposed they had to find

something to hang on to. The invincible Stone was in the hands of the Aiel. The Dragon Reborn was in his chambers a hundred feet above their heads, and Callandor was with him. Three thousand years of Tairen belief and history lay in ruins, and the world had been turned on its head. He wondered whether he had handled it any better; his own world had gone all askew in little more than a year. He rolled a gold Tairen crown across the backs of his fingers. However well he had done, he would not go back.

“When will we march, Mat?” Baran asked.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I don’t think Rand would start a war.” Unless he had gone mad already. That hardly bore thinking about.

The others looked as if he had assured them the sun would not come up tomorrow.

“We are all loyal to the Lord Dragon, of course.” Edorion frowned at his cards. “Out in the countryside, though . . . I hear that some of the High Lords, a few, have been trying to raise an army to take back the Stone.” Suddenly no one was looking at Mat, though Estean still seemed to be trying to make out his cards. “When the Lord Dragon takes us to war, of course, it will all melt away. In any case, we are loyal, here in the Stone. The High Lords, too, I am certain. It is only the few out in the countryside.”

Their loyalty would not outlast their fear of the Dragon Reborn. For a moment Mat felt as though he were planning to abandon Rand in a pit of vipers. Then he remembered what Rand was. It was more like abandoning a weasel in a henyard. Rand had been a friend. The Dragon Reborn, though . . . Who could be a friend to the Dragon Reborn? I’m not abandoning anybody. He could probably pull the Stone down on their heads, if he wanted to. On my head, too. He told himself again that it was time to be gone.

“No fishermen’s daughters,” Estean mumbled. “You will speak to the Lord Dragon?”

“It is your turn, Mat,” Carlomin said anxiously. He looked half afraid, though what he feared - that Estean would anger Mat again, or that the talk might go back to loyalty - was impossible to say. “Will you buy the fifth card, or stack?”

Mat realized he had not been paying attention. Everyone but himself and Carlomin had five cards, though Reimon had neatly stacked his facedown beside the pot to show that he was out. Mat hesitated, pretending to think, then sighed and tossed another coin toward the pile.

As the silver crown bounced end over end, he suddenly felt luck grow from trickles to a flood. Every ping of silver against wooden tabletop rang clear in his head; he could have called face or sigil and known how the coin would land on any bounce. Just as he knew what his next card would be before Carlomin laid it in front of him.

Sliding his cards together on the table, he fanned them in one hand. The Ruler of Flames stared at him alongside the other four, the Amyrlin Seat balancing a flame on her palm, though she looked nothing like Suan Sanche. However the Tairens felt about Aes Sedai, they acknowledged the power of Tar Valon, even if Flames was the lowest suit.

What were the odds of being dealt all five? His luck was best with random things, like dice, but perhaps a little more was beginning to rub off on cards. “The Light burn my bones to ash if it is not so,” he muttered. Or that was what he meant to say.

“There,” Estean all but shouted. “You cannot deny it this time. That was the Old Tongue. Something about burning, and bones.” He grinned around the table. “My tutor would be proud. I ought to send him a gift. If I can find out where he went.”

Nobles were supposed to be able to speak the Old Tongue, though in reality few knew more than Estean seemed to. The young lords set to arguing over exactly what Mat had said. They seemed to think it had been a comment on the heat.

Goose bumps pebbled Mat’s skin as he tried to recall the words that had just come out of his mouth. A string of gibberish, yet it almost seemed he should understand. Burn Moiraine! If she’d left me alone, I wouldn’t have holes in

my memory big enough for a wagon and team, and I wouldn't be spouting . . . whatever it bloody is! He would also be milking his father's cows instead of walking the world with a pocketful of gold, but he managed to ignore that part of it.

"Are you here to gamble," he said harshly, "or babble like old women over their knitting!"

"To gamble," Baran said curtly. "Three crowns, gold!" He tossed the coins onto the pot.

"And three more besides." Estean hiccoughed and added six golden crowns to the pile.

Suppressing a grin, Mat forgot about the Old Tongue. It was easy enough; he did not want to think about it. Besides, if they were starting this strongly, he might win enough on this hand to leave in the morning. And if he's crazy enough to start a war, I'll leave if I have to walk.

Outside in the darkness, a cock crowed. Mat shifted uneasily and told himself not to be foolish. No one was going to die.

His eyes dropped to his cards - and blinked. The Amyrlin's flame had been replaced by a knife. While he was telling himself he was tired and seeing things, she plunged the tiny blade into the back of his hand.

With a hoarse yell, he flung the cards away and hurled himself backward, overturning his chair, kicking the table with both feet as he fell. The air seemed to thicken like honey. Everything moved as if time had slowed, but at the same time everything seemed to happen at once. Other cries echoed his, hollow shouts reverberating inside a cavern. He and the chair drifted back and down; the table floated upward.

The Ruler of Flames hung in the air, growing larger, staring at him with a cruel smile. Now close to life-size, she started to step out of the card; she was still a painted shape, with no depth, but she reached for him with her blade, red with his blood as if it had already been driven into his heart. Beside her the Ruler of Cups began to grow, the Tairen High Lord drawing his sword.

Mat floated, yet somehow he managed to reach the dagger in his left sleeve and hurl it in the same motion, straight for the Amyrlin's heart. If this thing had a heart. The second knife came into his left hand smoothly and left more smoothly. The two blades drifted through the air like thistledown. He wanted to scream, but that first yell of shock and outrage still filled his mouth. The Ruler of Rods was expanding beside the first two cards, the Queen of Andor gripping the rod like a bludgeon, her red-gold hair framing a madwoman's snarl.

He was still falling, still yelling that drawn-out yell. The Amyrlin was free of her card, the High Lord striding out with his sword. The flat shapes moved almost as slowly as he. Almost. He had proof the steel in their hands could cut, and no doubt the rod could crack a skull. His skull.

His thrown daggers moved as if sinking in jelly. He was sure the cock had crowed for him. Whatever his father said, the omen had been real. But he would not give up and die. Somehow he had two more daggers out from under his coat, one in either hand. Struggling to twist in midair, to get his feet under him, he threw one knife at the golden-haired figure with the bludgeon. The other he held on to as he tried to turn himself, to land ready to face

The world lurched back into normal motion, and he landed awkwardly on his side, hard enough to drive the wind out of him. Desperately he struggled to his feet, drawing another knife from under his coat. You could not carry too many, Thom claimed. Neither was needed.

For a moment he thought cards and figures had vanished. Or maybe he had imagined it all. Maybe he was the one going mad. Then he saw the cards, back to ordinary size, pinned to one of the dark wood panels by his still quivering knives. He took a deep, ragged breath.

The table lay on its side, coins still spinning across the floor where lordlings and servants crouched among scattered cards. They gaped at Mat and his knives, those in his hands and those in the wall, with equally wide eyes. Estean

snatched a silver pitcher that had somehow escaped being overturned and began pouring wine down his throat, the excess spilling over his chin and down his chest.

“Just because you do not have the cards to win,” Edorion said hoarsely, “there is no need to-” He cut off with a shudder.

“You saw it, too.” Mat slipped the knives back into their sheaths. A thin trickle of blood ran down the back of his hand from the tiny wound. “Don’t pretend you went blind!”

“I saw nothing,” Reimon said woodenly. “Nothing!” He began crawling across the floor, gathering up gold and silver, concentrating on the coins as if they were the most important thing in the world. The others were doing the same, except Estean, who scrambled about checking the fallen pitchers for any that still held wine. One of the servants had his face hidden in his hands; the other, eyes closed, was apparently praying in a low, breathless whine.

With a muttered oath, Mat strode to where his knives pinned the three cards to the panel. They were only playing cards again, just stiff paper with the clear lacquer cracked. But the figure of the Amyrlin still held a dagger instead of a flame. He tasted blood and realized he was sucking the cut in the back of his hand.

Hastily he wrenched his knives free, tearing each card in half before tucking the blade away. After a moment, he hunted through the cards littering the floor until he found the rulers of Coins and Winds, and tore them across, too. He felt a little foolish - it was over and done with; the cards were just cards again - but he could not help it.

None of the young lords crawling about on hands and knees tried to stop him. They scrambled out of his way, not even glancing at him. There would be no more gambling tonight, and maybe not for some nights to come. At least, not with him. Whatever had happened, it had been aimed at him, dearly. Even more clearly, it had to have been done with the One Power. They wanted no part of that.

“Burn you, Rand!” he muttered under his breath. “If you have to go mad, leave me out of it!” His pipe lay in two pieces, the stem bitten through cleanly. Angrily he grabbed his purse from the floor and stalked out of the room.

In his darkened bedchamber Rand tossed uneasily on a bed wide enough for five people. He was dreaming.

Through a shadowy forest Moiraine was prodding him with a sharp stick toward where the Amyrlin Seat waited, sitting on a stump with a rope halter for his neck in her hands. Dim shapes moved half-seen through the trees, stalking, hunting him; here a dagger blade flashed in the failing light, over there he caught a glimpse of ropes ready for binding. Slender and not as tall as his shoulder, Moiraine wore an expression he had never seen on her face. Fear. Sweating, she prodded harder, trying to hurry him to the Amyrlin’s halter. Darkfriends and the Forsaken in the shadows, the White Tower’s leash ahead and Moiraine behind. Dodging Moiraine’s stick, he fled.

“It is too late for that,” she called after him, but he had to get back. Back.

Muttering, he thrashed on the bed, then was still, breathing more easily for a moment.

He was in the Waterwood back home, sunlight slanting through the trees to sparkle on the pond in front of him. There was green moss on the rocks at this end of the pond, and thirty paces away at the other end a small arc of wildflowers. This was where, as a child, he had learned to swim.

“You should have a swim now.”

He spun around with a start. Min stood there, grinning at him in her boy’s coat and breeches, and next to her, Elayne, with her red-golden curls, in a green silk gown fit for her mother’s palace.

It was Min who had spoken, but Elayne added, “The water looks inviting, Rand. No one will bother us here.”

“I don’t know,” he began slowly. Min cut him off by twining her fingers behind his neck and pulling herself up on tiptoe to kiss him.

She repeated Elayne’s words in a soft murmur. “No one will bother us here.” She stepped back and doffed her coat, then attacked the laces of her shirt.

Rand stared, the more so when he realized Elayne’s gown was lying on the mossy ground. The Daughter-Heir was bending, arms crossed, gathering up the hem of her shift.

“What are you doing?” he demanded in a strangled voice.

“Getting ready to go swimming with you,” Min replied.

Elayne flashed him a smile, and hoisted the shift over her head.

He turned his back hastily, though half wanting not to. And found himself staring at Egwene, her big, dark eyes looking back at him sadly. Without a word she turned and vanished into the trees.

“Wait!” he shouted after her. “I can explain.”

He began to run; he had to find her. But as he reached the edge of trees, Min’s voice stopped him.

“Don’t go, Rand.”

She and Elayne were in the water already, only their heads showing as they swam lazily in the middle of the pond.

“Come back,” Elayne called, lifting a slim arm to beckon. “Do you not deserve what you want for a change?”

He shifted his feet, wanting to move but unable to decide which way. What he wanted. The words sounded strange. What did he want? He raised a hand to his face, to wipe away what felt like sweat. Festering flesh almost obliterated the heron branded on his palm; white bone showed through red-edged gaps.

With a jerk, he came awake, lying there shivering in the dark heat. Sweat soaked his smallclothes, and the linen sheets beneath his back. His side burned, where an old wound had never healed properly. He traced the rough scar, a circle nearly an inch across, still tender after all this time. Even Moiraine’s Aes Sedai Healing could not mend it completely. But I’m not rotting yet. And I’m not mad, either. Not yet. Not yet. That said it all. He wanted to laugh, and wondered if that meant he was a little mad already.

Dreaming about Min and Elayne, dreaming of them like that . . . Well, it was not madness, but it was surely foolishness. Neither one of them had ever looked at him in that way when he was awake. Egwene he had been all but promised to since they were both children. The betrothal words had never been spoken in front of the Women’s Circle, but everyone in and around Emond’s Field knew they would marry one day.

That one day would never come, of course; not now, not with the fate that lay ahead of a man who channeled. Egwene must have realized that, too. She must have. She was all wrapped up in becoming Aes Sedai. Still, women were odd; she might think she could be an Aes Sedai and marry him anyway, channeling or no channeling. How could he tell her that he did not want to marry her anymore, that he loved her like a sister? But there would not be any need to tell her, he was sure. He could hide behind what he was. She had to understand that. What man could ask a woman to marry him when he knew he had only a few years, if he was lucky, before he went insane, before he began to rot alive? He shivered despite the heat.

I need sleep. The High Lords would be back in the morning, maneuvering for his favor. For the Dragon Reborn’s favor. Maybe I won’t dream, this time. He started to roll over, searching for a dry place on the sheets-and froze, listening to small rustlings in the darkness. He was not alone.

The Sword That Is Not a Sword lay across the room, beyond his reach, on a throne-like stand the High Lords had given him, no doubt in the hopes he would keep Callandor out of their sight. Someone wanting to steal Callandor. A second thought came. Or to kill the Dragon Reborn. He did not need Thom's whispered warnings to know that the High Lords' professions of undying loyalty were only words of necessity.

He emptied himself of thought and emotions, assuming the Void; that much came without effort. Floating in the cold emptiness within himself, thought and emotion outside, he reached for the True Source. This time he touched it easily, which was not always the case.

Saidin filled him like a torrent of white heat and light, exalting him with life, sickening him with the foulness of the Dark One's taint, like a skim of sewage floating on pure, sweet water. The torrent threatened to wash him away, burn him up, engulf him.

Fighting the flood, he mastered it by bare effort of will and rolled from the bed, channeling the Power as he landed on his feet in the stance to begin the sword-form called Apple Blossoms in the Wind. His enemies could not be many or they would have made more noise; the gently named form was meant for use against more than one opponent.

As his feet hit the carpet, a sword was in his hands, with a long hilt and a slightly curved blade sharp on only one edge. It looked to have been wrought from flame yet it did not feel even warm. The figure of a heron stood black against the yellow-red of the blade. In the same instant every candle and gilded lamp burst alight, small mirrors behind them swelling the illumination. Larger mirrors on the walls and two stand-mirrors reflected it further, until he could have read comfortably anywhere in the large room.

Callandor sat undisturbed, a sword seemingly of glass, hilt and blade, on a stand as tall as a man and just as wide, the wood ornately carved and gilded and set with precious stones. The furnishings, too, were all gilded and begemmed, bed and chairs and benches, wardrobes and chests and washstand. The pitcher and bowl were golden Sea Folk porcelain, as thin as leaves. The broad Tarabon carpet, in scrolls of scarlet and gold and blue, could have fed an entire village for months. Almost every flat surface held more delicate Sea Folk porcelain, or else goblets and bowls and ornaments of gold worked with silver, and silver chased with gold. On the broad marble mantel over the fireplace, two silver wolves with ruby eyes tried to pull down a golden stag a good three feet tall. Draperies of scarlet silk embroidered with eagles in thread-of-gold hung at the narrow windows, stirring slightly in a failing wind. Books lay wherever there was room, leather-bound, wood-bound, some tattered and still dusty from the deepest shelves of the Stone's library.

Now, where he had thought to see assassins, or thieves, one beautiful young woman stood hesitant and surprised in the middle of the carpet, black hair falling in shining waves to her shoulders. Her thin, white silk robe emphasized more than it hid. Berelain, ruler of the city-state of Mayene, was the last person he had expected.

After one wide-eyed start, she made a deep, graceful curtsy that drew her garments tight. "I am unarmed, my Lord Dragon. I submit myself to your search, if you doubt me." Her smile suddenly made him uncomfortably aware that he wore nothing but his smallclothes.

I'll be burned if she makes me scramble around trying to cover myself. The thought floated beyond the Void. I didn't ask her to walk in on me. To sneak in! Anger and embarrassment drifted along the borders of emptiness too, but his face reddened all the same; dimly he was aware of it, aware of the knowledge deepening the flush in his cheeks. So coldly calm within the Void; outside He could feel each individual droplet of sweat sliding down his chest and back. It took a real effort of stubborn will to stand there under her eyes. Search her? The Light help me!

Relaxing his stance, he let the sword vanish but held the narrow flow connecting him to saidin. It was like drinking from a hole in a dike when the whole long mound of earth wanted to give way, the water sweet as honeyed wine and sickening as a rivulet through a midden.

He did not know much of this woman, except that she walked through the Stone as if it were her palace in Mayene. Thom said the First of Mayene asked questions constantly, of everyone. Questions about Rand. Which might have been natural, given what he was, but they made him no easier in his mind. And she had not returned to Mayene. That was not natural. She had been held captive in all but name for months, until his arrival, cut off from her throne and the

ruling of her small nation. Most people would have taken the first opportunity to get away from a man who could channel.

“What are you doing here?” He knew he sounded harsh, and did not care. “There were Aiel guarding that door when I went to sleep. How did you come past them?”

Berelain’s lips curved up a trifle more; to Rand it seemed the room had gotten suddenly even hotter. “They passed me through immediately, when I said I had been summoned by the Lord Dragon.”

“Summoned? I didn’t summon anybody.” Stop this, he told himself. She’s a queen, or the next thing to it. You know as much about the ways of queens as you do about flying. He tried to make himself be civil, only he did not know what to call the First of Mayene. “My Lady . . .” That would have to do. “. . . why would I summon you at this time of night?”

She gave a low, rich laugh, deep in her throat; even wrapped in emotionless emptiness it seemed to tickle his skin, make the hairs stir on his arms and legs. Suddenly he took in her clinging garb as if for the first time, and felt himself go red all over again. She can’t mean Can she? Light, I’ve never said two words to her before.

“Perhaps I wish to talk, my Lord Dragon.” She let the pale robe fall to the floor, revealing an even thinner white silk garment he could only call a nightgown. It left her smooth shoulders completely bare, and exposed a considerable expanse of pale bosom. He found himself wondering distantly what held it up. It was difficult not to stare. “You are a long way from your home, like me. The nights especially seem lonely.”

“Tomorrow, I will be happy to talk with you.”

“But during the day, people surround you. Petitioners. High Lords. Aiel.” She gave a shiver; he told himself he really ought to look away, but he could as easily have stopped breathing. He had never before been so aware of his own reactions when wrapped in the Void. “The Aiel frighten me, and I do not like Tairen lords of any sort. “

About the Tairens he could believe her, but he did not think anything frightened this woman. Burn me, she’s in a strange man’s bedchamber in the middle of the night, only half-dressed, and I’m the one who’s jumpy as a cat in a dog run, Void or no. It was time to put an end to things before they went too far.

“It would be better if you return to your own bedchamber, my Lady.” Part of him wanted to tell her to put on a cloak, too. A thick cloak. Part of him did. “It. . . . It is really too late for talking. Tomorrow. In daylight.”

She gave him a slanted, quizzical look. “Have you absorbed stuffy Tairen ways already, my Lord Dragon? Or is this reticence something from your Two Rivers? We are not so . . . formal . . . in Mayene.”

“My Lady. . . .” He tried to sound formal; if she did not like formality, that was what he wanted. “I am promised to Egwene al’Vere, my Lady.”

“You mean the Aes Sedai, my Lord Dragon? If she really is Aes Sedai. She is quite young - perhaps too young - to wear the ring and the shawl.” Berelain spoke as if Egwene were a child, though she herself could not be more than a year older than Rand, if that, and he had only a little over two years on Egwene. “My Lord Dragon, I do not mean to come between you. Marry her, if she is Green Ajah. I would never aspire to wed the Dragon Reborn himself. Forgive me if I overstep myself, but I told you we are not so . . . formal in Mayene. May I call you Rand?”

Rand surprised himself by sighing regretfully. There had been a glint in her eye, a slight shift of expression, gone quickly, when she mentioned marrying the Dragon Reborn. If she had not considered it before, she had now. The Dragon Reborn, not Rand al’Thor; the man of prophecy, not the shepherd from the Two Rivers. He was not shocked, exactly; some girls back home mooned over whoever proved himself fastest or strongest in the games at Bel Tine and Sunday, and now and again a woman set her eyes on the man with the richest fields or the largest flocks. It would have been good to think she wanted Rand al’Thor. “It is time for you to go, my Lady,” he said quietly.

She stepped closer. “I can feel your eyes on me, Rand.” Her voice was smoky heat. “I am no village girl tied to her mother’s apron, and I know you want-“

“Do you think I’m made of stone, woman?” She jumped at his roar, but the next instant she was crossing the carpet, reaching for him, her eyes dark pools that could pull a man into their depths.

“Your arms look as strong as stone. If you think you must be harsh with me, then be harsh, so long as you hold me.” Her hands touched his face; sparks seemed to leap from her fingers.

Without thinking he channeled the flows still linked to him, and suddenly she was staggering back, eyes wide with startlement, as if a wall of air pushed her. It was air, he realized; he did things without knowing what he was doing more often than he did know. At least, once done, he could usually remember how to do them again.

The unseen, moving wall scraped ripples along the carpet, sweeping along Berelain’s discarded robe, a boot he had tossed aside undressing, and a red leather footstool supporting an open volume of Eban Vandes’s *The History of the Stone of Tear*, pushing them along as it forced her almost to the wall, fenced her in. Safely away from him. He tied off the flow - that was all he could think to call what he did - and no longer needed to maintain the shield himself. For a moment he studied what he had done, until he was sure he could repeat it. It looked useful, especially the tying off.

Dark eyes still wide, Berelain felt along the confines of her invisible prison with trembling hands. Her face was almost as white as her skimpy silk shift. Footstool, boot and book lay at her feet, jumbled with the robe.

“Much as I regret it,” he told her, “we will not speak again, except in public, my Lady.” He really did regret it. Whatever her motives, she was beautiful. Burn me, I am a fool! He was not sure how he meant that - for thinking of her beauty, or for sending her away. “In fact, it is best you arrange your journey back to Mayene as soon as possible. I promise you that Tear will not trouble Mayene again. You have my word.” It was a promise good only for his lifetime, perhaps only as long as he stood in the Stone, but he had to offer her something. A bandage for wounded pride, a gift to take her mind off being afraid.

But her fear was already under control, on the outside, at least. Honesty and openness filled her face, all efforts at allure gone. “Forgive me. I have handled this badly. I did not mean to offend. In my country, a woman may speak her mind to a man freely, or he to her. Rand, you must know that you are a handsome man, tall and strong. I would be the one made of stone, if I did not see it, and admire. Please do not send me away from you. I will beg it, if you wish.” She knelt smoothly, like a dance. Her expression still said she was being open, confessing everything, but on the other hand, in kneeling she had managed to tug her already precarious gown down until it looked in real danger of falling off. “Please, Rand?”

Even sheltered in emptiness as he was, he gaped at her, and it had nothing to do with her beauty or her near undress. Well, only partly. If the Defenders of the Stone had been half as determined as this woman, half as steadfast in purpose, ten thousand Aiel could never have taken the Stone.

“I am flattered, my Lady,” he said diplomatically. “Believe me, I am. But it would not be fair to you. I cannot give you what you deserve.” And let her make of that what she will.

Outside in the darkness, a cock crowed.

To Rand’s surprise, Berelain suddenly stared past him, eyes as big as teacups. Her mouth dropped open, and her slim throat corded with a scream that would not come. He spun, the yellow-red sword flashing back into his hands.

Across the room, one of the stand-mirrors threw his reflection back at him, a tall young man with reddish hair and gray eyes, wearing only white linen smallclothes and holding a sword carved from fire. The reflection stepped out onto the carpet, raising its sword.

I have gone mad. Thought drifted on the borders of the Void. No! She saw it. It’s real!

Movement to his left caught the corner of his eye. He twisted before he could think, sword sweeping up in *The Moon Rises Over Water*. The blade slashed through the shape - his shape - climbing out of a mirror on the wall. The form

wavered, broke up like dust motes floating on air, vanished. Rand's reflection appeared in the mirror again, but even as it did, it put hands on the mirror frame. He was aware of movement in mirrors all around the room.

Desperately, he stabbed at the mirror. Silvered glass shattered, yet it seemed that the image shattered first. He thought he heard a distant scream inside his head, his own voice screaming, fading. Even as shards of mirror fell, he lashed out with the One Power. Every mirror in the room exploded silently, fountaining glass across the carpet. The dying scream in his head echoed again and again, sending shivers down his back. It was his voice; he could hardly believe it was not himself who made the sounds.

He spun back to face the one that had gotten out, just in time to meet its attack, Unfolding the Fan to counter Stones Falling Down the Mountain. The figure leaped back, and suddenly Rand realized it was not alone. As quickly as he had smashed the mirrors, two more reflections had escaped. Now they stood facing him, three duplicates of himself down to the puckered round scar on his side, all staring at him, faces twisted with hatred and contempt, with a strange hunger. Only their eyes seemed empty, lifeless. Before he could take a breath, they rushed at him.

Rand stepped sideways, pieces of broken mirror slicing his feet, ever sideways, from stance to stance and form to form, trying to face only one at a time. He used everything Lan, Moiraine's Warder, had taught him of the sword in their daily practice.

Had the three fought together, had they supported one another, he would have died in the first minute, but each fought him alone, as if the others did not exist. Even so, he could not stop their blades entirely; in minutes blood ran down the side of his face, his chest, his arms. The old wound tore open, adding its flow to stain his smallclothes with red. They had his skill as well as his face, and they were three to his one. Chairs and tables toppled; priceless Sea Folk porcelain shattered on the carpet.

He felt his strength ebbing. None of his cuts was major by itself, except the old wound, but all together . . . He never thought of calling for help from the Aiel outside his door. The thick walls would stifle even a death scream. Whatever was done, he must do alone. He fought wrapped in the cold emotionlessness of the Void, but fear scraped at its boundaries like wind-lashed branches scratching a window in the night.

His blade slipped past its opponent to slash across a face just below the eyes - he could not help wincing; it was his face - its owner sliding back just far enough to avoid a killing cut. Blood welled from the gash, veiling mouth and chin in dark crimson, but the ruined face did not change expression, and its empty eyes never flickered. It wanted him dead the way a starving man wanted food.

Can anything kill them? All three bled from the wounds he had managed to inflict, but bleeding did not seem to slow them as he knew it was slowing him. They tried to avoid his sword, but did not appear to realize they had been hurt. If they have been, he thought grimly. Light, if they bleed, they can be hurt! They must!

He needed a respite, a moment to catch his breath, to gather himself. Suddenly he leaped away from them, onto the bed, rolling across its width. He sensed rather than saw blades slashing the sheets, barely missing his flesh. Staggering, he landed on his feet, caught at a small table to steady himself. The shining, gold-worked silver bowl on the table wobbled. One of his doubles had climbed onto the torn bed, kicking goose feathers as it padded across warily, sword at the ready. The other two came slowly around, still ignoring each other, intent only on him. Their eyes glistened like glass.

Rand shuddered as pain stabbed his hand on the table. An image of himself, no more than six inches tall, drew back its small sword. Instinctively, he grabbed the figure before it could stab again. It writhed in his grip, baring teeth at him. He became aware of small movements all around the room, of small reflections by the score stepping out of polished silver. His hand began to numb, to grow cold, as if the thing were sucking the warmth out of his flesh. The heat of saidin swelled inside him; a rushing filled his head, and the heat flowed into his icy hand.

Suddenly the small figure burst like a bubble, and he felt something flow into him - from the bursting - some little portion of his lost strength. He jerked as tiny jolts of vitality seemed to pelt him.

When he raised his head - wondering why he was not dead - the small reflections he had half-glimpsed were gone. The three larger stood wavering, as if his gain in strength had been their loss. Yet as he looked up, they steadied on their feet and came on, if more cautiously.

He backed away, thinking furiously, sword threatening first one and then another. If he continued to fight them as he had been, they would kill him sooner or later. He knew that as surely as he knew he was bleeding. But something linked the reflections. Absorbing the small one - the far-off thought made him queasy, but that was what it had been - had not only brought the others with it, it had also affected the bigger, for a moment at least. If he could do the same to one of them, it might destroy all three.

Even thinking of absorbing them made him vaguely aware of wanting to empty his stomach, but he did not know another way. I don't know this way. How did I do it? Light, what did I do? He had to grapple with one of them, to touch it at least; he was somehow sure of that. But if he tried to get that close, he would have three blades through him in as many heartbeats. Reflections. How much are they still reflections?

Hoping he was not being a fool - if he was, he might well be a dead one - he let his sword vanish. He was ready to bring it back on the instant, but when his carved-fire blade winked out of existence, the others' did, too. For a moment, confusion painted three copies of his face, one a bloody ruin. But before he could seize one of them, they leaped for him, all four crashing to the floor in a tangle of grappling limbs, rolling across the glass-littered carpet.

Cold soaked into Rand. Numbness crept along his limbs, through his bones, until he barely felt the shards of mirror, the slivers of porcelain grinding into his flesh. Something close to panic flickered across the emptiness surrounding him. He might have made a fatal mistake. They were larger than the one he had absorbed, and they were drawing more heat from him. And not only heat. As he grew colder, the glassy gray eyes staring into his took on life. With chill certainty he knew that if he died, that would not end the struggle. The three would turn on one another until only one remained, and that one would have his life, his memories, would be him.

Stubbornly he fought, struggling harder the weaker he became. He pulled on saidin, trying to fill himself with its heat. Even the stomach-turning taint was welcome, for the more of it he felt, the more saidin suffused him. If his stomach could rebel, then he was still alive, and if he lived, he could fight. But how? How? What did I do before? Saidin raged through him till it seemed that if he survived his attackers, he would only be consumed by the Power. How did I do it? All he could do was pull at saidin, and try . . . reach . . . strain. . . .

One of the three vanished - Rand felt it slide into him; it was as if he had fallen from a height, flat onto stony ground - and then the other two together. The impact flung him onto his back, where he lay staring up at the worked plaster ceiling with its gilded bosses, lay luxuriating in the fact that he was still breathing.

The Power still swelled in every crevice of his being. He wanted to spew up every meal he had ever eaten. He felt so alive that, by comparison, life not soaked in saidin was living a shadow. He could smell the beeswax of the candles, and the oil in the lamps. He could feel every fiber of the carpet against his back. He could feel every gash in his flesh, every cut, every nick, every bruise. But he held on to saidin.

One of the Forsaken had tried to kill him. Or all of them had. It must have been that, unless the Dark One was free already, in which case he did not think he would have faced anything as easy or as simple as this. So he held his link to the True Source. Unless I did it myself. Can I hate what I am enough to try to kill myself? Without even knowing it? Light, I have to learn to control it. I have to!

Painfully, he pushed himself up. Leaving bloody footprints on the carpet, he limped to the stand where Callandor rested. Blood from hundreds of cuts covered him. He lifted the sword, and its glassy length glowed with the Power flowing into it. The Sword That Is Not a Sword. That blade, apparently glass, would cut as well as the finest steel, yet Callandor truly was not a sword, but instead a remnant of the Age of Legends, a sa'angreal. With the aid of one of the relatively few angreal known to have survived the War of the Shadow and Breaking of the World, it was possible to channel flows of the One Power that would have burned the channeler to ash without it. With one of the even rarer sa'angreal, the flows could be increased as much over those possible with an angreal as an angreal increased them over channeling naked. And Callandor, usable only by a man, linked to the Dragon Reborn through three thousand years of legend and prophecy, was one of the most powerful sa'angreal ever made. Holding Callandor in his hands, he could

level a city's walls at a blow. Holding Callandor in his hands, he could face even one of the Forsaken. It was them. It must have been.

Abruptly he realized he had not heard a sound from Berelain. Half fearing to see her dead, he turned.

Still kneeling, she flinched. She had donned her robe again, and hugged it around her like steel armor, or stone walls. Face as white as snow, she licked her lips. "Which one are . . . ?" She swallowed and began again. "Which one . . . ?" She could not finish it.

"I am the only one there is," he said gently. "The one you were treating as if we were betrothed." He meant it to soothe her, perhaps make her smile - surely a woman as strong as she had shown herself to be could smile, even facing a blood-drenched man - but she bent forward, pressing her face to the floor.

"I apologize humbly for having most grievously offended you, Lord Dragon." Her breathy voice did sound humble, and frightened. Completely unlike herself. "I beg you to forget my offense, and forgive. I will not bother you again. I swear it, my Lord Dragon. On my mother's name and under the Light, I swear it."

He loosed the knotted flow; the invisible wall confining her became a momentary stir that ruffled her robe. "There is nothing to forgive," he said wearily. He felt very tired. "Go as you wish."

She straightened hesitantly, stretched out a hand, and gave a relieved gasp when it encountered nothing. Gathering the skirts of her robe, she began to pick her way across the glass-littered carpet, shards grating under her velvet slippers. Short of the door, she stopped, facing him with an obvious effort. Her eyes could not quite meet his. "I will send the Aiel in to you, if you wish. I could send for one of the Aes Sedai to tend your wounds."

She would as soon be in a room with a Myrddraal, now, or the Dark One himself, but she's no milksop. "Thank you," he said quietly, "but no. I would appreciate it if you told no one what happened here. Not yet. I will do what needs to be done." It had to be the Forsaken.

"As my Lord Dragon commands." She gave him a tight curtsy and hurried out, perhaps afraid he might change his mind about letting her go.

"As soon the Dark One himself," he murmured as the door closed behind her.

Limping to the foot of the bed, he lowered himself into the chest there and laid Callandor across his knees, bloody hands resting on the glowing blade. With that in his hands, even one of the Forsaken would fear him. In a moment he would send for Moiraine to Heal his wounds. In a moment he would speak to the Aiel outside, and become the Dragon Reborn again. But for now, he only wanted to sit, and remember a shepherd named Rand al'Thor.

Chapter 3 - Reflection

Despite the hour, a good many people were hurrying through the Stone's wide corridors, a steady trickle of men and women in the black and gold of Stone servants or the livery of one High Lord or another. Now and again a Defender or two appeared, bareheaded and unarmed, some with their coats undone. The servants bowed or curtsied to Perrin and Faile if they came close, then hurried on with hardly a pause. Most of the soldiers gave a start on seeing them. Some bowed stiffly, hand to heart, but one and all quickened their steps as if eager to be away.

Only one lamp in three or four was lit. In the dim stretches between their tall stands, shadows blurred the hanging tapestries and obscured the occasional chest against the wall. For any eyes but Perrin's, they did. His eyes glowed like burnished gold in those murky lengths of hall. He walked quickly from lamp to lamp and kept his gaze down unless he was in full light. Most people in the Stone knew about his strangely colored eyes, one way or another. None of them mentioned it, of course. Even Faile seemed to assume the color was part of his association with an Aes Sedai, something that simply was, to be accepted but never explained. Even so, a prickling always ran across his back whenever he realized that a stranger had seen his eyes shining in the dark. When they held their tongues, the silence only emphasized his apartness.

"I wish they wouldn't look at me like that," he muttered as a grizzled Defender twice his age came close to running once he had passed. "As though they are afraid of me. They haven't before; not this way. Why aren't all these people in bed?" A woman carrying a mop and a bucket bobbed a curtsy and scurried by with her head down.

Her arm twined through his, Faile glanced at him. "I would say the guards are not supposed to be in this part of the Stone unless they are on duty. A good time to cuddle a maid on a lord's chair, and maybe pretend they are the lord and lady, while lord and lady are asleep. They are probably worried that you might report them. And servants do most of their work at night. Who would want them underfoot, sweeping and dusting and polishing, in daylight?"

Perrin nodded doubtfully. He supposed she would know about such things from her father's house. A successful merchant likely had servants, and guards for his wagons. At least these folk were not out of their beds because what had happened to him had happened to them, too. If that were the case, they would be out of the Stone altogether, and likely still running. But why had he been a target, singled out, as it seemed? He was not looking forward to confronting Rand, but he had to know. Faile had to stretch her stride to keep up with him.

For all its splendor, all the gold and fine carving and inlays, the interior of the Stone had been designed for war as much as its exterior had been. Murderholes dotted the ceiling wherever corridors crossed. Never used arrowslits peeked into the halls at places where they might cover an entire hallway. He and Faile climbed narrow, curving staircase after narrow, curving staircase, all built into the walls or else enclosed, with more arrowslits looking down on the corridor below. None of this design had hampered the Aiel, of course, the first enemy ever to get beyond the outer wall.

As they trotted up one of the winding stairs - Perrin did not realize they were trotting, though he would have been moving faster if not for Faile on his arm - he caught a whiff of old sweat and a hint of sickly-sweet perfume, but they registered only in the back of his brain. He was caught up in what he was going to say to Rand. Why did you try to kill me? Are you going mad already? There was no easy way to ask, and he did not expect easy answers.

Stepping out into a shadowed corridor nearly at the top of the Stone, he found himself staring at the backs of a High Lord and two of the nobleman's personal guards. Only the Defenders were allowed to wear armor inside the Stone, but these three had swords at their hips. That was not unusual, of course, but their presence here, on this floor, in the shadows, staring intently at the bright light at the far end of the hall, that was not usual at all. That light came from the anteroom in front of the chambers Rand had been given. Or taken. Or maybe been pushed into by Moiraine.

Perrin and Faile had made no effort to be quiet in climbing the stairs, but the three men were so intent in their watching that none of them noticed the new arrivals at first. Then one of the blue-coated bodyguards twisted his head as if working a cramp in his neck; his mouth dropped open when he saw them. Biting off an oath, the fellow whirled to face Perrin, baring a good hand of his swordblade. The other was only a heartbeat slower. Both stood tensed, ready, but their eyes shifted uneasily, sliding off Perrin's. They gave off a sour smell of fear. So did the High Lord, though he had his fear tightly reined.

The High Lord Torean, white streaking his dark, pointed beard, moved languidly, as if at a ball. Pulling a too sweetly scented handkerchief from his sleeve, he dabbed at a knobby nose that appeared not at all large when compared with his ears. A fine silk coat with red satin cuffs only exaggerated the plainness of his face. He eyed Perrin's shirtsleeves and dabbed his nose again before inclining his head slightly. "The Light illumine you," he said politely. His glance touched Perrin's yellow stare and flinched away, though his expression did not change. "You are well, I trust?" Perhaps too politely.

Perrin did not really care for the man's tone, but the way Torean looked Faile up and down, with a sort of casual interest, clenched his fists. He managed to keep his voice level, though. "The Light illumine you, High Lord Torean. I am glad to see you helping keep watch over the Lord Dragon. Some men in your place might resent him being here."

Torean's thin eyebrows twitched. "Prophecy has been fulfilled, and Tear has fulfilled its place in that prophecy. Perhaps the Dragon Reborn will lead Tear to a still greater destiny. What man could resent that? But it is late. A good night to you." He eyed Faile again, pursing his lips, and walked off down the hall just a bit too briskly, away from the anteroom's lights. His bodyguards heeled him like well-trained dogs.

"There was no need for you to be uncivil," Faile said in a tight voice when the High Lord was out of hearing. "You sounded as if your tongue were frozen iron. If you do intend to remain here, you had better learn to get on with the lords."

"He was looking at you as if he wanted to dandle you on his knee. And I do not mean like a father."

She sniffed dismissively. "He is not the first man ever to look at me. If he found the nerve to try more, I could put him in his place with a frown and a glance. I do not need you to speak for me, Perrin Aybara." Still, she did not sound entirely displeased.

Scratching his beard, he peered after Torean, watching the High Lord and his guards vanish around a distant corner. He wondered how the Tairen lords managed without sweating to death. "Did you notice, Faile? His heel-hounds did not take their hands off their swords until he was ten paces clear of us."

She frowned at him, then down the hall after the three, and nodded slowly. "You're right. But I do not understand. They do not bow and scrape the way they do for him, but everyone walks as warily around you and Mat as they do around the Aes Sedai."

"Maybe being a friend of the Dragon Reborn isn't as much protection as it used to be.

She did not suggest leaving again, not in words, but her eyes were full of it. He was more successful in ignoring the unspoken suggestion than he had been with the spoken.

Before they reached the end of the hallway, Berelain came hurrying out of the bright lights of the anteroom, clutching a thin white robe tightly around her with both arms. If the First of Mayene had been walking any faster, she would have been running.

To show Faile he could be as civil as she could possibly wish, Perrin swept a bow that he wagered even Mat could not have bettered. By contrast, Faile's curtsy was the barest nod of her head, the merest bending of a knee. He hardly noticed. As Berelain rushed past them without a glance, the smell of fear, rank and raw as a festering wound, made his nostrils twitch. Beside this, Torean's fear was nothing. This was mad panic tied with a frayed rope. He straightened slowly, staring after her.

"Filling your eyes?" Faile asked softly.

Intent on Berelain, wondering what had driven her so near the brink, he spoke without thinking. "She smelled of -"

Far down the corridor, Torean suddenly stepped out of a side hallway to seize Berelain's arm. He was talking a torrent, but Perrin could not make out more than a handful of scattered words, something about her overstepping herself in her

pride, and something else that seemed to be Torean offering her his protection. Her reply was short, sharp, and even more inaudible, delivered with lifted chin. Pulling herself free roughly, the First of Mayene walked away, back straight and seemingly more in command of herself. On the point of following, Torean saw Perrin watching. Dabbing at his nose with his handkerchief, the High Lord vanished back into the crossing corridor.

“I do not care if she smelled of the Essence of Dawn,” Faile said darkly. “That one is not interested in hunting a bear, however fine his hide would look stretched on a wall. She hunts the sun.”

He frowned at her. “The sun? A bear? What are you talking about?”

“You go on by yourself. I think I will go to my bed after all.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said slowly, “but I thought you were as eager to find out what happened as I am.”

“I think not. I’ll not pretend I am eager to meet the . . . Rand . . . not after avoiding it until now. And now I am especially not eager. No doubt the two of you will have a fine talk without me. Especially if there’s wine.”

“You don’t make any sense,” he muttered, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “If you want to go to bed, then fine, but I wish you would say something I understand.”

For a long moment she studied his face, then suddenly bit her lip. He thought she was trying not to laugh. “Oh, Perrin, sometimes I believe it is your innocence I enjoy most of all.” Sure enough, traces of laughter silvered her voice. “You go on to . . . to your friend and tell me of it in the morning. As much as you want to.” She pulled his head down to brush his lips with a kiss and, as quick as the kiss, ran back down the hallway.

Shaking his head, he watched until she turned in to the stairs with no sign of Torean. Sometimes it was as if she spoke another language. He headed toward the lights.

The anteroom was a round chamber fifty paces or more across. A hundred gilded lamps hung on golden chains from its high ceiling. Polished redstone columns made an inner ring, and the floor appeared to be one huge slab of black marble, streaked with gold. It had been the anteroom of the king’s chambers, in the days when Tear had kings, before Artur Hawkwing put everything from the Spine of the World to the Aryth Ocean under one king. The Tairen kings had not returned when Hawkwing’s empire collapsed, and for a thousand years the only inhabitants of these apartments had been mice tracking through dust. No High Lord had ever had enough power to dare claim them for his own.

A ring of fifty Defenders stood rigidly in the middle of the room, breastplates and rimmed helmets gleaming, spears all slanted at exactly the same angle. Facing every direction as they did, they were supposed to keep all intruders from the current lord of the Stone. Their commander, a captain distinguished by two short white plumes on his helmet, held himself only a trifle less stiffly. He posed with one hand on his sword hilt and the other on his hip, self-important with his duty. They all smelled of fear and uncertainty, like men who lived under a crumbling cliff and had almost managed to convince themselves it would never fall. Or at least not tonight. Not in the next hour.

Perrin walked on by them, his bootheels making echoes. The officer started toward him, then hesitated when Perrin did not stop to be challenged. He knew who Perrin was, of course; at least, he knew as much as any Tairen knew. Traveling companion of Aes Sedai, friend of the Lord Dragon. Not a man to be interfered with by a mere officer of the Defenders of the Stone. There was his apparent task of guarding the Lord Dragon’s rest, of course, but though he probably did not admit it even to himself, the officer had to know that he and his brave show of polished armor were simply that. The real guards were those Perrin met when he strode beyond the columns and approached the doors to Rand’s chambers.

They had been sitting so still behind the columns that they seemed to fade into the stone, though their coats and breeches - in shades of gray and brown, made to hide them in the Waste - stood out here as soon as they moved. Six Maidens of the Spear, Aiel women who had chosen a warrior’s life over the hearth, flowed between him and the doors on soft, laced boots that reached their knees. They were tall for women, the tallest barely a hand shorter than he, sun-darkened, with short-cropped hair, yellow or red or something in between. Two held curved horn bows with arrows

nocked, if not drawn. The others carried small hide bucklers and three or four short spears each - short, but with spearheads long enough to stick through a man's body with inches to spare.

"I do not think I can let you go in," a woman with flame-colored hair said, smiling slightly to take the sting out of the words. Aiel did not go about grinning as much as other folk, or show a great deal of any outward emotion for that matter. "I think he does not want to see anyone tonight."

"I am going in, Bain." Ignoring her spears, he took her by the upper arms. That was when it became impossible to ignore the spears, since she had managed to get a spearpoint hard against the side of his throat. For that matter, a somewhat blonder woman named Chiad suddenly had one of her spears at the other side, as if the two were intended to meet somewhere in the middle of his neck. The other women only watched, confident that Bain and Chiad could handle whatever had to be done. Still, he did his best. "I don't have time to argue with you. Not that you listen to people who argue with you, as I remember. I am going in." As gently as he could, he picked Bain up and set her out of his way.

Chiad's spear only needed her to breathe on it to draw blood, but after one startled widening of dark blue eyes, Bain abruptly took hers away and grinned. "Would you like to learn a game called Maidens' Kiss, Perrin? You might play well, I think. At the very least you would learn something." One of the others laughed aloud. Chiad's spearpoint left his neck.

He took a deep breath, hoping they would not notice it was his first since the spears touched him. They had not veiled their faces - their shoufa lay coiled around their necks like dark scarves - but he did not know if Aiel had to do so before they killed, only that veiling meant they were ready to.

"Another time, perhaps," he said politely. They were all grinning as if Bain had said something amusing, and his not understanding was part of the humor. Thom was right. A man could go crazy trying to understand women, of any nation and any station in life; that was what Thom said.

As he reached for a door handle in the shape of a rearing golden lion, Bain added, "On your head be it. He has already chased out what most men would consider better company by far than you."

Of course, he thought, pulling open the door, Berelain. She was coming from here. Tonight, everything it revolving around -

The First of Mayene vanished from his thoughts as he got a look into the room. Broken mirrors hung on the walls and broken glass covered the floor, along with shards of shattered porcelain and feathers from the slashed mattress. Open books lay tumbled among overturned chairs and benches. And Rand was sitting at the foot of his bed, slumped against one of the bedposts with eyes closed and hands limp atop Callandor, which lay across his knees. He looked as if he had taken a bath in blood.

"Get Moiraine!" Perrin snapped at the Aiel women. Was Rand still alive? If he was, he needed Aes Sedai Healing to stay that way. "Tell her to hurry!" He heard a gasp behind him, then soft boots running.

Rand lifted his head. His face was a smeared mask. "Shut the door."

"Moiraine will be here soon, Rand. Rest easy. She will - "

"Shut the door, Perrin."

Murmuring among themselves, the Aiel women frowned, but moved back. Perrin pulled the door to, cutting off a questioning shout from the white-plumed officer.

Glass crunched under his boots as he crossed the carpet to Rand. Tearing a strip from a wildly sliced linen sheet, he wadded it against the wound in Rand's side. Rand's hands tightened on the transparent sword at the pressure, then relaxed. Blood soaked through almost immediately. Cuts and gashes covered him from the soles of his feet to his head;

slivers of glass glittered in many of them. Perrin rolled his shoulders helplessly. He did not know what more to do, other than wait for Moiraine.

“What under the Light did you try to do, Rand? You look as though you tried to skin yourself. And you nearly killed me, as well.” For a moment he thought Rand was not going to answer.

“Not me,” Rand said finally, in a near whisper. “One of the Forsaken.”

Perrin tried to relax muscles he did not remember tensing. The effort was only partly successful. He had mentioned the Forsaken to Faile, not exactly casually, but by and large he had been trying not to think of what the Forsaken might do when they found out where Rand was. If one of them could bring down the Dragon Reborn, he or she would stand high above the others when the Dark One broke free. The Dark One free, and the Last Battle lost before it was fought.

“Are you sure?” he said, just as quietly.

“It had to be, Perrin. It had to be.”

“If one of them came after me as well as you . . . ? Where’s Mat, Rand? If he was alive, and went through what I did, he’d be thinking what I did. That it was you. He’d be here by now to bless you out.”

“Or on a horse and halfway to the city gates.” Rand struggled to sit erect. Drying blood smears cracked, and fresh trickles started on his chest and shoulders. “If he is dead, Perrin, you had best get as far from me as you can. I think you and Loial are right about that.” He paused, studying Perrin. “You and Mat must wish I had never been born. Or at least that you’d never seen me.”

There was no point in going to check; if anything had happened to Mat, it was over and done now. And he had a feeling that his makeshift bandage pressed against Rand’s side might be what would keep him alive long enough for Moiraine to get there. “You don’t seem to care if he has gone off. Burn me, he’s important, too. What are you going to do if he’s gone? Or dead, the Light send it not so.”

“What they least expect.” Rand’s eyes looked like morning mist covering the dawn, blue-gray with a feverish glow seeping through. His voice had a knife edge. “That is what I have to do in any case. What everyone least expects.”

Perrin took a slow breath. Rand had a right to taut nerves. It was not a sign of incipient madness. He had to stop watching for signs of madness. Those signs would come soon enough, and watching would do nothing but keep his stomach tied in knots. “What’s that?” he asked quietly.

Rand closed his eyes. “I only know I have to catch them by surprise. Catch everyone by surprise,” he muttered fiercely.

One of the doors opened to admit a tall Aielman, his dark red hair touched with gray. Behind him the Tairen officer’s plumes bobbed as he argued with the Maidens; he was still arguing when Bain pushed the door shut.

Rhuarc surveyed the room with sharp blue eyes, as if he suspected enemies hiding behind a drape or an overturned chair. The clan chief of the Taardad Aiel had no visible weapon except the heavy-bladed knife at his waist, but he carried authority and confidence like weapons, quietly, yet as surely as if they were sheathed alongside the knife. And his shoufa hung about his shoulders; no one who knew the slightest about Aiel took one for less than dangerous when he wore the means to veil his face.

“That Tairen fool outside sent word to his commander that something had happened in here,” Rhuarc said, “and rumors are already sprouting like corpse moss in a deep cave. Everything from the White Tower trying to kill you to the Last Battle fought here in this room.” Perrin opened his mouth; Rhuarc raised a forestalling hand. “I happened to meet Berelain, looking as if she had been told the day she would die, and she told me the truth of it. And it does look to be the truth, though I doubted her.”

“I sent for Moiraine,” Perrin said. Rhuarc nodded. Of course, the Maidens would have told him everything they knew.

Rand gave a painful bark of a laugh. "I told her to keep quiet. It seems the Lord Dragon doesn't rule Mayene." He sounded more wryly amused than anything else.

"I have daughters older than that young woman," Rhuarc said. "I do not believe she will tell anyone else. I think she would like to forget everything that happened tonight. "

"And I would like to know what happened," Moiraine said, gliding into the room. Slight and slender as she was, Rhuarc towered over her as much as the man who followed her in - Lan, her Warder - but it was the Aes Sedai who dominated the room. She must have run to come so fast, but she was calm as a frozen lake now. It took a great deal to ruffle Moiraine's serenity. Her blue silk gown had a high lace neck and sleeves slashed with darker velvet, but the heat and humidity did not appear to touch her. A small blue stone, suspended on her forehead from a fine golden chain in her dark hair, flashed in the light, emphasizing the absence of the slightest sheen of sweat.

As always when they met, Lan's and Rhuarc's icy blue stares nearly struck sparks. A braided leather cord held Lan's dark hair, gray-streaked at the temples. His face looked to have been carved from rock, all hard planes and angles, and his sword rode his hip like part of his body. Perrin was not sure which of the two men was more deadly, but he thought a mouse could starve on the difference.

The Warder's eyes swung to Rand. "I thought you were old enough to shave without someone to guide your hand."

Rhuarc smiled, a slight smile but the first Perrin had ever seen from him in Lan's presence. "He is young yet. He will learn."

Lan glanced back at the Aielman, then returned the smile, just as slightly.

Moiraine gave the two men a brief, withering look. She did not seem to pick her way as she crossed the carpet, but she stepped so lightly, holding her skirts up, that not one shard of glass crunched under her slippers. Her eyes swept around the room; taking in the smallest details, Perrin was sure. For a moment she studied him - he did not meet her gaze; she knew too much about him for comfort - but she bore down on Rand like a silent, silken avalanche, icy and inexorable.

Perrin dropped his hand and moved out of her way. The wadded cloth stayed against Rand's side, held by congealing blood. From head to foot the blood was beginning to dry in black streaks and smears. The slivers of glass in his skin glittered in the lamplight. Moiraine touched the blood-caked cloth with her fingertips, then took her hand back as though changing her mind about looking underneath. Perrin wondered how the Aes Sedai could look at Rand without wincing, but her smooth face did not change. She smelled faintly of rose-scented soap.

"At least you are alive." Her voice was musical, a chill, angry music at the moment. "What happened can wait. Try to touch the True Source."

"Why?" Rand asked in a wary voice. "I cannot Heal myself, even if I knew how to Heal. No one can. I know that much."

For the space of a breath Moiraine seemed on the point of an outburst, strange as that would have been, but in another breath she was once again layered in calm so deep that surely nothing could crack it. "Only some of the strength for Healing comes from the Healer. The Power can replace what comes from the Healed. Without it, you will spend tomorrow flat on your back and perhaps the next day as well. Now, draw on the Power, if you can, but do nothing with it. Simply hold it. Use this, if you must." She did not have to bend far to touch Callandor.

Rand moved the sword from under her hand. "Simply hold it, you say." He sounded about to laugh out loud. "Very well."

Nothing happened that Perrin could see, not that he expected to. Rand sat there like the survivor of a lost battle, looking at Moiraine. She hardly blinked. Twice she scrubbed her fingers against her palms as if unaware.

After a time Rand sighed. "I cannot even reach the Void. I can't seem to concentrate." A quick grin cracked the blood drying on his face. "I do not understand why." A thick red thread snaked its way down past his left eye.

“Then I will do it as I always have,” Moiraine said, and took Rand’s head in her hands, careless of the blood that ran over her fingers.

Rand lurched to his feet with a roaring gasp, as if all the breath were being squeezed from his lungs, back arching so his head nearly tore free of her grasp. One arm flung wide, fingers spread and bending back so far it seemed they must break; the other hand clamped down on Callandor’s hilt, the muscles of that arm knotting visibly into cramps. He shook like cloth caught in a windstorm. Dark flakes of dried blood fell, and bits of glass tinkled onto the chest and floor, forced out of cuts dosing up and knitting themselves together.

Perrin shivered as if that windstorm roared around him. He had seen Healing done before, that and more, greater and worse, but he could never be complacent about seeing the Power used, about knowing it was being used, not even for this. Tales of Aes Sedai, told by merchants’ guards and drivers, had embedded themselves in his mind long years before he met Moiraine. Rhuarc smelled sharply uneasy. Only Lan took it as a matter of course. Lan and Moiraine.

Almost as soon as it began, it was done. Moiraine took her hands away, and Rand slumped, catching the bedpost to hold himself on his feet. It was difficult to say whether he clutched the bedpost or Callandor more tenaciously. When Moiraine tried to take the sword to replace it on the ornate stand against the wall, he drew it away from her firmly, even roughly.

Her mouth tightened momentarily, but she contented herself with pulling the wad of cloth from his side, using it to scrub away some of the surrounding smears. The old wound was a tender scar again. The other injuries were simply gone. The mostly dried blood that still covered him could have come from someone else.

Moiraine frowned. “It still does not respond,” she murmured, half to herself. “It will not heal completely.”

“That is the one that will kill me, isn’t it?” he asked her softly, then quoted, “‘His blood on the rocks of Shayol Ghul, washing away the Shadow, sacrifice for man’s salvation.’”

“You read too much,” she said sharply, “and understand too little.”

“Do you understand more? If you do, then tell me.”

“He is only trying to find his way,” Lan said suddenly. “No man likes to run forward blindly when he knows there is a cliff somewhere ahead.”

Perrin gave a twitch of surprise. Lan almost never disagreed with Moiraine, or at least not where anyone could overhear. He and Rand had been spending a good deal of time together, though, practicing the sword.

Moiraine’s dark eyes flashed, but what she said was “He needs to be in bed. Will you ask that washwater be brought, and another bedchamber prepared? This one needs a thorough cleaning and a new mattress.” Lan nodded and put his head into the anteroom for a moment, speaking quietly.

“I will sleep here, Moiraine.” Letting go of the bedpost, Rand pushed himself erect, grounding Callandor’s point on the littered carpet and resting both hands on the hilt. If he leaned a little on the sword, it did not show much. “I won’t be chased any more. Not even out of a bed.”

“Tai’shar Manetheren,” Lan murmured.

This time even Rhuarc looked startled, but if Moiraine heard the Warder compliment Rand, she gave no sign of it. She was staring at Rand, her face smooth but thunderheads in her eyes. Rand wore a quizzical little smile, as if wondering what she would try next.

Perrin edged toward the doors. If Rand and the Aes Sedai were going to match wills, he would just as soon be elsewhere. Lan did not appear to care; it was hard to tell with that stance of his, somehow standing with his back

straight and slouching at the same time. He could have been bored enough to sleep where he stood or ready to draw his sword; his manner suggested either, or both. Rhuarc stood much the same, but he was eyeing the doors, too.

“Stay where you are!” Moiraine did not look away from Rand, and her outflung finger pointed halfway between Perrin and Rhuarc, but Perrin’s feet stopped just the same. Rhuarc shrugged and folded his arms.

“Stubborn,” Moiraine muttered. This time the word was for Rand. “Very well. If you mean to stand there until you drop, you can use the time before you fall on your face to tell me what occurred here. I cannot teach you, but if you tell me perhaps I can see what you did wrong. A small chance, but perhaps I can.” Her voice sharpened.

“You must learn to control it, and I do not mean just because of things like this. If you do not learn to control the Power, it will kill you. You know that. I have told you often enough. You must teach yourself. You must find it within yourself.”

“I did nothing except survive,” he said in a dry voice. She opened her mouth, but he went on. “Do you think I could channel and not know it? I didn’t do it in my sleep. This happened awake.” He wavered, and caught himself on the sword.

“Even you could not channel anything but Spirit asleep,” Moiraine said coolly, “and this was never done with Spirit. I was about to ask what did happen.”

Perrin felt his hackles rising as Rand told his story. The axe had been bad enough, but at least the axe was something solid, something real. To have your own reflection jump out of mirrors at you Unconsciously he shifted his feet, trying not to stand on any fragments of glass.

Soon after he began speaking, Rand glanced behind him at the chest, a quick look, as if he did not want it observed. After a moment the slivers of silvered glass that were scattered across the lid of the chest stirred and slid off onto the carpet as though pushed by an unseen broom. Rand exchanged looks with Moiraine, then sat down slowly and went on. Perrin was not sure which of them had cleared the chest top. There was no mention of Berelain in the tale.

“It must have been one of the Forsaken,” Rand finished at last. “Maybe Sammael. You said he’s in Illian. Unless one of them is here in Tear. Could Sammael reach the Stone from Illian?”

“Not even if he held Callandor,” Moiraine told him. “There are limits. Sammael is only a man, not the Dark One.”

Only a man? Not a very good description, Perrin thought. A man who could channel, but who somehow had not gone mad; at least, not yet, not that anyone knew. A man perhaps as strong as Rand, but where Rand was trying to learn, Sammael knew every trick of his talents already. A man who had spent three thousand years trapped in the Dark One’s prison, a man who had gone over to the Shadow of his own choice. No. “Only a man” did not begin to describe Sammael, or any of the Forsaken, male or female.

“Then one of them is here. In the city.” Rand put his head down on his wrists, but jerked himself erect immediately, glaring at those in the room. “I’ll not be chased again. I’ll be the hound, first. I will find him - or her - and I will - ”

“Not one of the Forsaken,” Moiraine cut in. “I think not. This was too simple. And too complex.”

Rand spoke calmly. “No riddles, Moiraine. If not the Forsaken, who? Or what?”

The Aes Sedai’s face could have done for an anvil, yet she hesitated, feeling her way. There was no telling whether she was unsure of the answer or deciding how much to reveal.

“As the seals holding the Dark One’s prison weaken,” she said after a time, “it may be inevitable that a . . . miasma . . . will escape even while he is still held. Like bubbles rising from the things rotting on the bottom of a pond. But these bubbles will drift through the Pattern until they attach to a thread and burst.”

“Light!” It slipped out before Perrin could stop it. Moiraine’s eyes turned to him. “You mean what happened to . . . to Rand is going to start happening to everybody?”

“Not to everyone. Not yet, at least. In the beginning I think there will only be a few bubbles, slipping through cracks the Dark One can reach through. Later, who can say? And just as ta’veeren bend the other threads in the Pattern around them, I think perhaps ta’veeren will tend to attract these bubbles more powerfully than others do.” Her eyes said she knew Rand was not the only one to have had a waking nightmare. A brief touch of a smile, there and gone almost before he saw it, said he could keep silent if he wished to hold it secret from others. But she knew. “Yet in the months to come—the years, should we be lucky enough to have that long—I fear a good many people will see things to give them white hairs, if they survive.”

“Mat,” Rand said. “Do you know if he . . . ? Is he . . . ?”

“I will know soon enough,” Moiraine replied calmly. “What is done cannot be undone, but we can hope.” Whatever her tone, though, she smelled ill at ease until Rhuarc spoke.

“He is well. Or was. I saw him on my way here.”

“Going where?” Moiraine said with an edge in her voice.

“He looked to be heading for the servants’ quarters,” the Aielman told her. He knew that the three were ta’veeren, if not as much else as he thought he did, and he knew Mat well enough to add, “Not the stables, Aes Sedai. The other way, toward the river. And there are no boats at the Stone’s docks.” He did not stumble over words like “boat” and “dock” the way most of the Aid did, although in the Waste such things existed only in stories.

She nodded as if she had expected nothing else. Perrin shook his head; she was so used to hiding her real thoughts, she seemed to veil them out of habit.

Suddenly one of the doors opened and Bain and Chiad slipped in, without their spears. Bain was carrying a large white bowl and a fat pitcher with steam rising from the top. Chiad had towels folded under her arm.

“Why are you bringing this?” Moiraine demanded.

Chiad shrugged. “She would not come in.”

Rand barked a laugh. “Even the servants know enough to stay clear of me. Put it anywhere.”

“Your time is running out, Rand,” Moiraine said. “The Tairens are becoming used to you, after a fashion, and no one fears what is familiar as much as what is strange. How many weeks, or days, before someone tries to put an arrow in your back or poison in your food? How long before one of the Forsaken strikes, or another bubble comes sliding along the Pattern?”

“Don’t try to harry me, Moiraine.” He was blood filthy, half naked, more than half leaning on Callandor to stay sitting up, but he managed to fill those words with quiet command. “I will not run for you, either.”

“Choose your way soon,” she said. “And this time, inform me what you mean to do. My knowledge cannot aid you if you refuse to accept my help.”

“Your help?” Rand said wearily. “I’ll take your help. But I will decide, not you.” He looked at Perrin as if trying to tell him something without words, something he did not want the others to hear. Perrin had not a clue what it was. After a moment Rand sighed; his head sank a little. “I want to sleep. All of you, go away. Please. We will talk tomorrow.” His eyes flickered to Perrin again, underscoring the words for him.

Moiraine crossed the room to Bain and Chiad, and the two Aiel women leaned close so she could speak for their ears alone. Perrin heard only a buzz, and wondered if she was using the Power to stop him eavesdropping. She knew the keenness of his hearing. He was sure of it when Bain whispered back and he still could not make out anything. The Aes

Sedai had done nothing about his sense of smell, though. The Aiel women looked at Rand as they listened, and they smelled wary. Not afraid, but as if Rand were a large animal that would be dangerous if they misstepped.

The Aes Sedai turned back to Rand. "We will talk tomorrow. You cannot sit like a partridge waiting for a hunter's net." She was moving for the door before Rand could reply. Lan looked at Rand as if about to say something, but followed her without speaking.

"Rand?" Perrin said.

"We do what we have to." Rand did not look up from the dear hilt between his hands. "We all do what we have to." He smelled afraid.

Perrin nodded and followed Rhuarc out of the room. Moiraine and Lan were nowhere in sight. The Tairen officer was staring at the doors from ten paces off, trying to pretend the distance was his choice and had nothing to do with the four Aiel women watching him. The other two Maidens were still in the bedchamber, Perrin realized. He heard voices from the room.

"Go away," Rand said tiredly. "Just put that down and go away."

"If you can stand up," Chiad said cheerfully, "we will. Only stand."

There was the sound of water splashing into a bowl. "We have tended to wounded before," Bain said in soothing tones. "And I used to wash my brothers when they were little."

Rhuarc pushed the door shut, cutting off the rest.

"You do not treat him the way the Tairens do," Perrin said quietly. "No bowing and scraping. I don't think I have heard one of you call him Lord Dragon."

"The Dragon Reborn is a wetlander prophecy," Rhuarc said. "Ours is He Who Comes With the Dawn."

"I thought they were the same. Else why did you come to the Stone? Burn me, Rhuarc, you Aiel are the People of the Dragon, just as the Prophecies say. You've as good as admitted it, even if you won't say it out loud."

Rhuarc ignored the last part. "In your Prophecies of the Dragon, the fall of the Stone and the taking of Callandor proclaim that the Dragon has been Reborn. Our prophecy says only that the Stone must fall before He Who Comes With the Dawn appears to take us back to what was ours. They may be one man, but I doubt even the Wise Ones could say for sure. If Rand is the one, there are things he must do yet to prove it."

"What?" Perrin demanded.

"If he is the one, he will know, and do them. If he does not, then our search still goes on."

Something unreadable in the Aielman's voice pricked Perrin's ears. "And if he isn't the one you search for? What then, Rhuarc?"

"Sleep well and safely, Perrin." Rhuarc's soft boots made no sound on the black marble as he walked away.

The Tairen officer was still staring past the Maidens, smelling of fear, failing to mask the anger and hatred on his face. If the Aiel decided Rand was not He Who Comes With the Dawn . . . Perrin studied the Tairen officer's face and thought of the Maidens not being there, of the Stone empty of Aiel, and he shivered. He had to make sure Faile decided to leave. That was all there was for it. She had to decide to go, and without him.

Chapter 4 - Strings

Thom Merrill sprinkled sand across what he had written to blot the ink, then carefully poured the sand back into its jar and flipped the lid shut. Ruffling through the papers scattered in rough piles across the table-six tallow candles made fire a real danger, but he needed the light-he selected a crumpled sheet marred by an inkblot. Carefully he compared it with what he had written, then stroked a long white mustache with a thumb in satisfaction and permitted himself a leathery-faced smile. The High Lord Carleon himself would have thought it was his own hand.

Be wary. Your husband suspects.

Only those words, and no signature. Now if he could arrange for the High Lord Tedosian to find it where his wife, the Lady Alteima, might carelessly have left it

A knock sounded at the door, and he jumped. No one came to see him at this time of the night.

“A moment,” he called, hastily stuffing pens and inkpots and selected papers into a battered writing chest. “A moment while I put on a shirt.”

Locking the chest, he shoved it under the table where it might escape casual notice and ran an eye over his small, windowless room to see if he had left anything out that should not be seen. Hoops and balls for juggling littered his narrow, unmade bed, and lay among his shaving things on a single shelf with fire wands and small items for sleight of hand. His gleeman’s cloak, covered with loose patches in a hundred colors, hung from a peg on the wall along with his spare clothes and the hard leather cases holding his harp and flute. A woman’s diaphanous red silk scarf was tied around the strap of the harp case, but it could have belonged to anyone.

He was not sure he remembered who had tied it there; he tried to pay no more attention to one woman than any other, and all of it lighthearted and laughing. Make them laugh, even make them sigh, but avoid entanglements, that was his motto; he had no time for those. That was what he told himself.

“I’m coming.” He limped to the door irritably. Once he had drawn oohs and aahs from people who could hardly believe, even while they watched, that a rawboned, white-haired old man could do backsprings and handstands and flips, limber and quick as a boy. The limp had put an end to that, and he hated it. The leg ached worse when he was tired. He jerked open the door, and blinked in surprise. “Well. Come in, Mat. I thought you would be hard at work lightening lordlings’ purses.”

“They didn’t want to gamble any more tonight,” Mat said sourly, dropping onto the three-legged stool that served as a second chair. His coat was undone and his hair disheveled. His brown eyes darted around, never resting on one spot long, but their usual twinkle, suggesting that the lad saw something funny where no one else did, was missing tonight.

Thom frowned at him, considering. Mat never stepped across this threshold without a quip about the shabby room. He accepted Thom’s explanation that his sleeping beside the servants’ quarters would help people forget that he had arrived in the shadow of Aes Sedai, but Mat seldom let a chance for a joke pass. If he realized that the room also assured that no one could think of Thom having any connection to the Dragon Reborn, Mat, being Mat, probably thought that a reasonable wish. It had taken Thom all of two sentences, delivered in haste during a rare moment when no one was looking, to make Rand see the real point. Everyone listened to a gleeman, everyone watched him, but no one really saw him or remembered who he talked to, as long as he was only a gleeman, with his hedgerow entertainments fit for country folk and servants, and perhaps to amuse the ladies. That was how Tairens saw it. It was not as if he were a bard, after all.

What was bothering the boy to bring him down here at this hour? Probably one or another of the young women, and some old enough to know better, who had let themselves be caught by Mat's mischievous grin. Still, he would pretend it was one of Mat's usual visits until the lad said otherwise.

"I'll get the stones board. It is late, but we have time for one game." He could not resist adding, "Would you care for a wager on it?" He would not have tossed dice with Mat for a copper, but stones was another matter; he thought there was too much order and pattern in stones for Mat's strange luck.

"What? Oh. No. It's too late for games. Thom, did . . . ? Did anything . . . happen down here?"

Leaning the stones board against a table leg, Thom dug his tabac pouch and long-stemmed pipe out of the litter remaining on the table. "Such as what?" he asked, thumbing the bowl full. He had time to stick a twist of paper in the flame of one of the candles, puff the pipe alight and blow out the spill before Mat answered.

"Such as Rand going insane, that's what. No, you'd not have had to ask if it had."

A prickling made Thom shift his shoulders, but he blew a blue-gray streamer of smoke as calmly as he could and took his chair, stretching his gimpy leg out in front of him. "What happened?"

Mat drew a deep breath, then let everything out in a rush. "The playing cards tried to kill me. The Amyrlin, and the High Lord, and . . . I didn't dream it, Thom. That's why those puffed-up jackdaws don't want to gamble anymore. They're afraid it will happen again. Thom, I'm thinking of leaving Tear."

The prickling felt as if he had blackwasp nettles stuffed down his back. Why had he not left Tear himself long since? Much the wisest thing. Hundreds of villages lay out there, waiting for a gleeman to entertain and amaze them. And each with an inn or two full of wine to drown memories. But if he did, Rand would have no one except Moiraine to keep the High Lords from maneuvering him into corners, and maybe cutting his throat. She could do it, of course. Using different methods than his. He thought she could. She was Cairhienin, which meant she had probably taken in the Game of Houses with her mother's milk. And she would tie another string to Rand for the White Tower while she was about it. Mesh him in an Aes Sedai net so strong he would never escape. But if the boy was going mad already . . .

Fool, Thom called himself. A pure fool to stay mixed in this because of something fifteen years in the past. Staying would not change that; what was done was done. He had to see Rand face-to-face, no matter what he had told him about keeping clear. Perhaps no one would think it too odd if a gleeman asked to perform a song for the Lord Dragon, a song especially composed. He knew a deservedly obscure Kandori tune, praising some unnamed lord for his greatness and courage in grandiose terms that never quite managed to name deeds or places. It had probably been bought by some lord who had no deeds worth naming. Well, it would serve him now. Unless Moiraine decided it was strange. That would be as bad as the High Lords taking notice. I am a fool! I should be out of here tonight!

He was roiling inside, his stomach churning acid, but he had spent long years learning to keep his face straight before ever he put on a gleeman's cloak. He puffed three smoke rings, one inside the other, and said, "You have been thinking of leaving Tear since the day you walked into the Stone."

Perched on the edge of the stool, Mat shot him an angry look. "And I mean to. I do. Why not come with me, Thom? There are towns where they think the Dragon Reborn hasn't drawn a breath yet, where nobody's given a thought to the bloody Prophecies of the bloody Dragon in years, if ever. Places where they think the Dark One is a grandmother's tale, and Trollocs are travelers' wild stories, and Myrddraal ride shadows to scare children. You could play your harp and tell your stories, and I could find a game of dice. We could live like lords, traveling as we want, staying where we want, with no one trying to kill us."

That hit too close for comfort. Well, he was a fool and there it was; he just had to make the best of it. "If you really mean to go, why haven't you?"

"Moiraine watches me," Mat said bitterly. "And when she isn't, she has somebody else doing it."

“I know. Aes Sedai don’t like to let someone go once they lay hands on them.” It was more than that, he was sure, more than what was openly known, certainly, but Mat denied any such thing, and no one else who knew was talking either, if anyone besides Moiraine did know. It hardly mattered. He liked Mat - he even owed him, in a fashion - but Mat and his troubles were a street-corner raree com-pared to Rand. “But I cannot believe she really has someone watching you all the time.”

“As good as. She’s always asking people where I am, what I’m doing. It gets back to me. Do you know anybody who won’t tell an Aes Sedai what she wants to know? I don’t. As good as being watched.”

“You could avoid eyes if you put your mind to it. I’ve never seen anyone as good at sneaking about as you. I mean that as a compliment.”

“Something always comes up,” Mat muttered. “There’s so much gold to be had here. And there’s a big-eyed girl in the kitchens who likes a little kiss and tickle, and one of the maids has hair like silk, to her waist, and the roundest” He trailed off as if he had suddenly realized how foolish he sounded.

“Have you considered that maybe it’s because - ”

“If you mention ta’veren, Thom, I’m leaving.”

Thom changed what he had been going to say. “ - that maybe it’s because Rand is your friend and you don’t want to desert him?”

“Desert him!” The boy jumped up, kicking over the stool. “Thom, he is the bloody Dragon Reborn! At least, that’s what he and Moiraine say. Maybe he is. He can channel, and he has that bloody sword that looks like glass. Prophecies! I don’t know. But I know I would have to be as crazy as these Tairens to stay.” He paused. “You don’t think You don’t think Moiraine is keeping me here, do you? With the Power?”

“I do not believe she can,” Thom said slowly. He knew a good bit about Aes Sedai, enough to have some idea how much he did not know, and he thought he was right on this.

Mat raked his fingers through his hair. “Thom, I think about leaving all the time, but I get these strange feelings. Almost as if something was going to happen. Something. . . . Momentous; that’s the word. It’s like knowing there’ll be fireworks for Sunday, only I don’t know what it is I’m expecting. Whenever I think too much about leaving, it happens. And suddenly I’ve found some reason to stay another day. Always just one more bloody day. Doesn’t that sound like Aes Sedai work to you?”

Thom swallowed the word ta’veren and took his pipe from between his teeth to peer into the smoldering tabac. He did not know much about ta’veren, but then no one did except the Aes Sedai, or maybe some of the Ogier. “I was never much good at helping people with their problems.” And worse with my own, he thought. “With an Aes Sedai close to hand, I’d advise most people to ask her for help.” Advice I’d not take myself.

“Ask Moiraine!”

“I suppose that is out of the question in this case. But Nynaeve was your Wisdom back in Emond’s Field. Village Wisdoms are used to answering people’s questions, helping with their problems.”

Mat gave a raucous snort of laughter. “And put up with one of her lectures about drinking and gambling and . . . ? Thom, she acts like I’m ten years old. Sometimes I think she believes I’ll marry a nice girl and settle down on my father’s farm.”

“Some men would not find it an objectionable life,” Thom said quietly.

“Well, I would. I want more than cows and sheep and tabac for the rest of my life. I want - ” Mat shook his head. “All these holes in memory. Sometimes I think if I could just fill them in, I’d know Burn me, I don’t know what I’d know, but I know I want to know it. That’s a twisty riddle, isn’t it?”

“I’m not certain even an Aes Sedai can help with that. A gleeman surely can’t.”

“I said no Aes Sedai!”

Thom sighed. “Calm yourself, boy. I was not suggesting it.”

“I am leaving. As soon as I can fetch my things and find a horse. Not a minute longer.”

“In the middle of the night? The morning will do.” He refrained from adding, If you really do leave. “Sit down. Relax. We’ll play a game of stones. I have a jar of wine here, somewhere.”

Mat hesitated, glancing at the door. Finally he jerked his coat straight. “The morning will do.” He sounded uncertain, but he picked up the overturned stool and set it beside the table. “But no wine for me,” he added as he sat down. “Strange enough things happen when my head is clear. I want to know the difference.”

Thom was thoughtful as he put the board and the bags of stones on the table. Just that easily the lad was diverted. Pulled along by an even stronger ta’veren named Rand al’Thor, was how Thom saw it. It occurred to him to wonder if he was caught in the same way. His life had certainly not been headed toward the Stone of Tear and this room when he first met Rand, but since then it had been twitched about like a kite string. If he decided to leave, say if Rand really had gone mad, would he find reasons to keep putting it off?

“What is this, Thom?” Mat’s boot had encountered the writing case under the table. “Is it all right if I move it out of my way?”

“Of course. Go right ahead.” He winced inside as Mat shoved the case aside roughly with his foot. He hoped he had corked all the ink bottles tightly. “Choose,” he said, holding out his fists.

Mat tapped the left, and Thom opened it to reveal a smooth black stone, flat and round. The boy chortled at having the first go and placed the stone on the crosshatched board. No one seeing the eagerness in his eyes would have suspected that only moments before he had been twice as eager to go. A greatness he refused to recognize clinging to his back, and an Aes Sedai intent on keeping him for one of her pets. The lad was well and truly caught.

If he was caught, too, Thom decided, it would be worth it to help one man, at least, keep free of Aes Sedai. Worth it, to make a payment on that fifteen-year-old debt.

Suddenly and strangely content, he set a white stone. “Did I ever tell you,” he said around his pipestem, “about the wager I once made with a Domani woman? She had eyes that could drink a man’s soul, and an odd-looking red bird she had bought off a Sea Folk ship. She claimed it could tell the future. This bird had a fat yellow beak nearly as long as its body, and it . . .”

Chapter 5 - Questioners

“They should be back by now.” Egwene fluttered the painted silk fan vigorously, glad the nights were at least a little cooler than the days. Tairen women carried the fans all the time - the nobles, at least, and the wealthy - but as far as she could see they did no good at all except when the sun was down, and not much then. Even the lamps, great golden, mirrored things on silvered wall brackets, seemed to add to the heat. “What can be keeping them?” An hour, Moiraine had promised them, for the first time in days, and then she had left without explanation after a bare five minutes. “Did she give any hint of why they wanted her, Aviendha? Or who wanted her, for that matter?”

Seated cross-legged on the floor beside the door, large green eyes startling in her dark tanned face, the Aiel woman shrugged. In coat and breeches and soft boots, shoufa looped about her neck, she appeared unarmed. “Careen whispered her message to Moiraine Sedai. I would not have been proper to listen. I am sorry, Aes Sedai.”

Guiltily, Egwene fingered the Great Serpent ring on her right hand, the golden serpent biting its own tail. As an Accepted, she should have been wearing it on the third finger of her left hand, but letting the High Lords believe that they had four full Aes Sedai inside the Stone kept them on their best manners, or what passed for manners among Tairen nobles. Moiraine did not lie, of course; she never said they were more than Accepted. But she never said they were Accepted, either, and let everyone think what they wanted to think, believe what they thought they saw. Moiraine could not lie, but she could make truth dance a fine jig.

It was not the first time Egwene and the others had pretended to full sisterhood since leaving the Tower, but more and more she felt uncomfortable deceiving Aviendha. She liked the Aiel woman, thought they could be friends if they could ever come to know one another; but that hardly seemed possible as long as Aviendha thought Egwene was Aes Sedai. The Aiel woman was there only at Moiraine’s order, issued for unspoken purposes of her own. Egwene suspected it was to give them an Aiel bodyguard, as if they had not learned to protect themselves. Still, even if she and Aviendha did become friends, she could not tell her the truth. The best way to keep a secret was to make sure no one knew who did not absolutely have to know. Another point Moiraine had made. Sometimes Egwene found herself wishing the Aes Sedai could be wrong, glaringly wrong, just once. In a way that would not mean disaster, of course. That was the rub.

“Tanchico,” Nynaeve muttered. Her dark, wrist-thick braid hung down her back to her waist as she stared out of one of the narrow windows, casements swung out in the hope of catching a night breeze. On the broad River Erinin below bobbed the lanterns of a few fishing boats that had not ventured downriver, but Egwene doubted she saw them. “There is nothing for it but to go to Tanchico, it seems.” Nynaeve gave an unconscious hitch to her green dress, with its wide neck that bared her shoulders; she did that a good deal. She would have denied wearing the dress for Lan, Moiraine’s Warder - she would have if Egwene had dared make the suggestion - but green, blue and white seemed to be Lan’s favorite colors on women, and every dress that was not green, blue or white had vanished from Nynaeve’s wardrobe. “Nothing for it.” She did not sound happy.

Egwene caught herself giving an upward tug to her own dress. They felt odd, these dresses that just clung to the shoulders. On the other hand, she did not believe she could bear to be more covered. Light as it was, the pale red linen felt like wool. She wished she could bring herself to wear the filmy gowns Berelain wore. Not that they were suitable for public eyes, but they certainly did appear to be cool.

Stop fretting over comfort, she told herself sternly. Keep your mind on the business at hand. “Perhaps,” she said aloud. “Myself, I am not convinced.”

A long, narrow table, polished till it glistened, ran down the middle of the room. A tall chair stood at the end near Egwene, lightly carved and touched here and there with gilt, quite plain for Tear, while the sidechairs had progressively lower backs, until those at the far end seemed little more than benches. Egwene had no idea what purpose the Tairens had put the room to. She and the others used it for questioning two prisoners taken when the Stone fell.

She could not force herself to go into the dungeons, though Rand had ordered all of the implements that had decorated the guardroom walls melted or burned. Neither Nynaeve nor Elayne had been eager to return, either. Besides, this brightly lit room, with its clean-swept green tile floor and its wall panels carved with the Three Crescents of Tear, was

a sharp contrast to the grim, gray stone of the cells, all dim and dank and dirty. That had to have some softening effect on the two women in prisoners' rough-woven woolens.

Only that drab brown dress, however, would have told most people that Joiya Byir, standing beyond the table with her back turned, was a prisoner at all. She had been White Ajah, and had lost none of the Whites' cool arrogance on shifting her allegiance to the Black. Every line of her proclaimed that she stared rigidly at the far wall of her own choice, and for no other reason. Only a woman who could channel would have seen the thumb-thick flows of Air that held Joiya's arms to her sides and lashed her ankles together. A cage woven of Air kept her eyes straight ahead. Even her ears were stopped up, so she could not hear what anyone said until they wanted her to.

Once again Egwene checked the shield woven from Spirit that blocked Joiya from touching the True Source. It held, as she knew it must. She herself had woven all the flows around Joiya and tied them to maintain themselves, but she could not be easy in the same room with a Darkfriend who had the ability to channel, even if it was blocked. Worse than just a Darkfriend. Black Ajah. Murder was the least of Joiya's crimes. She should have been bowed down under her weight of broken oaths, blasted lives and blighted souls.

Joiya's fellow prisoner, her sister in the Black Ajah, lacked her strength. Standing stoop-shouldered at the far end of the table, head down, Amico Nagoyin seemed to sink in on herself under Egwene's gaze. There was no need to shield her. Amico had been stilled during her capture. Still able to sense the True Source, she would never again touch it, never again channel. The desire to, the need to, would remain, as sharp as the need to breathe, and her loss would be there for as long as she lived, saidar forever out of reach. Egwene wished she could find in herself even a shred of pity. But she did not wish for it very hard.

Amico murmured something at the tabletop.

"What?" Nynaeve demanded. "Speak up."

Amico raised her face humbly on its slender neck. She was still a beautiful woman, with large, dark eyes, but there was something different about her that Egwene could not quite put her finger on. Not the fear that made her clutch her coarse prisoner's dress with both hands. Something else.

Swallowing, Amico said, "You should go to Tanchico."

"You've told us that twenty times," Nynaeve said roughly. "Fifty times. Tell us something new. Name names we do not already know. Who still in the White Tower is Black Ajah?"

"I do not know. You must believe me." Amico sounded tired, utterly beaten. Not at all the way she had sounded when they were the prisoners and she the gaoler. "Before we left the Tower, I knew only Liandrin, Chesmal and Rianna. No one knew more than two or three others, I think. Except Liandrin. I have told you everything I know."

"Then you are remarkably ignorant for a woman who expected to rule part of the world when the Dark One breaks free," Egwene said dryly, snapping her fan shut for emphasis. It still stunned her, how easily she could say that now. Her stomach still clenched, and icy fingers still crawled her spine, but she no longer wanted to scream, or run weeping. It was possible to become used to anything.

"I overheard Liandrin that once, talking to Temaile," Amico said wearily, starting a tale she had told them many times. In the first days of her captivity she had tried to improve her story, but the more she elaborated the more she had tangled herself in her own lies. Now she almost always told it the same way, word for word. "If you could have seen Liandrin's face when she saw me She would have murdered me on the spot had she thought I had heard anything. And Temaile likes to hurt people. She enjoys it. I only heard a little before they saw me. Liandrin said there was something in Tanchico, something dangerous to . . . to him." She meant Rand. She could not say his name, and a mention of the Dragon Reborn was enough to send her into tears. "Liandrin said it was dangerous to whoever used it, too. Almost as dangerous as to . . . him. That is why she had not already gone after it. And she said being able to channel would not protect him. She said, 'When we find it, his filthy ability will bind him for us.'" Sweat ran down her face, but she shivered almost uncontrollably.

Not a word had changed.

Egwene opened her mouth, but Nynaeve spoke first. "I've heard enough of this. Let us see if the other has anything new to say."

Egwene glared at her, and Nynaeve stared back just as hard, neither blinking. Sometimes she thinks she's still the Wisdom, Egwene thought grimly, and I'm still the village girl to teach about herbs. She had better realize things are different now. Nynaeve was strong in the Power, stronger than Egwene, but only when she could actually manage to channel; unless angry, Nynaeve could not channel at all.

Elayne usually smoothed things over when it came to this, as it did more often than it should. By the time Egwene thought of smoothing matters herself, she had almost always dug in her heels and flared back, and trying to be soothing then would only be backing down. That was how Nynaeve would see it, she was sure. She could not remember Nynaeve ever making any move to back down, so why should she? This time Elayne was not there; Moiraine had summoned the Daughter-Heir with a word and a gesture to follow the Maiden who had come for the Aes Sedai. Without her, the tension stretched, each of the Accepted waiting for the other to blink first. Aviendha barely breathed; she kept herself strictly out of their confrontations. No doubt she considered it simple wisdom to stand clear.

Strangely, it was Amico who broke the impasse this time, though likely all she meant to do was demonstrate her cooperation. She turned to face the far wall, waiting patiently to be bound.

The foolishness of it struck Egwene suddenly. She was the only woman in the room who could channel-unless Nynaeve grew angry, or Joiya's shield failed; she tested the weave of Spirit again without thinking-and she indulged in a staring match while Amico waited to accept her bonds. At another time she might have laughed at herself aloud. Instead, she opened herself to saidar, that never-seen, ever-felt glowing warmth that seemed always to be just beyond the corner of her eye. The One Power filled her, like joyous life itself redoubled, and she wove the flows around Amico.

Nynaeve merely grunted; it was doubtful she was mad enough to sense what Egwene was doing-she could not, without her temper up - yet she could see Amico stiffen as the flows of Air touched her, then slump, half supported by the flows, as if to show how little she was resisting.

Aviendha shuddered, the way she had taken to doing whenever she knew the Power was being channeled near her.

Egwene wove blocks for Amico's ears - questioning them one at a time did little good if they could hear each other's stories - and turned to Joiya. She shifted her fan from hand to hand so she could wipe them on her dress, and stopped with a grimace of distaste. Her sweaty palms had nothing to do with the temperature.

"Her face," Aviendha said abruptly. And surprisingly; she almost never spoke unless addressed by Moiraine or one of the others. "Amico's face. She does not have the look she did, as if the years had passed her by. Not as much as she did. Is that because she was . . . because she was stilled?" she finished in a breathless rush. She had picked up a few habits being so much around them. No woman of the Tower could speak of stilling without a chill.

Egwene moved down the table, to where she could see Amico's face from the side and yet stay out of Joiya's vision. Joiya's eyes always turned her stomach to a lump of ice.

Aviendha was right; that was the difference she herself had noticed and not understood. Amico looked young, perhaps younger than her years, but it was not quite the agelessness of Aes Sedai who had worked years with the One Power. "You have sharp eyes, Aviendha, but I don't know if this has anything to do with stilling. It must, though, I suppose. I don't know what else could cause it."

She realized that did not sound very much like an Aes Sedai, who generally spoke as if they knew everything; when an Aes Sedai said she did not know, she usually managed to make her denial appear to cloak volumes of knowledge. While she was racking her brain for something properly portentous, Nynaeve came to her rescue.

"Relatively few Aes Sedai have ever been burned out, Aviendha, and far fewer stilled."

“Burned out” was what it was called when it happened by accident; officially, stilling resulted from trial and sentence. Egwene could not see the point of it, really; it was like having two words for falling down the stairs, depending on whether you tripped or were pushed. For that, most Aes Sedai seemed to see it the same, except when teaching novices or Accepted. Three words, actually. Men were “gentled,” must be gentled, before they went mad. Only now there was Rand, and the Tower did not dare gentle him.

Nynaeve had put on a lecturing tone, no doubt trying to sound Aes Sedai. She was doing an imitation of Sheriam before a class, Egwene realized, hands clasped at her waist, smiling slightly as if it were all so simple when you applied yourself.

“Stilling is not a thing anyone would choose to study, you understand,” Nynaeve continued. “It is generally accepted to be irreversible. What makes a woman able to channel cannot be replaced once it is removed, any more than a hand that has been cut off can be Healed back into existence.” At least, no one had ever been able to Heal stilling. There had been attempts. What Nynaeve said was generally true, yet some sisters of the Brown Ajah would study almost anything if given the chance, and some Yellow sisters, the best Healers, would try to learn to Heal anything. But even a hint of success at Healing a woman who had been stilled was nonexistent. “Aside from that one hard fact, little is known. Women who are stilled seldom live more than a few years. They seem to stop wanting to live; they give up. As I said, it is an unpleasant subject.”

Aviendha shifted uncomfortably. “I only thought that might be it,” she said in a low voice.

Egwene thought it might be, too. She resolved to ask Moiraine. If she ever saw her without Aviendha there as well. It seemed to her that their deceit got in the way almost as much as it helped.

“Let us see if Joiya still tells the same tale, too.” Even so, she had to take herself in hand before she could unravel the flows of Air woven around the Darkfriend.

Joiya must have been stiff from standing so still for so long, but she turned smoothly to face them. The sweat beading her forehead could not diminish her dignity and presence, any more than her drab, rough dress lessened the sense of her being there by choice. She was a handsome woman with something motherly about her face despite its ageless smoothness, something comforting. But the dark eyes set in that face made a hawk’s look kind. She smiled at them, a smile that never reached those eyes. “The Light illumine you. May the hand of the Creator shelter you.”

“I will not hear that out of you.” Nynaeve’s voice was quiet and calm, but she tossed her braid over her shoulder and gripped the end in her fist, the way she did when angry or uneasy. Egwene did not think she was uneasy; Joiya did not seem to make Nynaeve’s skin crawl as she did Egwene’s.

“I have repented my sins,” Joiya said smoothly. “The Dragon is Reborn, and he holds Callandor. The Prophecies are fulfilled. The Dark One must fail. I can see that, now. My repentance is real. No one can walk so long in the Shadow that she cannot come again to the Light.”

Nynaeve’s face had grown darker by the word. Egwene was sure she was furious enough to channel now, but if she did it would probably be to strangle Joiya. Egwene did not believe Joiya’s repentance any more than Nynaeve, of course, but the woman’s information might be real. Joiya was quite capable of a cold decision to go over to what she believed would be the winning side. Or she might only be buying time, lying in hope of rescue.

Lies should not have been possible for an Aes Sedai, even one who had lost all right to the name, not outright lies. The very first of the Three Oaths, taken with the Oath Rod in hand, should have seen to that. But whatever oaths to the Dark One were sworn on joining the Black Ajah, they seemed to sever all Three Oaths.

Well. The Amyrlin had sent them out to hunt the Black Ajah, to hunt Liandrin and the other twelve who had done murder and fled the Tower. And all they had to go on now was what these two could, or would, tell them.

“Give us your tale again,” Egwene commanded. “Use different words, this time. I am tired of listening to memorized stories.” If she was lying, there was more chance she would trip herself up telling it differently. “We will hear you out.” That was for Nynaeve’s benefit; she gave a loud sniff, then a curt nod.

Joiya shrugged. “As you wish. Let me see. Different words. The false Dragon, Mazrim Taim, who was captured in Saldaea, can channel with incredible strength. Perhaps as much as Rand al’Thor, or nearly so, if the reports can be believed. Before he can be brought to Tar Valon and gentled, Liandrin means to break him free. He will be proclaimed as the Dragon Reborn, his name given as Rand al’Thor, and then he will be set to destruction on such a scale as the world has not seen since the War of the Hundred Years.”

“That is impossible,” Nynaeve broke in. “The Pattern will not accept a false Dragon, not now that Rand has proclaimed himself.”

Egwene sighed. They had had this out before, but Nynaeve always argued the point. She was not sure Nynaeve really believed that Rand was the Dragon Reborn, no matter what she said, no matter the Prophecies and Callandor and the fall of the Stone. Nynaeve was just enough older than he to have looked after him when he was a child, just as she had after Egwene. He was an Emond’s Fielder, and Nynaeve still saw her first duty as protecting the people of Emond’s Field.

“Is that what Moiraine told you?” Joiya asked with a touch of contempt. “Moiraine has spent little time in the Tower since she was raised, and not much more with her sisters anywhere. I suppose she knows the workings of village life, perhaps even something of the politics between nations, but she does claim certainty about matters learned only through study and discussion with those who know. Still, she might be correct. Mazrim Taim might well find it impossible to proclaim himself. But if others do it for him, is there a difference that matters?”

Egwene wished Moiraine would come back. The woman would not speak so confidently if Moiraine were there. Joiya knew very well that she and Nynaeve were only Accepted. It made a difference.

“Go on,” Egwene said, almost as harshly as Nynaeve. “And remember, different words.”

“Of course,” Joiya replied, as though responding to a gracious invitation, but her eyes glittered like chips of black glass. “You can see the obvious result. Rand al’Thor will be blamed for the depredations of . . . Rand al’Thor. Even proof that they are not the same man may well be dismissed. After all, who can say what tricks the Dragon Reborn can play? Perhaps put himself in two places at once. Even the sort who have always rallied to a false Dragon will hesitate in the face of the indiscriminate slaughter and worse laid at his feet. Those who do not shrink at such butchery will seek out the Rand al’Thor who seems to revel in blood. The nations will unite as they did in the Aiel War . . .” She gave Aviendha an apologetic smile, incongruous beneath those merciless eyes. “. . . but no doubt much more quickly. Even the Dragon Reborn cannot stand against that, not forever. He will be crushed before the Last Battle even begins, by the very ones he was meant to save. The Dark One will break free, the day of Tarmon Gai’don will come, and the Shadow will cover the earth and remake the Pattern for all time. That is Liandrin’s plan.” There was not a hint of satisfaction in her voice, but no horror, either.

It was a plausible story, more plausible than Amico’s tale of a few eavesdropped sentences, but Egwene believed Amico and not Joiya. Perhaps because she wanted to. A vague threat in Tanchico was easier to face than this fully fleshed plan to turn every hand against Rand. No, she thought. Joiya is lying. I am sure she is. Yet they could not afford to ignore either story. But they could not chase after both, not with any hope of success.

The door banged open, and Moiraine strode in, with Elayne following. The Daughter-Heir was frowning at the floor in front of her toes, lost in dark thoughts, but Moiraine For once the Aes Sedai’s serenity had vanished; fury painted her face.

Chapter 6 - Doorways

Rand al'Thor," Moiraine told the air in a low, tight voice, "is a mule-headed, stone-willed fool of a . . . a . . . a man!"

Elayne lifted her chin angrily. Her childhood nurse, Lini, used to say you could weave silk from pig bristles before you could make a man anything but a man. But that was no excuse for Rand.

"We breed them that way in the Two Rivers." Nynaeve was suddenly all half-suppressed smiles and satisfaction. She seldom hid her dislike of the Aes Sedai half as well as she thought she did. "Two Rivers women never have any trouble with them." From the startled look Egwene gave her, that was a lie big enough to warrant having her mouth washed out.

Moiraine's brows drew down as if she were about to reply to Nynaeve in harder kind. Elayne stirred, but she could not find anything to say that would head off argument. Rand kept dancing through her head. He had no right! But what right did she have?

Egwene spoke instead. "What did he do, Moiraine?"

The Aes Sedai's eyes swung to Egwene, a stare so hard that the younger woman stepped back and snapped her fan open, nervously fluttering it at her face. But Moiraine's gaze settled on Joiya and Amico, the one watching her warily, the other bound and unaware of anything but the far wall.

Elayne gave a small start at realizing Joiya was not bound. Hastily she checked the shield blocking the woman from the True Source. She hoped none of the others had noticed her jump; Joiya frightened her nearly to death, but Egwene and Nynaeve were no more scared of the woman than Moiraine was. Sometimes it was difficult being as brave as the Daughter-Heir of Andor should be; she often found herself wishing she could manage as well as those two.

"The guards," Moiraine muttered as if to herself. "I saw them in the corridor still, and never thought." She smoothed her dress, composing herself with an obvious effort. Elayne did not believe she had ever seen Moiraine so out of herself as tonight. But then, the Aes Sedai had cause. No more than I do. Or do I? She found herself trying not to meet Egwene's eyes.

Had it been Egwene or Nynaeve or Elayne who was off balance, Joiya would surely have said something, subtle and of two meanings, calculated to upset them a little more. If they had been alone, at least. With Moiraine, she only watched uneasily, silently.

Moiraine walked the length of the table, her calm restored. Joiya was nearly a head the taller, but had she also been dressed in silks, there would have been no doubt which was in command of the situation. Joiya did not quite draw back, but her hands tightened on her skirts for a moment before she could master them.

"I have made arrangements," Moiraine said quietly. "In four days you will be taken upriver by ship, to Tar Valon and the Tower. There they are not so gentle as we have been. If you have not found the truth so far, find it before you reach Southharbor, or you will assuredly go to the gallows in the Traitors' Court. I will not speak to you again unless you send word that you have something new to tell. And I do not want to hear a word from you - not one word - unless it is new. Believe me, it will save you pain in Tar Valon. Aviendha, will you tell the captain to bring in two of his men?" Elayne blinked as the Aiel woman unfolded herself and vanished through the doorway; sometimes Aviendha could be so still she seemed not to be there.

Joiya's face worked as if she wanted to speak, but Moiraine stared up at her, and finally the Darkfriend turned her eyes away. They glittered like a raven's, full of black murder, but she held her tongue.

To Elayne's eyes a golden-white glow suddenly surrounded Moiraine, the glow of a woman embracing saidar. Only another woman trained to channel could have seen it. The flows holding Amico unraveled more quickly than Elayne could have managed. She was stronger than Moiraine, potentially, at least. In the Tower, the women teaching her had been almost unbelieving at her potential, and at Egwene's and Nynaeve's. Nynaeve was the strongest of them all -

when she could manage to channel. But Moiraine had the experience. What they were still learning to do, Moiraine could do half asleep. Yet there were some things Elayne could do, and the other two, that the Aes Sedai could not. It was a small satisfaction in the face of how easily Moiraine cowed Joiya.

Freed, able to hear, Amico turned and became aware of Moiraine for the first time. With a squeak, she dropped a curtsy as deep as any new novice. Joiya was glaring at the door, avoiding anyone's gaze. Nynaeve, arms crossed and knuckles white from gripping her braid, was giving Moiraine a stare almost as murderous as Joiya's. Egwene fingered her skirt and glowered at Joiya; Elayne frowned, wishing she were as brave as Egwene, wishing she did not feel she was betraying her friend. Into that walked the captain with two more Defenders in black and gold on his heels. Aviendha was not with them; it seemed she had taken her opportunity to escape Aes Sedai.

The grizzled officer, two short white plumes on his rimmed helmet, shied as his eyes met Joiya's, though she did not even seem to see him. His gaze skittered from woman to woman uncertainly. The mood of the room was trouble, and a wise man did not want any part of trouble among this sort of women. The two soldiers clutched their tall spears to their sides almost as if they feared they might have to defend themselves. Perhaps they did fear it.

"You will take these two back to their cells," Moiraine told the officer curtly. "Repeat your instructions. I want no mistakes."

"Yes, Ae - " The captain's throat seemed to seize. He gulped a breath. "Yes, my Lady," he said, watching her anxiously to see if that would do. When she only continued to look at him, waiting, he gave an audible sigh of relief. "The prisoners are to talk to no one except myself, not even each other. Twenty men in the guardroom and two outside each cell at all times, four if a cell door has to be opened for any reason. I myself will watch their food prepared and take it to them. All as you have commanded, my Lady." A hint of question tinged his voice. A hundred rumors floated through the Stone concerning the prisoners, and why two women needed to be guarded so heavily. And there were whispered stories about the Aes Sedai, each darker than the last.

"Very good," Moiraine said. "Take them."

It was not clear who was more eager to leave the room, the prisoners or the guards. Even Joiya stepped quickly, as if she could not bear keeping silent near Moiraine for another moment.

Elayne was certain she had kept her face calm since entering the room, but Egwene came to her, put an arm around her. "What is the matter, Elayne? You look about to cry."

The concern in her voice made Elayne feel like bursting into tears. Light! she thought. I will not be that silly. I will not! "A weeping woman is a bucket with no bottom." Lini had been full of sayings like that.

"Three times - " Nynaeve burst out at Moiraine, "only three! - you have consented to help us question them. This time you vanish before we begin, and now you calmly announce you are sending them off to Tar Valon! If you will not help, at least do not interfere!"

"Do not presume on the Amyrlin's authority too far," Moiraine said coolly. "She may have set you to chase Liandrin, but you are still only Accepted, and woefully ignorant, whatever letters you carry. Or did you mean to keep questioning them forever before reaching a decision? You Two Rivers people seem to work at avoiding decisions that must be made." Nynaeve opened and closed her mouth, eyes bulging, as if wondering which accusation to answer first, but Moiraine turned to Egwene and Elayne. "Pull yourself together, Elayne. How you can carry out the Amyrlin's orders if you think every land has the customs you were born to, I do not know. And I do not know why you are so upset. Do not let your feelings hurt others."

"What do you mean?" Egwene said. "What customs? What are you talking about?"

"Berelain was in Rand's chambers," Elayne said in a small voice before she could stop herself. Her eyes flickered guiltily toward Egwene. Surely she had kept her own feelings hidden.

Moiraine gave her a reproachful look and sighed. "I would have spared you this if I could, Egwene. If Elayne had not let her disgust with Berelain overcome her sense. The customs of Mayene are not those either of you were born to. Egwene, I know what you feel for Rand, but you must realize by now that nothing can come of it. He belongs to the Pattern, and to history."

Seemingly ignoring the Aes Sedai, Egwene peered into Elayne's eyes. Elayne wanted to look away, and could not. Suddenly Egwene leaned closer, whispering behind a cupped hand. "I love him. Like a brother. And you like a sister. I wish you well of him."

Elayne's eyes widened, a smile spreading slowly across her face. She answered Egwene's hug with a fierce hug of her own. "Thank you," she murmured softly. "I love you too, sister. Oh, thank you."

"She got it wrong," Egwene said half to herself, a delighted grin blooming on her face. "Have you ever been in love, Moiraine?"

What a startling question. Elayne could not imagine the Aes Sedai in love. Moiraine was Blue Ajah, and it was said Blue sisters gave all their passions to causes.

The slender woman was not at all taken aback. For a long moment she looked levelly at the pair of them, each with an arm around the other. Finally she said, "I could wager I know the face of the man I will marry better than either of you knows that of your future husband."

Egwene gaped in surprise.

"Who?" Elayne gasped.

The Aes Sedai appeared regretful of having spoken. "Perhaps I only meant we share an ignorance. Do not read too much into a few words." She looked at Nynaeve consideringly. "Should I ever choose a man - should, I say - it will not be Lan. That much I will say."

That was a sop to Nynaeve, but Nynaeve did not seem to like hearing it. Nynaeve had what Lini would have called "a hard patch to hoe," loving not just a Warder but a man who tried to deny returning her love. Fool man that he was, he talked of the war against the Shadow he could not stop fighting and could never win, of refusing to dress Nynaeve in widow's clothes for her wedding feast. Silly things of that sort. Elayne did not see how Nynaeve put up with it. She was not a very patient woman.

"If you are finished chatting about men," Nynaeve said acidly, as though to prove just that, "perhaps we can go back to what is important?" Gripping her braid hard, she picked up speed and force as she went along, like a waterwheel with the gears disengaged. "How are we to decide whether Joiya is lying, or Amico, if you send them away? Or whether they both are? Or neither? I don't relish dithering here, Moiraine, no matter what you think, but I have walked into too many traps to want to walk into another. And I don't want to run after Jak-o'-the-Wisps, either. I . . . we . . . are the ones the Amyrlin sent after Liandrin and her cronies. Since you don't seem to think they are important enough to spare more than a moment to help us, the least you can do is not crack our ankles with a broom!"

She seemed about to rip that braid free and try to strangle the Aes Sedai with it, and Moiraine wore a dangerously cool crystalline calm that suggested she might be ready to teach again the lesson on holding her tongue that she had taught Joiya. It was, Elayne decided, time for her to stop moping. She did not know how she had fallen into the role of peacemaker among these women - sometimes she wanted to take them all by the scruff of the neck and shake them - but her mother always said no good decision was ever made in anger. "You might add to your list of what you want to know," she said, "why were we summoned to Rand? That is where Careen took us. He is all right, now, of course. Moiraine Healed him." She could not repress a shudder, thinking of her brief glimpse inside his chamber, but the diversion worked a charm.

"Healed!" Nynaeve gasped. "What happened to him?"

"He almost died," the Aes Sedai said, as calmly as if she were saying he had a pot of tea.

Elayne felt Egwene tremble as they listened to Moiraine's dispassionate report, but perhaps some of the trembling was her own. Bubbles of evil drifting through the Pattern. Reflections leaping out of mirrors. Rand a mass of blood and wounds. Almost as an afterthought, Moiraine added that she was sure Perrin and Mat had experienced something of the same, but escaped unharmed. The woman must have ice instead of blood. No, she was heated enough about Rand's stubbornness. And she wasn't cold when she spoke of marrying, however much she pretended to be. But now she could have been discussing whether a bolt of silk was the right color for a dress.

"And these . . . these things will keep on?" Egwene said when Moiraine finished. "Is there nothing you can do to stop it? Or that Rand can do?"

The small blue stone dangling from Moiraine's hair swung as she shook her head. "Not until he learns to control his abilities. Perhaps not then. I do not know if even he will be strong enough to push the miasma away from himself. At the least, though, he will be better able to defend himself."

"Can't you do something to help him?" Nynaeve demanded. "You are the one of us who is supposed to know everything, or pretends to. Can't you teach him? Some part of it, anyway? And don't quote proverbs about birds teaching fish to fly."

"You would know better," Moiraine replied, "if you had taken the advantage of your studies that you should have. You should know better. You want to know how to use the Power, Nynaeve, but you do not care to learn about the Power. Saidin is not saidar. The flows are different, the ways of weaving are different. The bird has a better chance."

This time Egwene took a turn at diffusing tension. "What is Rand being stubborn about, now?" Nynaeve opened her mouth, and she added, "He can be stubborn as a stone, sometimes." Nynaeve shut her mouth with a snap; they all knew how true that was.

Moiraine eyed them, considering. At times, Elayne was not sure how much the Aes Sedai trusted them. Or anyone. "He must move," the Aes Sedai said at last. "Instead, he sits here, and the Tairens already begin to lose their fear of him. He sits here, and the longer he sits, doing nothing, the more the Forsaken will see his inaction as a sign of weakness. The Pattern moves and flows; only the dead are still. He must act, or he will die. From a crossbow bolt in his back, or poison in his food, or the Forsaken banding together to rip his soul from his body. He must act or die." Elayne winced at each danger on her list; that they were real only made it worse.

"And you know what he must do, don't you?" Nynaeve said tightly. "You have this action planned."

Moiraine nodded. "Would you rather he go haring off alone once more? I dare not risk it. This time he might be dead, or worse, before I find him."

That was true enough. Rand hardly knew what he was doing. And Elayne was sure Moiraine had no wish to lose the little guidance she still gave him. The little he allowed her to give.

"Will you share your plan for him with us?" Egwene demanded. She was certainly not helping soothe the air now.

"Yes, do," Elayne said, surprising herself with a cool echo of Egwene's tone. Confrontation was not her way when it could be avoided; her mother always said it was better to guide people than try to hammer them into line.

If their manner irritated Moiraine, she gave no sign of it. "As long as you understand that you must keep it to yourselves. A plan revealed is a plan doomed to fail. Yes, I see you do understand."

Elayne certainly did; the plan was dangerous, and Moiraine was not sure it would work.

"Sammael is in Illian," the Aes Sedai went on. "The Tairens are always as ripe for war with Illian as the other way around. They have been killing each other off and on for a thousand years, and they speak of their chance for it as other men speak of the next feastday. I doubt even knowing of Sammael's presence would change that, not with the Dragon Reborn to lead them. Tear will follow Rand eagerly enough in that enterprise, and if he brings Sammael down, he - "

“Light!” Nynaeve exclaimed. “You not only want him to start a war, you want him to seek out one of the Forsaken! No wonder he is being stubborn. He is not a fool, for a man.”

“He must face the Dark One in the end,” Moiraine said calmly. “Do you truly think he can avoid the Forsaken now? As for war, there are wars enough without him, and every one worse than useless.”

“Any war is useless,” Elayne began, then faltered as comprehension suddenly filled her. Sadness and regret had to show on her face, too, but certainly comprehension. Her mother had lectured her often on how a nation was led as well as how it was governed, two very different things, but both necessary. And sometimes things had to be done for both that were worse than unpleasant, although the price of not doing them was worse still.

Moiraine gave her sympathetic look. “It is not always pleasant, is it? Your mother began when you were just old enough to understand, I suppose, teaching you what you will need to rule after her.” Moiraine had grown up in the Royal Palace in Cairhien, not destined to reign, but related to the ruling family and no doubt overhearing the same lectures. “Yet sometimes it seems ignorance would be better, to be a farm woman knowing nothing beyond the boundaries of her fields.”

“More riddles?” Nynaeve said contemptuously. “War used to be something I heard about from peddlers, something far away that I didn’t really understand. I know what it is, now. Men killing men. Men behaving like animals, reduced to animals. Villages burned, farms and fields burned. Hunger, disease and death, for the innocent as the guilty. What makes this war of yours better, Moiraine? What makes it cleaner?”

“Elayne?” Moiraine said quietly.

She shook her head - she did not want to be the one to explain this - but she was not sure even her mother sitting on the Lion Throne could have kept silent under Moiraine’s compelling, dark-eyed stare. “War will come whether Rand begins it or not,” she said reluctantly. Egwene stepped back a pace, staring at her in disbelief no sharper than that on Nynaeve’s face; the incredulity faded from both women as she continued. “The Forsaken will not stand idly and wait. Sammael cannot be the only one to have seized a nation’s reins, just the lone one we know. They will come after Rand eventually, in their own persons perhaps, but certainly with whatever armies they command. And the nations that are free of the Forsaken? How many will cry glory to the Dragon banner and follow him to Tarmon Gai’don, and how many will convince themselves the fall of the Stone is a lie and Rand only another false Dragon who must be put down, a false Dragon perhaps strong enough to threaten them if they do not move against him first? One way or another, war will come.” She cut off sharply. There was more to it, but she could not, would not, tell them that part.

Moiraine was not so reticent. “Very good,” she said, nodding, “yet incomplete.” The look she gave Elayne said she knew Elayne had left out what she had on purpose. Hands folded calmly at her waist, she addressed Nynaeve and Egwene. “Nothing makes this war better, or cleaner. Except that it will cement the Tairens to him, and the Illianers will end up following him just as the Tairens do now. How could they not, once the Dragon banner flies over Illian? Just the news of his victory might decide the wars in Tarabon and Arad Doman in his favor; there are wars ended for you.

“In one stroke he will make himself so strong in terms of men and swords that only a coalition of every remaining nation from here to the Blight can defeat him, and with the same blow he shows the Forsaken that he is not a plump partridge on a limb for the netting. That will make them wary, and buy him time to learn to use his strength. He must move first, be the hammer, not the nail.” The Aes Sedai grimaced slightly, a hint of her earlier anger marring her calm. “He must move first. And what does he do? He reads. Reads himself into deeper trouble.”

Nynaeve looked shaken, as if she could see all the battles and death; Egwene’s dark eyes were large with horrified understanding. Their faces made Elayne shiver. One had watched Rand grow up, the other had grown up with him. And now they saw him starting wars. Not the Dragon Reborn, but Rand al’Thor.

Egwene struggled visibly, latching onto the smallest part, the most inconsequential, of what Moiraine had said. “How can reading put him in trouble?”

“He has decided to find out for himself what the Prophecies of the Dragon say.” Moiraine’s face remained cool and smooth, but suddenly she sounded almost as tired as Elayne felt. “They may have been proscribed in Tear, but the Chief Librarian had nine different translations in a locked chest. Rand has them all, now. I pointed out the verse that applies here, and he quoted it to me, from an old Kandori translation.

“Power of the Shadow made human flesh,
wakened to turmoil, strife and ruin.
The Reborn One, marked and bleeding,
dancer the sword in dreams and mist,
chains the Shadowsworn to his will,
from the city, lost and forsaken,
leads the spears to war once more,
breaks the spears and makes them see,
truth long hidden in the ancient dream.”

She grimaced. “It applies to this as well as it does to anything. Illian under Sammael is surely a forsaken city. Lead the Tairen spears to war, chain Sammael, and he has fulfilled the verse. The ancient dream of the Dragon Reborn. But he will not see it. He even has a copy in the Old Tongue, as if he understood two words. He runs after shadows, and Sammael, or Rahvin, or Lanfear may have him by the throat before I can convince him of his mistake.”

“He is desperate.” Nynaeve’s gentle tone was not for Moiraine, Elayne was sure, but for Rand. “Desperate and trying to find his way.”

“So am I desperate,” Moiraine said firmly. “I have dedicated my life to finding him, and I will not let him fail if I can prevent it. I am almost desperate enough to - ” She broke off, pursing her lips. “Let it be enough that I will do what I must.”

“But it isn’t enough,” Egwene said sharply. “What is it you’ll do?”

“You have other matters to concern you,” the Aes Sedai said. “The Black Ajah - ”

“No!” Elayne’s voice was knife-edged and commanding, her knuckles a hard white where she gripped her soft blue skirts. “You keep many secrets, Moiraine, but tell us this. What do you mean to do to him?” An image flashed in her mind of seizing Moiraine and shaking the truth out of her if need be.

“Do to him? Nothing. Oh, very well. There is no reason you should not know. You have seen what the Tairens call the Great Holding?”

Oddly for a people that feared the Power so, the Tairens held in the Stone a collection of objects connected to the Power second only to that in the White Tower. Elayne, for one, thought it was because they had been forced to guard Callandor so long, whether they wanted or not. Even the Sword That Is Not a Sword might seem less than what it was when it was one among many. But the Tairens had never been able to make themselves display their prizes. The Great Holding was kept in a filthy series of crowded rooms buried even deeper than the dungeons. When Elayne had first seen them the locks on the doors had long since rusted shut, where the doors had not simply collapsed from dry rot.

“We spent an entire day down there,” Nynaeve said. “To see if Liandrin and her friends took anything. I don’t think they did. Everything was buried in dust and mold. It will take ten riverboats to transport all of it to the Tower. Perhaps they can make some sense of it there; I surely could not.” The temptation to prod Moiraine was apparently too great to avoid, for she added, “You would know all this if you had given us a little more of your time.”

Moiraine took no notice. She seemed to be looking inward, examining her own thoughts, and she spoke almost to herself. “There is one particular ter’angreal in the Holding, a thing like a redstone doorframe, subtly twisted to the eye. If I cannot make him reach some decision, I may have to step through.” The small blue stone on her forehead trembled, sparkling. Apparently she was not eager to take that step.

At the mention of ter’angreal, Egwene instinctively touched the bodice of her dress. She had sewn a small pocket there herself, to hide the stone ring it now held. That ring was a ter’angreal, powerful in its way if small, and Elayne was one of only three women who knew she had it. Moiraine was not one of the three.

They were strange things, ter’angreal, fragments of the Age of Legends like angreal and sa’angreal, if more numerous. Ter’angreal used the One Power instead of magnifying it. Each had apparently been made to do one thing and one thing alone, but though some were used now, no one was sure if those uses were anything like what they had been made for. The Oath Rod, on which a woman took the Three Oaths on being raised Aes Sedai, was a ter’angreal that made those oaths a part of her flesh and bone. The last test a novice took on being raised to Accepted was inside another ter’angreal that ferreted out her most heartfelt fears and made them seem real - or perhaps took her to a place where they were real. Odd things could happen with ter’angreal. Aes Sedai had been burned out or killed, or had simply vanished, in studying them. And in using them.

“I saw that doorway,” Elayne said. “In the last room at the end of the hall. My lamp went out, and I fell three times before I made it to the door.” A slight flush of embarrassment reddened her cheeks. “I was afraid to channel in there, even to relight the lamp. Much of it looks rubbish, to me-I think the Tairens simply grabbed anything that anyone hinted might be connected to the Power-but I thought if I channeled, I might accidentally empower something that wasn’t rubbish, and who knows what it might do.”

“And if you had stumbled in the dark and fallen through the twisted doorway?” Moiraine said wryly. “That needs no channeling, only to step through.”

“To what purpose?” Nynaeve asked.

“To gain answers. Three answers, each true, about past, present or future.”

Elayne’s first thought was for the children’s tale, Bili Under the Hill, but only because of the three answers. A second thought came on its heels, and not to her alone. She spoke while Nynaeve and Egwene were still opening their mouths. “Moiraine, this solves our problem. We can ask whether Joiya or Amico is telling the truth. We can ask where Liandrin and the others are. The names of the Black Ajah still in the Tower - ”

“We can ask what this thing is that is dangerous to Rand,” Egwene put in, and Nynaeve added, “Why haven’t you told us of this before? Why have you let us go on listening to the same tales day after day when we could have settled it all by now?”

The Aes Sedai winced and threw up her hands. “You three rush in blindly where Lan and a hundred Warders would tread warily. Why do you think I have not stepped through? Days ago I could have asked what Rand must do to survive and triumph, how he can defeat the Forsaken and the Dark One, how he can learn to control the Power and hold off madness long enough to do what he must.” She waited, hands on hips, while it sank in. None of them spoke. “There are rules,” she went on, “and dangers. No one may step through more than once. Only once. You may ask three questions, but you must ask all three and hear the answers before you may leave. Frivolous questions are punished, it seems, but it also seems what may be serious for one can be frivolous coming from another. Most importantly, questions touching the Shadow have dire consequences.

“If you asked about the Black Ajah, you might be returned dead, or come out a gibbering madwoman, if you came out at all. As for Rand . . . I am not certain it is possible to ask a question about the Dragon Reborn that does not touch the Shadow in some way. You see? Sometimes there are reasons for caution.”

“How do you know all this?” Nynaeve demanded. Planting fists on hips she confronted the Aes Sedai. “The High Lords surely never let Aes Sedai study anything in the Holding. From the filth down there, none of it has seen sunlight in a hundred years or more.”

“More, I should think,” Moiraine told her calmly. “They ceased their collecting nearly three hundred years gone. It was just before they stopped completely that they acquired this ter’angreal. Up until then it was the possession of the Firsts of Mayene, who used its answers to help keep Mayene out of Tear’s grasp. And they allowed Aes Sedai to study it. In secret, of course; Mayene has never dared anger Tear too openly.”

“If it was so important to Mayene,” Nynaeve said suspiciously, “why is it here, in the Stone?”

“Because Firsts have made bad decisions as well as good in trying to keep Mayene free of Tear. Three hundred years ago the High Lords were planning to build a fleet to follow Mayener ships and find the oilfish shoals. Halvar, the then First, raised the price of Mayener lamp oil well above that of oil from Tear’s olives, and to further convince the High Lords that Mayene would always put its own interests behind those of Tear, made them a gift of the ter’angreal. He had already used it, so it was no further good to him, and he was almost as young as Berelain is now, apparently with a long reign ahead of him and many years of needing Tairen goodwill.”

“He was a fool,” Elayne muttered. “My mother would never make such a mistake.”

“Perhaps not,” Moiraine said. “But then, Andor is not a small nation cornered by a much larger and stronger. Halvar was a fool as it turned out - the High Lords had him assassinated the very next year - but his foolishness does present me with an opportunity, if I need it. A dangerous one, yet better than none.”

Nynaeve muttered to herself, perhaps disappointed that the Aes Sedai had not tripped herself up.

“It leaves the rest of us right where we were.” Egwene sighed. “Not knowing who is lying, or whether they both are.”

“Question them again, if you wish,” Moiraine said. “You have until they are put on the ship, though I very much doubt either will change her tale now. My advice is to concentrate on Tanchico. If Joiya speaks truly, it will take Aes Sedai and Warders to guard Mazrim Taim, not just the three of you. I sent a warning to the Amyrlin by pigeon when I first heard Joiya’s story. In fact, I sent three pigeons, to make sure one reaches the Tower.”

“So kind of you to keep us informed,” Elayne murmured coolly. The woman did go her own way. Just because they were only pretending to be full Aes Sedai was no reason for Moiraine to keep them in the dark. The Amyrlin had sent them out to hunt the Black Ajah.

Moiraine inclined her head briefly, as if accepting the thanks for real. “You are welcome. Remember that you are the hounds the Amyrlin set after the Black Ajah.” Her slight smile at Elayne’s start said she knew exactly what Elayne had been thinking. “The decision on where to course must be yours. You have pointed that out to me, as well,” she added drily. “I trust it will prove an easier decision than mine. And I trust you will sleep well, what sleep is left before daybreak. A good night to you. “

“That woman . . .” Elayne muttered when the door had closed behind the Aes Sedai. “Sometimes I could almost strangle her.” She dropped into one of the chairs at the table and sat frowning at her hands in her lap.

Nynaeve gave a grunt that might have been agreement as she went to a narrow table against the wall where silver goblets and spice jars stood next to two pitchers. One pitcher, full of wine, rested in a gleaming bowl of now mossy melted ice, brought all the way from the Spine of the World packed in chests of sawdust. Ice in the summer to chill a High Lord’s drink; Elayne could barely imagine such a thing.

“A cool drink before bed will do us all good,” Nynaeve said, busying herself with wine and water and spices.

Elayne lifted her head as Egwene took a seat next to her. "Did you mean what you said, Egwene? About Rand?" Egwene nodded, and Elayne sighed. "Do you remember what Min used to say, all her jokes about sharing him? I sometimes wondered if that was a viewing she did not tell us about. I thought she meant we both loved him, and she knew it. But you had the right to him, and I didn't know what to do. I still don't. Egwene, he loves you."

"He will just have to be put straight," Egwene said firmly. "When I marry, it will be because I want to, not just because a man expects me to love him. I will be gentle with him, Elayne, but before I am done, he will know he is free. Whether he wants to be or not. My mother says men are different from us. She says we want to be in love, but only with the one we want; a man needs to be in love, but he will love the first woman to tie a string to his heart."

"That is all very well," Elayne said in a tight voice, "but Berelain was in his chambers."

Egwene sniffed. "Whatever she intends, Berelain won't keep her mind on one man long enough to make him love her. Two days ago she was casting eyes at Rhuarc. In two more, she'll be smiling at someone else. She is like Else Grinwell. You remember her? The novice who spent all her time out at the practice yards fluttering her eyelashes at the Warders?"

"She was not just fluttering her eyelashes, in his bedchamber at this hour. She was wearing even less than usual, if that is possible!"

"Do you mean to let her have him, then?"

"No!" Elayne said it very fiercely, and she meant it, but in the next breath she was full of despair. "Oh, Egwene, I do not know what to do. I love him. I want to marry him. Light! What will mother say? I would rather spend a night in Joiya's cell than listen to the lectures mother will give me." Andoran nobles, even in royal families, married commoners often enough that it hardly occasioned comment - in Andor, at least - but Rand was not exactly the usual run of commoner. Her mother was quite capable of actually sending Lini to drag her home by her ear.

"Morgase can hardly say much if Mat is to be believed," Egwene said comfortingly. "Or even half believed. This Lord Gaebriel your mother is mooning after hardly sounds the choice of a woman thinking with her head."

"I am sure Mat exaggerated," Elayne replied primly. Her mother was too shrewd to make herself a fool over any man. If Lord Gaebriel - she had never even heard of him before Mat spoke his name - if this fellow dreamed he could gain power through Morgase, she would give him a rude awakening.

Nynaeve brought three goblets of spiced wine to the table, beads of condensation running down their shining sides, and small green-and-gold woven straw mats to put them on so the damp would not mar the table's polish. "So," she said, taking a chair, "you've discovered you are in love with Rand, Elayne, and Egwene has discovered she isn't."

The two younger women gaped at her, one dark, the other fair, yet a near mirror image of astonishment.

"I have eyes," Nynaeve said complacently. "And ears, when you don't take the trouble to whisper." She sipped at her wine, and her voice grew cold when she continued. "What do you mean to do about it? If that chit Berelain has her claws into him, it will not be easy to pry them loose. Are you sure you want to go to the effort? You know what he is. You know what lies ahead of him, even setting the Prophecies aside. Madness. Death. How long does he have? A year? Two? Or will it begin before summer's end? He is a man who can channel." She bit off each word in tones of iron. "Remember what you were taught. Remember what he is."

Elayne held her head high and met Nynaeve stare for stare. "It does not matter. Perhaps it should, but it doesn't. Perhaps I am being foolish. I do not care. I cannot change my heart to order, Nynaeve."

Suddenly Nynaeve smiled. "I had to be sure," she said warmly. "You must be sure. It isn't easy loving any man, but loving this man will be harder yet." Her smile faded as she went on. "My first question still has to be answered. What do you mean to do about it? Berelain may look soft - she certainly makes men see her so! - but I do not think she is.

She will fight for what she wants. And she's the kind to hold hard to something she doesn't particularly want, just because someone else does want it."

"I would like to stuff her in a barrel," Egwene said, gripping her goblet as if it were the First's throat, "and ship her back to Mayene. In the bottom of the hold."

Nynaeve's braid swung as she shook her head. "All very well, but try to offer advice that helps. If you cannot, keep silent and let her decide what she must do." Egwene stared at her, and she added, "Rand is Elayne's to deal with, now, not yours. You have stepped aside, remember."

The remark should have made Elayne smile, but it did not. "This was all supposed to be different." She sighed. "I thought I would meet a man, learn to know him over months or years, and slowly I would come to realize I loved him. That is the way I always thought it would be. I hardly know Rand. I've talked with him no more than half a dozen times in the space of a year. But I knew I loved him five minutes after I first set eyes on him." Now that was foolish. Only, it was true, and she did not care if it was foolish. She would tell her mother the same to her face, and Lini. Well, perhaps not Lini. Lini had drastic ways of dealing with foolishness, and she seemed to think Elayne had not aged beyond ten. "As matters stand, though, I don't even have the right to be angry with him. Or Berelain." But she was. I would like to slap his face till his ears ring for a year! I'd like to switch her all the way to the ship that takes her back to Mayene! Only, she did not have the right, and that made it all the worse. Infuriatingly, a plaintive tone touched her voice. "What can I do? He has never looked at me twice."

"In the Two Rivers," Egwene said slowly, "if a woman wants a man to know she is interested in him, she puts flowers in his hair at Bel Time or Sunday. Or she might embroider a feastday shirt for him any time. Or make a point of asking him to dance and no one else." Elayne gave her an incredulous look, and she hastened to add, "I am not suggesting you embroider a shirt, but there are ways to let him know how you feel."

"Mayeners believe in speaking out." Elayne's voice held a brittle edge. "Perhaps that is the best way. Just tell him right out. At least he'll know how I feel, then. At least I'll have some right to -"

She snatched her spiced wine and tilted her head back, drinking. Speak out? Like some Mayener hussy! Setting the empty goblet back on the small mat, she drew a deep breath and murmured, "What will Mother say?"

"What's more important," Nynaeve said gently, "is what you will do when we have to leave here. Whether it's Tanchico, or the Tower, or somewhere else, we will have to go. What will you do when you've just told him you love him, and you must leave him behind? If he asks you to stay with him? If you want to?"

"I will go." There was no hesitation in Elayne's reply, but a touch of asperity. The other woman should not have had to ask. "If I must accept him being the Dragon Reborn, he must accept that I am what I am, that I have duties. I want to be Aes Sedai, Nynaeve. It isn't some idle amusement. Neither is the work we three have to do. Could you really think I would abandon you and Egwene?"

Egwene hurried to assure her that the thought had never crossed her mind; Nynaeve did the same, but slowly enough to give herself the lie.

Elayne looked from one to the other of them. "In truth, I feared you might tell me I was foolish, fretting over a thing like this when we have the Black Ajah to worry about."

A slight flicker of Egwene's eyes said the thought had occurred to her, but Nynaeve said, "Rand is not the only one who might die next year, or next month, We might, too. Times are not what they were, and we cannot be, either. If you sit and wish for what you want, you may not see it this side of the grave."

It was a chilling sort of reassurance, but Elayne nodded. She was not being silly. If only the Black Ajah could be settled so easily. She pressed her empty silver goblet to her forehead for the coolness. What were they to do?

Chapter 7 - Playing With Fire

With the sun barely above the horizon the next morning, Egwene presented herself at the doors to Rand's chambers, followed by a foot-dragging Elayne. The Daughter-Heir wore a long-sleeved dress of pale blue silk, cut in the Tairen fashion, and pulled low after some little discussion. A necklace of sapphires like a deep morning sky, and another strand woven into her red-gold curls, showed up the blue of her eyes. Despite the damp warmth, Egwene wore a plain, deep red scarf, as large as a shawl, around her shoulders. Aviendha had supplied the scarf, and the sapphires too. Surprisingly, the Aiel woman had a tidy store of such things somehow.

For all she had known they were there, Egwene gave a start when the Aiel guards glided to their feet with startling suddenness. Elayne let out a small gasp, but quickly eyed them with that regal bearing she managed so well. It seemed to have no effect on these sun-dark men. The six were Shae'en M'taal, Stone Dogs, and appeared relaxed for Aiel, meaning they seemed to be looking everywhere, seemed ready to move in any direction.

Egwene drew herself up in imitation of Elayne - she did wish she could do that as well as the Daughter-Heir - and announced, "I . . . we . . . want to see how the Lord Dragon's wounds are."

Her remark was plainly foolish, if they knew much about Healing, but that likelihood was small; few people did, and Aiel probably less than most. She had not intended to give any reason for being there-it was enough that they thought her Aes Sedai-but when the Aiel appeared almost to spring out of the black marble floor, it suddenly seemed a good idea. Not that they were making any move to stop Elayne and her, of course. But these men were all so tall, so stone-faced, and they carried those short spears and horn bows as if using them would be as natural as breathing, and as easy. With those light-colored eyes regarding her so intently, it was all too easy to remember stories of black-veiled Aiel, without mercy or pity, of the Aiel War and the men like these who had destroyed every army sent against them until the last, who had only turned back to the Waste after fighting the allied nations to a standstill during three blood-soaked days and nights before Tar Valon itself. She very nearly embraced saidar.

Gaul, the Stone Dogs' leader, nodded, looking down at Elayne and her with a touch of respect. He was a handsome man, in a rugged way, a little older than Nynaeve, with eyes as green and clear as polished gems and long eyelashes so dark they seemed to outline his eyes in black. "They may be troubling him. He is in a foul mood this morning." Gaul grinned, just a quick flash of white teeth, in understanding of a temper when wounded. "He has chased off a group of these High Lords already, and threw one of them out himself. What was his name?"

"Torean," another, even taller man replied. He had an arrow nocked, the short, curved bow held almost casually. His gray eyes rested on the two women for an instant, then went back to searching among the anteroom's columns.

"Torean," Gaul agreed. "I thought he would slide as far as those pretty carvings . . ." He pointed a spear to the ring of stiff-standing Defenders. ". . . but he came short by three paces. I lost a good Tairen hanging, all hawks in gold thread, to Mangin." The taller man gave a brief, contented smile.

Egwene blinked at the image of Rand physically pitching a High lord across the floor. He had never been violent; far from it. How much had he changed? She had been too busy with Joiya and Amico, and he too busy with Moiraine or Lan or the High Lords, to do more than speak in passing, a few words about home here and there, about how the Bel Tine festival might have gone this year and what Sunday would be like. It had all been so brief. How much had he changed?

"We have to see him," Elayne said, a slight tremor in her voice.

Gaul made a bow, grounding the point of one spear on the black marble. "Of course, Aes Sedai."

It was with some trepidation that Egwene entered Rand's chambers, and Elayne's face spoke volumes of the effort those few steps took.

No evidence of last night's horror remained, unless it was the absence of mirrors; lighter patches marked the wall panels where those hanging there had been taken away. Not that the room came anywhere near neatness; books lay

everywhere, on everything, some lying open as if abandoned in the middle of a page, and the bed was still unmade. The crimson draperies were pulled open on all the windows, facing westward toward the river that was Tear's heartvein, and Callandor sparkled like polished crystal on a huge gilded stand of surpassing gaudiness. Egwene thought the stand the ugliest thing she had ever seen decorating a room-until she glimpsed the silver wolves savaging a golden stag on the mantel above the fireplace. Scant breezes off the river kept the room surprisingly cool compared to the rest of the Stone.

Rand sat in his shirtsleeves, sprawled in a chair with one leg over the arm and a leather-bound book propped against his knee. At the sound of their footsteps, he snapped the book shut and dropped it among the others on the scroll-worked carpet, bounding to his feet ready to fight. The scowl on his face faded as he took in who they were.

For the first time in the Stone, Egwene looked for changes in him and found them. How many months before then since she had seen him last? Enough for his face to have grown harder, for the openness that had once been there to fade. He moved differently, too, a little like Lan, a little like the Aiel. With his height and his reddish hair, and eyes that seemed now blue, now gray, as the light took them, he looked all too much like an Aielman, too much for comfort. But had he changed inside?

"I thought you were . . . someone else," he mumbled, sharing out embarrassed glances between them. That was the Rand she knew, even to the flush that rose in his cheeks every time he looked at her or Elayne, either one. "Some . . . people want things I can't give. Things I will not give." Suspicion grew on his face with shocking suddenness, and his tone hardened. "What do you want? Did Moiraine send you? Are you supposed to convince me to do what she wants?"

"Don't be a goose," Egwene said sharply before she thought. "I do not want you to start a war!"

Elayne added in pleading tones, "We came to . . . to help you, if we can." That was one of their reasons, and the easiest to bring up, they had decided over breakfast.

"You know about her plans for . . ." he began roughly, then made a sudden shift. "Help me? How? That is what Moiraine says."

Egwene sternly folded her arms beneath her breasts, holding the scarf tight, in the way Nynaeve used to address the Village Council when she meant to have her way no matter how stubborn they were. It was too late to start over; the only thing was to go on as she had begun. "I told you not to be a fool, Rand al'Thor. You may have Tairens bowing to your boots, but I remember when Nynaeve switched your bottom for letting Mat talk you into stealing a jar of apple brandy." Elayne kept her face carefully composed. Too carefully; it was plain to Egwene that she wanted to laugh out loud.

Rand did not notice, of course. Men never did. He grinned at Egwene, close to laughing himself. "We had just turned thirteen. She found us asleep behind your father's stable, and our heads hurt so much we didn't even feel her switch." That was not at all the way Egwene recalled it. "Not like when you threw that bowl at her head. Remember? She'd dosed you with dogweed tea because you had been moping about for a week, and as soon as you tasted it, you hit her with her best bowl. Light, did you squeal! When was that? Two years ago come this -"

"We are not here to talk over old times," Egwene said, shifting the scarf irritably. It was thin wool, but still far too hot. Really, he did have the habit of remembering the most unfortunate things.

He grinned as if he knew what she was thinking, and went on in better humor. "You are here to help me, you say. With what? I don't suppose you know how to make a High Lord keep his word when I'm not staring over his shoulder. Or how to stop unwanted dreams? I could surely use help with -" Eyes darting to Elayne and back to her, he made another abrupt shift. "What about the Old Tongue? Did you learn any of that in the White Tower?" Without waiting for an answer he began rooting through the volumes scattered across the carpet. There were more on the chairs, among the tumbled bedclothes. "I have a copy here . . . some-where . . . of. . ."

"Rand." Egwene raised her voice. "Rand, I cannot read the Old Tongue." She shot a look at Elayne, warning her not to admit to any such knowledge. They had not come to translate the Prophecies of the Dragon for him. The sapphires in the Daughter--Heir's hair swayed as she nodded agreement. "We had other things to learn."

He straightened from the books with a sigh. "It was too much to hope." For a moment he seemed on the point of saying more, but stared at his boots. Egwene wondered how he managed to deal with the High Lords in all their arrogance if she and Elayne put him so out of countenance.

"We came to help you with channeling," she told him. "With the Power." What Moiraine claimed was supposed to be true; a woman could not teach a man to channel any more than she could teach him how to bear a child. Egwene was not so sure. She had felt something woven from saidin, once. Or rather, she had felt nothing, something blocking her own flows as surely as stone dammed water. But she had learned as much outside the Tower as within; surely in her knowledge there was something she could teach him, some guidance she could offer.

"If we can," Elayne added.

Suspicion flashed across his face again. It was unnerving how his mood changed so quickly. "I have more chance of reading the Old Tongue than you do of . . . Are you sure this isn't Moiraine's doing? Did she send you here? Thinks she can convince me by some roundabout way, does she? Some twisty Aes Sedai plot I'll not see the point of until I am mired in it?" He grunted sourly and pulled a dark green coat from the floor behind one of the chairs, shrugging into it hastily. "I agreed to meet some more of the High Lords this morning. If I don't keep an eye on them, they just find ways to get around what I want. They'll learn sooner or later. I rule Tear, now. Me. The Dragon Reborn. I will teach them. You will have to excuse me."

Egwene wanted to shake him. He ruled Tear? Well, perhaps he did, if it came to that, but she remembered a boy with a lamb nestled inside his coat, proud as a rooster because he had driven off the wolf that tried to take it. He was a shepherd, not a king, and even if he had call to give himself airs, it was no good to him that he did.

She was about to tell him as much, but before she could Elayne spoke up fiercely. "No one sent us. No one. We came because . . . because we care for you. Perhaps it will not work, but you can try. If I . . . if we care enough to try, you can try, too. Is it so unimportant to you that you cannot spare us an hour? For you life?"

He stopped buttoning up his coat, staring at the Daughter-Heir so intently that for a moment Egwene thought he had forgotten she was there. With a shiver he pulled his eyes away. Glancing at Egwene, he shifted his feet and frowned at the floor. "I will try," he muttered. "It'll do no good, but I will . . . What do you want me to do?"

Egwene drew a deep breath. She had not thought convincing him would be this easy; he had always been like a boulder buried in mud when he decided to dig his heels in, which he did far too often.

"Look at me," she said, embracing saidar. She let the Power fill her as completely as it ever had, more completely, accepting every drop she could hold; it was as if light suffused every particle of her, as if the Light itself filled every cranny. Life seemed to burst inside her like fireworks. She had never before let this much in. It was a shock to realize she was not quivering; surely she could not bear this glorious sweetness. She wanted to revel in it, to dance and sing, to simply lie back and let it roll through her, over her. She made herself speak. "What do you see? What do you feel? Look at me, Rand!"

He lifted his head slowly, still frowning. "I see you. What am I supposed to see? Are you touching the Source? Egwene, Moiraine has channeled around me a hundred times, and I never saw anything. Except what she did. It doesn't work that way. Even I know that much."

"I am stronger than Moiraine," she told him firmly. "She would be whimpering on the floor, or insensible, if she tried to hold as much as I hold now." It was true, though she had never before rated the Aes Sedai's ability so closely.

It cried out to be used, this Power pulsing through her stronger than heartblood. With this much, she could do things Moiraine could not dream of doing. The wound in Rand's side that Moiraine could never Heal completely. She did not know Healing - it was considerably more complex than anything she had ever done - but she had watched Nynaeve Heal, and perhaps, with this great pool of the Power filling her, she could see something of how that could be Healed. Not to do it, of course; only to see.

Carefully she spun out hair-fine flows of Air and Water and Spirit, the Powers used for Healing, and felt for his old injury. One touch, and she recoiled, shivering, snatching back her weaving; her stomach churned as if every meal she had ever eaten wanted to come up. It seemed that all the darkness in the world rested there in Rand's side, all the world's evil in a festering sore only lightly covered by tender scar tissue. A thing like that would soak up Healing flows like drops of water on dry sand. How could he bear the pain? Why was he not weeping?

From first thought to action had taken only a moment. Shaken, and desperately hiding it, she went on without a pause. "You are as strong as I. I know it; you must be. Feel, Rand. What do you feel?" Light, what can Heal that? Can anything?

"I don't feel anything," he muttered, shifting his feet. "Goose bumps. And no wonder. It's not that I don't trust you, Egwene, but I cannot help being nervous when a woman is channeling around me. I am sorry."

She did not bother explaining to him the difference between channeling and merely embracing the True Source. There was so much he did not know, even compared to her own scant knowledge. He was a blind man trying to work a loom by touch, with no idea of colors or what the threads, or even the loom, looked like.

With an effort she released saidar, and it was an effort. Part of her wanted to cry at the loss. "I am not touching the Source now, Rand." She stepped closer and peered up at him. "Do you still feel goose bumps?"

"No. But that's just because you told me." He gave an abrupt shrug of his shoulders. "You see? I started thinking about it, and I have them again."

Egwene smiled triumphantly. She did not need to look around at Elayne to confirm what she had already sensed, what they had agreed upon earlier for this point. "You can sense a woman embracing the Source, Rand. Elayne is doing just that right now." He squinted at the Daughter-Heir. "It doesn't matter what you see or don't see. You felt it. We have that much. Let's see what else we can find. Rand, embrace the Source. Embrace saidin." The words came out hoarsely. They had agreed on this, too, she and Elayne. He was Rand, not a monster from the stories, and they had agreed on it, but still, asking a man to . . . The wonder was that she had gotten the words out at all. "Do you see anything?" she asked Elayne. "Or feel anything?"

Rand still doled out glances between them, in between staring at the floor and sometimes blushing. Why was he so out of countenance? Studying him fixedly, the Daughter-Heir shook her head. "He could just be standing there for all I can tell. Are you sure he is doing anything?"

"He can be stubborn, but he isn't foolish. At least, he isn't foolish most of the time."

"Well, stubborn or foolish or something else, I feel nothing at all."

Egwene frowned at him. "You said you would do as we asked, Rand. Are you? If you felt something, so should I, and I do not -" She broke off with a stifled yelp. Something had pinched her bottom. Rand's lips twitched, clearly fighting a grin. "That," she told him crisply, "was not nice."

He tried to keep his face innocent, but the grin slipped. "You said you wanted to feel something, and I just thought -" His sudden roar made Egwene jump. Clapping a hand to his left buttock, he hobbled in a pained circle. "Blood and ashes, Egwene! There was no need to -" He fell off into deeper, inaudible mutters Egwene was just as glad she did not understand.

She took the opportunity to flap the scarf for a little air, and shared a small smile with Elayne. The glow faded around the Daughter-Heir. They both came close to giggling as they rubbed themselves surreptitiously. That should show him. About a hundred for one, Egwene estimated.

Turning back to Rand, she put on her sternest face. "I would have expected something like that from Mat. I thought you, at least, had grown up. We came here to help you, if we can. Try to cooperate. Do something with the Power, something that isn't childish. Perhaps we will be able to sense that."

Hunched, he glared at them. "Do something," he muttered. "You had no call to - I'll limp for - You want me to do something?"

Suddenly she lifted into the air, and Elayne, too; they stared at each other, wide-eyed, as they floated a pace above the carpet. There was nothing holding them, no flows Egwene could feel or see. Nothing. Her mouth tightened. He had no right to do this. No right at all, and it was time he learned it. The same sort of shield of Spirit that cut Joiya off from the Source would stop him, too; Aes Sedai used it on the rare men they found who could channel.

She opened herself to saidar - and her stomach sank. Saidar was there - she could feel its warmth and light - but between her and the True Source stood something, nothing, an absence that shut her away from the Source like a stone wall. She felt hollow inside, until panic welled up to fill her. A man was channeling, and she was caught in it. He was Rand, of course, but dangling there like a basket, helpless, all she could think of was a man channeling, and the taint on saidin. She tried to shout at him, but all that came out was a croak.

"You want me to do something?" Rand growled. A pair of small tables flexed their legs awkwardly, the wood creaking, and began to stumble about in a stiff parody of dance, gilt flaking off and falling. "Do you like this?" Fire flared up in the fireplace, filling the hearth from side to side, burning on stone bare of ashes. "Or this?" The tall stag and wolves above the fireplace began to soften and slump. Thin streams of gold and silver flowed out from the mass, fining down to shining threads, snaking, weaving themselves into a narrow sheet of metallic cloth; the length of glittering fabric hung in the air as it grew, its far end still linked to the slowly melting statuette on the stone mantel. "Do something," Rand said. "Do something! Do you have any idea what it is like to touch saidin, to hold it? Do you? I can feel the madness waiting. Seeping into me!"

Abruptly the capering tables burst into flame like torches, dancing still; books spun into the air, pages fluttering; the mattress on the bed erupted, showering feathers across the room like snow. Feathers falling onto the burning tables filled the room with their sharp, sooty stink.

For a moment Rand stared wildly at the blazing tables. Then whatever was holding Egwene and Elayne vanished, along with the shield; their heels thumped onto the carpet in the same instant the flames went out as if sucked into the wood they had been consuming. The blaze in the fireplace winked out, as well, and the books fell to the floor in a worse jumble than before. The length of gold-and-silver cloth dropped, too, along with strands of rough-melted metal, no longer liquid or even hot. Only three largish items, two silver and one gold, remained on the mantel, cold and unrecognizable.

Egwene had staggered into Elayne as they landed. They clutched each other for support, but Egwene felt the other woman doing exactly what she was doing, embracing saidar as quickly as she could. In moments she had a shield ready to throw around Rand if he even appeared to be channeling, but he stood stunned, staring at the charred tables with feathers still drifting down around him, flecking his coat.

He did not seem to be a danger, now, but the room was certainly a mess. She wove tiny flows of Air to pull all the floating feathers together, and those already on the carpet, as well. As an afterthought, she added those on his coat. The rest of it he could have the majhere straighten, or see to himself.

Rand flinched as the feathers floated past him to alight on the tattered ruins of the mattress. It did nothing for the smell, burned feathers and burned wood, but at least the room was neater, and the open windows and faint breezes were already lessening the stench.

"The majhere may not want to give me another," he said with a strained laugh. "A mattress a day is probably more than she is willing to . . ." He avoided looking at her or Elayne. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to . . . Sometimes it runs wild. Sometimes there's nothing there when I reach for it, and sometimes it does things I don't . . . I'm sorry. Perhaps you had better go. I seem to say that a lot." He blushed again and cleared his throat. "I am not touching the Source, but maybe you had best go.

"We are not done yet," Egwene said gently. More gently than she felt - she wanted to box his ears; the idea of picking her up like that, shielding her - and Elayne - but he was on the ragged edge. Of what, she did not know, and she did not want to find out, not now, not here. With so many exclaiming over their strength - everyone said she and Elayne would

be among the strongest Aes Sedai, if not the strongest, in a thousand years or more - she had assumed they were as strong as he. Near to it, at least. She had just been rudely disabused. Perhaps Nynaeve could come close, if she was angry enough, but Egwene knew she herself could never have done what he just had, split her flows that many ways, worked that many things at once. Working two flows at once was far more than twice as hard as working one of the same magnitude, and working three much more than twice again working two. He had to have been weaving a dozen. He did not even look tired, yet exertion with the Power took energy. She very much feared he could handle her and Elayne both like kittens. Kittens he might decide to drown, if he went mad.

But she would not, could not, just walk away. That would be the same as quitting, and she was not made that way. She meant to do what she had come there for - all of it - and he was not going to chase her off short of it. Not him or anything else.

Elayne's blue eyes were filled with determination, and the moment Egwene fell silent she added in a much firmer voice, "And we will not go until we are. You said you would try. You must try."

"I did say that, didn't I?" he murmured after a time. "At least we can sit down."

Not looking at the blackened tables or the band of metallic cloth lying crumpled on the carpet, he led them, limping slightly, to high-backed chairs near the windows. They had to move books from the red silk cushions in order to sit; Egwene's chair held Volume Twelve of The Treasurer of the Stone of Tear, a dusty, wood-bound book entitled Travels in the Aiel Waste, with Various Observations on the Savage Inhabitants, and a thick, tattered leather volume called Dealings with the Territory of Mayene, 500 to 750 of the New Era. Elayne had a bigger stack to move, but Rand hurriedly took them from her along with those from his chair and put them all on the floor, where the pile promptly fell over. Egwene laid hers neatly beside them.

"What do you want me to do now?" He sat on the edge of his seat, hands on his knees. "I promise I won't do anything but what you ask this time."

Egwene bit her tongue to keep from telling him that promise came a bit late. Perhaps she had been a little vague in what she had asked for, but that was no excuse. Still, that was something to be dealt with another time. She realized she was thinking of him as just Rand again, but he looked as if he had just splashed mud on her best dress and was worried she would not believe it an accident. Yet she had not let go of saidar, and neither had Elayne. There was no need to be foolish. "This time," she said, "we just want you to talk. How do you embrace the Source? Just tell us. Take it step by step, slowly."

"More like wrestling than embracing." He grunted. "Step by step? Well, first I imagine a flame, and then I push everything into it. Hate, fear, nervousness. Everything. When they're all consumed, there's an emptiness, a void, inside my head. I am in the middle of it, but I'm a part of whatever I am concentrating on, too."

"That sounds familiar," Egwene said. "I've heard your father talk about a trick of concentration he uses to win the archery competitions. What he calls the Flame and the Void."

Rand nodded; sadly, it seemed. She thought he must be missing home, and his father. "Tam taught it to me first. And Lan uses it, too, with the sword. Selene - someone I met once - called it the Oneness. A good many people seem to know about it, whatever they call it. But I found out for myself that when I was inside the void, I could feel saidin, like a light just beyond the corner of my eye in the emptiness. There's nothing but me and that light. Emotion, even thought, is outside. I used to have to take it bit by bit, but it all comes at once, now. Most of it does, anyway. Most of the time."

"Emptiness," Elayne said with a shiver. "No emotion. That doesn't sound very much like what we do."

"Yes, it does," Egwene insisted eagerly. "Rand, we just do it a little differently, that's all. I imagine myself to be a flower, a rosebud, imagine it until I am the rosebud. That is like your void, in a way. The rosebud's petals open out to the light of saidar, and I let it fill me, all light and warmth and life and wonder. I surrender to it, and by surrendering, I control it. That was the hardest part to learn, really; how to master saidar by submitting, but it seems so natural now

that I do not even think about it. That is the key to it, Rand. I am sure. You must learn to surrender - ” He was shaking his head vigorously.

“That’s nothing like what I do,” he protested. “Let it fill me? I have to reach out and take hold of saidin. Sometimes there’s still nothing there when I do, nothing I can touch, but if I didn’t reach for it, I could stand there forever and nothing would happen. It fills me all right, once I take hold, but surrender to it?” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Egwene, if I surrendered - even for a minute - saidin would consume me. It’s like a river of molten metal, an ocean of fire, all the light of the sun gathered in one spot. I must fight it to make it do what I want, fight it to keep from being eaten up.”

He sighed. “I know what you mean about life filling you, though, even with the taint turning my stomach. Colors are sharper, smells clearer. Everything is more real, somehow. I don’t want to let go, once I have it, even while it’s trying to swallow me. But the rest . . . Face the facts, Egwene. The Tower is right about this. Accept it for the truth, because it is.”

She shook her head. “I will accept it when it is proved to me.” She did not sound as sure as she wanted to, not as sure she had been. What he told sounded like some twisted half-reflection of what she did, similarities only emphasizing differences. Yet there were similarities. She would not give up. “Can you tell the flows apart? Air, Water, Spirit, Earth, Fire?”

“Sometimes,” he said slowly. “Not usually. I just take what I need to do what I want. Fumble for it, mostly. It’s very strange. Sometimes I need to do a thing, and I do it, but only afterward do I know what it was I did, or how. It’s almost like remembering something I’ve forgotten. But I can remember how to do it again. Most of the time.”

“Yet you do remember how,” she insisted. “How did you set fire to those tables?” She wanted to ask him how he had made them dance - she thought she saw a way, with Air and Water - but she wanted to start with something simple; lighting a candle and putting it out were things a novice could do.

Rand’s face took on a pained expression. “I don’t know.” He sounded embarrassed. “When I want fire, for a lamp or a fireplace, I just make it, but I do not know how. I don’t really need to think to do things with fire.”

That almost stood to reason. Of the Five Powers, Fire and Earth had been strongest in men in the Age of Legends, and Air and Water in women; Spirit had been shared equally. Egwene hardly had to think to use Air or Water, once she had learned to do a thing in the first place. But the thought did not further their purpose.

This time it was Elayne who pressed him. “Do you know how you extinguished them? You seemed to think before they went out.”

“That I do remember, because I don’t believe I have ever done it before. I took in the heat from the tables and spread it into the stone of the fireplace; a fireplace wouldn’t even notice that much heat.”

Elayne gasped, unconsciously cradling her left arm for a moment, and Egwene winced in sympathy. She remembered when that arm had been a mass of blisters because the Daughter-Heir had done what Rand had just described, and with just the lamp in her room. Sheriam had threatened to let the blisters heal by themselves; she had not done it, but she had threatened. It was one of the warnings novices were given; never draw heat in. A flame could be extinguished using Air or Water, but using Fire to pull the heat away meant disaster with a flame of any size. It was not a matter of strength, so Sheriam had said; heat once taken in could not be gotten rid of, not by the strongest woman ever to come out of the White Tower. Women had actually burst into flame themselves that way. Women had burst into flame. Egwene drew a ragged breath.

“What’s the matter?” Rand asked.

“I think you just proved the difference to me.” She sighed.

“Oh. Does that mean you’re ready to give up?”

“No!” She tried to make her voice softer. She was not angry with him. Exactly. She was not sure who she was angry with. “Maybe my teachers were right, but there has to be a way. Some way. Only I cannot think of one, right now.”

“You tried,” he said simply. “I thank you for that. It is not your fault it did not work. “

“There must be a way,” Egwene muttered, and Elayne murmured, “We will find it. We will.”

“Of course you will,” he said with a forced cheerfulness. “But not today.” He hesitated. “I suppose you’ll be going, then.” He sounded half-regretful, half-glad. “I do need to tell the High Lords a few things about taxes this morning. They seem to think they can take as much from a farmer in a poor year as a good without begging him. And I suppose you have to get back to questioning those Darkfriends.” He frowned.

He had not said anything, but Egwene was sure he would like to keep them as far from the Black Ajah as possible. She was a little surprised he had not already tried to make them return to the Tower. Perhaps he knew that she and Nynaeve would put a flea in his ear the size of a horse if he tried.

“We do,” she said firmly. “But not right away. Rand . . .” The time had come to bring up her second reason for being there, but it was even more difficult than she had expected. This was going to hurt him; those sad, wary eyes convinced her it would. But it had to be done. She snugged the scarf around her; it enveloped her from shoulders to waist. “Rand, I cannot marry you.”

“I know,” he said.

She blinked. He was not taking it as hard as she expected. She told herself that was good. “I do not mean to hurt you - really, I don’t - but I do not want to marry you.”

“I understand, Egwene. I know what I am. No woman could - ”

“You wool-brained idiot!” she snapped. “This had nothing to do with you channeling. I do not love you! At least, not in the way to want to marry you.”

Rand’s jaw dropped. “You don’t . . . love me?” He sounded as surprised as he looked. And hurt, too.

“Please try to understand,” she said in a gentler voice. “People change, Rand. Feelings change. When people are apart, sometimes they grow apart. I love you as I would a brother, perhaps more than a brother, but not to marry. Can you understand that?”

He managed a rueful grin. “I really am a fool. I didn’t really believe you might change, too. Egwene, I do not want to marry you, either. I did not want to change, I didn’t try to, but it happened. If you knew how much this means to me. Not having to pretend. Not being afraid I’ll hurt you. I never wanted to do that, Egwene. Never to hurt you.”

She very nearly smiled. He was putting on such a brave face; he was actually quite close to convincing. “I am glad you are taking it so well,” she told him in a soft voice. “I did not want to hurt you, either. And now I really must go.” Rising from her chair, she bent to brush a kiss across his cheek. “You will find someone else.”

“Of course,” he said, getting to his feet, the lie loud in his voice.

“You will.”

She slipped out with a sense of satisfaction and hurried across the anteroom, letting saidar go as she took the scarf from her shoulders. The thing was abominably hot.

He was ready for Elayne to pick up like a lost puppy if she handled him the way they had discussed. She thought Elayne would manage him nicely, now and later. For as much later as they had. Something had to be done about his control. She was willing to admit that what she had been told was right - no woman could teach him; fish and birds - but that was not the same as giving up. Something had to be done, so a way had to be found. That horrible wound and

the madness were problems for later, but they would be dealt with eventually. Somehow. Everyone said Two Rivers men were stubborn, but they could not match Two Rivers women.

Chapter 8 - Hard Heads

Elayne was not certain Rand realized she was still in the room, the way he stared after Egwene with a half-bewildered expression. Now and again he shook his head as if arguing with himself, or trying to straighten his mind. She was content to wait him out. Anything that put off the moment a while longer. She concentrated on maintaining an outward composure, back straight and head high, hands folded in her lap, a calmness on her face that could have rivaled Moiraine's best. Butterflies the size of hedgehogs frolicked in her stomach.

It was not fear of him channeling. She had let go of saidin as soon as Egwene stood to leave. She wanted to trust him, and she had to. It was what she wanted to happen that had her trembling inside. She had to concentrate not to fidget her necklace or fiddle with the strand of sapphires in her hair. Was her perfume too heavy? No. Egwene said he liked the smell of roses. The dress. She wanted to tug it up, but

He turned - the slight limp in his step tightened her lips thoughtfully - saw her sitting in her chair, and gave a start, eyes widening with what seemed very close to panic. She was glad to see it; the effort of keeping her own face serene had leaped tenfold as soon as his eyes touched her. Those eyes were blue now, like a misty morning sky.

He recovered on the instant and made a quite unnecessary bow, wiping his hands once nervously on his coat. "I did not realize you were still - " Flushing, he cut off; forgetting her presence might be taken as an insult. "I mean . . . I didn't . . . that is, I . . ." He took a deep breath and began again. "I am not as much of a fool as I sound, my Lady. It isn't every day someone tells you they don't love you, my Lady."

She put on a tone of mock severity. "If you call me that again, I shall call you my Lord Dragon. And curtsy. Even the Queen of Andor might curtsy to you, and I am only Daughter-Heir."

"Light! Don't do that." He seemed uneasy out of all proportion to the threat.

"I will not, Rand," she said in a more serious voice, "if you call me by my name. Elayne. Say it."

"Elayne." He spoke awkwardly, yet, delightfully, as if he were savoring the name, too.

"Good." It was absurd to be so pleased; all he had done was say her name, after all. There was something she had to know before she could go on. "Did it hurt you very much?" That could be taken two ways, she realized. "What Egwene told you, I mean."

"No. Yes. Some. I don't know. Fair is fair, after all." His small grin took some of the edge off of his wariness. "I sound a fool again, don't I?"

"No. Not to me."

"I told her the pure truth, but I don't think she believed me. I suppose I did not want to believe it of her, either. Not really. If that isn't foolish, I don't know what is."

"If you tell me one more time that you are a fool, I may begin to believe it." He won't try to hold on to her; I won't have to deal with that. Her voice was calm, with a light enough tone to let him know she did not really mean what she said. "I saw a Cairhienin lord's fool, once, a man in a funny striped coat, too big for him and sewn with bells. You would look silly wearing bells."

"I suppose I would," he said ruefully. "I will remember that." His slow grin was wider this time, warming his whole face.

The butterflies' wings flogged her for haste, but she occupied herself with straightening her skirts. She had to go slowly, carefully. If I don't, he'll think I am just a foolish girl. And he will be right. The butterflies in her belly were beating kettle drums, now.

“Would you like a flower?” he asked suddenly, and she blinked in confusion.

“A flower?”

“Yes.” Striding to the bed, he scooped up a double handful of feathers from the tattered mattress and held them out to her. “I made one for the majhere last night. You’d have thought I had given her the Stone. But yours will be much prettier,” he added hastily. “Much prettier. I promise.”

“Rand, I - ”

“I will be careful. It takes only a trickle of the Power. Just a thread, and I will be very careful.”

Trust. She had to trust him. It was a small surprise to realize that she did. “I would like that, Rand.”

For long moments he stared at the fluffy mound in his hands, a slow frown on his face. Abruptly he let the feathers fall, dusting his hands. “Flowers,” he said. “That’s no fit gift for you.” Her heart went out to him; clearly he had tried to embrace saidin and failed. Masking disappointment in action, he limped hurriedly to the metallic cloth and began gathering it over his arm. “Now this is a proper gift for the Daughter-Heir of Andor. You could have a seamstress make . . .” He floundered over what a seamstress might make from a four-pace length of gold-and-silver cloth, less than two feet wide.

“I am sure a seamstress will have many ideas,” she told him diplomatically. Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve, she knelt for a moment to collect the feathers he had dropped into the square of pale blue silk.

“The maids will take care of that,” he said as she tucked the small bundle securely into her belt pouch.

“Well, this bit is done.” How could he understand that she would keep the feathers because he had wanted them to be a flower? He shifted his feet, holding the glittering folds as if he did not know what to do with them. “The majhere must have seamstresses,” she told him. “I will give that to one of them.” He brightened, smiling; she saw no reason to tell him she meant it as a gift. Those thundering butterflies would not let her hold back any longer. “Rand, do you . . . like me?”

“Like you?” he frowned. “Of course, I like you. I like you very much.”

Did he have to look as if he did not understand at all? “I am fond of you, Rand.” She was startled that she said it so calmly; her stomach seemed to be trying to writhe up into her throat, and her hands and feet felt like ice. “More than fond.” That was enough; she was not going to make a fool of herself. He has to say more than “like.” first. She almost giggled hysterically. I will keep control of myself. I will not let him see me behave like a moon-eyed girl. I will not.

“I am fond of you,” he said slowly.

“I am not usually so forward.” No; that might make hire think of Berelain. There was red in his cheeks; he was thinking of Berelain. Burn him! Her voice came as smooth as silk. “Soon I will have to go, Rand. To leave Tear. I may not see you again for months.” Or ever, a tiny voice cried in her head. She refused to listen. “I could not go without letting you know how I feel. And I am . . . very fond of you.”

“Elayne, I am fond of you. I feel . . . I want . . .” The scarlet spots on his cheeks grew. “Elayne, I don’t know what to say, how to . . .”

Suddenly it was her face that was flaming. He must think she was trying to force him into saying more. Aren’t you? the small voice mocked, which only made her cheeks hotter. “Rand, I am not asking for . . .” Light! How to say it? “I only wanted you to know how I feel. That is all.” Berelain would not have let it go at that. Berelain would have been wrapped around him by now. Telling herself she would not let that half-dressed snip better her, she moved closer to him, took the glittering cloth from his arm, and dropped it on the carpet. For some reason he seemed taller than he ever had before. “Rand . . . Rand, I want you to kiss me.” There. It was out.

“Kiss you?” he said as if he had never heard of kissing before. “Elayne, I don’t want to promise more than . . . I mean, it isn’t as if we were betrothed. Not that I am suggesting we should be. It’s just that . . . I am fond of you, Elayne. More than fond. I just do not want you to think I . . .”

She had to laugh at him, with all his confused earnestness. “I do not know how things are done in the Two Rivers, but in Caemlyn you don’t wait until you are betrothed before kissing a girl. And it does not mean you must become betrothed, either. But perhaps you do not know how - ” His arms went around her almost roughly, and his lips came down on hers. Her head spun; her toes tried to curl up in her slippers. Some time later - she was not certain how long - she realized she was leaning against his chest, knees trembling, trying to gulp air.

“Forgive me for interrupting you,” he said. She was glad to hear a touch of breathlessness in his voice. “I am just a backward shepherd from the Two Rivers.”

“You are uncouth,” she murmured against his shirt, “and you did not shave this morning, but I would not say you are backward.”

“Elayne, I - ”

She put a hand over his mouth. “I do not want to hear anything; from you that you do not mean with your whole heart,” she said firmly. “Not now, or ever.”

He nodded, not as if he understood why, but at least as if he understood that she meant what she said. Straightening her hair - the strand of sapphires was tangled beyond mending without a mirror - she stepped out of his encircling arms, not without reluctance; it would be all too easy to remain there, and she had already been more forward than she had ever dreamed of before. Speaking up like that; asking for a kiss. Asking! She was not Berelain.

Berelain. Perhaps Min had had a viewing. What Min saw, happened, but she would not share him with Berelain. Perhaps she needed to do a bit more plain speaking. Obliquely plain, at least. “I expect you will not lack for company after I go. Just remember that some women see a man with their hearts, while others see no more than a bauble to wear, no different than a necklace or a bracelet. Remember that I will come back, and I am one who sees with her heart.” He looked confused, at first, then a little alarmed. She had said too much, too fast. She had to divert him. “Do you know what you have not said to me? You have not tried to frighten me away by telling me how dangerous you are. Don’t try now. It is too late.”

“I did not think of it.” Another thought came to him, though, and his eyes crinkled with suspicion. “Did you and Egwene scheme this up between you?”

She managed to combine wide-eyed innocence with mild outrage. “How could you even consider such a thing? Do you imagine we would hand you around between us like a package? You think a good deal of yourself. There is such a thing as being over-proud.” He did look confused, now. Quite satisfactory. “Are you sorry for what you did to us, Rand?”

“I did not mean to frighten you,” he said hesitantly. “Egwene made me angry; she’s always been able to without half trying. That’s no excuse, I know. I said I was sorry, and I am. Look what it got me. Burned tables and another mattress ruined.”

“And for . . . the pinch?”

His face reddened again, but he faced her firmly even so. “No. No, I am not sorry for that. The two of you, talking over my head, as if I were a lump of wood with no ears. You deserved as much, both of you, and I won’t say different.”

For a moment she considered him. He rubbed his arms through his coat sleeves as she momentarily embraced saidar. She did not know Healing to any degree, but she had learned bits and pieces on the edge of it. Channeling, she soothed away the hurt she had given him for the pinch. His eyes widened in surprise, and he shifted on his feet as if testing the absence of pain. “For being honest,” she told him simply.

There was a rap at the door, and Gaul looked in. At first the Aielman had his head down, but after a quick glance at them he raised it. Color flooded Elayne's face as she realized he had suspected that he might be interrupting something he should not see. She very nearly embraced saidar again and taught him a lesson.

"The Tairens are here," Gaul said. "The High Lords you were expecting."

"I will go, then," she told Rand. "You must tell them about - taxes, was it not? Think on what I have said." She did not say "think of me," but she was sure the effect would be the same.

He reached out as if to stop her, but she slipped away from him. She had no intention of putting on a display in front of Gaul. The man was Aiel, but what must he think of her, wearing perfume and sapphires at that hour of the morning? It required real effort not to pull the neckline of her dress up higher.

The High Lords entered as she reached the door, a cluster of graying men in pointed beards and colorful, ornate coats with puffy sleeves. They crowded out of her way with reluctant bows, their bland faces and polite murmurs not hiding their relief that she was leaving.

She glanced back once from the doorway. A tall, broad-shouldered young man in a plain green coat among the High Lords in their silks and satin stripes, Rand looked like a stork among peacocks, yet there was something about him, a presence that said he commanded there by right. The Tairens recognized it, bending their stiff necks reluctantly. He thought probably they bowed just because he was the Dragon Reborn, and perhaps they thought so, too. But she had seen men, like Gareth Bryne, the Captain-Commander of her mother's Guards, who could have dominated a room in rags, with no title and no one knowing their name. Rand might not know it, but he was such a man. He had not been when she first saw him, but he was now. She pulled the door shut behind her.

The Aiel around the entrance glanced at her, and the captain commanding the ring of Defenders in the middle of the anteroom stared uneasily, but she barely noticed them. It was done. Or at least it was begun. Four days she had before Joiya and Amico were put on that ship, four days at most to twine herself so firmly into Rand's thoughts that he had no room for Berelain. Or if not that, firmly enough that she stayed inside his head until she had the chance to do more. She had never thought she might do a thing like this, stalk a man like a huntress stalking a wild boar. The butterflies were still gamboling in her stomach. At least she had not let him see how nervous she was. And it occurred to her that she had not once thought of what her mother would say. With that, the flutterings vanished. She did not care what her mother said. Morgase had to accept her daughter as a woman; that was all there was to it.

The Aiel bowed as she moved away, and she acknowledged them with a gracious nod that would have done Morgase proud. Even the Tairen captain looked at her as if he could see her new serenity. She did not think she would be troubled by butterflies again. For the Black Ajah perhaps, but not for Rand.

Ignoring the High Lords in their anxious semicircle, Rand watched the door close behind Elayne with wonder in his eyes. Dreams coming true, even only this much, made him uneasy. A swim in the Waterwood was one thing, but he would never have believed a dream where she came to him like this. She had been so cool and collected, while he was tripping over his own tongue. And Egwene, giving his own thoughts back to him and only concerned she might hurt him. Why was it women could go to pieces or fly into a rage at the smallest thing, yet never flicker an eyelash at what left you gaping?

"My Lord Dragon?" Sunamon murmured even more diffidently than usual. Word of this morning must have spread through the Stone already; that first lot had nearly run on their way out, and it was doubtful Torean would show his face, or his filthy suggestions, anywhere Rand was.

Sunamon essayed, an ingratiating smile, then smothered it, dry-washing his plump hands, when Rand only looked at him. The rest pretended they did not see the burned tables, or the shattered mattress and scattered books, or the half-melted lumps over the fireplace that had been the stag and wolves. High Lords were good at seeing only what they wanted to see. Carleon and Tedosian, false self-effacement in every line of their thick bodies, surely never realized

there was anything suspicious in never looking at one another. But then, Rand might never have noticed if not for Thom's note, found in the pocket of a coat just back from being brushed.

"The Lord Dragon wished to see us?" Sunamon managed.

Could Egwene and Elayne have worked it up between them? Of course not. Women did not do things like that any more than men. Did they? It had to be coincidence. Elayne heard that he was free and decided to speak. That was it. "Taxes," he barked. The Tairens did not move, but they gave the impression of stepping back. How he hated dealing with these men; he wanted to dive back into the books.

"It is a bad precedent, my Lord Dragon, lowering taxes," a lean, gray-haired man said in an oily voice. Meilan was tall for a Tairen, only a hand shorter than Rand, and hard as any Defender. He held himself in a stoop in Rand's presence; his dark eyes showed how he hated it. But he had hated it when Rand told them to stop crouching around him, too. None of them straightened, but Meilan especially had not liked being reminded of what he did. "The peasants have always paid easily, but if we lower their taxes, when the day comes that we raise them back to where they now are, the fools will complain as bitterly as if we had doubled the present levy. There might well be riots when that day comes, my Lord Dragon."

Rand strode across the room to stand before Callandor; the crystal sword glittered, outshining the gilt and gemstones surrounding it. A reminder of who he was, of the power he could wield. Egwene. It was foolish to feel hurt because she said she no longer loved him. Why should he expect her to have feelings for him that he did not have for her? Yet it did hurt. A relief, but not a pleasant one. "You will have riots if you drive men off their farms." Three books stood in a stack almost by Meilan's feet. The Treasurer of the Stone of Tear, Travels in the Waste, and Dealings with the Territory of Mayene. The keys lay in those, and in the various translations of The Karaethon Cycle, if he could only find them and fit them to the proper locks. He pushed his mind back to the High Lords. "Do you think they will watch their families starve and do nothing?"

"The Defenders of the Stone have put down riots before, my Lord Dragon," Sunamon said soothingly. "Our own guards can keep peace in the countryside. The peasants will not disturb you, I give you my assurance."

"There are too many farmers as it is." Carleon flinched at Rand's glare. "It is the civil war in Cairhien, my Lord Dragon," he explained hurriedly. "The Cairhienin can buy no grain, and the granaries are bursting. This year's harvest will go to waste as it is. And next year . . . ? Burn my soul, my Lord Dragon, but what we need is for some of those peasants to stop their eternal digging and planting." He seemed to realize he had said too much, though he clearly did not understand why. Rand wondered whether he had any idea how food got to his table. Did he see anything but gold, and power?

"What will you do when Cairhien is buying grain again?" Rand said coolly. "For that matter, is Cairhien the only land that needs grain?" Why had Elayne spoken up like that? What did she expect of him? Fond, she said. Women could play games with words like Aes Sedai. Did she mean she loved him? No, that was plain foolishness. Over-proud to a degree.

"My Lord Dragon," Meilan said, half subservient, half as if explaining some-thing to a child, "if the civil wars stopped today, Cairhien still could not buy more than a few bargeloads for two, even three years. We have always sold our grain to Cairhien."

Always - for the twenty years since the Aiel War. They were so bound up in what they had always done that they could not see what was so simple. Or would not see it. When the cabbages sprouted like weeds around Emond's Field, it was a near certainty that bad rain or whiteworm had struck Deven Ride or Watch Hill. When Watch Hill had too many turnips, Emond's Field would have a shortage, or Deven Ride.

"Offer it in Illian," he told them. What did Elayne expect? "Or Altara." He did like her, but he liked Min as much. Or thought he did. It was impossible to sort out his feelings for either of them. "You have ships for the sea as well as riverboats and barges, and if you don't have enough, hire them from Mayene." He liked both women, but beyond that . . . He had spent very nearly his whole life mooning after Egwene; he was not about to dive into that again until he was sure. Sure of something. Sure. If Dealings with the Territory of Mayene was to be believed . . . Stop this, he told

himself. Keep your mind on these weasels, or they'll find cracks to slip through, and bite you on the way. "Pay with grain; I'm sure the First will be amenable, for a good price. And maybe a signed agreement, a treaty . . ." That was a good word; the sort they used. ". . . pledging to leave Mayene alone in return for ships." He owed her that.

"We trade little with Illian, my Lord Dragon. They are vultures, and scum." Tedosian sounded scandalized, and so did Meilan when he said, "We have always dealt with Mayene from strength, my Lord Dragon. Never with bent knee."

Rand took a deep breath. The High Lords tensed. It always came to this. He always tried to reason with them, and it always failed. Thom said the High Lords had heads as hard as the Stone, and he was right. What do I feel for her? Dreaming about her. She's certainly pretty. He was not sure if he meant Elayne or Min. Stop this! A kiss means no more than a kiss. Stop it! Putting women firmly out of his head, he set himself to telling these stone-brained fools what they were going to do. "First, you will cut taxes on farmers by three-quarters, and on everyone else by half. Don't argue! Just do it! Second, you go to Berelain and ask - ask! - her price for hiring . . ."

The High Lords listened with false smiles and grinding teeth, but they listened.

Egwene was considering Joiya and Amico when Mat fell in beside her, just walking down the hallway as if he merely happened to be going the same way. He was frowning to himself, and his hair needed brushing, as if he had been scrubbing his fingers through it. Once or twice he glanced at her but did not speak. The servants they passed bowed or curtsied, and so did the occasional High Lords and Ladies, if with markedly less enthusiasm. Mat's lip-curling stares at the nobles would have brought trouble if she had not been there, friend of the Lord Dragon or not.

This silence was not like him, not like the Mat she knew. Except for his fine red coat-wrinkled as if he had slept in it - he seemed no different than the old Mat, yet they were surely all different now. His quiet was unsettling. "Is last night troubling you?" she asked at last.

He missed a step. "You know about that? Well, you would, wouldn't you. Doesn't bother me. Wasn't much to it. Over and done with now, anyway."

She pretended to believe him. "Nynaeve and I do not see much of you." That was a rank understatement.

"I have been busy," he muttered with an uncomfortable shrug, looking everywhere but at her again.

"Dicing?" she asked dismissively.

"Cards." A plump maid, curtsying with her arms full of folded towels, glanced at Egwene and, apparently thinking she was not looking, winked at Mat. He grinned at her. "I've been busy playing cards."

Egwene's eyebrows rose sharply. That woman had to be ten years older than Nynaeve. "I see. It must use up a great deal of time. Playing cards. Too much to spare a few moments for old friends."

"The last time I spared you a moment, you and Nynaeve tied me up with the Power like a pig for market so you could rummage through my room. Friends don't steal from friends." He grimaced. "Besides, you're always with that Elayne, with her nose in the air. Or Moiraine. I do not like -" Clearing his throat, he shot her a sideways glance. "I don't like taking up your time. You are busy, from what I hear. Questioning Darkfriends. Doing all sorts of important things, I should imagine. You know these Tairens think you are Aes Sedai, don't you?"

She shook her head ruefully. It was Aes Sedai he did not like. However much of the world Mat saw, nothing would ever change him. "It is not stealing to take back what was supposed to be a loan," she told him.

"I don't remember you saying anything about a loan. Aaah, what use do I have for a letter from the Amyrlin? Just get me in trouble. You could have asked, though."

She refrained from pointing out that they had asked. She wanted neither an argument nor a sulky departure. He would not call it that, of course. This time she would let him get away with his version. "Well, I am glad you are still willing to talk to me. Was there a special reason for it today?"

He shoved his fingers through his hair and muttered to himself. What he needed was his mother to haul him off by his ear for a long talking to. Egwene counseled herself to patience. She could be patient when she wanted to. She would not say a word before he did, if she burst for it.

The corridor opened into a railed colonnade of white marble, looking down on one of the Stone's few gardens. Large white blossoms covered a few small, waxy-leaved trees and gave a scent even sweeter than the banks of red and yellow roses. A sullen breeze failed to stir the hangings on the inner wall, but it did cut the morning's growing damp warmth. Mat took a seat on the wide balustrade with his back against a column and one foot up in front of him. Peering down into the garden, he finally said, "I . . . need some advice."

He wanted advice from her? She goggled at him. "Whatever I can do to help," she said faintly. He turned his head to her, and she did her best to assume something like Aes Sedai calm. "What do you want advice about?"

"I don't know."

It was a ten-pace drop to the garden. Besides, there were men down there weeding among the roses. If she pushed him over, he might land on one. A gardener, not a rosebush. "How am I supposed to advise you, then?" she asked in a thin voice.

"I am . . . trying to decide what to do." He looked embarrassed; he had a right to, in her opinion.

"I hope you are not thinking of trying to leave. You know how important you are. You cannot run away from it, Mat."

"You think I don't know that? I don't think I could leave if Moiraine told me I could. Believe me, Egwene, I am not going anywhere. I just want to know what's going to happen." He gave a rough shake of his head, and his voice grew tighter. "What comes next? What's in these holes in my memory? There are chunks of my life that aren't even there; they don't exist, as if they never happened! Why do I find myself spouting gibberish? People say it's the Old Tongue, but it's goose gabble to me. I want to know, Egwene. I have to know, before I go as crazy as Rand."

"Rand is not crazy," she said automatically. So Mat was not trying to run away. That was a pleasant surprise; he had not seemed to believe in responsibility. But there was pain and worry in his voice. Mat never worried, or never let anyone see it if he did. "I do not know the answers, Mat," she said gently. "Perhaps Moiraine -"

"No!" He was on his feet in a bound. "No Aes Sedai! I mean . . . You're different. I know you, and you aren't . . . Didn't they teach you anything in the Tower, some trick or other, something that would serve?"

"Oh, Mat, I am sorry. I am so sorry."

His laugh reminded her of their childhood. Just so he had always laughed when his grandest expectations went astray. "Ah, well, I guess it does not matter. It'd still be the Tower, if at second hand. No offense to you." Just so he had moaned over a splinter in his finger and treated a broken leg as if it were nothing at all.

"There might be a way," she said slowly. "If Moiraine says it is all right. She might."

"Moiraine! Haven't you heard a word I said? The last thing I want is Moiraine meddling. What way?"

Mat had always been rash. But he wanted no more than she did, to know. If only he showed a little sense and caution for once. A passing Tairen noblewoman with dark braids coiled about her head, shoulders bare above yellow linen, bent her knee slightly, looking at them with no expression; she walked on quickly, with a stiff back. Egwene watched her until she was well beyond earshot, and they were alone. Unless the gardeners, thirty feet below, counted. Mat was staring at her expectantly.

In the end, she told him of the ter'angreal, the twisted doorway that held answers on its other side. It was the dangers she emphasized, the consequences of foolish questions, or those touching the Shadow, the dangers even Aes Sedai might not know. She was more than flattered that he had come to her, but he had to show a little sense. "You must

remember this, Mat. Frivolous questions can get you killed, so if you do use it, you will have to be serious for a change. And you mustn't ask any questions that touch the Shadow."

He had listened with greater and greater incredulity. When she was done, he exclaimed, "Three questions? You go in like Bili, I suppose, spend a night and come out ten years later with a purse that's always full of gold and a -"

"For once in your life, Matrim Cauthon," she snapped, "do not talk like a fool. You know very well ter'angreal are not stories. It's the dangers you have to be aware of. Maybe the answers you seek are inside this one, but you must not try it before Moiraine says you can. You must promise me that, or I promise you I will take you to her like a trout on a string. You know I can."

He gave a loud snort. "I'd be a fool if I did try it, no matter what Moiraine says.

Walk into a bloody ter'angreal? It's less I want to do with the bloody Power, not more. You can blot it right out of your mind."

"It is the only chance I know, Mat."

"Not for me, it isn't," he said firmly. "No chance at all is better than that."

Despite his tone, she wanted to put an arm around him. Only he would likely make some joke at her expense, and try to goose her. He had been incorrigible from the clay he was horn. But he had come to her for help. "I'm sorry, Mat. What will you do?"

"Oh, play cards, I suppose. If anyone will play with me. Play stones with Thom. Dice in the taverns. I can still go as far as the city, at least." His gaze strayed toward a passing maidservant, a slender, dark-eyed girl, near his own age. "I'll find something to take up time."

Her hand itched to slap him, but instead she said cautiously, "Mat, you really aren't thinking of leaving, are you?"

"Would you tell Moiraine, if I was?" He put up his hands to forestall her. "Well, there's no need. I told you I wouldn't. I'll not pretend I'd not like to, but I won't. Is that good enough for you?" A pensive frown crept onto his face. "Egwene, do you ever wish you were back home? That none of this had ever happened?"

It was a startling question, coming from him, but she knew her answer. "No. Even with everything, no. Do you?"

"I would be a fool then, wouldn't I?" he laughed. "It's cities I like, and this one will do for now. This one will do. Egwene, you won't tell Moiraine about this, will you? About me asking for advice and all?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked suspiciously. He was Mat, after all.

He gave an embarrassed hitch of his shoulders. "I've been keeping wider of her than I have of . . . Anyway, I've been staying clear, especially when she wants to root around in my head. She might think I'm weakening. You won't tell her, will you?"

"I won't," she said, "if you promise me you will not go near that ter'angreal without asking her permission. I shouldn't even have told you about it."

"I promise." He grinned. "I won't go near that thing unless my life depends on it. I swear." He finished with mock solemnity.

Egwene shook her head. However much everything else changed, Mat just never would.

Chapter 9 - Decisions

Three days passed with heat and damp that seemed to sap even the Tairens' strength. The city slowed to a lethargic walk, the Stone to a crawl. Servants worked nearly in their sleep; the majhere tore her coiled braids in frustration, but even she could not find the energy to rap knuckles or flick ears with a hard fingers. Defenders of the Stone slumped at their posts like half-melted candles, and the officers showed more interest in chilled wine than in making their rounds. The High Lords kept largely to their apartments, sleeping through the hottest part of the day and a few left the Stone entirely for the relative cool of estates far to the east, on the slopes of the Spine of the World. Oddly, only the outlanders, who felt the heat worst of all, pushed on with their lives as hard as ever, if not harder. For them, the heavy heat did not weigh nearly as much as did the hours rushing by.

Mat quickly discovered that he had been right about the young lords who saw the playing cards try to kill him. Not only did they avoid him, they spread the word among their friends, often garbled; no one in the Stone who had two pieces of silver in hand would say more than hasty excuses while backing away. The rumors spread beyond the lordlings. More than one serving woman who had enjoyed a cuddle now declined, too, and two said uneasily that they had heard it was dangerous to be alone with him. Perrin appeared all wrapped up in his own worries, and Thom seemed to vanish by sleight of hand; Mat had no idea what occupied the gleeman, but he was seldom to be found, day or night. Moiraine, the one person Mat wished would ignore him, instead seemed to be there whenever he turned around; she was just passing by, or crossing the corridor in the distance, but her eyes met his every last time, looking as if she knew what he was thinking and what he wanted, knew how she was going to make him do exactly what she wanted instead. None of it made any difference in one respect; he still managed to find excuses to put off leaving for another day. As he saw it, he had not promised Egwene he would stay. But he did.

Once, he carried a lamp down into the belly of the Stone, to the so-called Great Holding, as far as the dry-rotted door at the far end of the narrow hallway. A few minutes of peering into the shadowy interior at dim shapes covered with dusty canvas, roughly stacked crates and barrels, their flat ends used as shelves for jumbles of figurines and carvings and peculiar things of crystal and glass and metal - a few minutes of that, and he hurried away, muttering, "I'd have to be the biggest bloody fool in the whole bloody world!"

Nothing kept him from going into the city, though, and there was no chance at all of meeting Moiraine in the dockside taverns of the Maule, the port district, or the inns in the Chalm, where the warehouses were, dimly lit, cramped, often dirty places of cheap wine, bad ale, occasional fights and unending dice games. The stakes in the dice games were small, compared to what he had grown used to, but that was not why he always found himself back in the Stone after a few hours. He tried not to think about what always drew him back, near to Rand.

Perrin sometimes saw Mat in the waterfront taverns, drinking too much cheap wine, dicing as if he did not care whether he won or lost, once flashing a knife when a burly shipman pressed him on how often he did win. It was not like Mat to be so irritable, but Perrin avoided him instead of trying to find out what was troubling him. Perrin was not there for wine or dice, and the men who thought of fighting changed their minds after a good look at his shoulders - and his eyes. He bought bad ale, though, for sailors in wide leather trousers and for under-merchants with thin silver chains across their coat fronts, for any man who looked to be from a distant land. It was rumor he hunted, word of something that might draw Faile away from Tear. Away from him.

He was sure if he found an adventure for her, something that smacked of a chance at putting her name in the stories, she would go. She pretended to understand why he had to stay, but occasionally she still hinted that she wanted to leave and hoped he would go with her. He was certain the right bait would pull her, without him.

Most rumors she would know for outdated twistings of the truth, just as he did. The war that burned along the Aryth Ocean was said to be the work of a people no one had ever heard of before called the Sawchin, or something like it - he heard many variations from many tellers - a strange folk who might be Artur Hawkwing's armies come back after a thousand years. One fellow, a Taraboner in a round, red hat and a mustache as thick as a bull's horns, solemnly informed him that Hawkwing himself led these people, his legendary sword justice in hand. There were rumors that the fabled Horn of Valere, meant to call dead heroes from the grave to fight in the Last Battle, had been found. In Ghealdan, riots had broken out all over the country; Illian was suffering from outbreaks of mass madness; in Cairhien,

famine was slowing the killing; someplace in the Borderlands, Trolloc raids were on the increase. Perrin could not send Faile into any of that, not even to get her away from Tear.

Reports of trouble in Saldaea seemed promising - her own home must be attractive to her, and he had heard that Mazrim Taim, the false Dragon, was safely in Aes Sedai hands - but no one knew what sort of trouble. Making something up would do no good; whatever he found, she would surely ask her own questions before chasing after it. Besides, any turmoil in Saldaea might easily be as bad as the other things he heard.

He could not tell her where he was spending his time, either, because she would inevitably ask why. She knew he was not Mat, to enjoy lolling about taverns. He had never been good at lying, so he put her off as best he could, and she began to give him long, silent, slanted looks. All he could do was redouble his efforts to find a tale to lure her away. He had to send her away from him before he got her killed. He had to.

Egwene and Nynaeve spent more hours with Joiya and Amico, to no avail. Their stories never wavered. Over Nynaeve's protests, Egwene even tried telling each of them what the other had said, to see if anything joggled loose. Amico stared at them, whining that she had never heard any such plan. But it might be true, she added. It might. She sweated with eagerness to please. Joiya coolly told them to go to Tanchico if they wished. "It is an uncomfortable city now, I hear," she said smoothly, raven eyes glittering. "The King holds little more than the city itself, and I understand the Panarch has ceased keeping civil order. Strong arms and quick knives rule Tanchico. But go, if it pleases you."

No word came from Tar Valon, nothing to say if the Amyrlin was dealing with the possible threat to free Mazrim Taim. There had been plenty of time for a message to come, by quick riverboat or a man changing horses, since Moiraine had sent the pigeons-provided she had sent them. Egwene and Nynaeve argued about that; Nynaeve admitted the Aes Sedai could not lie, but she tried to find some twist in Moiraine's words. Moiraine did not seem to fret over the lack of response from the Amyrlin, though it was hard to tell through her crystal calm.

Egwene did fret over it, and over whether Tanchico was a false trail, or a real one, or a trap. The Stone's library held books about Tarabon and Tanchico, but though she read until her eyes ached she found no clue to anything dangerous to Rand. Heat and worry did nothing for her temper; she was sometimes as snappish as Nynaeve.

Some things were going well, of course. Mat was still in the Stone; obviously he really was growing up and learning about responsibility. She regretted failing him, but she was not certain any woman in the Tower could have done more. She understood his thirst to know, because she thirsted, too, although for other knowledge, for the things she could only learn in the Tower, the things she might discover that no one else had known how to do before, the lost things she might relearn.

Aviendha began to visit with Egwene, apparently of her own choice. If the woman was wary at first, well, she was Aiel, after all, and she did think Egwene was full Aes Sedai. Still, her company was enjoyable, although Egwene sometimes thought she saw unasked questions in her eyes. If Aviendha kept her reserve, it soon became apparent that she had a quick wit, and a sense of humor akin to Egwene's; they sometimes ended up giggling together like girls. Aiel ways were nothing Egwene was used to, though, such as Aviendha's discomfort at sitting in a chair, and her shock at finding Egwene in her bath, a silver-plated tub the majhere had had brought up. Not shock at walking in on her naked - in fact, when she saw that Egwene was uncomfortable, she peeled off her own clothes and sat down on the floor to talk - but at seeing Egwene sitting chest-deep in water. It was dirtying so much water that made her eyes pop. For another thing, Aviendha refused to understand why she and Elayne had not done something drastic to Berelain, since they wanted her out of the way. It was all but forbidden for a warrior to kill a woman not wed to the spear, but since neither Elayne nor Berelain were Maidens of the Spear, it was apparently quite all right in Aviendha's view for Elayne to challenge the First of Mayene to fight with knives, or failing that with fists and feet. Knives were best, as she saw it. Berelain looked the sort of woman who could be beaten several times without giving up. Best simply to challenge and kill her. Or Egwene could do it for her, as friend and near-sister.

Even with that, it was a pleasure to have someone to talk and laugh with. Elayne was occupied most of the time, of course, and Nynaeve, seeming to feel the rush of time as keenly as Egwene, gave her free moments over to moonlit walks on the battlements with Lan and to preparing foods the Warder liked with her own hands, not to mention curses that sometimes drove the cooks from the kitchen; Nynaeve did not know very much about cooking. If not for Aviendha, Egwene was not sure what she would have done in the muggy hours between questionings of the

Darkfriends: sweated, undoubtedly, and worried that she might have to do something that gave her nightmares thinking of it.

By agreement, Elayne was never present at those questionings; one more set of ears listening would make no difference. Instead, whenever Rand had a moment to spare, the Daughter-Heir just happened to be close by, to talk, or simply walk holding his arm, even if it was only from a meeting with some High Lords to a room where others waited, or to a lightning inspection of the Defenders' quarters. She became quite good at finding secluded corners where the two of them could pause, alone. Of course, he always had Aiel trailing after him, but she soon cared as little for what they thought as for what her mother would. She even entered a sort of conspiracy with the Maidens of the Spear; they seemed to know every hidden nook in the Stone, and they let her know whenever Rand was alone. They seemed to think the game great sport.

The surprise was that he asked her about the governing of nations and listened to what she said. That, she wished her mother could see. More than once Morgase had laughed, half-despairingly, and told her she had to learn to concentrate. Which crafts to protect and how, and which not and why, might be dry decisions, but as important as how to care for the sick. It might be fun to guide a stubborn lord or merchant into doing what he did not want to while thinking it was his own idea, it might be warming to feed the hungry, but if the hungry were to be fed it was necessary to decide how many clerks and drivers and wagons were needed. Others might arrange it, but then you would never know until it was too late whether they had made a mistake. He listened to her, and often took her advice. She thought she could have loved him for those two things alone. Berelain was not setting foot outside her chambers; Rand had begun smiling as soon as he saw her; nothing could be finer about the world. Unless the days could stop passing.

Three short days, slipping away like water through her fingers. Joiya and Amico would be sent north and the reason for staying in Tear would vanish; it would be time for her and Egwene and Nynaeve to leave, too. She would go, when that time came; she had never considered not. Knowing that made her proud of behaving like a woman, not a girl; knowing it made her want to cry.

And Rand? He met with High Lords in his chambers and issued orders. He startled them by appearing at secret gatherings of three or four that Thom had ferreted out, just to reiterate some point from his last commands. They smiled and bowed and sweated and wondered how much he knew. A use had to be found for their energy before one of them decided that if Rand could not be manipulated, he must be killed. Whatever it took to divert them, he would not start a war. If he had to confront Sammael, so be it; but he would not start a war.

Forming his plan of action occupied most of his time not given over to hounding the High Lords. Bits and pieces came from the books he had the librarians bring to his rooms by armloads, and from his talks with Elayne. Her advice was certainly useful with the High Lords; he could see them hastily reassessing him when he displayed knowledge of things they themselves only half-knew. She stopped him when he wanted to give her the credit.

"A wise ruler takes advice," she told him, smiling, "but should never be seen to take it. Let them think you know more than you do. It will not harm them, and it will help you." She seemed pleased he had suggested it, though.

He was not entirely sure that he was not still putting off some decision, at least, because of her. Three days of planning, of trying to puzzle out what was still missing. Something was. He could not react to the Forsaken; he had to make them react to him. Three days, and on the fourth she would go - back to Tar Valon, he hoped - but once he moved, he suspected even their brief moments together would end. Three days of stolen kisses, when he could forget he was anything but a man with his arms around a woman. He knew it for a foolish reason, if true. He was relieved she did not seem to want more than his company, but in those moments alone he could forget decisions, forget the fate awaiting the Dragon Reborn. More than once he considered asking her to stay, but it would not be fair to raise her expectations when he had no idea what he wanted from her beyond her presence. If she had any expectations, of course. Much better just to think of them as a man and a young woman walking out together of a feastday evening. That became easier; sometimes he forgot she was the Daughter-Heir, and he a shepherd. But he wished she were not going. Three days. He had to decide. He had to move. In a direction no one expected.

The sun slid slowly toward the horizon on the evening of the third day. The half-drawn draperies of Rand's bedchamber lessened the reddish yellow glare. Callandor glittered on its ornate stand like the purest crystal.

Rand stared at Meilan and Sunamon, then tossed the thick bundle of large vellum sheets at them. A treaty, all neatly scribed, lacking only signatures and seals. It hit Meilan in the chest, and he caught it by reflex; he bowed as if honored, but his tight smile revealed clenched teeth.

Sunamon shifted from foot to foot, dry-washing his hands. "All is as you said, my Lord Dragon," he said anxiously. "Grain for ships - "

"And two thousand Tairen levies," Rand cut him off. " 'To see to proper distribution of the grain and protect Tairen interests.' " His voice was like ice, but his stomach seemed to be boiling; he nearly shook with the desire to pound at these fools with his fists. "Two thousand men. Under the command of Torean!"

"The High Lord Torean has in interest in affairs with Mayene, my Lord Dragon," Meilan said smoothly.

"He has an interest in forcing his attentions on a woman who won't look at him!" Rand shouted. "Grain for ships, I said! No soldiers. And certainly no bloody Torean! Have you even spoken to Berelain?"

They blinked at him as if they did not understand the words. It was too much. He snatched at saidin; the vellum in Meilan's arms erupted into flame. With a yell, Meilan hurled the fiery bundle into the bare fireplace and hurriedly brushed at sparks and scorch marks on his red silk coat. Sunamon stared at the burning sheets, which were crackling and turning black, with his mouth hanging open.

"You will go to Berelain," he told them, surprised at how calm his voice was. "By tomorrow midday you will have offered her the treaty I want, or by sunset tomorrow I'll hang both of you. If I have to hang High Lords every day, two by two, I will. I will send every last one of you to the gallows if you won't obey me. Now, get out of my sight."

The quiet tone seemed to affect them more than his shouting had. Even Meilan looked uneasy as they backed away, bowing at every other step, murmuring protestations of undying loyalty and everlasting obedience. They sickened him.

"Get out!" he roared, and they abandoned dignity, almost fighting with one another to pull the doors open. They ran. One of the Aiel guards put his head in for a moment, to see that Rand was all right, before drawing the door shut.

Rand trembled openly. They disgusted him almost as much as he disgusted himself. Threatening to hang men because they did not do as he told them. Worse, meaning it. He could remember when he did not have a temper, or, at least, when he rarely had, and had managed to keep it on a short rein.

He crossed the room to where Callandor sparkled with the light streaming in between the draperies. The blade looked like the finest glass, absolutely clear; it felt like steel to his fingers, sharp as a razor. He had come close to reaching for it, to deal with Meilan and Sunamon. Whether to use it as a sword or for its real purpose, he did not know. Either possibility horrified him. I am not mad yet. Only angry. Light, so angry!

Tomorrow. The Darkfriends would be put on a ship, tomorrow. Elayne would be leaving. And Egwene and Nynaeve, of course. Back to Tar Valon, he prayed; Black Ajah or no Black Ajah, the White Tower had to be as safe a place as there was now. Tomorrow. No more excuses to put off what he had to do. Not after tomorrow.

He turned his hands over, looking at the heron branded into each palm. He had examined them so often that he could have sketched every line perfectly from memory. The Prophecies foretold them.

Twice and twice shall he be marked,
twice to live, and twice to die.
Once the heron to set his path.
Twice the heron, to name him true.
Once the Dragon, for remembrance lost
Twice the Dragon, for the price he must pay.

But if the herons “named him true,” what need for Dragons? For that matter, what was a Dragon? The only Dragon he had ever heard of was Lews Therin Telamon. Lews Therin Kinslayer had been the Dragon; the Dragon was the Kinslayer. Except now there was himself. But he could not be marked with himself. Perhaps the figure on the banner was a Dragon; not even Aes Sedai seemed to know what that creature was.

“You are changed from when I last saw you. Stronger. Harder.”

He spun, gaping at the young woman standing by the door, fair of skin and dark of hair and eye. Tall, dressed all in white and silver, she arched an eyebrow at the half-melted lumps of gold and silver over the fireplace. He had left them there to remind him what could happen when he acted without thinking, when he lost control. Much good it had done.

“Selene,” he gasped, hurrying to her. “Where did you come from? How did you get here? I thought you must still be in Cairhien, or” Looking down at her, he did not want to say he feared she might be dead, or a starving refugee.

A woven silver belt glittered around her narrow waist; silver combs worked with stars and crescent moons shone in hair that fell to her shoulders like waterfalls of night. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Elayne and Egwene were only pretty beside her. For some reason, though, she did not affect him the way she had; perhaps it was the long months since he had last seen her, in a Cairhien not yet racked by civil war.

“I go where I wish to be.” She frowned at his face. “You have been marked, but no matter. You were mine, and you are mine. Any other is no more than a caretaker whose time has passed. I will lay claim to what is mine openly, now.”

He stared at her. Marked? Did she mean his hands? And what did she mean, he was hers? “Selene,” he said gently, “we had pleasant days together - and hard days; I’ll never forget your courage, or your help - but there was never more between us than companionship. We traveled together, but that was the end of it. You will stay here in the Stone, in the best apartments, and when peace returns to Cairhien, I will see that your estates there are returned to you, if I can.”

“You have been marked.” She smiled wryly. “Estates in Cairhien? I may have had estates in those lands, once. The land has changed so much that nothing is as it was. Selene is only a name I sometimes use, Lews Therin. The name I made my own is Lanfear.”

Rand barked a shallow laugh. “A poor joke, Selene. I’d as soon make jests about the Dark One as one of the Forsaken. And my name is Rand.”

“We call ourselves the Chosen,” she said calmly. “Chosen to rule the world forever. We will live forever. You can, also.”

He frowned at her worriedly. She actually thought she was Her travails in reaching Tear must have unhinged her. But she did not look mad. She was calm, cool, certain. Without thinking, he found himself reaching for saidin. He reached for it - and struck a wall he could not see or feel, except that it kept him from the Source. “You can’t be.” She smiled. “Light,” he breathed. “You are one of them.”

Slowly, he backed away. If he reached Callandor, at least he would have a weapon. Perhaps it could not work as an angreal, but it would do for a sword. Could he use a sword against a woman, against Selene? No, against Lanfear, against one of the Forsaken.

His back came up hard against something, and he looked around to see what it was. There was nothing there. A wall of nothing, with his back pressed against it. Callandor glittered not three paces away - on the other side. He thumped a fist against the barrier in frustration; it was as unyielding as rock.

“I cannot trust you fully, Lews Therin. Not yet.” She came closer, and he considered simply seizing her. He was bigger and stronger by far - and blocked as he was, she could wrap him up with the Power like a kitten tangled in a ball of string. “Not with that, certainly,” she added, grimacing at Callandor. “There are only two more powerful that a man can use. One at least, I know, still exists. No, Lews Therin. I will not trust you yet with that.”

“Stop calling me that,” he growled. “My name is Rand. Rand al’Thor.”

“You are Lews Therin Telamon. Oh, physically, nothing is the same except your height, but I would know who is behind those eyes even if I’d found you in your cradle.” She laughed suddenly. “How much easier everything would be if I had found you then. If I had been free to . . .” Laughter faded into an angry stare. “Do you wish to see my true appearance? You can’t remember that, either, can you?”

He tried to say no, but his tongue would not work. Once he had seen two of the Forsaken together, Aginor and Balthamel, the first two loosed, after three thousand years trapped just beneath the seal on the Dark One’s prison. The one had been more withered than anything could be and still live; the other hid his face behind a mask, hid every bit of his flesh as though he could not bear to see it or have it seen.

The air rippled around Lanfear, and she changed. She was older than he, certainly, but older was not the right word. More mature. Riper. Even more beautiful, if that was possible. A lush blossom in full flower compared to a bud. Even knowing what she was, she made his mouth go dry, his throat tighten.

Her dark eyes examined his face, full of confidence yet with a hint of questioning, as if wondering what he saw. Whatever she perceived seemed to satisfy her. She smiled again. “I was buried deeply, in a dreamless sleep where time did not flow. The turnings of the Wheel passed me by. Now you see me as I am, and I have you in my hands.” She drew a fingernail along his jaw hard enough to make him flinch. “The time for games and subterfuge is past, Lews Therin. Long past.”

His stomach lurched. “Do you mean to kill me, then? The Light burn you, I - ”

“Kill you?” she spat incredulously. “Kill you! I mean to have you, forever. You were mine long before that pale-haired milksop stole you. Before she ever saw you. You loved me!”

“And you loved power!” For a moment he felt dazed. The words sounded true - he knew they were true - but where had they come from?

Selene - Lanfear - seemed as startled as he, but she recovered quickly. “You’ve learned much - you have done much I’d not have believed you could, unaided - but you are still fumbling your way through a maze in the dark, and your ignorance may kill you. Some of the others fear you too much to wait. Sammael, Rahvin, Moghedien. Others, perhaps, but those of a certainty. They will come after you. They will not try to turn your heart. They will come at you by stealth, destroy you while you sleep. Because of their fear. But there are those who could teach you, show you what you once knew. None would dare oppose you then.”

“Teach me? You want me to let one of the Forsaken teach me?” One of the Forsaken. A male Forsaken. A man who had been Aes Sedai in the Age of Legends, who knew the ways of channeling, knew how to avoid the pitfalls, knew - As much had been offered him before. “No! Even if it was offered, I’d refuse, and why should it be? I oppose them - and you! I hate everything you’ve done, everything you stand for.” Fool! he thought. Trapped here, and I spout defiance like some idiot in a story who never suspects he might make his captor angry enough to do something about it. But he could not force himself to take the words back. Stubbornly, he plowed ahead and made it worse. “I’ll destroy you, if I can. You, and the Dark One, and every last Forsaken!”

A dangerous gleam flashed in her eyes and was gone. “Do you know why some of us fear you? Do you have any idea? Because they are afraid the Great Lord of the Dark will give you a place above them.”

Rand surprised himself by managing a laugh. “Great Lord of the Dark! Can’t you say his true name, either? Surely you don’t fear to attract his attention, as decent people do. Or do you?”

“It would be blasphemy,” she said simply. “They are right to be afraid, Sammael and the rest. The Great Lord does want you. He wants to exalt you above all other men. He told me.”

“That’s ridiculous! The Dark One is still bound in Shayol Ghul, or I would be fighting Tarmon Gai’don right now. And if he knows I exist, he’d want me dead. I mean to fight him.”

“Oh, he knows. The Great Lord knows more than you would suspect. It is possible to talk with him. Go to Shayol Ghul, into the Pit of Doom, and you can . . . hear him. You can . . . bathe in his presence.” A different light shone on her face, now. Ecstasy. She breathed through parted lips, and for a moment seemed to stare at something distant and wondrous. “Words cannot even begin to describe it. You must experience it to know. You must.” She was seeing his face again, with eyes large and dark and insistent. “Kneel to the Great Lord, and he will set you above all others. He will leave you free to reign as you will, so long as you bend knee to him only once. To acknowledge him. No more than that. He told me this. Asmodean will teach you to wield the Power without it killing you, teach what you can do with it. Let me help you. We can destroy the others. The Great Lord will not care. We can destroy all of them, even Asmodean, once he has taught you all you need to know. You and I can rule the world together under the Great Lord, forever.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, equal parts eagerness and fear. “Two great sa’angreal were made just before the end, one that you can use, one that I can. Far greater than that sword. Their power is beyond imagining. With those, we could challenge even . . . the Great Lord himself. Even the Creator!”

“You are mad,” he said raggedly. “The Father of Lies says he will leave me free? I was born to fight him. That is why I am here, to fulfill the Prophecies. I’ll fight him, and all of you, until the Last Battle! Until my last breath!”

“You do not have to. Prophecy is no more than the sign of what people hope for. Fulfilling the Prophecies will only bind you to a path leading to Tarmon Gai’don and your death. Moghedien or Sammael can destroy your body. The Great Lord of the Dark can destroy your soul. An end utter and complete. You will never be born again no matter how long the Wheel of time turns!”

“No!”

For what seemed a long time she studied him; he could almost see the scales weighing alternatives. “I could take you with me,” she said finally. “I could have you turned to the Great Lord whatever you want or believe. There are ways.”

She paused, perhaps to see if her words had had any effect. Sweat rolled down his back, but he kept his face straight. He would have to do something, whether he had a chance or not. A second attempt to reach saidin battered vainly against that invisible barrier. He let his eyes wander as if he were thinking. Callandor was behind him, as far out of reach as the other side of the Aryth Ocean. His belt knife lay on a table by the bed, together with a half-made fox he had been carving. The shapeless lumps of metal mocking him from above the fireplace, a drably clad man slipping in at the doors with a knife in his hand, the books lying everywhere. He turned back to Lanfear, tensing.

“You were always stubborn,” she muttered. “I won’t take you, this time. I want you to come to me of your own will. And I will have it. What is the matter? You’re frowning.”

A man slipping in at the doors with a knife; his eyes had slid past the fellow almost without seeing. Instinctively he pushed Lanfear out of the way and reached for the True Source; the shield blocking him vanished as he touched it, and his sword was in his hands like a red-gold flame. The man rushed at him, knife held low and point up for a killing stroke. Even then it was difficult to keep his eyes on the fellow, but Rand pivoted smoothly, and *The Wind Blows Over the Wall* took off the hand holding the knife and finished by driving through his assailant’s heart. For an instant he stared into dull eyes - lifeless while that heart still pumped - then pulled his blade free.

“A Gray Man.” Rand took what felt like his first breath in hours. The corpse at his feet was messy, bleeding onto the scroll-worked carpet, but there was no difficulty in fixing an eye on him now. It was always that way with the Shadow’s assassins; when they were noticed, it was usually too late. “This makes no sense. You could have killed me easily. Why distract me for a Gray Man to sneak up on me?”

Lanfear was watching him warily. “I make no use of the Soulless. I told you there are . . . differences among the Chosen. It seems I was a day late in my judgment, but there is still time for you to come with me. To learn. To live. That sword,” she all but sneered. “You do not do the tenth part of what you can. Come with me, and learn. Or do you mean to try to kill me, now? I loosed you to defend yourself.”

Her voice, her stance, said she expected an attack, or at the very least was ready to counter it, but that was not what stopped him, any more than her loosing the bonds in the first place. She was one of the Forsaken; she had served evil so long she made a Black sister look like a newborn babe. Yet he saw a woman. He called himself nine kinds of fool,

but he could not do it. Maybe if she tried to kill him. Maybe. But all she did was stand there, watching, waiting. No doubt ready to do things with the Power he did not even know were possible, if he attempted to hold her. He had managed to block Elayne and Egwene, but that had been one of those things he did without thinking, the way of it buried somewhere in his head. He could only remember that he had done it, not how. At least he had a firm grip on saidin; she would not surprise him that way again. The stomach-wrenching taint was nothing; saidin was life, perhaps in more ways than one.

A sudden thought boiled up in his head like a hot spring. The Aiel. Even a Gray Man should have found it impossible to sneak through doors watched by half a dozen Aiel.

“What did you do to them?” His voice grated as he backed toward the doors, keeping his eyes on her. If she used the Power, maybe he would have some warning. “What did you do to the Aiel outside?”

“Nothing,” she replied coolly. “Do not go out there. This may be only a testing to see how vulnerable you are, but even a testing may kill you if you are a fool.”

He flung open the left-hand door onto a scene of madness.

Chapter 10 - The Stone Stands

Dead Aielmen lay at Rand's feet, tangled with the bodies of three very ordinary men in very ordinary coats and breeches. Ordinary-looking men, except that six Aiel, the entire guard, had been slain, some obviously before they knew what was happening, and each of those ordinary men had at least two Aiel spears through him.

That was not the half of it, though. As soon as he pulled the door open, a roar of battle had washed over him: shouting, howling, steel clashing on steel among the redstone columns. The Defenders in the anteroom were fighting for their lives beneath the gilded lamps, against bulky, black-mailed shapes head-and-shoulders taller than they, shapes like huge men, but with heads and faces distorted by horns or feathers, by muzzle or beak where mouth and nose should be. Trollocs. They strode on paws or hooves as often as on booted feet, cutting men down with oddly spiked axes and hooked spears and scythe-like swords that curved the wrong way. And with them, a Myrddraal, like a sleek-moving man with maggot-white skin in black armor, like death made bloodless flesh.

Somewhere in the Stone an alarm gong sounded, then stopped with lethal suddenness. Another took it up, and another, in brazen tolls.

The Defenders fought, and they still outnumbered the Trollocs, but there were more men down than Trollocs. Even as Rand's eyes found them, the Myrddraal tore off half the Tairen captain's face with one bare hand while the other drove a dead black blade through a Defender's throat, slipping Defenders' spear thrusts like a snake. The Defenders faced what they had thought were only travelers' tales to frighten children; their nerve was frayed to snapping. One man who had lost his rimmed helmet threw down his spear and tried to flee, only to have his head split like a melon by a Trolloc's massive axe. Yet another man looked at the Myrddraal and fled screaming. The Myrddraal darted sinuously to intercept. In a moment the humans would all be running.

"Fade!" Rand shouted. "Try me, Fade!" The Myrddraal stopped as if it had never moved, its pale, eyeless face turning to him. Fear rippled through Rand at that stare, sliding over the bubble of cold calm that encased him when he held saidin; in the Borderlands they said, "The look of the Eyeless is fear." Once he had believed Fades rode shadows like horses and disappeared when they turned sideways. Those old beliefs were not so very far wrong.

The Myrddraal flowed toward him, and Rand leaped the dead men in front of the doorway to meet it, his boots skidding on bloody black marble as he landed. "Rally to the Stone!" he shouted as he leaped. "The Stone stands!" Those were the battle cries he had heard on the night the Stone had not stood.

He thought he heard a vexed shout of "Fool!" from the room he had left, but he had no time for Lanfear or what she might do. That skid very nearly cost him his life; his red-gold blade barely turned the Myrddraal's black one as he fought for balance. "Rally to the Stone! The Stone stands!" He had to keep the Defenders together, or face the Myrddraal and twenty Trollocs alone. "The Stone stands!"

"The Stone stands!" he heard someone echo him, then another. "The Stone stands!"

The Fade moved as fluidly as a serpent, the snakelike illusion heightened by the overlapping plates of black armor down its chest. Yet not even a blacklance ever struck so quickly. For a time it was all Rand could do to keep its blade from his own unarmored flesh. That black metal could make wounds that festered, almost as hard to Heal as the one that ached in his side now. Each time dark steel forged in Thakandar, below the slopes of Shayol Ghul, met red-gold Power-wrought blade, light flashed like sheet lightning in the room, a sharp bluish white that hurt the eyes. "You will die this time," the Myrddraal rasped at him in a voice like the crumbling of dead leaves. "I will give your flesh to the Trollocs and take your women for my own."

Rand fought as coldly as he ever had, and as desperately. The Fade knew the use of a sword. Then an instant came when he could strike a blow squarely at the sword itself, not merely divert it. With a hiss as of ice falling on molten metal the red-gold blade sheared through the black. His next blow took that eyeless head from its shoulders; the shock of hacking through bone shivered up his arms. Inky blood fountained from the stump of its neck. The thing did not fall, though. Thrashing blindly with its broken sword, the headless figure stumbled about, striking randomly at the air.

As the Fade's head fell to roll across the floor, the remaining Trollocs fell, too, shrieking, kicking, tearing at their heads with coarse-haired hands. It was a weakness of Myrddraal and Trollocs. Even Myrddraal did not trust Trollocs, so they often linked with them in some way Rand did not understand; it apparently ensured the Trollocs' loyalty, but those linked to a Myrddraal did not survive its death long.

The Defenders still standing, fewer than two dozen, did not wait. In twos and threes they stabbed each Trolloc repeatedly with their spears until it stopped moving. Some of them had the Myrddraal down, but it flailed wildly no matter how much they stabbed. As the Trollocs fell silent, a few surviving human wounded could be heard moaning, weeping. There were still more men littering the floor than Shadowspawn. The black marble was slick with blood, almost invisible against the dark stone.

"Leave it," Rand told the Defenders trying to finish the Myrddraal. "It's dead already. Fades just don't want to admit they're dead." Lan had told him that, what seemed a long time ago; he had had proof of it before this. "See to the injured."

Peering at the headless, thrashing shape, its torso a tatter of gaping wounds, they shivered and moved back, muttering about Lurks. That was what they called Fades in Tear, in tales meant for children. Some began to hunt among the downed humans for any still alive, pulling aside those who could not stand, helping those who could to their feet. All too many were left where they lay. Hasty bandages ripped from a man's own bloody shirt were the only comfort that could be offered now.

They did not look so pretty as they had, these Tairens. Their no longer gleaming breast - and back-plates bore dents and scuffs; blood-soaked slashes marred once fine black-and-gold coats and breeches. Some had no helmets, and more than one leaned on his spear as if it were the only thing holding him on his feet. Perhaps it was. They breathed heavily, wild expressions on their faces, that blend of stark terror and blind numbness that afflicts men in battle. They stared at Rand uncertainly - fleeting, fearful stares - as if he might have called these creatures out of the Blight himself.

"Wipe those spearpoints," he told them. "A Fade's blood will etch steel like acid if it's left on long enough." Most moved slowly to obey, hesitantly using what was available, the coatsleeves of their own dead.

The sounds of more fighting drifted through the corridors, distant shouts, the muted clash of metal. They had obeyed him twice; it was time to see if they would do more. Turning his back on them, he started across the anteroom, toward the sounds of battle. "Follow me," he ordered. He raised his fire-wrought blade to remind them of who he was, hoping the reminder did not bring a spear in his back. It had to be risked. "The Stone stands! For the Stone!"

For a moment his own hollow footsteps were the only sound in the columned chamber; then boots began to follow. "For the Stone!" a man shouted, and another, "For the Stone and the Lord Dragon!" Others took it up. "For the Stone and the Lord Dragon!" Quickening to a trot, Rand led his bloodied army of twenty-three deeper into the Stone.

Where was Lanfear, and what part had she played in this? He had little time for wondering. Dead men spotted the halls of the Stone in pools of their own blood, one here and farther on two or three more, Defenders, servants, Aiel. Women, too, linen-gowned noble and wool-clad servant alike struck down as they fled. Trollocs did not care whom they killed; they took pleasure in it. Myrddraal were worse; Halfmen gloried in pain and death.

A little deeper in, the Stone of Tear boiled. Knots of Trollocs rampaged through the halls, sometimes with a Myrddraal leading, sometimes alone, battling Aiel or Defenders, cutting down the unarmed, hunting for more to kill. Rand led his small force at any Shadowspawn they found, his sword slicing coarse flesh and black mail with equal ease. Only the Aiel faced a Fade without flinching. The Aiel and Rand. He passed up Trollocs to reach Fades; sometimes the Myrddraal took a dozen or two Trollocs with it in dying, sometimes none.

Some of his Defenders fell and did not rise, but Aiel joined them, nearly doubling their number. Groups of men broke off in furious battles that drifted away in shouts and clatter like a forge gone mad. Other men fell in behind Rand, broke away, were replaced, till none of those who had started with him remained. Sometimes he fought alone, or ran down a hallway, empty save for himself and the dead, following the sounds of distant combat.

Once, with two Defenders, in a colonnade looking down into a long chamber with many doorways, he saw Moiraine and Lan, surrounded by Trollocs. The Aes Sedai stood, head high like some storied queen of battles, and bestial shapes burst into flame around her—but only to be replaced by more, dashing in through this door or that, six or eight at a time. Lan's sword accounted for those who escaped Moiraine's fire. The Warder had blood on both sides of his face, yet he flowed through the forms as coolly as if practicing before a mirror. Then a wolf-snouted Trolloc thrust a Tairen spear toward Moiraine's back. Lan whirled as though he had eyes in the back of his head, taking off the Trolloc's leg at the knee. The Trolloc fell, howling, yet still managed to thrust spearpoint at Lan just as another clubbed the Warder awkwardly with the flat of its axe, buckling his knees.

Rand could do nothing, for at that moment five Trollocs fell upon him and his two companions, all snouts and boars' tusks and rams' horns, pushing the humans out of the colonnade by the sheer weight of their rush. Five Trollocs should have been able to kill three men without much difficulty, except that one of the men was Rand, with a sword that treated their mail like cloth. One of the Defenders died, and the other vanished chasing after a wounded Trolloc, the lone survivor of the five. When Rand hurried back to the colonnade, there was a smell of burned meat from the chamber below, and great burned bodies on its floor, but no sign of Moiraine or Lan.

That was the way of the contest for the Stone. Or the contest for Rand's life. Battles sprang up and drifted away from where they began, or died when one side fell. Not only did men fight Trollocs and Myrddraal. Men fought men; there were Darkfriends siding the Shadowspawn, roughly dressed fellows who looked like former soldiers and tavern brawlers. They seemed as fearful of the Trollocs as the Tairens did, but they killed as indiscriminately, where they could. Twice Rand actually saw Trollocs battling Trollocs. He could only assume the Myrddraal had lost control of them and their bloodlust had taken over. If they wanted to slay each other, he left them to it.

Then, alone once more and seeking, he trotted 'round a corner and right into three Trollocs, each twice as wide as he and nearly half again as tall. One of them, with an eagle's hooked beak thrusting out of an otherwise human face, was hacking an arm from the corpse of a Tairen noblewoman while the other two watched eagerly, licking their snouts. Trollocs ate anything, so long as it was meat. It was an even chance whether he was more surprised or they were, but he was the first to recover.

The one with the eagle's beak went down, mail and belly alike opened across. The sword-form called Lizard in the Thornbush should have done for the other two, but that first fallen Trolloc, thrashing still, half-kicked his foot out from under him, and he staggered, his blade only scoring a slice along his target's mail, right into the path of the second Trolloc as it fell, wolf's muzzle snapping at nothing. It crushed him to the stone tiles beneath its bulk, trapping sword arm and sword alike. The one still standing raised its spiked axe, coming as close to a smile as a boar's snout and tusks would allow. Rand struggled to move, to breathe.

A scythe-curved sword split the boar's snout to the neck.

Wrenching its blade free, a fourth Trolloc bared goat teeth at him in a snarl, ears twitching beside its horns. Then it darted away, sharp hooves clicking on the floor tiles.

Rand heaved himself out from under the dead weight of the Trolloc, half-stunned. A Trolloc saved me. A Trolloc? Trolloc blood was all over him, thick and dark. Far down the hallway, in the opposite direction from where the goat-horned Trolloc had fled, blue-white flashed as two Myrddraal moved into view. Fighting each other, in an almost boneless blur of continuous motion. One forced the other into a crossing corridor, and the flashing light faded from sight. I'm mad. That's what it is. I am mad, and this it all some crazed dream.

"You risk everything, rushing about wildly with that . . . that sword."

Rand turned to face Lanfear. She had put on the appearance of a girl again, no older than he, perhaps younger. She lifted her white skirts to step over the Tairen lady's torn body; for all the emotion on her face, it might as well have been a log.

"You build a hut of twigs," she went on, "when you could have marble palaces for the snap of your fingers. You could have had their lives and such souls as Trollocs possess with little effort, and instead they nearly killed you. You must learn. Join with me."

“Was this your doing?” he demanded. “That Trolloc, saving me? Those Myrddraal? Was it?”

She considered him a moment before giving a slight, regretful shake of her head. “If I take credit, you will expect it again, and that could be deadly. None of the others is really certain where I stand, and I like it that way. You can expect no open aid from me.”

“Expect your aid?” he growled. “You want me to turn to the Shadow. You can’t make me forget what you are with soft words.” He channeled, and she slammed against a wall hanging hard enough to make her grunt. He held her there, spread-eagled over a woven hunting scene, feet off the floor and snowy gown spread out and flattened. How had he blocked Egwene and Elayne? He had to remember.

Suddenly he flew across the hallway to crash into the wall opposite Lanfear, pressed there like an insect by something that barely allowed him to breathe.

Lanfear appeared to have no trouble breathing. “Whatever you can do, Lews Therin, I can do. And better.” Pinned against the wall as she was, she seemed unperturbed. The din of fighting surged up somewhere nearby, then faded as the battle moved away. “You half-use the smallest fraction of what you are capable of, and walk away from what would allow you to crush all who come against you. Where is Callandor, Lews Therin? Still up in your bedchamber like some useless ornament? Do you think yours is the only hand that can wield it, now that you have drawn it free? If Sammael is here, he will take it, and use it against you. Even Moghedien would take it to deny you its use; she could gain much by trading it to any male Chosen.”

He struggled against whatever held him; nothing moved but his head, flung from side to side. Callandor in the hands of a male Forsaken. The thought drove him half-mad with fear and frustration. He channeled, tried to pry at what held him, but there might as well have been nothing to pry. And then abruptly it was gone; he lurched away from the wall, still fighting, before he realized he was free. And from nothing he had done.

He looked at Lanfear. She still hung there, as complacently as if taking the air on a streamside. She was trying to lull him, to gull him into softening toward her. He hesitated over the flows holding her. If he tied them off and left her, she might tear half the Stone down trying to get free-if a passing Trolloc did not kill her, thinking she was one of the Stone’s folk. That should not have troubled him - not the death of a Forsaken - but the thought of leaving a woman, or anyone, helpless for Trollocs repelled him. A glance at her unruffled composure rid him of that thought. No one, nothing, in the Stone would harm her as long as she could channel. If he could find Moiraine to block her

Once more Lanfear took the decision from him. The impact of severed flows jolted him, and she dropped lightly to the floor. He stared as she stepped away from the wall, calmly brushing her skirts. “You can’t do that,” he gasped foolishly, and she smiled.

“I do not have to see a flow to unravel it, if I know what it is and where. You see, you have much to learn. I like you like this. You were always too stiff-necked and sure of yourself for comfort. It was always better when you were a bit uncertain of your footing. Are you forgetting Callandor, then?”

Still he hesitated. One of the Forsaken stood there. And there was absolutely nothing he could do. Turning, he ran for Callandor. Her laughter seemed to follow him.

This time he did not turn aside to fight Trollocs or Myrddraal, did not slow his wild climb through the Stone unless they got in his way. Then his sword carved of fire sliced a way through for him. He saw Perrin and Faile, he with axe in hand, she guarding his back with her knives; the Trollocs seemed as reluctant to face Perrin’s yellow-eyed stare as his axe blade. Rand left them behind without a second look. If one of the Forsaken took Callandor, none of them would live to see the sun rise.

Breathless, he scrambled through the columned anteroom, leaping the dead still lying there, Defenders and Trollocs alike, in his haste to reach Callandor. He flung open both doors. The Sword That Is Not a Sword sat on its gilded and gem-set stand, shining with the light of the setting sun. Waiting for him.

Now that he had it in sight, safe, he was almost loath to touch it. Once, he had used Callandor as it was truly meant to be used. Only once. He knew what awaited him when he took it up again, used it to draw on the True Source far beyond what any human could hold unaided. Letting go the red-gold blade seemed more than he could do; when it vanished, he almost called it back.

Feet dragging, he skirted the corpse of the Gray Man and put his hands slowly on Callandor's hilt. It was cold, like crystal long in the dark, but it did not feel so smooth that it would slip in the hand.

Something made him look up. A Fade stood in the doorway, hesitating, its pale-faced, eyeless gaze on Callandor.

Rand pulled at saidin. Through Callandor. The Sword That Is Not a Sword blazed in his hands, as if he held noonday. The Power filled him, hammering down like solid thunder. The taint rushed through him in a flood of blackness. Molten rock pulsed along his veins; the cold inside him could have frozen the sun. He had to use it, or burst like a rotted melon.

The Myrddraal turned to flee, and suddenly black clothes and armor crumpled to the floor, leaving oily motes floating in the air.

Rand was not even aware he had channeled until it was done; he could not have said what he had done if his life had depended upon it. But nothing could threaten his life while he held Callandor. The Power throbbed in him like the heartbeat of the world. With Callandor in his hands, he could do anything. The Power hammered at him, a hammer to crack mountains. A channeled thread whisked the Myrddraal's drifting remains out into the anteroom, and its clothes and armor, too; a trickled flow incinerated both. He strode out to hunt those who had come hunting him.

Some of them had come as far the anteroom. Another Fade and a huddle of cowering Trollocs stood before the columns at the far side staring at ash that sifted out of the air, the last fragments of the Myrddraal and all its garb. At the sight of Rand with Callandor flaring in his hands, the Trollocs howled like beasts. The Fade stood paralyzed with shock. Rand gave them no chance to run. Maintaining his deliberate pace toward them, he channeled, and flames roared from the bare, black marble beneath the Shadowspawn, so hot that he flung up a hand against it. By the time he reached them, the flames were gone; nothing remained but dull circles on the marble.

Back down into the Stone he went, and every Trolloc, every Myrddraal he saw died wreathed in fire. He burned them fighting Aiel or Tairens, and killing servants trying to defend themselves with spears or swords snatched from the dead. He burned them as they ran, whether stalking more victims or fleeing him. He began to move faster, trotting, then running, past the wounded, often lying untended, past the dead. It was not enough; he could not move fast enough. While he killed Trollocs in handfuls, others still slew, if only to escape.

Suddenly he stopped, surrounded by the dead, in a wide hallway. He had to do something - something more. The Power slid along his bones, pure essence of fire. Something more. The Power froze his marrow. Something to kill them all; all of them at once. The taint on saidin rolled over him, a mountain of rotting filth threatening to bury his soul. Raising Callandor, he drew on the Source, drew on it till it seemed he must scream screams of frozen flame. He had to kill them all.

Just beneath the ceiling, right above his head, air slowly began to revolve, spinning faster, milling in streaks of red and black and silver. It roiled and collapsed inward, boiling harder, whining as it whirled and grew smaller still.

Sweat rolled down Rand's face as he stared up at it. He had no idea what it was, only that racing flows he could not begin to count connected him to the mass. It had mass; a weight growing greater while the thing fell inward on itself. Callandor flared brighter and brighter, too brilliant to look at; he closed his eyes, and the light seemed to burn through his eyelids. The Power raced through him, a raging torrent that threatened to carry all that was him into the spinning. He had to let go. He had to. He forced his eyes open, and it was like looking at all the thunderstorms in the world compressed to the size of a Trolloc's head. He had to . . . had to . . . had to . . .

Now. The thought floated like cackling laughter on the rim of his awareness. He severed the flows rushing out of him, leaving the thing still whirling, whining like a drill on bone. Now.

And the lightnings came, flashing out along the ceiling left and right like silver streams. A Myrddraal stepped out of a side corridor, and before it could take a second step half a dozen flaring streaks stabbed down, blasting it apart. The other streams flowed on, fanning down every branching of the corridor, replaced by more and more erupting every second.

Rand had not a clue to what he had made, or how it worked. He could only stand there, quivering with the Power that filled him with the need to use it. Even if it destroyed him. He could feel Trollocs and Myrddraal dying, feel the lightnings strike and kill. He could kill them everywhere, everywhere in the world. He knew it. With Callandor he could do anything. And he knew trying would kill him just as surely.

The lightnings faded and died with the last Shadowspawn; the spinning mass imploded with a loud clap of inrushing air. But Callandor still shone like the sun; he shook with the Power.

Moiraine was there, a dozen paces away, staring at him. Her dress was neat, every fold of blue silk in place, but wisps of her hair were disarranged. She looked tired - and shocked. "How . . . ? What you have done, I would not have believed possible." Lan appeared, half-trotting up the hall, sword in hand, face bloodied, coat torn. Without taking her eyes from Rand, Moiraine flung out a hand, halting the Warder short of her. Well short of Rand. As if he were too dangerous for even Lan to approach. "Are you . . . well, Rand?"

Rand pulled his gaze away from her, and it fell on the body of a dark-haired girl, little more than a child. She lay sprawled on her back, eyes wide and fixed on the ceiling, blood blackening the bosom of her dress. Sadly, he bent to brush strands of hair from her face. Light, she is only a child. I was too late. Why didn't I do it sooner. A child!

"I will see that someone takes care of her, Rand," Moiraine said gently. "You cannot help her now."

His hand shook so hard on Callandor that he could barely hold on. "With this, I can do anything." His voice was harsh in his own ears. "Anything!"

"Rand!" Moiraine said urgently.

He would not listen. The Power was in him. Callandor blazed, and he was the Power. He channeled, directing flows into the child's body, searching, trying, fumbling; she lurched to her feet, arms and legs unnaturally rigid and jerky.

"Rand, you cannot do this. Not this!"

Breathe. She has to breathe. The girl's chest rose and fell. Heart. Has to beat. Blood already thick and dark oozed from the wound in her chest. Live. Live, burn you! I didn't mean to be too late. Her eyes stared at him, filmed. Lifeless. Tears trickled unheeded down his cheeks. "She has to live! Heal her, Moiraine. I don't know how. Heal her!"

"Death cannot be Healed, Rand. You are not the Creator."

Staring into those dead eyes, Rand slowly withdrew the flows. The body fell stiffly. The body. He threw back his head and howled, as wild as any Trolloc. Braided fire sizzled into walls and ceiling as he lashed out in frustration and pain.

Sagging, he released saidin, pushed it away; it was like pushing away a boulder, like pushing away life. Strength drained out of him with the Power. The taint remained, though, a stain weighing him down with darkness. He had to ground Callandor on the floor tiles and lean on it to stay on his feet.

"The others." It was hard to speak; his throat hurt. "Elayne, Perrin, the rest? Was I too late for them, too?"

"You were not too late," Moiraine said calmly. But she had come no closer, and Lan looked ready to dart between her and Rand. "You must not - "

"Are they still alive?" Rand shouted.

"They are," she assured him.

He nodded in weary relief. He tried not to look at the girl's body. Three days waiting, so he could enjoy a few stolen kisses. If he had moved three days ago But he had learned things in those three days, things he might be able to use if he could put them together. If. Not too late for his friends, at least. Not too late for them. "How did the Trollocs get in? I don't think they climbed the walls like Aiel, not with the sun still up. Is it still up?" He shook his head to dispel some of the fog. "No matter. The Trollocs. How?"

Lan was the one who answered. "Eight large grain barges tied up at the Stone's docks late this afternoon. Apparently no one thought to question why laden grain barges would be coming downriver" - his voice was heavy with contempt - "or why they'd dock at the Stone, or why the crews left the hatches shut until nearly sunfall. Also, a train of wagons arrived - about two hours ago, now - thirty of them, supposedly bringing some lord or other's things from the country for his return to the Stone. When the canvas was thrown back, they were packed with Halfmen and Trollocs, too. If they came in any other way, I don't know of it, yet."

Rand nodded again, and the effort buckled his knees. Suddenly Lan was there, pulling Rand's arm over his shoulder to hold him up. Moiraine took his face in her hands. A chill rippled through him, not the blasting cold of full Healing, but a chill that pushed weariness out as it passed. Most of the weariness. A seed remained, as if he had worked a day hoeing tabac. He moved away from the support he no longer needed. Lan watched him warily, to see if he could really stand alone, or perhaps because the Warder was not certain how dangerous he was, how sane.

"I left some a purpose," Moiraine told him. "You need to sleep tonight."

Sleep. There was too much to do to sleep. But he gave another nod. He did not want her shadowing him. Yet what he said was "Lanfear was here. This was not her doing. She said so, and I believe her. You don't seem surprised, Moiraine." Would Lanfear's offer surprise her? Would anything? "Lanfear was here, and I talked with her. She didn't try to kill me, and I didn't try to kill her. And you are not surprised."

"I doubt you could kill her. Yet." Her glance at Callandor was the merest flicker of dark eyes. "Not unaided. And I doubt she will try to kill you. Yet. We know little of any of the Forsaken, and least of all Lanfear, but we do know she loved Lews Therin Telamon. To say you are safe from her is certainly too strong - there is a good deal she can do to harm you short of murder - but I do not think she will try to kill as long as she thinks she might win Lews Therin back again."

Lanfear wanted him. The Daughter of the Night, used by mothers who only half-believed in her to frighten children. She certainly frightened him. It was nearly enough to make him laugh. He had always felt guilty for looking at any woman besides Egwene, and Egwene did not want him, but the Daughter-Heir of Andor wanted to kiss him, at least, and one of the Forsaken claimed to love him. Nearly enough for laughter, but not quite. Lanfear seemed jealous of Elayne; that pale-haired milksop, she had called her. Madness. All madness.

"Tomorrow." He started away from them.

"Tomorrow?" Moiraine said.

"Tomorrow, I will tell you what I am going to do." Some of it, he would. The thought of Moiraine's face if he told her everything made him want to laugh. If he knew everything himself, yet. Lanfear had given him almost the last piece, without knowing it. One more step, tonight. The hand holding Callandor by his side trembled. With that, he could do anything. I am not mad yet. Not mad enough for that. "Tomorrow. A good night to us all, the Light willing." Tomorrow he would begin to unleash another kind of lightning. Another lightning that might save him. Or kill him. He was not mad yet.

Chapter 11 - What Lies Hidden

Clad in her shift, Egwene drew a deep breath and left the stone ring lying beside an open book on her bedside table. All flecked and striped in brown and red and blue, it was slightly too large for a finger ring, and shaped wrong, flattened and twisted so that a fingertip run along the edge would circle both inside and out before coming back to where it had started. There was only one edge, impossible though that seemed. She was not leaving the ring there because she might fail without it, because she wanted to fail. She had to try without the ring sooner or later, or she could never do more than dabble her toes where she dreamed of swimming. It might as well be now. That was the reason. It was.

The thick leather-bound book was *A Journey to Tarabon*, written by Eurian Romavni, from Kandor - fifty-three years ago, according to the date the author gave in the first line, but little of any consequence would have changed in Tanchico in that short a time. Besides, it was the only volume she had found with useful drawings. Most of the books only had portraits of kings, or fanciful renderings of battles by men who had not seen them.

Darkness filled both windows, but the lamps gave more than adequate light. One tall beeswax candle burned in a gilded candlestick on the bedside table. She had gone to fetch that herself; this was no night to be sending a maid for a candle. Most of the servants were tending the wounded or weeping over loved ones, or being tended themselves. There had been too many for Healing any but those who would have died without it.

Elayne and Nynaeve waited with high-backed chairs pulled to either side of the wide bed with its tall, swallow-carved posts; they tried to hide their anxiety with differing degrees of success. Elayne managed a passably stately calm, and only spoiled it by frowning and chewing her underlip when she thought Egwene was not looking. Nynaeve was all brisk confidence, the sort that made you feel comforted when she tucked you into a sickbed, but Egwene recognized the set of her eyes; they said Nynaeve was afraid.

Aviendha sat cross-legged beside the door, her browns and grays standing out sharply against the deep blue of the carpet. This time the Aiel woman had her long-bladed knife at one side of her belt, a bristling quiver at the other, and four short spears across her knees. Her round, hide buckler lay close at hand, atop a horn bow in a worked leather case with straps that could hold it on her back. After tonight, Egwene could not fault her for going armed. She still wanted to hold a lightning bolt ready to fling herself.

Light, what was that Rand did? Burn him, he frightened me almost as badly as the Fades did. Maybe worse. It isn't fair he can do something like that and I can't even see the flows.

She climbed onto the bed and took the leatherbound book on her knees, frowning at an engraved map of Tanchico. Little of any use was marked, really. A dozen fortresses, surrounding the harbor, guarding the city on its three hilly peninsulas, the Verana to the east, the Maseta in the center, and the Calpene nearest the sea. Useless. Several large squares, some open areas that seemed to be parks, and a number of monuments to rulers long since dust. All useless. A few palaces, and things that seemed strange. The Great Circle, for instance, on the Calpene. On the map it was just a ring, but Master Romavni described it as a huge gathering place that could hold thousands to watch horse races or displays of fireworks by the Illuminators. There was also a King's Circle, on the Maseta and larger than the Great Circle, and a Panarch's Circle, on the Verana, just a little smaller. The Chapter House of the Guild of Illuminators was marked as well. They were all useless. The text certainly had nothing of use.

"Are you certain you want to try this without the ring?" Nynaeve asked quietly.

"Certain," Egwene replied as calmly as she could. Her stomach was leaping as badly as it had when she saw that first Trolloc tonight, holding that poor woman by the hair and slitting her throat like a rabbit's. The woman had screamed like a rabbit, too. Killing the Trolloc had done her no good; the woman was as dead as the Trolloc. Only her shrill scream would not go away. "If it doesn't work, I can always try again with the ring." She leaned over to mark the candle with a thumbnail. "Wake me when it burns down to there. Light, but I wish we had a clock."

Elayne laughed at her, a lighthearted trill, and it very nearly sounded unforced. "A clock in a bedchamber? My mother has a dozen docks, but I never heard of a clock in a bedchamber."

“Well, my father has one clock,” Egwene grumbled, “the only one in the whole village, and I wish I had it here. Do you think it will burn that far in an hour? I don’t want to sleep longer than that. You must wake me as soon as the flame reaches that mark. As soon as!”

“We will,” Elayne said soothingly. “I promise it.”

“The stone ring,” Aviendha said suddenly. “Since you are not using it, Egwene, could not someone - one of us - use it to go with you?”

“No,” Egwene muttered. Light, I wish they would all come with me. “Thank you for the thought, though.”

“Can only you use it, Egwene?” the Aiel woman asked.

“Any of us might,” Nynaeve replied, “even you, Aviendha. A woman needn’t be able to channel, only sleep with it touching her skin. A man might be able to, for all we know. But we do not know Tel’aran’rhiod as well as Egwene, or the rules of it.”

Aviendha nodded. “I see. A woman can make mistakes where she does not know the ways, and her mistakes can kill others as well as herself.”

“Exactly,” Nynaeve said. “The World of Dreams is a dangerous place. That much we do know.”

“But Egwene will be careful,” Elayne added, speaking to Aviendha but obviously meaning it for Egwene’s ears. “She promised. She will look around - carefully! - and no more.”

Egwene concentrated on the map. Careful. If she had not guarded her twisted stone ring so jealously-she thought of it as hers; the Hall of the Tower might not agree, but they did not know she had it-if she had been willing to let Elayne or Nynaeve use it more than once or twice, they might know enough to come with her now. Yet it was not regret that made her avoid looking at the other women. She did not want them to see the fear in her eyes.

Tel’aran’rhiod. The Unseen World. The World of Dreams. Not the dreams of ordinary people, though sometimes they touched Tel’aran’rhiod briefly, in dreams that seemed as true as life. Because they were. In the Unseen World, what happened was real, in a strange way. Nothing that happened there affected what was-a door opened in the World of Dreams would still be shut in the real world; a tree cut down there still stood here-yet a woman could be killed there, or stilled. “Strange” barely began to describe it. In the Unseen World the whole world lay open, and maybe other worlds, too; any place was attainable. Or at least, its reflection in the World of Dreams was. The weave of the Pattern could be read there - past, present and future - by one who knew how. By a Dreamer. There had not been a Dreamer in the White Tower since Corianin Nedeal, nearly five hundred years earlier.

Four hundred and seventy-three years, to be exact, Egwene thought. Or is it four hundred seventy-four now? When did Corianin die? If Egwene had had a chance to finish novice training in the Tower, to study there as an Accepted, perhaps she would know. There was so much she might have known, then.

A list lay in Egwene’s pouch of the ter’angreal, most small enough to slip into a pocket, that had been stolen by the Black Ajah when they fled the Tower. They all three had a copy. Thirteen of those stolen ter’angreal had “no known use” written alongside, and “last studied by Corianin Nedeal.” But if Corianin Sedai had truly not discovered their uses, Egwene was sure of one of them. They gave entrance to Tel’aran’rhiod, not as easily as the stone ring, perhaps, and perhaps not without channeling, but they did it.

Two they had recovered from Joiya and Amico: an iron disc, three inches across, scribed on both sides with a tight spiral, and a plaque no longer than her hand, apparently dear amber yet hard enough to scratch steel, with a sleeping woman somehow carved into the middle of it. Amico had spoken freely of them, and so had Joiya, after a session alone in her cell with Moiraine that had left the Darkfriend pale-faced and almost civil. Channel a flow of Spirit into either ter’angreal, and it would take you into sleep and then into Tel’aran’rhiod. Elayne had tried both of them briefly, and they worked, though all she saw was the inside of the Stone, and Morgase’s Royal Palace in Caemlyn.

Egwene had not wanted her to try, however fleeting the visit, but not from jealousy. She had not been able to argue very effectively, though, for she had been afraid Elayne and Nynaeve would hear what was in her voice.

Two recovered meant eleven still with the Black Ajah. That was the point Egwene had tried to make. Eleven ter'angreal that could take a woman to Tel'aran'rhiod, all in the hands of Black sisters. When Elayne made her short journeys into the Unseen World, she could have found the Black Ajah waiting for her, or walked into them before she knew they were there. The thought made Egwene's stomach writhe. They could be waiting for her now. Not likely; not on purpose-how would they know she was coming?-but they could be there when she stepped through. One she could face, unless she was caught by surprise, and she did not mean to allow that. But if they did surprise her? Two or three of them together? Liandrin and Rianna, Chesmal Emry and Jeane Caide and all the rest at once?

Frowning at the map, she made her hands loosen their white-knuckled grip. Tonight had given everything urgency. If Shadowspawn could attack the Stone, if one of the Forsaken could suddenly appear in their midst, she could not give in to fear. They had to know what to do. They had to have something besides Armco's vague tale. Something. If only she could learn where Mazrim Taim was in his caged journey to Tar Valon, or if she could somehow slip into the Amyrlin's dreams and speak to her. Perhaps those things were possible for a Dreamer. If they were, she did not know how. Tanchico was what she had to work with.

"I must go alone, Aviendha. I must." She thought her voice was calm and steady, but Elayne patted her shoulder.

Egwene did not know why she was scrutinizing the map. She already had it fixed in her head, everything in relation to everything else. Whatever existed in this world existed in the World of Dreams, and sometimes more besides, of course. She had her destination chosen. She thumbed through the book to the only engraving showing the inside of a building named on the map, the Panarch's Palace. It would do no good to find herself in a chamber if she had no idea where it was in the city. None of it might do any good in any case. She put that out of her mind. She had to believe there was some chance.

The engraving showed a large room with a high ceiling. A rope strung along waist-high posts would keep anyone from going too close to the things displayed on stands and in open-fronted cabinets along the walls. Most of those displays were indistinct, but not what stood at the far end of the room. The artist had taken pains to show the massive skeleton standing there as if the rest of the creature had that moment disappeared. It had four thick-boned legs, but otherwise resembled no animal Egwene had ever seen. For one thing, it had to stand at least two spans high, well over twice her height. The rounded skull, set low on the shoulders like a bull's, looked big enough for a child to limb inside, and in the picture it seemed to have four eye sockets. The skeleton marked the room off from any other; there was no mistaking it for anything but itself. Whatever it was. If Eurian Romavni had known, he had not named it in these pages.

"What is a panarch, anyway?" she asked, laying the book aside. She had studied the picture a dozen times. "All of these writers seem to think you know already."

"The Panarch of Tanchico is the equal of the king in authority," Elayne recited. "She is responsible for collecting taxes, customs and duties; he for spending them properly. She controls the Civil Watch and the courts, except for the High Court, which is the king's. The army is his, of course, except for the Panarch's Legion. She -"

"I didn't really want to know." Egwene sighed. It had only been something to say, another few moments to delay what she was going to do. The candle was burning down; she was wasting precious minutes. She knew how to step out of the dream when she wanted, how to wake herself, but time passed differently in the World of Dreams, and it was easy to lose track. "As soon as it reaches the mark," she said, and Elayne and Nynaeve murmured reassurances.

Settling back on her feather pillows, at first she only stared at the ceiling, painted with blue sky and clouds and swooping swallows. She did not see them.

Her dreams had been bad enough lately, most of them. Rand was in them, of course. Rand as tall as a mountain, walking through cities, crushing buildings beneath his feet, with screaming people like ants fleeing from him. Rand in chains, and it was he who was screaming. Rand building a wall with him on one side and her on the other, her and Elayne and others she could not make out. "It has to be done," he was saying as he piled up stones. "I'll not let you stop me now." His were not the only nightmares. She had dreamed of Aiel fighting each other, killing each other, even

throwing away their weapons and running as if they had gone mad. Mat wrestling with a Seanchan woman who tied an invisible leash to him. A wolf - she was sure it was Perrin, though - fighting a man whose face kept changing. Galad wrapping himself in white as though putting on his own shroud, and Gawyn with his eyes full of pain and hatred. Her mother weeping. They were the sharp dreams, the ones she knew meant something. They were hideous, and she did not know what any of them meant. How could she presume to think she could find any meanings or dues in Tel'aran'rhiod? But there was no other choice.. No other choice but ignorance, and she could not choose that.

Despite her anxiety, going to sleep was no problem; she was exhausted. It was just a matter of dosing her eyes and taking deep, regular breaths. She fixed in her thoughts the room in the Panarch's Palace and the huge skeleton. Deep, regular breaths. She could remember how using the stone ring felt, the step into Tel'aran'rhiod. Deep-regular-breaths.

Egwene stepped back with a gasp, one hand to her throat. This close, the skeleton seemed even larger than she had thought, the bones bleached dull and dry. She stood right in front of it, inside the rope. A white rope, as thick as her wrist and apparently silk. She had no doubt this was Tel'aran'rhiod. The detail was as fine as reality, even for things half-seen from the corner of her eye. That she could even be aware of the differences between this and an ordinary dream told her where she was. Besides, it felt . . . right.

She opened herself to saidar. A nick on the finger in the World of Dreams would still be there on waking; there would be no waking from a killing stroke with the Power, or even from a sword, or a dub. She did not intend to be vulnerable for an instant.

Instead of her shift, she wore something very much like Aviendha's Aiel garb, but in red brocaded silk; even her soft boots, laced to the knee, were supple red leather, suitable for gloves, with gold stitching and laces. She laughed softly to herself. Clothes in Tel'aran'rhiod were what you wanted them to be. Apparently part of her mind wanted to be ready to move quickly, while another part wanted to be ready for a ball. It would not do. The red faded to grays and browns; the coat and breeches and boots became exact copies of the Maidens'. No better, really, not in a city. Abruptly she was in a copy of the dresses Faile always wore, dark, with narrow divided skirts, long sleeves and a high snug bodice. Foolish to worry about it. No one a going to see me except in their dreams, and few ordinary dreams reach here. It would make no deference if I were naked.

For a moment she was naked. Her face colored with embarrassment; there was no one there to see her bare as in her bath, before she hastily brought the dark dress back, but she should have remembered how stray thoughts could affect things here, especially when you had embraced the Power. Elayne and Nynaeve thought she was so knowledgeable. She knew a few of the rules of the Unseen World, and knew there were a hundred, a thousand more of which she was ignorant. Somehow, she had to learn them, if she was to be the Tower's first Dreamer since Corianin.

She took a closer look at the huge skull. She had grown up in a country village, and she knew what animal bones looked like. Not four eye sockets after all. Two seemed to be for tusks of some kind instead, on either side of where its nose had been. Some sort of monstrous boar, perhaps, though it looked like no pig skull she had ever seen. It had a feel of age, though; great age.

With the Power in her, she could sense things like that, here. The usual enhancement of senses was with her, of course. She could feel tiny cracks in the gilded plaster bosses covering the ceiling fifty feet up, and the smooth polish of the white stone floor. Infinitesimal cracks, invisible to the eye, spread across the floorstones as well.

The chamber was huge, perhaps two hundred paces long and nearly half as wide, with rows of thin white columns, and that white rope running all the way around except where there were doorways, with double-pointed arches. More ropes encircled polished wooden stands and cabinets holding other exhibits out in the floor. Up under the ceiling, an elaborate pattern of tiny carvings pierced the walls, letting in plenty of light. Apparently she had dreamed herself into a Tanchico where it was day.

"A grand display of artifacts of Ages long past, of the Age of Legends and Ages before, open to all, even the common folk, three days in the month and on feastsdays," Eurian Romavni had written. He had spoken in glowing terms of the priceless display of cuendillar figures, six of them, in a glass-sided case in the center of the hall, always watched by four of the Panarch's personal guards when people were allowed in, and had gone on for two pages about the bones of fabulous beasts "never seen alive by the eyes of man." Egwene could see some of those. On one side of the room was

the skeleton of something that looked a little like a bear, if a bear had two front teeth as long as her forearm, and opposite it on the other side were the bones of some slender, four-footed beast with a neck so long the skull was half as high as the ceiling. There were more, spaced down the chamber's walls, just as fantastic. All of them felt old enough to make the Stone of Tear seem new-built. Ducking under the rope barrier, she walked down the chamber slowly, staring. I

A weathered stone figurine of a woman, seemingly unclothed but wrapped in hair that fell to her ankles, was outwardly no different from the others sharing its case, each not much bigger than her hand. But it gave an impression of soft warmth that she recognized. It was an angreal, she was sure; she wondered why the Tower had not managed to get it away from the Panarch. A finely jointed collar and two bracelets of dull black metal, on a stand by themselves, made her shiver; she felt darkness and pain associated with them—old, old pain, and sharp. A silvery thing in another cabinet, like a three-pointed star inside a circle, was made of no substance she knew; it was softer than metal, scratched and gouged, yet even older than any of the ancient bones. From ten paces she could sense pride and vanity.

One thing actually seemed familiar, though she could not say why. Tucked into a corner of one of the cabinets, as if whoever put it there had been uncertain that it was worthy of display, lay the upper half of a broken figure carved from some shiny white stone, a woman holding a crystal sphere in one upraised hand, her face calm and dignified and full of wise authority. Whole, she would have been perhaps a foot tall. But why did she appear so familiar? She almost seemed to call to Egwene to pick her up.

Not until Egwene's fingers closed on the broken statuette did she realize she had climbed over the rope. Foolish, when I don't know what it is, she thought, but it was already too late.

As her hand grasped it, the Power surged within her, into the half-figure then back into her, into the figure and back, in and back. The crystal sphere flickered in fitful, lurid flashes, and needles stabbed her brain with each flash. With a sob of agony, she loosed her hold and clasped both hands to her head.

The crystal sphere shattered as the figure hit the floor and broke into pieces, and the needles vanished, leaving only dull memories of the pain and a queasiness that wobbled her knees. She squeezed her eyes shut so she could not see the room heaving. The figure had to be a ter'angreal, but why had it hurt her like that when she only touched it? Perhaps because it was broken; perhaps, broken, it could not do what it was meant for. She did not even want to think of what it might have been made for; testing ter'angreal was dangerous. At least it must be broken beyond danger now. Here, at least. Why did it seem to call me?

Nausea faded, and she opened her eyes. The figure was back on the shelf, as whole as it had been when she first saw it. Strange things happened in Tel'aran'rhiod, but that was stranger than she wanted to see. And this was not what she had come for. First she had to find her way out of the Panarch's Palace. Climbing back over the rope, she hurried out of the chamber, trying not to run.

The palace was empty of life, of course. Human life, at least. Colorful fish swam in large fountains that splashed merrily in the courtyards surrounded by delicately columned walks and balconies screened by stonework like intricately carved lace. Lily pads floated on the waters, and white flowers as big as dinner plates. In the World of Dreams, a place was as it was in the so-called real world. Except for people. Elaborate golden lamps stood in the hallways, wicks uncharted, but she could smell the perfumed oil in them. Her feet raised no hint of dust from the bright carpets that surely could never have been beaten, not here.

Once she did see another person walking ahead of her, a man in gilded, ornately worked plate-and-mail armor, a pointed golden helmet crested with white egret plumes under his arm. "Aeldra?" he called, smiling. "Aeldra, come look at me. I am named the Lord Captain of the Panarch's Legion. Aeldra?" He walked on another pace, still calling, and suddenly was not there. Not a Dreamer. Not even someone using a ter'angreal like her stone ring or Amico's iron disc. Only a man whose dream had touched a place he was not aware of, with dangers he did not know. People who died unexpectedly in their sleep had often dreamed their way into Tel'aran'rhiod and in truth had died there. He was well out of it, back into an ordinary dream.

The candle was burning down beside that bed back in Tear. Her time in Tel'aran'rhiod was burning away.

Hastening her steps, she came to tall, carved doors leading outside, to wide white stairs and a huge empty square. Tanchico spread out in every direction across steep hills, white buildings upon white buildings shining in the sun, hundreds of thin towers and almost as many pointed domes, some gilded. The Panarch's Circle, a tall round wall of white stone, stood in plain sight not half a mile away and a little lower than the palace. The Panarch's Palace rose atop one of the loftiest hills. At the top of the deep stairs, she was high enough to see water glinting to the west, inlets separating her from more hilly fingers where the rest of the city lay. Tanchico was larger than Tear, perhaps larger than Caemlyn.

So much to search, and she did not even know for what. For something that signified the presence of the Black Ajah, or something that indicated some sort of danger to Rand, if either existed here. Had she been a real Dreamer, trained in the use of her talent, she would surely have known what to look for, how to interpret what she saw. But no one remained who could teach her. Aiel Wise Ones supposedly knew how to decipher dreams. Aviendha had been so reluctant to talk about the Wise Ones that Egwene had not asked any of the other Aiel. Perhaps a Wise One could teach her. If she could find one.

She took a step toward the square, and suddenly she was somewhere else.

Great stone spires rose around her in a heat that sucked the moisture out of her breath. The sun seemed to bake right through her dress, and the breeze blowing in her face seemed to come from a stove. Stunted trees dotted a landscape almost bare of other growth, except for a few patches of tough grass and some prickly plants she did not recognize. She recognized the lion, however, even if she had never seen one in the flesh. It lay in a crevice in the rocks not twenty paces away, black-tufted tail switching idly, looking not at her but at something another hundred strides on. The large boar covered in coarse hair was rooting and snuffing at the base of a thorny bush, never noticing the Aiel woman creeping up on it with a spear ready to thrust. Garbed like the Aiel in the Stone, she had her shoufa around her head but her face uncovered.

The Waste, Egwene thought incredulously. I've jumped into the Aiel Waste! When will I learn to watch what I think here?

The Aiel woman froze. Her eyes were on Egwene now, not the boar. If it was a boar; it did not seem to be shaped exactly right.

Egwene was sure the woman was not a Wise One. Not dressed like a Maiden, from what Egwene had been told, a Maiden of the Spear who wanted to become a Wise One had to "give up the spear." This had to be just an Aiel woman who had dreamed herself into Tel'aran'rhod, like that fellow in the palace. He would have seen her, too, if he had ever turned around. Egwene closed her eyes and concentrated on her one dear image of Tanchico, that huge skeleton in the great hall.

When she opened them again, she was staring at the massive bones. They had been wired together, she noticed this time. Quite cleverly, so that the wires hardly showed at all. The half-figurine with its crystal sphere was still on its shelf. She did not go near it, any more than the black collar and bracelets that felt of so much pain and suffering. The angreal, the stone woman, was a temptation. What are you going to do with it? Light, you're here to look, to search! Nothing more than that. Get on with it, woman!

This time she quickly found her way back to the square. Time passed differently here; Elayne and Nynaeve could be waking her up any moment, and she still had not even begun. There might be no more minutes to waste. She had to be careful of what she thought from here on. No more thinking about the Wise Ones. Even the admonition made everything lurch around her. Keep your mind on what you are doing, she told herself firmly.

She set out through the empty city, walking fast, sometimes trotting. Winding, stone-paved streets slanted up and down, curving every which way, all empty, except for green-backed pigeons and pale gray gulls that rose in thunderclaps of wings when she came close. Why birds and not people? Flies buzzed by, and she could see roaches and beetles scurrying along in the shadows. A pack of lean dogs, all different colors, loped across the street far ahead of her. Why dogs?

She pulled herself back to why she was there. What would be a sign of the Black Ajah? Or of this danger to Rand, if it existed? Most of the white buildings were plastered, the plaster chipped and cracked, often showing weathered wood or pale brown brick beneath. Only the towers and the larger structures - palaces, she supposed - were stone, if still white. Even the stone had tiny fissures, though, most of it; cracks too minute for the eye to catch, but she could feel them with the Power in her, spider-webbing domes and towers. Perhaps that meant something. Perhaps it meant Tanchico was a city not looked after by its inhabitants. As likely that as anything else. .

She jumped as a shrieking man suddenly plummeted out of the sky in front of her. She only had time to register baggy white trousers and thick mustaches covered by a transparent veil before he vanished, only a pace above the pavement. Had he struck, here in Tel'aran'rhiod, he would have been found dead in his bed.

He probably has as much to do with anything as the roaches, she told herself.

Perhaps something inside the buildings. It was a small chance, a wild hope, but she was desperate enough to try anything. Almost anything. Time. How much time did she have left? She began running from doorway to doorway, putting her head into shops and inns and houses.

Tables and benches stood in common rooms awaiting customers, as neatly arranged as the dully gleaming pewter mugs and plates on their shelves. The shops were as tidy as if the shopkeeper had just opened for the morning, yet while a tailor's tables held bolts of cloth, and a cutler's knives and scissors, the ceiling hooks hung empty in a butcher's shop and the shelves stood bare. A finger run along anywhere picked up no dust at all; everything was clean enough to suit her mother.

In the narrower streets there were homes, small simple white-plastered buildings with flat roofs and no windows onto the street, ready for families to walk in and sit on benches before cold fireplaces or around narrow cables with carved legs where a goodwife's best bowl or platter was given pride of place. Clothes hung on pegs, pots hung from ceilings, hand tools lay on benches, waiting.

On a hunch she retraced her steps once, just to see, back a dozen doors, and peered a second time into what was some woman's home in the real world. It was almost the way it had been. Almost. The red-striped bowl that had been on the table was now a narrow blue vase; one of the benches, on it a broken harness and the tools for mending it, that had been near the fireplace now sat by the door holding a darning basket and a child's embroidered dress.

Why did it change? she wondered. But for that matter, why should it stay the same? Light, I don't know anything!

There was a stable across the street, the white plaster showing large patches of brick. She trotted to it and pulled open one of the big doors. Straw covered the dirt floor, just as in every stable she had ever seen, but the stalls stood empty. No horses. Why? Something rustled in the straw, and she realized the stalls were not empty after all. Rats. Dozens of them, staring at her boldly, noses testing the air for her scent. None of the rats ran, or even shied away; they behaved as if they had more right there than she. In spite of herself she stepped back. Pigeons and gulls and dogs, flies and rats. Maybe a Wise One would know why.

As suddenly as that she was back in the Waste.

With a scream she fell flat on her back as the hairy boar-like creature darted straight for her, looking as large as a small pony. Not a pig, she saw as it leaped nimbly over her; the snout was too sharp and full of keen teeth, and it had four toes on each foot. The thought was calm, but she shuddered as the beast scampered away through the rocks. It was big enough to have trampled her, breaking bones and worse; those teeth could have ripped and torn as well as any wolf's. She would have awakened with the wounds. If she had waked at all.

The gritty rock under her back was a blistering stovetop. She scrambled to her feet, angry with herself. If she could not keep her mind on what she was doing, she would accomplish nothing. Tanchico was where she was supposed to be; she had to concentrate on that. Nothing else.

She stopped brushing at her skirts when she saw the Aiel woman watching her with sharp blue eyes from ten paces off. The woman was Aviendha's age, no older than herself, but the wisps of hair that stuck out from under her shoufa were

so pale as to be almost white. The spear in her hands was ready to be cast, and at that distance she was not likely to miss.

The Aiel were said to be more than rough with those who entered the Waste without permission. Egwene knew she could wrap woman and spear in Air, hold them safely, but would the flows keep long enough when she began to fade? Or would they just anger the woman enough to make her cast her spear the moment she was able, perhaps before Egwene was truly gone? Much good it would do to take herself back to Tanchico with an Aiel spear through her. If she tied the flows, that would leave the woman trapped in Tel'aran'rhiod until they were unraveled, helpless if that lion or the boar-like creature returned.

No. She simply needed the woman to lower her spear, just long enough to feel safe dosing her eyes, to take herself back to Tanchico. Back to what she was supposed to be doing. She had no more time for these flights of fancy. She was not entirely sure someone who had only dreamed themselves into Tel'aran'rhiod could harm her the way other things there could, but she was not going to risk finding out with an Aiel spearpoint. The Aiel woman should vanish in a few moments. Something to put her off balance until then.

Changing her clothes was easy; as soon as the thought came, Egwene was wearing the same browns and grays as the woman. "I mean you no harm," she said, outwardly calm.

The woman did not lower her weapon. Instead, she frowned and said, "You have no right to wear cadin'sor, girl." And Egwene found herself standing there in her skin, the sun burning her from overhead, the ground seating her bare feet.

For a moment she gaped in disbelief, dancing from foot to foot. She had not thought it possible to change things about someone else. So many possibilities, so many rules, that she did not know. Hurriedly she thought herself back into scout shoes and the dark dress with its divided skirts and at the same time made the Aiel woman's garments vanish. She had to draw on saidar to do it; the woman must have been concentrating on keeping Egwene naked. She had a flow ready to seize the spear if the other woman made to throw it.

It was the Aiel woman's turn to look shocked. She let the spear fall to her side, too, and Egwene seized the moment to shut her eyes and take herself back to Tanchico, back to the skeleton of that huge boar. Or whatever it was. She barely gave it a second glance this time. She was growing tired of things that looked like boars and were not.

How did she do that? No! It's wondering about how and why that keeps pulling me off the path. This time I'll stick to it.

She did hesitate, though. Just as she had closed her eyes it had seemed she saw another woman, beyond the Aiel woman, watching them both. A golden-haired woman holding a silver bow. You are letting wild fancies take you, now. You've been listening to too many of Thom Merrill's stories. Birgitte was long dead; she could not come again until the Horn of Valere called her back from the grave. Dead women, even heroes of legend, surely could not dream themselves into Tel'aran'rhiod.

It was only a moment's pause, though. Shutting off futile speculation, she ran back to the square. How much time did she have left? The whole city to search, and time slipping away, and she as ignorant as when she started. If only she had some idea of what to look for. Or where. Running did not seem to tire her here in the World of Dreams, but run as hard as she might, she would never cover the entire city before Elayne and Nynaeve woke her. She did not want to have to come back.

A woman appeared suddenly among the flock of pigeons that had gathered in the square. Her gown was pale green, thin and draped closely enough to have satisfied Berelain, her dark hair was in dozens of narrow braids, and her face was covered to the eyes by a transparent veil like the one the falling man had worn. The pigeons soared up, and so did the woman gliding over the nearest rooftops with them before abruptly winking out of existence.

Egwene smiled. She dreamed of flying like a bird all the time, and this was a dream, after all. She leaped into the air, and kept going up, toward the roofs. She wobbled as she thought how ridiculous this was - Flying? People did not fly! - then steadied again as she forced herself to be confident. She was doing it, and that was all there was to it. This was a dream, and she was flying. The wind rushed in her face, and she wanted to laugh giddily.

She skimmed across the Panarch's Circle, where rows of stone benches slanted down from the high wall to a broad field of packed dirt in the center. Imagine so many people gathered, and to watch a fireworks display by the Guild of Illuminators themselves. Back home fireworks were a rare treat. She could remember the handful of times in her life Emond's Field had had them, with the grown-ups as excited as the children.

She sailed over rooftops like a falcon, over palaces and mansions, humble dwellings and shops, warehouses and stables. She slid by domes topped with golden spires and bronze weathervanes, by towers ringed with lacy stone balconies. Carts and wagons dotted wagonyards, waiting. Ships crowded the great harbor and the fingers of water between the city's peninsulas; they lined the docks. Everything seemed in a poor state of repair, from the carts to the ships, but nothing she saw pointed to the Black Ajah. As far as she knew.

She considered trying to envision Liandrin - she knew that doll's face all too well, with its multitude of blond braids, its self-satisfied brown eyes, and its smirking rosebud mouth - picture her in the hopes she might be drawn to where the Black sister was. But if it worked, she might find Liandrin in Tel'aran'rhiod, too, and maybe others of them. She was not ready for that.

It suddenly occurred to her that if any of the Black Ajah were in Tanchico, in the Tanchico of Tel'aran'rhiod, she was flaunting herself for them. Any eye looking at the sky would notice a woman flying, one who did not vanish after a few moments. Her smooth flight staggered, and she swooped down below roof level, floating along the streets more slowly than before but still faster than a horse could run. She might be rushing toward them, but she could not make herself stop and wait for them.

Fool! she called herself furiously. Fool! They could know I'm here now. They could be laying a trap already. She considered stepping out of the dream, back to her bed in Tear, but she had found nothing. If there was anything to find.

A tall woman was suddenly standing in the street ahead of her, slim in a bulky brown skirt and loose white blouse, with a brown shawl around her shoulders and a folded scarf around her forehead to hold white hair that spilled to her waist. Despite her plain clothes she wore a great many necklaces and bracelets of gold or ivory or both. Fists planted on her hips, she stared straight at Egwene, frowning.

Another fool woman who's dreamed herself where she has no right to be and doesn't believe what she's seeing, Egwene thought. She had the description of every woman who had gone with Liandrin, and this woman certainly matched none of them. But the woman did not vanish again; she stood there as Egwene approached swiftly. Why doesn't she go? Why . . . ? Oh, Light! She's really . . . ! She snatched for the flows to weave lightning, to tangle the woman in Air, fumbling in startled haste.

"Put your feet on the ground, girl," the woman barked. "I had enough trouble finding you again without you flying off like some bird when I do."

Abruptly Egwene stopped flying. Her feet thumped hard on the pavement, and she staggered. It was the Aiel woman's voice, but this was an older woman. Not as old as Egwene had thought at first - in fact, she looked much younger than her white hair suggested - but with the voice, and those sharp blue eyes, she was sure it was the same woman. "You're . . . different," she said.

"You can be what you wish to be, here." The woman sounded embarrassed, but only a little. "At times I like to remember . . . That is not important. You are from the White Tower? It has been long since they had a dreamwalker. Very long. I am Amys, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel."

"You are a Wise One? You are! And you know dreams, you know Tel'aran'rhiod! You can . . . My name is Egwene. Egwene al'Vere. I . . ." She took a deep breath; Amys did not look a woman to lie to. "I am Aes Sedai. Of the Green Ajah."

Amys's expression did not change, really. A slight crinkling of her eyes, perhaps in skepticism. Egwene hardly looked old enough to be full Aes Sedai. What she said, though, was "I meant to leave you standing in your skin until you asked for some proper clothes. Putting on cadin'sor that way, as though you were . . . You surprised me, pulling free

as you did, turning my own spear on me. But you are still untaught, are you not, however strong. Else you would not have popped into the middle of my hunt that way, where you obviously did not wish to be. And this flying about? Did you come to Tel'aran'rhiod - Tel'aran'rhiod! - to stare at this city, wherever it is?"

"It's Tanchico," Egwene said faintly. She didn't know. But then how had Amys followed her, or found her? It was obvious she knew more of the World of Dreams than Egwene did, by far. "You can help me. I am trying to find women of the Black Ajah, Darkfriends. I think they are here, and I have to find them if they are."

"It truly exists, then." Amys almost whispered it. "An Ajah of Shadowrunners in the White Tower." She shook her head. "You are like a girl just wedded to the spear who thinks now she can wrestle men and leap mountains. For her it means a few bruises and a valuable lesson in humility. For you, here, it could mean death." Amys eyed the white buildings around them and grimaced. "Tanchico? In . . . Tarabon? This city is dying, eating itself. There is a darkness here, an evil. Worse than men can make. Or women." She looked at Egwene pointedly. "You cannot see it, or feel it, can you? And you want to hunt Shadowrunners in Tel'aran'rhiod."

"Evil?" Egwene said quickly. "That could be them. Are you sure? If I told you what they look like, could you be certain it was them? I can describe them. I can describe one to her last braid."

"A child," Amys muttered, "demanding a silver bracelet from her father this minute when she knows nothing of trading or the making of bracelets. You have much to learn. Far more than I can begin to teach you, now. Come to the Three-fold Land. I will have the word spread through the clans that an Aes Sedai called Egwene al'Vere is to be brought to me at Cold Rocks Hold. Give your name and show your Great Serpent ring, and you will have safe running. I am not there now, but I will return from Rhuidean before you can arrive."

"Please, you must help me. I need to know if they are here. I have to know."

"But I cannot tell you. I do not know them, or this place, this Tanchico. You must come to me. What you do is dangerous, far more dangerous than you know. You must-Where are you going? Stay!"

Something seemed to snatch at Egwene, pulling her into darkness.

Amys's voice followed her, hollow and dwindling. "You must come to me and learn. You must. . . ."

Chapter 12 - Tanchico or the Tower

Elayne drew a ragged, relieved breath as Egwene finally stirred and opened her eyes. At the foot of the bed, Aviendha's features lost their tinge of frustration and anxiety, and she flashed a quick smile that Egwene returned. The candle had burned past the mark minutes ago; it seemed an hour.

"You would not wake up," Elayne said unsteadily. "I shook you and shook you, but you would not wake." She gave a small laugh. "Oh, Egwene, you even frightened Aviendha."

Egwene put a hand on her arm and squeezed reassuringly. "I am back, now." She sounded tired, and she had sweated her shift through. "I suppose I had reason to stay a little longer than we planned. I will be more careful next time. I promise."

Nynaeve returned the pitcher of water to the washstand vigorously, sloshing some out. She had been on the point of throwing it in Egwene's sleeping face. Her features were composed, but the pitcher rattled the washbowl, and she let the spilled water drip to the carpet. "Was it something you found? Or was it . . . ? Egwene, if the World of Dreams can hold on to you in some way, maybe it is too dangerous until you learn more. Maybe the more often you go, the harder it is to come back. Maybe... I don't know. But I do know we cannot risk letting you become lost." She crossed her arms under her breasts, ready for an argument.

"I know," Egwene said, very close to meekly. Elayne's eyebrows shot up; Egwene was never meek with Nynaeve. Anything but.

Egwene struggled off the bed, refusing Elayne's help, and made her way to the washstand to bathe her face and arms in the relatively cool water. Elayne found a dry shift in the wardrobe while Egwene pulled off her sodden one.

"I met a Wise One, a woman named Amys." Egwene's voice was muffled until her head popped out of the top of the new shift. "She said I should come to her, to learn about Tel'aran'rhold. At some place in the Waste called Cold Rocks Hold."

Elayne had caught a flicker of Aviendha's eye at the mention of the Wise One's name. "Do you know her? Amys?"

The Aiel woman's nod could only be described as reluctant. "A Wise One. A dreamwalker. Amys was Far Dareis Mai until she gave up the spear to go to Rhuidean."

"A Maiden!" Egwene exclaimed. "So that's why she No matter. She said she is at Rhuidean, now. Do you know where this Cold Rocks Hold is, Aviendha?"

"Of course. Cold Rocks is Rhuarc's hold. Rhuarc is Amys's husband. I visit there, sometimes. I used to. My sister-mother, Lian, is sister-wife to Amys."

Elayne exchanged confused glances with Egwene and Nynaeve. Once Elayne had thought she knew a good bit about Aiel, all learned from her teachers in Caemlyn, but she had discovered since meeting Aviendha how little she did know. Customs and relationships all were a maze. First-sisters meant having the same mother; except that it was possible for friends to become first-sisters by making a pledge before Wise Ones. Second-sisters meant your mothers were sisters; if your fathers were brothers, you were father-sisters, and not considered as closely related as second-sisters. After that, it truly grew bewildering.

"What does 'sister-wife' mean?" she asked hesitantly.

"That you have the same husband." Aviendha frowned at the way Egwene gasped and Nynaeve's eyes opened as wide as they would go. Elayne had been half-expecting the answer, but she still found herself fussing with skirts that were perfectly straight. "This is not your custom?" the Aiel woman asked.

"No," Egwene said faintly. "No, it is not."

“But you and Elayne care for one another as first-sisters. What would you have done had one of you been unwilling to step aside for Rand al’Thor? Fight over him? Let a man damage the ties between you? Would it not have been better if you both had married him, then?”

Elayne looked at Egwene. The thought of . . . Could she have done such a thing? Even with Egwene? She knew her cheeks were red. Egwene merely looked startled.

“But I wanted to step aside,” Egwene said.

Elayne knew the remark was as much for her as for Aviendha, but the thought would not go away. Had Min had a viewing? What would she do if Min had? If it’s Berelain, I will strangle her, and him too! If it has to be someone, why couldn’t it be Egwene? Light, what am I thinking? She knew she was becoming flustered, and to cover it, she made her voice light. “You sound as if the man has no choice in the matter.”

“He can say no,” Aviendha said as if it were obvious, “but if he wishes to marry one, he must marry both when they ask. Please take no offense, but I was shocked when I learned that in your lands a man can ask a woman to marry him. A man should make his interest known, then wait for the woman to speak. Of course, some women lead a man to see where his interest lies, but the right of the question is hers. I do not really know very much of these things. I have wanted to be Far Dareis Mai since I was a child. All I want in life is the spear and my spear-sisters,” she finished quite fiercely.

“No one is going to try to make you marry,” Egwene said soothingly. Aviendha gave her a startled look.

Nynaeve cleared her throat loudly. Elayne wondered if she had been thinking about Lan; there were certainly hard spots of color in her cheeks. “I suppose, Egwene,” Nynaeve said in a slightly too energetic voice, “that you did not find what you were looking for, or you would have said something by now.”

“I found nothing,” Egwene replied regretfully. “But Amys said Aviendha, what sort of woman is Amys?”

The Aiel woman had taken up a study of the carpet. “Amys is hard as the mountains and pitiless as the sun,” she said without looking up. “She is a dreamwalker. She can teach you. Once she lays her hands on you, she will drag you by the hair toward what she wants. Rhuarc is the only one who can stand up to her. Even the other Wise Ones step carefully when Amys speaks. But she can teach you.”

Egwene shook her head. “I meant would being in a strange place unsettle her, make her nervous? Being in a city? Would she see things that weren’t there?”

Aviendha’s laugh was a short, sharp sound. “Nervous? Waking to find a lion in her bed would not make Amys nervous. She was a Maiden, Egwene, and she has grown no softer, you can be sure of it.”

“What did this woman see?” Nynaeve asked.

“It wasn’t something she saw, exactly,” Egwene said slowly. “I think not seeing. She said Tanchico had an evil in it. Worse than men could make, she said. That could be the Black Ajah. Don’t argue with me, Nynaeve,” she added in a firmer voice. “Dreams have to be interpreted. It very well could be.”

Nynaeve had begun frowning as soon as Egwene mentioned evil in Tanchico, and her frown turned to a heated glare when Egwene told her not to argue. Some-times Elayne wanted to shake both women. She stepped in quickly, before the older woman could erupt. “It very well could be, Egwene. You did find something. More than Nynaeve or I thought you could. Didn’t she, Nynaeve? Don’t you think so?”

“It could be,” Nynaeve said grudgingly.

“It could be.” Egwene did not sound happy about it. She took a deep breath. “Nynaeve is right. I have to learn what I’m doing. If I knew what I should, I would not have had to be told about the evil. If I knew what I should, I could have

found the very room Liandrin is staying in, wherever she is. Amys can teach me. That is why. . . . That is why I have to go to her.”

“Go to her?” Nynaeve sounded appalled. “Into the Waste?”

“Aviendha can take me right to this Cold Rocks Hold.” Egwene’s look, half-defiant, half-anxious, darted between Elayne and Nynaeve. “If I was certain they were in Tanchico, I wouldn’t let you go alone. If you decide to. But with Amys to help me, maybe I can find out where they are. Maybe I can That is just it; I do not even know what I’ll be able to do, only that I am certain it will be far more than I can now. It isn’t as if I will be abandoning you. You can take the ring with you. You know the Stone well enough to come back here in Tel’aran’rhiod. I can come to you in Tanchico. Whatever I learn from Amys, I can teach you. Please say you understand. I can learn so much from Amys, and then I can use it to help you. It will be as if all three of us had been trained by her. A dreamwalker; a woman who knows! Liandrin and the rest of them will be like children; they won’t know a quarter of what we do.” She chewed her lip, one pensive bite. “You don’t believe I am running out on you, do you? If you do, I won’t go.”

“Of course you must go,” Elayne told her. “I will miss you, but no one promised us we could stay together until this was done.”

“But the two of you . . . going alone . . . I should go with you. If they really are in Tanchico, I should be with you.”

“Nonsense,” Nynaeve said briskly. “Training is what you need. That will do us far more good in the long run than your company to Tanchico. It isn’t even as if we know any of them are in Tanchico. If they are, Elayne and I will do very well together, but we could arrive and find that this evil is no more than the war after all. The Light knows, war should be evil enough for anyone. We may be back in the Tower before you are. You must be careful in the Waste,” she added in a practical tone. “It is a dangerous place. Aviendha, you will look after her?”

Before the Aiel woman could open her mouth, there was a knock at the door, followed immediately by Moiraine. The Aes Sedai took them in with one sweeping look that weighed, measured and considered them and what they had been doing, all without the twitch of an eyelid to suggest her conclusions. “Joiya and Amico are dead,” she announced.

“Was that the reason for the attack, then?” Nynaeve said. “All that to kill them? Or perhaps to kill them if they could not be freed. I’ve been sure Joiya was so confident because she expected rescue. She must have been lying after all. I never trusted her repentance.”

“Not the main purpose, perhaps,” Moiraine replied. “The captain very wisely kept his men to their posts in the dungeons during the attack. They never saw a single Trolloc or Myrddraal. But they found the pair dead, after. Each with her throat rather messily cut. After her tongue had been nailed to her cell door.” She might as well have been speaking of having a dress mended.

Elayne’s stomach heaved leadenly at the detached description. “I would not have wanted that for them. Not like that. The Light illumine their souls.”

“They sold their souls to the Shadow long ago,” Egwene said roughly. She had both hands pressed to her stomach, though. “How. . . . How was it done? Gray Men?”

“I doubt even Gray Men could have managed that,” Moiraine said dryly. “The Shadow has resources beyond what we know, it seems.”

“Yes.” Egwene smoothed her dress, and her voice. “If there was no attempt at rescue, it must mean they were both telling the truth. They were killed because they talked.”

“Or to stop them from it,” Nynaeve added grimly. “We can hope they do not know that those two told us anything. Perhaps Joiya did repent, but I’ll not believe it.”

Elayne swallowed, thinking of being in a cell, having your face pressed to the door so your tongue could be pulled out and She shivered, but made herself say, “They might have been killed simply to punish them for being captured.”

She left out her thought that the killing might have been to make them believe whatever Joiya and Amico had said; they had enough doubts about what to do as it was. "Three possibilities, and only one says the Black Ajah knows they revealed a word. Since all three are equal, the chances are that they do not know."

Egwene and Nynaeve looked shocked. "To punish them?" Nynaeve said incredulously.

They were both tougher than she in many ways - she admired them for it - but they had not grown up watching the maneuverings at court in Caemlyn, hearing tales of the cruel way Cairhienin and Tairens played the Game of Houses.

"I think the Black Ajah might be less than gentle with failure of any kind," she told them. "I can imagine Liandrin ordering it. Joiya surely could have done it easily." Moiraine eyed her briefly, a reassessing look.

"Liandrin," Egwene said, her tone absolutely flat. "Yes, I can imagine Liandrin or Joiya giving that command."

"You did not have much longer to question them in any case," Moiraine said. "They would have been ship-bound by midday tomorrow." A hint of anger touched her voice; Elayne realized Moiraine must see the Black sisters' deaths as an escape from justice. "I hope you reach some decision soon. Tanchico or the Tower."

Elayne met Nynaeve's eyes and gave a slight nod.

Nynaeve nodded back, more assertively, before turning to the Aes Sedai. "Elayne and I will be going to Tanchico as soon as we can find a ship. A fast ship, I hope. Egwene and Aviendha will be going to Cold Rocks Hold, in the Aiel Waste." She gave no reasons, and Moiraine's eyebrows rose.

"Jolien can take her," Aviendha said into the momentary silence. She avoided looking at Egwene. "Or Sefela, or Bain and Chiad. I . . . I have a thought to go with Elayne and Nynaeve. If there is war in this Tanchico, they have need of a sister to watch their backs."

"If that is what you want, Aviendha," Egwene said slowly.

She looked surprised and hurt, but no more surprised than Elayne. She had thought the two of them were becoming friends. "I am glad you want to help us, Aviendha, but you should be the one to take Egwene to Cold Rocks Hold."

"She is going neither to Tanchico nor Cold Rocks Hold," Moiraine said, taking a letter from her pouch and unfolding the pages. "This was placed in my hand an hour gone. The young Aielman who brought it told me it was given to him a month ago, before any of us reached Tear, yet it is addressed to me by name, at the Stone of Tear." She glanced at the last sheet. "Aviendha, do you know Amys, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel; Bair, of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel; Melaine, of the Jhirad sept of the Goshien Aiel; and Seana; of the Black Cliff sept of the Nakai Aiel? They signed it."

"They are all Wise Ones, Aes Sedai. All dreamwalkers." Aviendha's stance had shifted to wariness, though she did not seem aware of it. She looked ready to fight or flee.

"Dreamwalkers," Moiraine mused. "Perhaps that explains it. I have heard of dreamwalkers." She turned to the second page of the letter. "Here is what they say about you. What they said perhaps before you had even decided to come to Tear. 'There is among the Maidens of the Spear in the Stone of Tear a willful girl called Aviendha, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. She must now come to us. There can be no more waiting or excuses. We will await her on the slopes of Chaendaer, above Rhuidean.' There is more about you, but mainly telling me that I must see you come to them without delay. They issue commands like the Amyrlin, these Wise Ones of yours." She made a vexed sound, which brought Elayne to wonder if the Wise Ones had tried issuing commands to the Aes Sedai, too. Not very likely. And unlikely to be successful if tried. Still, something about that letter irritated the Aes Sedai.

"I am Far Dareis Mai," Aviendha said angrily. "I do not go running like a child when someone calls my name. I will go to Tanchico if I wish."

Elayne pursed her lips thoughtfully. This was something new from the Aiel woman. Not the anger - she had seen Aviendha angry before, if not quite to this degree - but the undertone. She could call it nothing but sulkiness. That seemed as unlikely as Lan being sulky, but there it was.

Egwene heard it, too. She patted Aviendha's arm. "It's all right. If you want to go to Tanchico, I'll be pleased that you are protecting Elayne and Nynaeve." Aviendha gave her a truly miserable look.

Moiraine shook her head, only slightly, but still deliberate. "I showed this to Rhuarc." Aviendha opened her mouth, her face irate, but the Aes Sedai raised her voice and went on smoothly. "As the letter asks me to. Only the part concerning you, of course. He seems quite determined that you will do as the letter asks. As it orders. I think it wisest to do as Rhuarc and the Wise Ones wish, Aviendha. Do you not agree?"

Aviendha stared around the room wildly, as at a trap. "I am Far Dareis Mai," she muttered, and strode for the door without another word.

Egwene took a step, half-raising a hand to stop her, then let it fall as the door banged shut. "What do they want with her?" she demanded of Moiraine. "You always know more than you let on. What are you holding back this time?"

"Whatever the Wise Ones' reason," Moiraine said coolly, "it is surely a matter between Aviendha and them. If she wished you to know, she would have told you."

"You cannot stop trying to maneuver people," Nynaeve said bitterly. "You're maneuvering Aviendha into something now, aren't you?"

"Not I. The Wise Ones. And Rhuarc." Moiraine folded the letter, returning it to her belt pouch with a touch of acerbity in her manner. "She can always say no to him. A clan chief is not the same as a king, as I understand Aiel ways."

"Can she?" Elayne asked. Rhuarc reminded her of Gareth Bryne. The Captain--General of her mother's Royal Guards had seldom put his foot down, but when he did, not even Morgase could bring him around, short of a royal command. There would be no command from the throne this time - not that Morgase had ever issued one to Gareth Bryne when he had decided he was right, now that Elayne thought of it - and without one, she expected that Aviendha was going to the slopes of Chaendaer, above Rhuidean. "At least she can journey with you, Egwene. Amys can hardly meet you at Cold Rocks Hold if she plans to wait for Aviendha at Rhuidean. You can go to Amys together."

"But I do not want her to," Egwene said sadly. "Not if she doesn't want to."

"Whatever anyone wants," Nynaeve said, "we have work to do. You will need many things for a trip into the Waste, Egwene. Lan will tell me what. And Elayne and I must make preparations to sail for Tanchico. I suppose we can find a ship tomorrow, but that means deciding what to pack tonight."

"There is a ship of the Atha'an Miere at the docks in the Maule," Moiraine told them. "A raker. There are no ships faster. You did want a fast ship." Nynaeve gave a grudging nod.

"Moiraine," Elayne said, "what is Rand going to do now? After this attack . . . Will he start the war you want?"

"I do not want a war," the Aes Sedai replied. "I want what will see him alive to fight Tarmon Gai'don. He says he will tell us all what he means to do tomorrow."

The smallest frown creased her smooth forehead. "Tomorrow, we will all know more than we do tonight." Her departure was abrupt.

Tomorrow, Elayne thought. What will he do when I tell him. What will he say! He has to understand. Determinedly, she joined the other two to discuss their preparations.

Chapter 13 - Rumors

The tavern's business rocked along like any in the Maule, a wagonload of geese and crockery careering downhill through the night. The babble of voices fought with the musicians' offerings on three assorted drums, two hammered dulcimers, and a bulbous semseer that produced whining trills. The serving maids in dark, ankle-length dresses with necks up to the chin and short white aprons hustled between crowded tables, holding dusters of pottery mugs overhead so they could squeeze through. Barefoot leather-vested dockmen mixed with fellows in coats tight to the waist and bare-chested men with broad, colorful sashes to hold up their baggy breeches. So close to the docks, vestments of outlanders were everywhere among the crowd; high collars from the north and long collars from the west, silver chains on coats and bells on vests, knee-high boots and thigh-high boots, necklaces or earrings on men, lace on coats or shirts. One man with wide shoulders and a big belly had a forked yellow beard, and another had smeared something on his mustaches to make them glisten in the lamplight and curl up on either side of his narrow face. Dice rolled and tumbled in three corners of the room and on a number of tabletops, silver changing hands briskly to shouts and laughter.

Mat sat alone with his back to the wall where he could see all the doors, though mostly he peered into a still untouched mug of dark wine. He did not go near the dice games, and he never glanced at the serving girls' ankles. With the tavern so crowded, men occasionally thought to share his table, but a good look at his face made them sheer away and crowd onto a bench elsewhere.

Dipping a finger in his wine, he sketched aimlessly on the tabletop. These fools had no idea what had happened in the Stone tonight. He had heard a few Tairens mention some kind of trouble, quick words that trailed off into nervous laughter. They did not know and did not want to. He almost wished he did not know himself. No, he wished he had a better idea of what had happened. The images kept flashing in his head, flashing through the holes in his memory, making no real sense.

The din of fighting somewhere in the distance echoed down the corridor, dulled by the wall hangings. He retrieved his knife from the Gray Man's corpse with a shaking hand. A Gray Man, and hunting him. It had to have been after him. Gray Men did not wander about killing at random; they had targets as surely as an arrow. He turned to run, and there was a Myrddraal striding toward him like a black snake on legs, its party faced, eyeless stare sending shivers into his bones. At thirty paces he hurled the knife straight at where an eye should have been; at that distance he could hit a knothole no larger than an eye four times in five.

The Fade's black sword blurred as it knocked the dagger away, almost casually; it did not even break stride. "Time to die, Hornsunder." Its voice was a red adder's dry hiss, warning of death.

Mat backed away. He had a knife in either hand, now, though he did not remember drawing them. Not that knives would be much good against a sword, but running meant that black blade in his back as sure as five sixes beat four threes. He wished he had a good quarterstaff. Or a bow; he would like to see this thing try to deflect a shaft from a Two Rivers longbow. He wished he were somewhere else. He was going to die here.

Suddenly a dozen Trollocs roared out of a side hallway, piling onto the Fade in a frenzy of chopping axes and stabbing swords. Mat stared in amazed disbelief. The Halfman fought like a black-armored whirlwind. More than half the Trollocs were dead or dying before the Fade lay in a twitching heap; one arm flexed and thrashed like a dying snake three paces away from the body, still with that black sword in its fist.

A ram-horned Trolloc peered toward Mat, snout lifted to sniff the air. It snarled at him, then whined and began licking a long gash that had laid open mail and hairy forearm. The others finished cutting the throats of their wounded, and one barked a few harsh, guttural words. Without another glance at Mat, they turned and trotted away, hooves and boots making hollow sounds on the stone floor.

Away from him. Mat shivered. Trollocs to the rescue. What had Rand gotten him into now? He saw what he had drawn with the wine - an open door - and scrubbed it out angrily. He had to get away from here. He had to. And he could also feel that urge in the back of his head, that it was time to go back to the Stone. He pushed it away angrily, but it kept buzzing at him.

He caught a snatch of talk from the table to his right, where the lean-faced fellow with the curling mustaches was holding forth in a heavy Lugarder accent. "Now this Dragon of yours is a great man no doubt, I'll not be denying it, but he's not a patch on Logain. Why, Logain had all of Ghealdan at war, and half of Amadicia and Altara, as well. He made the earth swallow whole towns that resisted him, he did. Buildings, people and all entire. And the one up in Saldaea, Maseem? Why, they say he made the sun stand still till he defeated the Lord of Bashere's army. 'Tis a fact, they do say."

Mat shook his head. The Stone fallen and Callandor in Rand's hand, and this idiot still thought he was another false Dragon. He had sketched that doorway again. Rubbing a hand through it, he grabbed up the mug of wine, then stopped w it halfway to his mouth. Through the commotion his ear had picked out a familiar name spoken at a nearby table. Scraping back his bench, he made his way to that table, mug in hand.

The people around it were the sort of odd mixture made in taverns in the Maule. Two barefoot sailors wearing oiled coats over bare chests, one with a thick gold chain close around his neck. A once fat man with sagging jowls, in a dark Cairhienin coat with slashes of red and gold and green across his chest which might have indicated that he was a noble, though one sleeve was torn at the shoulder; a good many Cairhienin refugees had come down far in the world. A gray-haired woman all in subdued dark blue, with a hard face and a sharp eye and heavy gold rings on her fingers. And the speaker, the fork-bearded fellow, with a ruby the size of a pigeon's egg in his ear. The three silver chains looped across the straining chest of his dark, reddish coat named him a Kandori master merchant. They had a guild for merchants in Kandor.

The talk ceased and all eyes swung to Mat when he stopped at their table. "I heard you mention the Two Rivers."

Forkbeard ran a quick eye over him, the unbrushed hair, the tight expression on his face and the wine in his fist, the gleaming black boots, the green coat with its gold scrollwork, open to the waist to reveal a snowy linen shirt, but both coat and shirt heavily wrinkled. In short, the very image of a young noble sporting himself among the commoners. "I did, my Lord," he said heartily. "I was saying there'll be no tabac out of there this year, I'll wager. I have twenty casks of the finest Two Rivers leaf, though, than which there is none finer. Fetch an excellent price later in the year. If my Lord wishes a cask for his own stock . . ." He tugged one point of his yellow beard and laid a finger alongside his nose. ". . . I am certain I could manage to - "

"You'll wager that, will you?" Mat said softly, cutting him short. "Why would there be no tabac out of the Two Rivers?"

"Why, the Whitecloaks, my Lord. The Children of the Light."

"What about Whitecloaks?"

The master merchant peered around the table for help; there was a dangerous note in that quiet tone. The sailors looked as if they would leave if they dared. The Cairhienin was glaring at Mat, sitting up too straight and smoothing his worn coat as he swayed; the empty mug in front of him was obviously not his first. The gray-haired woman had her mug to her mouth, her sharp eyes watching Mat over the rim in a calculating way.

Managing a seated bow, the merchant put on an ingratiating tone. "The rumor is, my Lord, that the Whitecloaks have gone into the Two Rivers. Hunting the Dragon Reborn, it's said. Though of course, that cannot be, since the Lord Dragon is here in Tear." He eyed Mat to see how that had been taken; Mat's face did not change. "These rumors can run very wild, my Lord. Perhaps it's only wind in a bucket. The same rumor claims the Whitecloaks are after some Darkfriend with yellow eyes, too. Did you ever hear of a man with yellow eyes, my Lord? No more have I. Wind in a bucket."

Mat set his mug on the table and leaned closer to the man. "Who else are they hunting? According to this rumor. The Dragon Reborn. A man with yellow eyes. Who else?"

Beads of sweat formed on the merchant's face. "No one, my Lord. No one that I heard. Only rumor, my Lord. Straws in the wind; no more. A puff of smoke, soon vanished. If I might have the honor of presenting my Lord a cask of Two Rivers tabac? A gesture of appreciation . . . the honor of . . . to express my. . . ."

Mat tossed an Andoran gold crown onto the table. "Buy your drink on me till that runs out."

As he turned away he heard mutters from the table. "I thought he'd cut my throat. You know these lordlings when they're full of wine." That from the fork-bearded merchant. "An odd young man," the woman said. "Dangerous. Do not try your ploys on that kind, Paetram." "I do not think he is a lord at all," another man said petulantly. The Cairhienin, Mat supposed. His lip curled. A lord? He would not be a lord if it was offered to him. Whitecloaks in the Two Rivers. Light! Light help us!

Plowing his way to the door, he pulled a pair of wooden clogs from the pile against the wall. He had no idea whether they were the ones he had worn in - they all looked alike - and did not care. They fit his boots.

It had started raining outside, a light fall that made the darkness that much deeper. Turning up his collar, he splashed along the muddy streets of the Maule in an awkward trot, past blaring taverns and well-lit inns and dark-windowed houses. When mud gave way to paving stones at the wall marking the inner city, he kicked the clogs off and left them lying as he ran on. The Defenders guarding the nearest gate into the Stone let him pass without a word; they knew who he was. He ran all the way to Perrin's room and flung open the door, barely noticing the splintered split in the wood. Perrin's saddlebags lay on the bed, and Perrin was stuffing shirts and stockings into them. There was only one candle lit, but he did not seem to notice the gloom.

"You've heard, then," Mat said.

Perrin went on with what he was doing. "About home? Yes. I went down to sniff out a rumor for Faile. After tonight, more than ever, I have to get her . . ." The growl, deep in his throat, made Mat's hackles rise; it sounded like an angry wolf. "No matter. I heard. Maybe this will do as well."

As well as what? Mat wondered. "You believe it?"

For a moment Perrin looked up; his eyes gathered the light of the candle, shining a burnished golden yellow. "There doesn't seem to be much doubt, to me. It's all too close to the truth."

Mat shifted uncomfortably. "Does Rand know?" Perrin only nodded and went back to his packing. "Well, what does he say?"

Perrin paused, staring at the folded cloak in his hands. "He started muttering to himself. 'He said he'd do it. He said he would. I should have believed him.' Like that. It made no sense. Then he grabbed me by the collar and said he had to do 'what they don't expect.' He wanted to me to understand, but I'm not certain he does himself. He didn't seem to care whether I leave or stay. No, I take that back. I think he was relieved I'm leaving."

"Boil it down, and he's not going to do anything," Mat said. "Light, with Callandor he could blast a thousand Whitecloaks! You saw what he did to those bloody Trollocs. You're going, are you? Back to the Two Rivers? Alone?"

"Unless you are coming, too." Perrin stuffed the cloak into the saddlebags. "Are you?"

Instead of answering, Mat paced back and forth, his face in half-light and shadow by turns. His mother and father were in Emond's Field, and his sisters. Whitecloaks had no reason to hurt them. If he went home, he had the feeling he would never leave again, that his mother would marry him off before he could sit down. But if he did not go, if the Whitecloaks harmed them . . . All it took was rumor, for Whitecloaks, so he had heard. But why should there be any rumor about them? Even the Coplins, liars and troublemakers to a man, liked his father. Everyone liked Abell Caution.

"You don't have to," Perrin said quietly. "Nothing I heard mentioned you. Only Rand, and me."

"Burn me, I will g - " He could not say it. Thinking of going was easy enough, but saying he would? His throat tightened up to strangle the words. "Is it easy for you, Perrin? Going, I mean? Don't you . . . feel anything? Trying to hold you back? Telling you reasons you shouldn't go?"

“A hundred of them, Mat, but I know it comes down to Rand, and ta’veren. You won’t admit that, will you? A hundred reasons to stay, but the one reason to go outweighs them. The Whitecloaks are in the Two Rivers, and they’ll hurt people trying to find me. I can stop it, if I go.”

“Why should the Whitecloaks want you enough to hurt anybody? Light, if they go asking for somebody with yellow eyes, nobody in Emond’s Field will know who they’re talking about! And how can you stop anything? One more pair of hands won’t do much good. Aaah! The Whitecloaks have bitten a mouthful of leather if they think they can push Two Rivers folk around.”

“They know my name,” Perrin said softly. His gaze swung to where his axe hung on the wall, the belt tied around the haft and the wall hook. Or maybe it was his hammer he was staring at, standing propped against the wall beneath the axe; Mat could not be sure. “They can find my family. As for why, they have their reasons, Mat. Just as I have mine. Who can say who. has the better?”

“Burn me, Perrin. Burn me! I want to g-g- See? I can’t even say it, now. Like my head knows I’ll do it if I say it. I can’t even get it out in my mind!”

“Different paths. We’ve been sent down different paths before.”

“Different paths be bloodied,” Mat grunted. “I’ve had all I want of Rand, and Aes Sedai, shoving me down their bloody paths. I want to go where I want for a change, do what I want!” He turned for the door, but Perrin’s voice halted him.

“I hope your path is a happy one, Mat. The Light send you pretty girls and fools who want to gamble.”

“Oh, burn me, Perrin. The Light send you what you want, too.”

“I expect it will.” He did not sound happy at the prospect.

“Will you tell my da I’m all right? And my mother? She always did worry. And look after my sisters. They used to spy on me and tell Mother everything, but I wouldn’t want anything to happen to them.”

“I promise, Mat.”

Closing the door behind him, Mat wandered down the hallways aimlessly. His sisters. Eldrin and Bodewhin had always been ready to run shouting “Mama, Mat’s in trouble again, Mat’s doing what he shouldn’t, Mama.” Especially Bode. They would be sixteen and seventeen, now. Probably thinking of marriage before too much longer, already with some dull farmer picked out whether the fellow knew it or not. Had he really been gone so long? It did not seem so, sometimes. Sometimes he felt as if he had left Emond’s Field just a week or two past. Other times it seemed years gone, only dimly remembered at all. He could remember Eldrin and Bode smirking when he had been switched, but their faces were no longer sharp. His own sisters’ faces. These bloody holes in his memory, like holes in his life.

He saw Berelain coming toward him and grinned in spite of himself. For all her airs, she was a fine figure of a woman. That clinging white silk was thin enough for a handkerchief, not to mention being scooped low enough at the top to expose a considerable amount of excellent pale bosom.

He swept her his best bow, elegant and formal. “A good evening to you, my Lady.” She started to sweep by without a glance, and he straightened angrily. “Are you deaf as well as blind, woman? I’m not a carpet to walk over, and I distinctly heard myself speak. If I pinch your bottom, you can slap my face, but until I do, I expect a civil word for a civil word!”

The First stopped dead, eyeing him in that way women had. She could have sewn him a shirt and told his weight, not to mention when he had his last bath, from that look. Then she turned away, murmuring something to herself. All he caught was “too much like me.”

He stared after her in amazement. Not a word to him! That face, that walk, and her nose so far in the air it was a wonder her feet touched the ground. That was what he got, speaking to the likes of Berelain and Elayne. Nobles who thought you were dirt unless you had a palace and bloodlines back to Artur Hawkwing. Well, he knew a plump cook's helper - just plump enough - who did not think he was dirt. Dara had a way of nibbling his ears that . . .

His thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. He had been considering seeing whether Data was awake and up for a cuddle. He had even considered flirting with Berelain. Berelain! And the last words he had said to Perrin. Look after my sisters. As if he had already decided, already knew what to do. Only he had not. He would not, not so easily, just sliding into it. There was a way, perhaps.

Digging a gold coin from his pocket, he flipped it into the air and snatched it onto the back of his other hand. A Tar Valon mark, he saw for the first time, and he was staring at the Flame of Tar Valon, stylized like a teardrop. "Burn all Aes Sedai!" he announced loudly. "And burn Rand al'Thor for getting me into this!"

A black-and-gold liveried servant stopped in mid-stride, staring at him worriedly. The man's silver tray was piled high with rolled bandages and jars of ointment. As soon as he realized Mat had seen him, he gave a jump.

Mat tossed the gold mark onto the man's tray. "From the biggest fool in the world. Mind you spend it well, on women and wine."

"T-thank you, my Lord," the man stammered as if stunned.

Mat left him standing there. The biggest fool in the world. Aren't I just!

Chapter 14 - Customs of Mayene

Perrin shook his head as the door closed behind Mat. Mat would as soon hit himself on the head with a hammer as go back to the Two Rivers. Not unless he must. Perrin wished there was some way he could avoid going home, too. But there was no way; it was a fact as hard as iron and less forgiving. The difference between Mat and himself was that he was willing to accept that, even when he did not want to.

Easing his shirt off made him grunt, careful as he could be. A large bruise, already faded to browns and yellows, stained his entire left shoulder. A Trolloc had slipped past his axe, and only Faile's quick work with a knife had kept it from being more than it was. The shoulder made washing painful, but at least there was no worry about cold water in Tear.

He was packed and ready, only a change of clothes for the morning remaining out of his saddlebags. As soon as the sun rose, he would go find Loial. No point in bothering the Ogier tonight. He was probably already abed, where Perrin meant to be shortly. Faile was the only problem he had not figured out how to deal with. Even staying in Tear would be better for her than going with him.

The door opened, surprising him. Perfume wafted in to him as soon as the door cracked; it made him think of climbing flowers on a hot summer night. A tantalizing scent, not heavy, not to anyone but him, but nothing Faile would wear. Still, he was even more surprised when Berelain stepped into his room.

Holding the edge of the door, she blinked, making him realize how dim the light must be for her. "You are going somewhere?" she said hesitantly. With the light of the hallway's lamps behind her, it was difficult not to stare.

"Yes, my Lady." He bowed; not smoothly, but as well as he could. Faile could give all the sharp sniffs she wanted, but he saw no reason not to be polite. "In the morning."

"So am I." She closed the door and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. He looked away, watching her from the corner of his eye, so she would not think he was goggling. She went on without noticing his reaction. The single candle flame was reflected in her dark eyes. "After tonight . . . Tomorrow I will leave by carriage for Godan, and from there take ship for Mayene. I should have gone days ago, but I thought there must be some way to work matters out. Only, there wasn't, of course. I should have seen that sooner. Tonight convinced me. The way he.... All that lightning, flowing down the halls. I will leave tomorrow."

"My Lady," Perrin said in confusion, "why are you telling me?"

The way she tossed her head reminded him of a mare he had sometimes shod in Emond's Field; that mare would try to take a bite out of you. "So you can tell the Lord Dragon, of course."

That made no more sense to him. "You can tell him yourself," he said with more than a little exasperation. "I've no time for carrying messages before I go."

"I . . . do not think he would wish to see me."

Any man would want to see her, and she was beautiful to look at; she knew both things. He thought she had started to say something else. Could she have been that frightened by what had happened that night in Rand's bedchamber? Or the attack and the way Rand had ended it? Perhaps, but this was not a woman to frighten easily, not from the cool way she was eyeing him. "Give your message to a servant. I doubt I'll see Rand again. Not before I leave. Any servant will take a note to him."

"It would come better from you, a friend of the Lord - "

"Give it to a servant. Or one of the Aiel."

"You will not do as I ask?" she asked incredulously.

“No. Haven’t you been listening to me?”

She tossed her head again, but there was a difference this time, though he could not have said what. Studying him thoughtfully, she murmured half to herself, “Such striking eyes.”

“What?” Suddenly he realized he was standing there naked to the waist. Her intense scrutiny abruptly seemed like the study of a horse before purchase. Next thing, she would be feeling his ankles and inspecting his teeth. He snatched the shirt meant for morning from the bed and pulled it over his head. “Give your message to a servant. I want to go to bed now. I mean to be up early. Before sunrise.”

“Where are you going tomorrow?”

“Home. The Two Rivers. It is late. If you are leaving tomorrow, too, I suppose you want to get some sleep. I know I’m tired.” He yawned as widely as he could.

She still made no move toward the door. “You are a blacksmith? I have need of a blacksmith in Mayene. Making ornamental ironwork. A short stay before returning to the Two Rivers? You would find Mayene . . . entertaining.”

“I am going home,” he told her firmly, “and you are going back to your own rooms.”

Her small shrug made him look away again hastily. “Perhaps another day. I always get what I want in the end. And I think I want . . .” She paused, eyeing him up and down. “. . . ornamental ironwork. For the windows of my bedchamber.” She smiled so innocently that he felt alarm gongs sounding his head.

The door opened again, and Faile came in. “Perrin, I went into the city looking for you, and I heard a rumor -” She stopped stock still, her eyes hard on Berelain.

The First ignored her. Stepping close to Perrin, she ran a hand up his arm, across his shoulder. For an instant he thought she meant to try pulling his head down for a kiss-she certainly lifted her face as if for one-but she only trailed her hand along the side of his neck in a quick caress and stepped back. It was over and done before he could move to stop her. “Remember,” she said softly, as if they were alone, “I always get what I want.” And she swept past Faile and out of the room.

He waited for an explosion from Faile, but she glanced at his stuffed saddlebags on the bed and said, “I see you’ve heard the rumor already. It is only a rumor, Perrin.”

“Yellow eyes make it more than that.” She should have been erupting like a bundle of dry twigs tossed on a fire. Why was she so cool? “Very well. Moiraine is the next problem, then. Will she try to stop you?”

“Not if she doesn’t know. If she tries, I will go anyway. I have family and friends, Faile; I won’t leave them to Whitecloaks. But I hope to keep it from her until I am well out of the city.” Even her eyes were calm, like dark pools in the forest. It made his hackles rise.

“But it had to take weeks for that rumor to reach Tear, and it will take weeks more to ride to the Two Rivers. The Whitecloaks could be gone by then. Well, I have been wanting you to leave here. I should not complain. I just want you to know what to expect.”

“It won’t take weeks by the Ways,” he told her. “Two days, maybe three.” Two days. He supposed there was no means to make it faster.

“You are as mad as Rand al’Thor,” she said disbelievingly. Dropping on the foot of his bed, she folded her legs crosswise and addressed him in a voice suitable for lecturing children. “Go into the Ways, and you come out hopelessly mad. If you come out at all, which it is most likely you will not. The Ways are tainted, Perrin. They have been dark for-what?-three hundred years? Four hundred? Ask Loial. He could tell you. It was Ogiers built the Ways, or grew them, or

whatever it was. Not even they use the Ways. Why, even if you managed to make it through them unscathed, the Light alone knows where you would come out.”

“I have traveled them, Faile.” And a frightening trip it had been, too. “Loial can guide me. He can read the guideposts; that’s how we went before. He will do it for me again when he knows how important it is.” Loial was eager to be away from Tear, too; he seemed to be afraid that his mother knew where he was. Perrin was sure he would help.

“Well,” she said, rubbing her hands together briskly. “Well. I wanted adventure, and this is certainly it. Leaving the Stone of Tear and the Dragon Reborn, traveling the Ways to fight Whitecloaks. I wonder whether we can persuade Thom Merrilin to come along. If we cannot have a bard, a gleeman will do. He could compose the story, and you and I the heart of it. No Dragon Reborn or Aes Sedai about to swallow up the tale. When do we leave? In the morning?”

He took a deep breath to steady his voice. “I will be going alone, Faile. Just Loial and me.”

“We will need a packhorse,” she said as if he had not spoken. “Two, I think. The Ways are dark. We will need lanterns, and plenty of oil. Your Two Rivers people. Farmers? Will they fight Whitecloaks?”

“Faile, I said - ”

“I heard what you said,” she snapped. Shadows gave her a dangerous look, with her tilted eyes and high cheekbones. “I heard, and it makes no sense. What if these farmers won’t fight? Or don’t know how? Who is going to teach them? You? Alone?”

“I will do what has to be done,” he said patiently. “Without you.”

She bounced to her feet so fast he thought she was coming for his throat. “Do you think Berelain will go with you? Will she guard your back? Or perhaps you prefer her to sit on your lap and squeal? Tuck your shirt in, you hairy oaf! Does it have to be so dark in here? Berelain likes dim light, does she? Much good she will do you against the Children of the Light!”

Perrin opened his mouth to protest, and changed what he had been going to say. “She looks a pleasant armful, Berelain. What man wouldn’t want her on his lap?” The hurt on her face banded his chest with iron, but he made himself go on. “When I am done at home, I may go to Mayene. She asked me to come, and I might.”

Faile said not a word. She stared at him with a face like stone, then whirled and ran out, slamming the door behind her with a crash.

In spite of himself he started to follow, then stopped with his hands gripping the doorframe till his fingers hurt. Staring at the splintered gash his axe had made in the door, he found himself telling it what he could not tell her. “I killed Whitecloaks. They would have killed me if I hadn’t, but they still call it murder. I’m going home to die, Faile. That’s the only way I can stop them hurting my people. Let them hang me. I cannot let you see that. I can’t. You might even try to stop it, and then they’d . . .”

His head dropped against the door. She would not be sorry to see the last of him now; that was what was important. She would go find her adventure somewhere else, safe from Whitecloaks and ta’veeren and bubbles of evil. That was all that was important. He wished he did not want to howl with grief.

Faile strode through the halls at a near run, oblivious of who she passed or who had to scramble out of her way. Perrin. Berelain. Perrin. Berelain. He wants a milk faced vixen who runs about half-naked, does he? He doesn’t know what he wants. Hairy lummoX! Wooden-headed buffoon! Blacksmith! And that sneaking sow, Berelain. That prancing she-goat!

She did not realize where she was going until she saw Berelain ahead of her, gliding along in that dress that left nothing to the imagination, swaying along as if that walk of hers was not deliberately calculated to make male eyes pop. Before Faile knew what she was doing, she had darted ahead of Berelain and turned to face her where two corridors met.

“Perrin Aybara belongs to me,” she snapped. “You keep your hands and your smiles away from him!” She flushed to her hairline when she heard what she had said. She had promised herself she would never do this, never fight over a man like a farmgirl rolling in the dirt at harvest.

Berelain arched a cool eyebrow. “Belongs to you? Strange, I saw no collar on him. You serving girls - or are you a farmer’s daughter? - you have the most peculiar ideas.”

“Serving girl? Serving girl! I am - ” Faile bit her tongue to stop the furious words. The First of Mayene, indeed. There were estates in Saldaea larger than Mayene. She would not last a week in the courts of Saldaea. Could she recite poetry while hawking?

Could she ride in the hunt all day, then play the bittern at night while discussing how to counter Trolloc raids? She thought she knew men, did she? Did she know the language of fans? Could she tell a man to come or go or stay, and a hundred things more, all with the twist of a wrist and the placement of a lace fan? Light shine on me, what am I thinking? I swore I would never even hold a fan again! But there were other Saldaean customs. She was surprised to see the knife in her hand; she had been taught not to draw a knife unless she meant to use it. “Farm girls in Saldaea have a way of dealing with women who poach others’ men. If you do not swear to forget Perrin Aybara, I will shave your head as bald as an egg. Perhaps the boys who tend the chickens will pant after you, then!”

She was not sure exactly how Berelain gripped her wrist, but suddenly she was flying through the air. The floor crashing into her back drove all the air from her lungs.

Berelain stood smiling, tapping the blade of Faile’s knife on her palm. “A custom of Mayene. The Tairens do like to use assassins, and the guards cannot always be close at hand. I despise being attacked, farmgirl, so this is what I will do. I will take the blacksmith away from you and keep him as a pet for as long as he amuses me. Ogier’s oath on it, farmgirl. He is quite ravishing, really - those shoulders, those arms; not to mention those eyes of his - and if he is a bit uncultured, I can have that remedied. My courtiers can teach him how to dress, and rid him of that awful beard. Wherever he goes, I will find him and make him mine. You can have him when I am finished. If he still wants you, of course.”

Finally managing to draw a breath, Faile struggled to her feet, pulling a second knife. “I will drag you to him, after I cut off those clothes you are almost wearing, and make you tell him you are nothing but a sow!” Light help me, I am behaving like a farmgirl, and talking like one! The worst part was that she meant it.

Berelain set herself warily. She meant to use her hands, obviously, not the knife. She held it like a fan. Faile advanced on the balls of her feet.

Suddenly Rhuarc was there between them, towering over them, snatching the knives away before either woman was really aware of him. “Have you not seen enough blood already tonight?” he said coldly. “Of all those I thought I might find breaking the peace, the two of you would be the last named.”

Faile gaped at him. With no warning, she pivoted, driving her fist toward Rhuarc’s short ribs. The toughest man would feel it there.

He seemed to move without looking at her, caught her hand, forced her arm straight to her side, twisted. Abruptly she was standing very straight and hoping he did not push her arm right up out of her shoulder.

As if nothing had happened, he addressed Berelain. “You will go to your room, and you will not come out until the sun is above the horizon. I will see that no breakfast is brought to you. A little hunger will remind you that there is a time and place for fighting.”

Berelain drew herself up indignantly. “I am the First of Mayene. I will not be ordered about like - ”

“You will go to your rooms. Now,” Rhuarc told her flatly. Faile wondered if she could kick him; she must have tensed, because as soon as she thought of it, he increased the pressure on her wrist, and she was up on her tiptoes. “If you do not,” he went on to Berelain, “we will repeat our first talk together, you and I. Right here.”

Berelain’s face went white and red by turns. “Very well,” she said stiffly. “If you insist, I will perhaps - ”

“I did not propose a discussion. If I can still see you when I have counted three One.”

With a gasp, Berelain hiked her skirts and ran. She even managed to sway doing that.

Faile stared after her in amazement. It was almost worth having her arm nearly disjointed. Rhuarc was watching Berelain go, too, a small appreciative smile on his lips.

“Do you mean to hold me all night?” she demanded. He released her - and tucked her knives into his belt. “Those are mine!”

“Forfeit,” he said. “Berelain’s punishment for fighting was to have you see her sent to bed like a willful child. Yours is to lose these knives you prize. I know you have others. If you argue, I might take those, too. I will not have the peace broken.”

She glared at him, but she suspected he meant just what he said. Those knives had been made for her by a man who knew what he was doing; the balance was just right. “What ‘first talk’ did you have with her? Why did she run like that?”

“That is between her and me. You will not go near her again, Faile. I do not believe she started this; that one’s weapons are not knives. If either of you makes trouble again, I will put both of you to carrying offal. Some of the Tairens thought they could keep on fighting their duels after I had declared peace on this place, but the smell of the refuse carts soon taught them their mistake. Be sure you do not have to learn it the same way.”

She waited until he had gone before nursing her shoulder. He reminded her of her father. Not that her father had ever twisted her arm, but he had small patience with those who made trouble, whatever their position, and no one ever caught him by surprise. She wondered if she could bait Berelain into something, just to see the First of Mayene sweating among the refuse carts. But Rhuarc had said both of them. Her father meant what he said, too. Berelain. Something Berelain had said was tickling the back of her mind. Ogier’s oath. That was it. An Ogier never broke an oath. To say “Ogier oathbreaker” was like saying “brave coward,” or “wise fool.”

She could not help laughing aloud. “You will take him from me, you silly peahen? By the time you see him again, if you ever do, he’ll be mine once more.” Chuckling to herself, and occasionally rubbing her shoulder, she walked on with a light heart.

Chapter 15 - Into the Doorway

Holding the glass-mantled lamp high, Mat peered down the narrow corridor, deep in the belly of the Stone. Not unless my life depended on it. That's what I promised. Well, burn me if it doesn't!

Before doubt could seize him again, he hurried on, past doors dry-rotted and hanging aslant, past others only shreds of wood clinging to rusted hinges. The floor had been swept recently, but the air still smelled of old dust and mold. Something skittered in the darkness, and he had a knife out before he realized it was just a rat, running from him, no doubt running toward some escape hole it knew.

"Show me the way out," he whispered after it, "and I'll come with you." Why am I whispering? There's nobody down here to hear me. It seemed a place for quiet, though. He could feel the whole weight of the Stone over his head, pressing down.

The last door, she had said. That one hung askew, too. He kicked it open, and it fell apart. The room was littered with dim shapes, with crates and barrels and things stacked high against the walls and out into the floor. Dust, too. The Great Hold! It looks like the basement of an abandoned farmhouse, only worse. He was surprised that Egwene and Nynaeve had not dusted and tidied while they were down here. Women were always dusting and straightening, even things that did not need it. Footprints crisscrossed the floor, some of them from boots, but no doubt they had had men to shift the heavier items about for them. Nynaeve liked finding ways to make a man work; likely she had deliberately hunted out some fellows enjoying themselves.

What he sought stood out among the jumble. A tall redstone doorframe, looming oddly in the shadows cast by his lamp. When he came closer, it still looked odd. Twisted, somehow. His eye did not want to follow it around; the corners did not join right. The tall hollow rectangle seemed likely to fall over at a breath, but when he gave it an experimental push, it stood steady. He pushed a bit harder, not sure he did not want to heave the thing over, and that side of it scraped through the dust. Goose bumps ran down his arms. There might as well have been a wire fastened to the top, suspending it from the ceiling. He held the lamp up to see. There was no wire. At least it won't topple while I'm inside. Light, I am going inside, aren't I?

A clutter of figurines and small things wrapped in rotting cloth occupied the top of a tall, upended barrel near him. He pushed the jumble to one side so he could set the lamp there, and studied the doorway. The ter'angreal. If Egwene knew what she was talking about. She probably did; no doubt she had learned all sorts of strange things in the Tower, however much she denied. She would deny things, wouldn't she now. Learning to be Aes Sedai. She didn't deny this though, now did she? If he squinted, it just looked like a stone doorframe, dully polished and the duller for dust. Just a plain doorframe. Well, not entirely plain. Three sinuous lines carved deep in the stone ran down each upright from top to bottom. He had seen fancier on farmhouses. He would probably step through and find himself still in this dusty room.

Won't know till I try, will I? Luck! Taking a deep breath - and coughing from the dust - he put his foot through.

He seemed to be stepping through a sheet of brilliant white light, infinitely bright, infinitely thick. For a moment that lasted forever, he was blind; a roaring filled his ears, all the sounds of the world gathered together at once. For just the length of one measureless step.

Stumbling another pace, he stared around in amazement. The ter'angreal was still there, but this was certainly not where he had started. The twisted stone doorframe stood in the center of a round hall with a ceiling so high it was lost in shadows, surrounded by strange spiraled yellow columns snaking up into the gloom, like huge vines twining 'round poles that had been taken away. A soft light came from glowing spheres atop coiled stands of some white metal. Not silver; the shine was too dull for that. And no hint of what made the glow; it did not look like flame; the spheres simply shone. The floor tiles spiraled out in white and yellow stripes from the ter'angreal. There was a heavy scent in the air, sharp and dry and not particularly pleasant. He almost turned around and went back on the spot.

"A long time."

He jumped, a knife coming into his hand, and peered among the columns for the source of the breathy voice that pronounced those words so harshly.

“A long time, yet the seekers come again for answers. The questioners come once more.” A shape moved, back among the columns; a man, Mat thought. “Good. You have brought no lamps, no torches, as the agreement was, and is, and ever will be. You have no iron? No instruments of music?”

The figure stepped out, tall, barefoot, arms and legs and body wound about in layers of yellow cloth, and Mat was suddenly not so sure if it was a man. Or human. It looked human, at first glance, though perhaps too graceful, but it seemed far too thin for its height, with a narrow, elongated face. Its skin, and even its straight black hair, caught the pale light in a way that reminded him of a snake’s scales. And those eyes, the pupils just black, vertical slits. No, not human.

“Iron. Instruments of music. You have none?”

Mat wondered what it thought the knife was; it certainly did not seem concerned over it. Well, the blade was good steel, not iron. “No. No iron, and no instruments of - Why - ?” He cut off sharply. Three questions, Egwene had said. He was not about to waste one on “iron” or “instruments of music.” Why should he care if I have a dozen musicians in my pocket and a smithy on my back? “I have come here for true answers. If you are not the one to give them, take me to who can.”

The man - it was male at least, Mat decided - smiled slightly. He did not show any teeth. “According to the agreement. Come.” He beckoned with one long--fingered hand. “Follow.”

Mat made the knife disappear up his sleeve. “Lead, and I will follow.” Just you keep ahead of me and in plain sight. This place makes my skin crawl.

There was not a straight line to be seen anywhere except for the floor itself, as he trailed the strange man. Even the ceiling was always arched, and the walls bowed out. The halls were continuously curved, the doorways rounded, the windows perfect circles. Tilework made spirals and sinuous lines, and what seemed to be bronze metalwork set in the ceiling at intervals was all complicated scrolls. There were no pictures of anything, no wall hangings or paintings. Only patterns, and always curves.

He saw no one except his silent guide; he could have believed the place empty except for the two of them. From somewhere he had a dim memory of walking halls that had not known a human foot in hundreds of years, and this felt the same. Yet sometimes he caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye. Only, however quickly he turned, there was never anyone there. He pretended to rub his forearms, checking the knives up his coatsleeves for reassurance.

What he saw through those round windows was even worse. Tall wispy trees with only a drooping umbrella of branches at the top, and others like huge fans of lacy leaves, a tangle of growth equal to the heart of any briar-choked thicket, all under a dim, overcast light, though there did not seem to be a cloud in the sky. There were always windows, always along just one side of the curving corridor, but sometimes the side changed, and what surely should have been looking into courtyard or rooms instead gave out into that forest. He never caught as much as a glimpse of any other part of this palace, or whatever it was, through those windows, or any other building, except . . .

Through one circular window he saw three tall silvery spires, curving in toward each other so their points all aimed at the same spot. They were not visible from the next window, three paces away, but a few minutes later, after he and his guide had rounded enough curves that he had to be looking in another direction, he saw them again. He tried telling himself these were three different spires, but between them and him was one of those fan-shaped trees with a dangling broken branch, a tree that had been in the same spot the first time. After his third sight of the spires and the strange tree with the broken branch, this time ten paces farther on but on the other side of the hallway, he tried to stop looking at what lay outside at all.

The walk seemed interminable.

“When - ? Are - ?” Mat ground his teeth. Three questions. It was hard to learn anything without asking questions. “I hope you are taking me to those who can answer my questions. Burn my bones, I do. For my sake and yours, the Light know it true.”

“Here,” the peculiar, yellow-wrapped fellow said, gesturing with one of those thin hands to a rounded doorway twice as large as any Mat had seen before. His strange eyes studied Mat intently. His mouth gaped open, and he inhaled, long and slow. Mat frowned at him, and the stranger gave a writhing hitch of his shoulders. “Here your answers may be found. Enter. Enter and ask.”

Mat drew a deep breath of his own, then grimaced and scrubbed at his nose. That sharp, heavy smell was a rank nuisance. He took a hesitant step toward the tall doorway, and looked around for his guide again. The fellow was gone. Light! I don’t know why anything in this place surprises me now. Well, I will be burned if I’ll turn back now. Trying not to think of whether he could find the ter’angreal again on his own, he went in.

It was another round room, with spiraling floor tiles in red and white under a domed ceiling. It had no columns, or furnishings of any kind, except for three thick, coiled pedestals around the heart of the floor’s spirals. Mat could see no way to reach the top of them except by climbing the twists, yet a man like his guide sat cross-legged atop each, only wrapped in layers of red. Not all men, he decided at a second look; two of those long faces with the odd eyes had a definite feminine cast. They stared at him, intense penetrating stares, and breathed deeply, almost panting. He wondered if he made them nervous in some way. Not much bloody chance of that. But they’re certainly getting under my coat.

“It has been long,” the woman on the right said.

“Very long,” the woman on the left added.

The man nodded. “Yet they come again.”

All three had the breathy voice of the guide - almost indistinguishable from it, in fact - and the harsh way of pronouncing words. They spoke in unison, and the words might as well have come from one mouth. “Enter and ask, according to the agreement of old.”

If Mat had thought his skin crawled before, now he was sure it was writhing. He made himself go closer. Carefully - careful to say nothing that even sounded like a question - he laid the situation before them. The Whitecloaks, certainly in his home village, surely hunting friends of his, maybe hunting him. One of his friends going to face the Whitecloaks, another not. His family, not likely in danger, but with the bloody Children of the bloody Light around A ta’veren pulling at him so he could hardly move. He saw no reason to give names, or mention that Rand was the Dragon Reborn. His first question - and the other two, for that matter - he had worked out before going down to the Great Hold. “Should I go home to help my people?” he asked finally.

Three sets of slitted eyes lifted from him - reluctantly, it seemed - and studied the air above his head. Finally the woman on the left said, “You must go to Rhuidean.”

As soon as she spoke their eyes all dropped to him again, and they leaned forward, breathing deeply again, but at that moment a bell tolled, a sonorous brazen sound that rolled through the room. They swayed upright, staring at one another, then at the air over Mat’s head again.

“He is another,” the woman on the left whispered. “The strain. The strain.”

“The savor,” the man said. “It has been long.”

“There is yet time,” the other woman told them. She sounded calm - they all did - but there was a sharpness to her voice when she turned back to Mat. “Ask. Ask.”

Mat glared up at them furiously. Rhuidean? Light! That was somewhere out in the Waste, the Light and the Aiel knew where. That was about as much as he knew. In the Waste! Anger drove questions about how to get away from Aes

Sedai and how to recover the lost parts of his memory right out his head. "Rhuidean!" he barked. "The Light burn my bones to ash if I want to go Rhuidean! And my blood on the ground if I will! Why should I? You are not answering my questions. You are supposed to answer, not hand me riddles!"

"If you do not go to Rhuidean," the woman on the right said, "you will die."

The bell tolled again, louder this time; Mat felt its tremor through his boots. The looks the three shared were plainly anxious. He opened his mouth, but they were only concerned with each other.

"The strain," one of the women said hurriedly. "It is too great."

"The savor of him," the other woman said on her heels. "It has been so very long."

Before she was done the man spoke. "The strain is too great. Too great. Ask. Ask!"

"Burn your soul for a craven heart," Mat growled, "I will that! Why will I die if I do not go to Rhuidean? I very likely will die if I try. It makes no - "

The man cut him off and spoke hurriedly. "You will have sidestepped the thread of fate, left your fate to drift on the winds of time, and you will be killed by those who do not want that fate fulfilled. Now, go. You must go! Quickly!"

The yellow-clad guide was suddenly there at Mat's side, tugging at his sleeve with those too-long hands.

Mat shook him off. "No! I will not go! You have led me from the questions I wanted to ask and given me senseless answers. You will not leave it there. What fate are you talking about? I will have one dear answer out of you, at least!"

A third time the bell sounded mournfully, and the entire room trembled.

"Go!" the man shouted. "You have had your answers. You must go before it is too late!"

Abruptly a dozen of the yellow-dad men were around Mat, seeming to appear out of the air, trying to pull him toward the door. He fought with fists, elbows, knees. "What fate? Burn your hearts, what fate?" It was the room itself that pealed, the walls and floor quivering, nearly taking Mat and his attackers off their feet. "What fate?"

The three were on their feet atop the pedestals, and he could not tell which shrieked which answer.

"To marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons!"

"To die and live again, and live once more a part of what was!"

"To give up half the light of the world to save the world!"

Together they howled like steam escaping under pressure. "Go to Rhuidean, son of battles! Go to Rhuidean, trickster! Go, gambler! Go!"

Mat's assailants snatched him into the air by his arms and legs and ran, holding him over their heads. "Unhand me, you white-livered sons of goats!" he shouted, struggling. "Burn your eyes! The Shadow take your souls, loose me! I will have your guts for a saddle girth!" But writhe and curse as he would, those long fingers gripped like iron.

Twice more the bell tolled, or the palace did. Everything shook as in an earthquake; the walls rang with deafening reverberations, each louder than the last. Mat's captors stumbled on, nearly falling but never stopping their pell-mell race. He did not even see where they were taking him until they suddenly stopped short, heaving him into the air. Then he saw the twisted doorway, the ter'angreal, as he flew toward it.

White light blinded him; the roar filled his head till it drove thought away.

He fell heavily onto a dusty floor in dim light and rolled up against the barrel holding his lamp in the Great Hold. The barrel rocked, packets and figurines toppling to the floor in a crash of breaking stone and ivory and porcelain. Bounding to his feet, he threw himself back at the stone doorframe. "Burn you, you can't throw me - !"

He hurtled through - and stumbled against the crates and barrels on the other side. Without a pause, he turned and leaped at it again. With the same result. This time he caught himself on the barrel holding his lamp, which nearly fell onto the already shattered things littering the floor under his boots. He grabbed it in time, burning his hand, and fumbled it back to a steadier perch.

Burn me if I want to be down here in the dark, he thought, sucking his fingers. Light, the way my luck is running, it probably would have started a fire and I'd have burned to death!

He glared at the ter'angreal. Why was it not working? Maybe the folk on the other side had shut it off somehow. He understood practically nothing of what had happened. That bell, and their panic. You would have thought they were afraid the roof would come down on their heads. Come to think of it, it very nearly had: And Rhuidean, and all the rest of it. The Waste was bad enough, but they said he was fated to marry somebody called the Daughter of the Nine Moons. Marry! And to a noblewoman, by the sound of it. He would sooner marry a pig than a noblewoman. And that business about dying and living again. Nice of them to add the last bit! If some black-veiled Aielman killed him on the way to Rhuidean, he would find out how true it was. It was all nonsense, and he did not believe a word of it. Only. . . . The bloody doorway had taken him somewhere, and they had only wanted to answer three questions, just the way Egwene had said.

"I won't marry any bloody noblewoman!" he told the ter'angreal. "I'll marry when I'm too old to have any fun, that's what! Rhuidean my bloody - !"

A boot appeared, backing out of the twisted stone doorway, followed by the rest of Rand, with that fiery sword in his hands. The blade vanished as he stepped clear, and he heaved a sigh of relief. Even in the dim light, Mat could see he was troubled, though. He gave a start when he saw Mat. "Just poking around, Mat? Or did you go through, too?"

Mat eyed him warily for a moment. At least that sword was gone. He did not seem to be channeling-though how was anybody to tell?-and he did not look particularly like a madman. In fact, he looked very much as Mat remembered. He had to remind himself they were not back home any longer, and Rand was not what he remembered. "Oh, I went through, all right. A bunch of bloody liars, if you ask me! What are they? Made me think of snakes."

"Not liars, I think." Rand sounded as if he wished they were. "No, not that. They were afraid of me, right from the first. And when that tolling started. . . . The sword kept them back; they wouldn't even look at it. Shied away. Hid their eyes. Did you get your answers?"

"Nothing that makes sense," Mat muttered. "What about you?"

Suddenly Moiraine appeared from the ter'angreal, seeming to step gracefully out of thin air, flowing out. She would be a fine one to dance with if she were not Aes Sedai. Her mouth tightened at the sight of them.

"You! You were both in there. That is why. . . !" She made a vexed hiss. "One of you would have been bad enough, but two ta'veren at once - you might have tom the connection entirely and been trapped there. Wretched boys playing with things you do not know the danger of. Perrin! Is Perrin in there, too? Did he share your. . . exploit?"

"The last I saw of Perrin," Mat said, "he was getting ready to go bed." Maybe Perrin would give him the lie by being the next to step out of the thing, but he might as well deflect the Aes Sedai's anger if he could. No need for Perrin to face it, too. Maybe he'll make it clear of her, at least, if he gets away before .she knows what he's doing. Bloody woman! I'll wager she was noble born.

That Moiraine was angry there was no doubt. The blood had drained out of her cheeks, and her eyes were dark augers boring into Rand. "At least you escaped with your lives. Who told you of this? Which one of them? I will make her wish I had peeled off her hide like a glove."

“A book told me,” Rand said calmly. He sat down back on the edge of a crate that creaked alarmingly under his weight and crossed his arms. All very cool; Mat wished he could emulate it. “A pair of books, in fact. Treasures of the Stone and Dealings with the Territory of Mayene. Surprising what you can dig out of books if you read long enough, isn’t it?”

“And you?” She shifted that drilling gaze to Mat. “Did you read it in a book, too? You?”

“I do read sometimes,” he said dryly. He would not have been averse to a little hide-peeling for Egwene and Nynaeve after what they had done to make him tell where he had hidden the Amyrlin’s letter - tying him up with the Power was bad enough, but the rest! - yet it was more fun to tweak Moiraine’s nose. “Treasures. Dealings. Lots of things in books.” Luckily, she did not insist that he repeat the titles; he had not paid attention once Rand brought up books.

Instead she swung back to Rand. “And your answers?”

“Are mine,” Rand replied, then frowned. “It wasn’t easy, though. They brought a . . . woman . . . to interpret, but she talked like an old book. I could hardly understand some of the words. I never considered they might speak another language.”

“The Old Tongue,” Moiraine told him. “They use the Old Tongue - a rather harsh dialect of it - for their dealings with men. And you, Mat? Was your interpreter easily understood?”

He had to work moisture back into his mouth. “The Old Tongue? Is that what it was? They didn’t give me one. In fact, I never got to ask any questions. That bell started shaking the walls down, and they hustled me out like I was tracking cow manure on the rugs.” She was still staring, her eyes still digging into his head. She knew about the Old Tongue slipping out of him, sometimes. “I . . . almost understood a word here and there, but not to know it. You and Rand got answers. What do they get out of it? The snakes with legs. We aren’t going upstairs to find ten years gone, are we, like Bili in the story?”

“Sensations,” Moiraine replied with a grimace. “Sensations, emotions, experi-ences. They rummage through them; you can feel them doing it, making your skin crawl. Perhaps they feed on them in some manner. The Aes Sedai who studied this ter’angreal when it was in Mayene wrote of a strong desire to bathe afterward. I certainly intend to.”

“But their answers are true?” Rand said as she started to turn away. “You are sure of it? The books implied as much, but can they really give true answers about the future?”

“The answers are true,” Moiraine said slowly, “so long as they are in regard to your own future. That much is certain.” She watched Rand, and himself, weighing the effect of her words. “As to how, though, there is only speculation. That world is . . . folded . . . in strange ways. I cannot be dearer. It may be that that allows them to read the thread of a human life, read the various ways it may yet be woven into the Pattern. Or perhaps it is a talent of the people. The answers are often obscure, however. If you need help working out what yours mean, I offer my services.” Her eyes flickered from one of them to the other, and Mat nearly swore. She did not believe him about no answers. Unless it was simply general Aes Sedai suspicion.

Rand gave her a slow smile. “And will you tell me what you asked, and what they answered?”

For answer, she returned a level, searching look, then started for the door. A small ball of light, as bright as a lantern, was suddenly floating ahead of her, illuminating her way.

Mat knew he should leave it alone, now. Just let her go and hope she forgot he had ever been down here. But a knot of anger still burned inside him. All those ridiculous things they had said. Well, maybe they were true, if Moiraine said so, but he wanted to grab those fellows by the collar, or whatever passed for a collar in those wrappings, and make them explain a few things.

“Why can’t you go there twice, Moiraine?” he called after her. “Why not?” He very nearly asked why they worried about iron and musical instruments, too, and bit his tongue. He could not know about those if he had not understood what they were saying.

She paused at the door to the hall, and it was impossible to see if she was looking at the ter'angreal or at Rand. "If I knew everything, Matrim, I would not need to ask questions." She peered into the room a moment longer - she was staring at Rand - then glided away without another word.

For a time Mat and Rand looked at each other in silence.

"Did you find out what you wanted?" Rand asked finally.

"Did you?"

A bright flame leaped into existence, balanced above Rand's palm. Not the smooth glowing sphere of the Aes Sedai, but a rough blaze like a torch. As Rand moved to leave, Mat added another question. "Are you really going to just let the Whitecloaks do whatever they want back home? You know they're heading for Emond's Field. If they are not there already. Yellow eyes, the bloody Dragon Reborn. It's too much, otherwise."

"Perrin will do . . . what he has to do to save Emond's Field," Rand replied in a pained voice. "And I must do what I have to, or more than Emond's Field will fall, and to worse than Whitecloaks."

Mat stood watching the light of that flame fade away down the hall, until he remembered where he was. Then he snatched up his lamp and hurried out. Rhuidean! Light, what am I going to do?

Chapter 16 - Leavetakings

Lying on sweat-soaked sheets, staring at the ceiling, Perrin realized that the darkness was turning to gray. Soon the sun would be edging above the horizon. Morning. A time for new hopes; a time to be up and doing. New hopes. He almost laughed. How long had he been awake? An hour or more, surely, this time. Scratching his curly beard, he winced. His bruised shoulder had stiffened, and he sat up slowly; sweat poured out on his face as he worked the arm. He kept at it methodically, though, suppressing groans and now and again biting back a curse, until he could move the arm freely, if not comfortably.

Such sleep as he had managed had been broken and fitful. When he was awake he had seen Faile's face, her dark eyes accusing him, the hurt he had put there making him cringe inside. When he slept, he dreamed of mounting a gallows, and Faile watching, or worse, trying to stop it, trying to fight Whitecloaks with their lances and swords, and he was screaming while they fitted the noose around his neck, screaming because the Whitecloaks were killing Faile. Sometimes she watched them hang him with a smile of angry satisfaction. Small wonder such dreams wakened him with a jerk. Once he had dreamed of wolves running out of the forest to save both Faile and him - only to be spitted on Whitecloak lances, shot down by their arrows. It had not been a restful night. Washing and dressing as hurriedly as he could, he left the room as if hoping to leave memories of his dreams behind.

Little outward evidence remained of the night's attack, here a sword-slashed tapestry, there a chest with a corner splintered by an axe or a lighter patch on the stone-tiled floor where a bloodstained rug had been removed. The majhere had her liveried army of servants out in force, though many wore bandages, sweeping, mopping, clearing away and replacing. She limped about leaning on a stick, a broad woman with her gray hair pushed up like a round cap by the dressing wound around her head, calling her orders in a firm voice, with the clear intention of removing every sign of the Stone's second violation. She saw Perrin and gave him an infinitesimal curtsy. Even the High Lords did not get much more from her, even when she was well. Despite all the cleaning and scrubbing, under the smell of waxes and polishes and cleaning fluids Perrin could still catch the faint scent of blood, sharply metallic human blood, fetid Trolloc blood, acrid Myrddraal blood with its stink that burned his nostrils. He would be glad to be away from here.

The door to Loial's room was a span across and more than two spans high, with an overlarge door handle in the shape of entwined vines level with Perrin's head. The Stone had a number of rarely used Ogier guest rooms; the Stone of Tear predated even the age of great Ogier stoneworks, but it was a point of prestige to use Ogier stonemasons, at least from time to time. Perrin knocked and at the call of "Come in," in a voice like a slow avalanche, lifted the handle and complied.

The room was on a scale with the door in every dimension, yet Loial, standing in the middle of the leaf-patterned carpet in his shirtsleeves, a long pipe in his teeth, reduced it all to seemingly normal size. The Ogier stood taller than a Trolloc in his wide-toed, thigh-high boots, if not so broad as one. His dark green coat, buttoned to the waist, then flaring to his boot tops like a kilt over baggy trousers, no longer looked odd to Perrin, but one look was enough to tell this was not an ordinary man in an ordinary room. The Ogier's nose was so broad as to seem a snout, and eyebrows like long mustaches dangled beside eyes the size of teacups. Tufted ears poked up through shaggy black hair that hung nearly to his shoulders. When he grinned around his pipestem at the sight of Perrin, it split his face in half.

"Good morning, Perrin," he rumbled, removing the pipe. "You slept well? Not easy, after such a night as that. Myself, I have been up half the night, writing down what happened." He had a pen in his other hand, and ink stains on his sausage-thick fingers.

Books lay everywhere, on Ogier-sized chairs and the huge bed and the table that stood as high as Perrin's chest. That was no surprise, but what was a little startling was the flowers. Flowers of every sort, in every color. Vases of flowers, baskets of them, posies tied with ribbon or even string, great woven banks of flowers standing about like lengths of garden wall. Perrin had certainly never seen the like inside a room. Their scent filled the air. Yet what really caught his eye was the swollen knot on Loial's head, the size of a man's fist, and the heavy limp in Loial's walk. It Loial had been hurt too badly to travel He felt ashamed at thinking of it that way - the Ogier was a friend - but he had to.

"You were injured, Loial? Moiraine could Heal you. I'm sure she will."

“Oh, I can get around with no trouble. And there were so many who truly needed her help. I would not want to bother her. It certainly is not enough to hamper me in my work.” Loial glanced at the table where a large cloth-bound book - large for Perrin, but it would fit in one of the Ogier’s coat pockets - lay open beside an uncorked ink bottle. “I hope I wrote it all down correctly. I did not see very much last night until it was done.”

“Loial,” Faile said, standing up from behind one of the banks of flowers with a book in her hands, “is a hero.”

Perrin jumped; the flowers had masked her scent completely. Loial made shushing noises, his ears twitching with embarrassment, and waved his big hands at her, but she went on, her voice cool but her eyes hot on Perrin’s face.

“He gathered as many children as he could-and some of their mothers-into a large room, and held the door alone against Trollocs and Myrddraal through the entire fight. These flowers are from the women of the Stone, tokens to honor his steadfast courage, his faithfulness.” She made “steadfast” and “faithfulness” crack like whips.

Perrin managed not to flinch, but only just. What he had done was right, but he could not expect her to see it. Even if she knew why, she would not see it. It was the right thing. It was. He only wished he felt better about the entire matter. It was hardly fair that he could be right and still feel in the wrong.

“It was nothing.” Loial’s ears twitched wildly. “It is just that the children could not defend themselves. That’s all. Not a hero. No.”

“Nonsense.” Faile marked her place in the book with a finger and moved closer to the Ogier. She did not come up to his chest. “There is not a woman in the Stone who would not marry you, if you were human, and some would anyway. Loial well named, for your nature is loyalty. Any woman could love that.”

The Ogier’s ears went stiff with shock, and Perrin grinned. She had obviously been feeding Loial honey and butter all morning in hope the Ogier would agree to take her along no matter what Perrin wanted, but in trying to prick him she had just fed Loial a stone without knowing it. “Have you heard from your mother, Loial?” he asked.

“No.” Loial managed to sound relieved and worried at the same time. “But I saw Laefar in the city yesterday. He was as surprised to see me as I to see him; we are not a common sight in Tear. He came from Stedding Shangtai to negotiate repairs on some Ogier stonework in one of the palaces. I have no doubt the first words out of his mouth when he returns to the stedding will be ‘Loial is in Tear.’ ”

“That is worrying,” Perrin said, and Loial nodded dejectedly.

“Laefar says the Elders have named me a runaway and my other has promised to have me married and settled. She even has someone chosen. Laefar did not know who.

At least he said he did not. He thinks such things are funny. She could be here in a month’s time.”

Faile’s face was a picture of confusion that almost made Perrin grin again. She thought she knew so much more than he did about the world - well, she did, in truth - but she did not know Loial. Stedding Shangtai was Loial’s home, in the Spine of the World, and since he was barely past ninety, he was not old enough to have left on, his own. Ogier lived a very long time; by their standards, Loial was no older than Perrin, maybe younger. But Loial had gone anyway, to see the world, and his greatest fear was that his mother would find him and drag back to the stedding to marry, never to leave again.

While Faile was trying to figure out what was going on, Perrin stepped into the silence. “I need to go back to the Two Rivers, Loial. Your mother won’t find you there.”

“Yes. That is true.” The Ogier gave an uncomfortable shrug. “But my book. Rand’s story. And yours, and Mat’s. I have so many notes already, but . . .” He moved around behind the table, peering down at the open book, the pages filled with his neat script. “I will be the one to write the true story of the Dragon Reborn, Perrin. The only book by someone who traveled with him, who actually saw it unfold. The Dragon Reborn, by Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, of

Stedding Shangtai.” Frowning, he bent over the book, dipping his pen in the ink bottle. “That is not quite right. It was more - ”

Perrin put a hand on the page where Loial was going to write. “You’ll write no book if your mother finds you. Not about Rand, at least. And I need you, Loial.”

“Need, Perrin? I do not understand.”

“There are Whitecloaks in the Two Rivers. Hunting me.”

“Hunting you? But why?” Loial looked almost as confused as Faile had. Faile, on the other hand, had donned a complacent smugness that was worrisome. Perrin went on anyway.

“The reasons don’t matter. The fact is that they are. They may hurt people, my family, looking for me. Knowing Whitecloaks, they will. I can stop it, if I can get there quickly, but it must be quickly. The Light only knows what they’ve done already. I need you to take me there, Loial, by the Ways. You told me once there was a Waygate here, and I know there was one at Manetheren. It must still be there, in the mountains above Emond’s Field. Nothing can destroy a Waygate, you said. I need you, Loial.”

“Well, of course I will help,” Loial said. “The Ways.” He exhaled noisily, and his ears wilted a bit. “I want to write of adventures, not have them. But I suppose one more time will not hurt. The Light send it so,” he finished fervently.

Faile cleared her throat delicately. “Are you not forgetting something, Loial? You promised to take me into the Ways whenever I asked, and before you took anyone else.”

“I did promise you a look at a Waygate,” Loial said, “and what it is like inside. You can have that when Perrin and I go. You could come with us, I suppose, but the Ways are not traveled lightly, Faile. I would not enter them myself if Perrin did not have need.”

“Faile will not be coming,” Perrin said firmly. “Just you and me, Loial.”

Ignoring him, Faile smiled up at Loial as if he were teasing her. “You promised more than a look, Loial. To take me wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and before anyone else. You swore to it.”

“I did,” Loial protested, “but only because you refused to believe I would show you. You said you would not believe unless I swore. I will do as I promised, but surely you do not want to step ahead of Perrin’s need.”

“You swore,” Faile said calmly. “By your mother, and your mother’s mother, and your mother’s mother’s mother.”

“Yes, I did, Faile, but Perrin - ”

“You swore, Loial. Do you mean to break your oath?”

The Ogier looked like misery stacked on misery. His shoulders slumped and his ears drooped, the corners of his wide mouth turned down and the ends of his long eyebrows dragged onto his cheeks.

“She tricked you, Loial.” Perrin wondered if they could hear his teeth grinding. “She deliberately tricked you.”

Red stained Faile’s cheeks, but she still had the nerve to say, “Only because I had to, Loial. Only because a fool man thinks he can order my life to suit himself. I’d not have done it, otherwise. You must believe that.”

“Doesn’t it make any difference that she tricked you?” Perrin demanded, and Loial shook his massive head sadly.

“Ogier keep their word,” Faile said. “And Loial is going to take me to the Two

Rivers. Or to the Waygate at Manetheren, at least. I have a wish to see the Two Rivers.”

Loial stood up straight, "But that means I can help Perrin after all. Faile, why did you drag this out? Even Faelar would not think this funny." There was a touch of anger in his voice; it took a good bit to make an Ogier angry.

"If he asks," she said determinedly. "That was part of it, Loial. No one but you and me, unless they asked me. He has to ask me."

"No," Perrin told her while Loial was still opening his mouth. "No, I won't ask. I will ride to Emond's Field first. I'll walk! So you might as well give up this foolishness. Tricking Loial. Trying to force yourself in where . . . where you aren't wanted."

Her calm dropped away in anger. "And by the time you reach there, Loial and I will have done for the Whitecloaks. It will all be over. Ask, you anvil-headed blacksmith. Just ask and you can come with us."

Perrin took hold of himself. There was no way to argue her around to his way of thinking, but he would not ask. She was right - he would need weeks to reach the Two Rivers on his horse; they could be there in two days, perhaps, through the Ways - but he would not ask. Not after she tricked Loial and tried to bully me! "Then I'll travel the Ways to Manetheren alone. I'll follow you two. If I stay far enough back not to be part of your party, I won't be breaking Loial's oath. You can't stop me following."

"That is dangerous, Perrin," Loial said worriedly. "The Ways are dark. If you miss a turning, or take the wrong bridge by accident, you could be lost forever. Or until Machin Shin catches you. Ask her, Perrin. She said you can come if you de. Ask her."

The Ogier's deep voice trembled speaking the name of Machin Shin, and a shiver ran down Perrin's back, too. Machin Shin. The Black Wind. Not even Aes Sedai knew whether it was Shadowspawn or something that had grown out of the Ways' corruption. Machin Shin was why traveling the Ways meant risking death; that was what Aes Sedai said. The Black Wind ate souls; that Perrin knew for truth. But he kept his voice steady and his face straight. I'll be burned if I let her think I am weakening. "I can't, Loial. Or anyway, I won't."

Loial grimaced. "Faile, it will be dangerous for him, trying to follow us. Please relent and let him - " She cut him off sharply.

"No. If he is too stiff-necked to ask, why should I? Why should I even care if he does get lost?" She turned to Perrin. "You can travel close to us. As close as you need to, so long as it's plain you are following. You will trail after me like a puppy until you ask. Why won't you just ask?"

"Stubborn humans," the Ogier muttered. "Hasty and stubborn, even when haste lands you in a homer nest."

"I would like to leave today, Loial," Perrin said, not looking at Faile.

"Best to go quickly," Loial agreed with a regretful look at the book on the table. "I can tidy my notes on the journey, I suppose. The Light knows what I will miss, being away from Rand."

"Did you hear me, Perrin?" Faile demanded.

"I will get my horse and a few supplies, Loial. We can be on our way by midmorning."

"Burn you, Perrin Aybara, answer me!"

Loial eyed her worriedly. "Perrin, are you certain you could not - "

"No," Perrin interrupted gently. "She is mule-headed, and she likes playing tricks. I won't dance so she can laugh." He ignored the sound coming from deep in Faile's throat, like a cat staring at a strange dog and ready to attack. "I will let you know as soon as I am ready." He started for the door, and she called after him furiously.

“ ‘When’ is my decision, Perrin Aybara. Mine and Loial’s. Do you hear me? You had better be ready in two hours, or we’ll leave you behind. You can meet us at the Dragonwall Gate stable, if you’re coming. Do you hear me?”

He sensed her moving and shut the door behind him just as something thumped into it heavily. A book, he thought. Loial would give her fits about that. Better to hit Loial on the head than harm one of his books.

For a moment he leaned against the door, despairing. All he had done, all he had gone through, making her hate him, and she was going to be there to see him die anyway. The best thing he could say was that she might enjoy it now. Stubborn, mule-headed woman!

When he turned to go, one of the Aiel was approaching, a tall man with reddish hair and green eyes who could have been Rand’s older cousin, or a young uncle. He knew the man, and liked him, if only because Gaul had never given even a flicker of notice to his yellow eyes. “May you find shade this morning, Perrin. The majhere told me you had come this way, though I think she itched to put a broom in my hands. As hard as a Wise One, that woman.”

“May you find shade this morning, Gaul. Women are all hardheaded, if you ask me.”

“Perhaps so, if you do not know how to get ‘round them. I hear you are journeying to the Two Rivers.”

“Light!” Perrin growled before the Aiel could say more. “Does the whole Stone know?” If Moiraine knew -

Gaul shook his head. “Rand al’Thor took me aside and spoke to me, asking me to tell no one. I think he spoke to others, too, but I do not know how many will want to go with you. We have been on this side of the Dragonwall for a long time, and many ache for the Three-fold Land.”

“Come with me?” Perrin felt stunned. If he had Aiel with him . . . There were possibilities he had not dared consider before. “Rand asked you to come with me? To the Two Rivers?”

Gaul shook his head again. “He said only that you were going, and that there were men who might try to kill you. I mean to accompany you, though, if you will have me. “

“Will I?” Perrin almost laughed. “I will that. We will be into the Ways in a few hours.”

“The Ways?” Gaul’s expression did not change, but he blinked.

“Does that make a difference?”

“Death comes for all men, Perrin.” It was hardly a comforting answer.

“I cannot believe Rand is that cruel,” Egwene said, and Nynaeve added, “At least he did not try to stop you.” Seated on Nynaeve’s bed, they were finishing the division of the gold Moiraine had provided. Four fat purses apiece to be carried in pockets sewn under Elayne’s and Nynaeve’s skirts, and another each, not so large as to attract unwanted attention, to carry at the belt. Egwene had taken a lesser amount, there being less use for gold in the Waste.

Elayne frowned at the two neatly tied bundles and the leather script lying beside the door. They held all of her clothes and other things. Cased knife and fork, hairbrush and comb, needles, pins, thread, thimble, scissors. A tinder box and a second knife, smaller than the one at her belt. Soap and bath powder and . . . It was ridiculous to go over the list again. Egwene’s stone ring was snug in her pouch. She was ready to go. There was nothing to hold her back.

“No, he did not.” Elayne was proud of how calm and collected she sounded. He seemed almost relieved! Relieved! And I had to give him that letter, laying my heart open like a stone-blind fool. At least he won’t open it until I am gone. She jumped at the touch of Nynaeve’s hand on her shoulder.

“Did you want him to ask you to stay? You know what your answer would have been. You do, don’t you?”

Elayne compressed her lips. "Of course I do. But he did not have to look happy about it." She had not meant to say that.

Nynaeve gave her an understanding look. "Men are difficult at the best."

"I still cannot believe he would be so . . . so . . ." Egwene began in an angry mutter. Elayne never learned what she meant to say, for at that moment the door crashed open so hard that it bounced off the all.

Elayne embraced saidar before she had stopped flinching, then felt a moment of embarrassment when the rebounding door slapped hard against Lan's outstretched hand. A moment more, and she decided to hold on to the Source a while longer. The Warder filled the doorway with his broad shoulders, his face a thunderhead; if his blue eyes could really have given off the thunderbolts they threatened, they would have blasted Nynaeve. The glow of saidar surrounded Egwene, too, and did not fade.

Lan did not appear to see anyone but Nynaeve. "You let me believe you were returning to Tar Valon," he rasped at her.

"You may have believed it," she said calmly, "but I never said it."

"Never said it? Never said it! You spoke of leaving today, and always linked your leaving with - those Darkfriends being sent to Tar Valon. Always! What did you mean me to think?"

"But I never said -"

"Light, woman!" he roared. "Do not bandy words with me!"

Elayne exchanged worried looks with Egwene. This man had an iron self-control, but he was at a breaking point now. Nynaeve was one who often let her emotions rage, yet she faced him coolly, head high and eyes serene, hands still on her green silk skirts.

Lan took hold of himself with an obvious effort. He appeared as stone-faced as ever, as much in control of himself - and Elayne was sure it was all on the surface. "I'd not have known where you were off to if I had not heard that you had ordered a carriage. To take you to a ship bound for Tanchico. I do not know why the Amyrlin allowed you to leave the Tower in the first place, or why Moiraine involved you in questioning Black sisters, but you three are Accepted. Accepted, not Aes Sedai. Tanchico now is no place for anyone except a full Aes Sedai with a Warder to watch her back. I'll not let you go into that!"

"So," Nynaeve said lightly. "You question Moiraine's decisions, and those of the Amyrlin Seat as well. Perhaps I've misunderstood Warders all along. I thought you swore to accept and obey, among other things. Lan, I do understand your concern, and I am grateful - more than grateful - but we all have tasks to perform. We are going; you must resign yourself to the fact."

"Why? For the love of the Light, at least tell me why! Tanchico!"

"If Moiraine has not told you," Nynaeve said gently, "perhaps she has her reasons. We must do our tasks, as you must do yours."

Lan trembled - actually trembled! - and damped his jaw shut angrily. When he spoke, he was strangely hesitant. "You will need someone to help you in Tanchico. Someone to keep a Taraboner street thief from slipping a knife into your back for your purse. Tanchico was that sort of city before the war began, and everything I've heard says it is worse now. I could. . . . I could protect you, Nynaeve."

Elayne's eyebrows shot up. He could not be suggesting He just could not be.

Nynaeve gave no sign that he had said anything out of the ordinary. "Your place is with Moiraine."

“Moiraine.” Sweat beaded on the Warder’s hard face, and he struggled with the words. “I can . . . I must . . . Nynaeve, I . . . I . . .”

“You will remain with Moiraine,” Nynaeve said sharply, “until she releases you from your bond. You will do as I say.” Pulling a carefully folded paper from her pouch, she thrust it into his hands. He frowned, read, then blinked and read again.

Elayne knew what it said.

What the bearer does is done at my order and by my authority. Obey, and keep silent, at my command.

Siu'an Sanche

Watcher of the Seals

Flame of Tar Valon

The Amyrlin Seat

The other like it rested in Egwene’s pouch, though none of them were sure what good it would do where she was going.

“But this allows you to do anything you please,” Lan protested. “You can speak in the Amyrlin’s name. Why would she give this to an Accepted?”

“Ask no questions I cannot answer,” Nynaeve said, then added with a hint of a grin, “Just count yourself lucky I do not tell you to dance for me.”

Elayne suppressed a smile of her own. Egwene made a choking sound of swallowed laughter. It was what Nynaeve had said when the Amyrlin first handed them the letters. With this I could make a Warder dance. Neither of them had had any doubt which Warder she had meant.

“Do you not? You dispose of me very neatly. My bond, and my oaths. This letter.” Lan had a dangerous gleam in his eye, which Nynaeve seemed not to notice as she took back the letter and replaced it in the pouch on her belt.

“You are very full of yourself, al’Lan Mandragoran. We do as we must, as you will.”

“Full of myself, Nynaeve al’Meara. I am full of myself?” Lan moved so quickly toward Nynaeve that Elayne very nearly wrapped him in flows of Air before she could think. One moment Nynaeve was standing there, with just time to gape at the tall man sweeping toward her; the next her shoes were dangling a foot off the floor and she was being quite thoroughly kissed. At first she kicked his shins and hammered him with her fists and made sounds of frantic, furious protest, but her kicks slowed and stopped, and then she was holding on to his shoulders and not protesting at all.

Egwene dropped her eyes with embarrassment, but Elayne watched interestedly. Was that how she had looked when Rand . . . No! I will not think about him. She wondered if there was time to write him another letter, taking back everything she had said in the first, letting him know she was not to be trifled with. But did she want to?

After a while Lan set Nynaeve back on her feet. She swayed a bit as she straightened her dress and patted her hair furiously. “You have no right . . .” she began in a breathless voice, then stopped to swallow. “I will not be manhandled in that fashion for the whole world to see. I will not!”

“Not the whole world,” he replied. “But if they can see, they can hear as well. You have made a place in my heart where I thought there was no room for anything else. You have made flowers grow where I cultivated dust and stones. Remember this, on this journey you insist on making. If you die, I will not survive you long.” He gave Nynaeve one of his rare smiles. If it did not exactly soften his face, at least it made it less hard. “And remember also, I am not always so easily commanded, even with letters from the Amyrlin.” He made an elegant bow; for a moment Elayne thought he actually meant to kneel and kiss Nynaeve’s Great Serpent ring. “As you command,” he murmured, “so do I obey.” It was difficult to tell whether he meant to be mocking or not.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Nynaeve sank onto the edge of her bed as if letting her knees give way at last. She stared at the door with a pensive frown.

“ ‘Poke the meekest dog too often,’ ” Elayne quoted, “ ‘and he will bite.’ Not that Lan is very meek.” She got a sharp look and a sniff from Nynaeve.

“He is insufferable,” Egwene said. “Sometimes he is. Nynaeve, why did you do that? He was ready to go with you. I know you want nothing more than to break him free of Moiraine. Do not try to deny it.”

Nynaeve did not try. Instead she fussed with her dress, and smoothed the coverlet on the bed. “Not like that,” she said finally. “I mean him to be mine. All of him. I will not have him remembering a broken oath to Moiraine. I will not have that between us. For him, as well as myself.”

“But will it be any different if you bring him to ask Moiraine to release him from his bond?” Egwene asked. “Lan is the kind of man who would see it as much the same thing. All that leaves is to somehow make her let him go of her own accord. How can you manage that?”

“I do not know.” Nynaeve firmed her voice. “Yet what must be done, can be done. There is always a way. That is for another time. Work to be done, and we sit here fretting over men. Are you sure you have everything you need for the Waste, Egwene?”

“Aviendha is readying everything,” Egwene said. “She still seems unhappy, but she says we can reach Rhuidean in little more than a month, if we are lucky. You will be in Tanchico by then.”

“Perhaps sooner,” Elayne told her, “if what they say about Sea Folk rakers is true. You will be careful, Egwene? Even with Aviendha for a guide, the Waste cannot be safe.”

“I will. You be careful. Both of you. Tanchico is not much safer than the Waste now.”

Abruptly they were all hugging one another, repeating cautions to take care, making sure they all remembered the schedule for meeting in Tel’aran’rhiod’s Stone.

Elayne wiped tears from her cheeks. “As well Lan left.” She laughed tremulously. “He would think we were all being foolish.”

“No, he would not,” Nynaeve said, pulling up her skirts to settle a purse of gold into its pocket. “He may be a man, but he is not a complete dolt.”

There had to be time between here and the carriage to locate paper and pen, Elayne decided. She would find time. Nynaeve had the right of it. Men needed a firm hand. Rand would find he could not get away from her so easily. And he would not find it easy to worm his way back into her good graces.

Chapter 17 - Deceptions

Favoring his stiff right leg, Thom bowed with a flourish of his gleeman's cloak that set the colorful patches fluttering. His eyes felt grainy, but he made himself speak lightly. "A good morning to you." Straightening, he knuckled his long white mustaches grandly.

The black-and-gold-clad servants looked surprised. The two muscular lads straightened from the gold-studded red lacquer chest, with a shattered lid, that they had been about to lift, and the three women stilled their mops in front of them. The hallway was empty along here except for them, and any excuse to break their labor was good, especially at this hour. They looked as tired as Thom felt, with slumping shoulders and dark circles under their eyes.

"A good morning to you, gleeman," the oldest he women said. A bit plump and plain-faced, perhaps, she had a nice smile, weary as she was. "Can we help you?"

Thom produced four colored balls from a capacious coatsleeve and began to juggle. "I am just going about trying to raise spirits. A gleeman must do what he can." He would have used more than four, but he was fatigued enough to make even that many an exercise in concentration. How long since he had nearly dropped a fifth ball? Two hours? He stifled a yawn, turned it into a reassuring smile. "A terrible night, and spirits need lifting."

"The Lord Dragon saved us," one of the younger women said. She was pretty and slim, but with a predatory gleam in her dark, shadowed eyes that warned him to temper his smile. Of course, she might be useful if she was both greedy and honest, meaning that she would stay bought once he paid her. It was always good to find another set of hands to place a note, a tongue that would tell him what was heard and say what he wanted where he wanted. Old fool! You have enough hands and ears, so stop thinking of a fine bosom and remember the look in her eye! The interesting thing was that she sounded as if she meant what she said, and one of the young fellows nodded agreement to her words.

"Yes," Thom said. "I wonder which High Lord had charge of the docks yesterday?" He nearly fumbled the balls in irritation at himself. Bringing it right out like that. He was too tired; he should be in his bed. He should have been there hours ago.

"The docks are the Defenders' responsibility," the oldest woman told him. "You'd not know that, of course. The High Lords would not concern themselves."

Thom knew it very well. "Is that so? Well, I am not Tairen, of course." He changed the balls from a simple circle to a double loop; it looked more difficult than it was, and the girl with the predatory look clapped her hands. Now that he was into it, he might as well go on. After this, though, he would call it a night. A night? The sun was rising already. "Still, it is a shame no one asked why those barges were at the docks. With their hatches down, hiding all those Trollocs. Not that I am saying anyone knew the Trollocs were there." The double loop wobbled, and he quickly went back to a circle. Light, he was exhausted. "You'd think one of the High Lords would have asked, though."

The two young men frowned thoughtfully at one another, and Thom smiled to himself. Another seed planted, just that easily, if clumsily as well. Another rumor started, whatever they knew for a fact about who had charge of the docks. And rumors spread - a rumor like this would not stop short of the city - so it was another small wedge of suspicion driven between commoners and nobles. Who would the commoners turn to, except the man they knew the nobles hated? The man who had saved the Stone from Shadowspawn. Rand al'Thor. The Lord Dragon.

It was time to leave what he had sown. If the roots had taken hold here, nothing he said now could pull them loose, and he had scattered other seeds this night. But it would not do for anyone to discover he was the one doing the planting. "They fought bravely last night, the High Lords did. Why, I saw. . . ." He trailed off as the women leaped to their mopping and the men grabbed up the chest and hurried away.

"I can find work for gleemen, too," the majhere's voice said behind him. "Idle hands are idle hands."

He turned gracefully, considering his leg, and swept her a deep bow. The top of her head was below his shoulder, but she probably weighed half again what he did. She had a face like an anvil - not improved by the bandage around her

temples - an extra chin, and deep-set eyes like chips of black flint. "A good morning to you, gracious lady. A small token of this fresh, new day."

He gestured with a flurry of hands and tucked a golden yellow sunburst blossom, only a little bedraggled for its time up his sleeve, into the gray hair above her bandage. She snatched the flower right out again, of course, and eyed it suspiciously, but that was just as he wanted. He put three limping strides into her moment of hesitation, and when she shouted something after him, he neither listened nor slowed.

Horrible woman, he thought. If we had turned her loose on the Trollocs, she'd have had them all sweeping and mopping.

He yawned behind a hand, jaws creaking. He was too old for this. He was tired, and his knee was a knot of pain. Nights with no sleep, battles, plotting. Too old. He should be living quietly on a farm somewhere. With chickens. Farms always had chickens. And sheep. They must not be difficult to look after; shepherds seemed to loll about and play the pipes all the time. He would play the harp, of course, not pipes. Or his flute; weather was not good for the harp. And there would be a town nearby, with an inn where he could amaze the patrons in the common room. He flourished his cloak as he passed two servants. The only point in wearing it in this heat was to let people know he was a gleeman. They perked up at the sight of him, of course, hoping he might pause to entertain for a moment. Most gratifying. Yes, a farm had its virtues. A quiet place. No people to bother him. As long as there was a town close by.

Pushing open the door to his room, he stopped in his tracks. Moiraine straightened as if she had a perfect right to be going through the papers scattered on his table and calmly arranged her skirts as she sat on the stool. Now there was a beautiful woman, with every grace a man could want, including laughing at his quips. Fool! Old fool! She's Aes Sedai, and you're too tired to think straight.

"A good morning to you, Moiraine Sedai," he said, hanging his cloak on a peg. He avoided looking at his writing case, still sitting under the table where he had left it. No point in letting her know it was important. Probably no point in checking after she went, for that matter; she could have channeled the lock open and dosed again, and he would never be able to tell. Weary as he was, he could not even remember whether he had left anything incriminating in the case. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Everything he could see in the room was right where it belonged. He did not think he could have been foolish enough to leave anything out. Doors in the servants' quarters had no locks or latches. "I would offer you a refreshing drink, but I fear I have nothing but water."

"I am not thirsty," she said in a pleasant, melodious voice. She leaned forward, and the room was small enough for her to place a hand on his right knee. A chill tingle rippled through him. "I wish a good Healer had been near when this happened. It is too late now, I regret."

"A dozen Healers would not have been enough," he told her. "A Halfman did it."

"I know."

What else does she know? he wondered. Turning to pull his lone chair out from behind the table, he bit back an oath. He felt as if he had had a good night's sleep, and the pain was gone from his knee. His limp remained, but the joint was more limber than it had been since he was injured. The woman didn't even ask if I wanted it. Burn me, what is she after? He refused to flex the leg. If she would not ask, he would not acknowledge her gift.

"An interesting day, yesterday," she said as he sat down.

"I'd not call Trollocs and Halfmen interesting," he said dryly.

"I did not mean them. Earlier. The High Lord Carleon dead in a hunting accident. His good friend Tedosian apparently mistook him for a boar. Or perhaps a deer."

"I hadn't heard." He kept his voice calm. Even if she had found the note, she could not have traced it to him. Carleon himself would have thought it by his own hand. He did not think she could have, but he reminded himself again that

she was Aes Sedai. As if he needed any reminding, with that smooth pretty face across from him, those serene dark eyes watching him full of all Aes Sedai's secrets. "The servants' quarters are full of gossip, but I seldom listen."

"Do you not?" she murmured mildly. "Then you will not have heard that Tedosian fell ill not an hour after returning to the Stone, directly after his wife gave him a goblet of wine to wash away the dust of the hunt. It is said he wept when he learned that she means to tend him herself, and feed him with her own hands. No doubt tears of joy at her love. I hear she has vowed not to leave his side until he can rise again. Or until he dies."

She knew. How, he could not say, but she knew. But why was she revealing it to him? "A tragedy," he said, matching her bland tone. "Rand will need all the loyal High Lords he can find, I suppose."

"Carleon and Tedosian were hardly loyal. Even to each other, it seems. They led the faction that want to kill Rand and try to forget he ever lived."

"Do you say so? I pay little attention to such things. The works of the mighty are not for a simple gleeman."

Her smile was just short of laughter, but she spoke as if reading from a page. "Thomdril Merrillin. Called the Gray Fox, once, by some who knew him, or knew of him. Court-bard at the Royal Palace of Andor in Caemlyn. Morgase's lover for a time, after Taringail died. Fortunate for Morgase, Taringail's death. I do not suppose she ever learned he meant her to die and himself to be Andor's first king. But we were speaking of Thom Merrillin, a man who, it was said, could play the Game of Houses in his sleep. It is a shame that such a man calls himself a simple gleeman. But such arrogance to keep the same name."

Thom masked his shock with an effort. How much did she know? Too much if she knew not another word. But she was not the only one with knowledge. "Speaking of names," he said levelly, "it is remarkable how much can be puzzled out from a name. Moiraine Damodred. The Lady Moiraine of House Damodred, in Cairhien. Taringail's youngest half-sister. King Laman's niece. And Aes Sedai, let us not forget. An Aes Sedai aiding the Dragon Reborn since before she could have known that he was more than just another poor fool who could channel. An Aes Sedai with connections high in the White Tower, I would say, else she'd not risk what she has. Someone in the Hall of the Tower? More than one, I'd say; it would have to be. News of that would shake the world. But why should there be trouble? Perhaps it's best to leave an old gleeman tucked away in his hole in the servants' quarters. Just an old gleeman playing his harp and telling his tales. Tales that harm no one."

If he had managed to stagger her even a fraction, she did not show it. "Speculation without facts is always dangerous," she said calmly. "I do not use my House name, by choice. House Damodred had a deservedly unpleasant reputation before Laman cut down Avendoraldera and lost the throne and his life for it. Since the Aiel War, it has grown worse, also deservedly."

Would nothing shake the woman? "What do you want of me?" he demanded irritably.

She did not as much as blink. "Elayne and Nynaeve take ship for Tanchico today. A dangerous city, Tanchico. Your knowledge and skills might keep them alive."

So that was it. She wanted to separate him from Rand, leave the boy naked to her manipulations. "As you say, Tanchico is dangerous now, but then it always was. I wish the young women well, yet I've no wish to stick my head into a viper's nest. I am too old for that sort of thing. I have been thinking of taking up farming. A quiet life. Safe."

"A quiet life would kill you, I think." Sounding distinctly amused, she busied herself rearranging the folds of her skirt with small, slender hands. He had the impression she was hiding a smile. "Tanchico will not, however. I guarantee that, and by the First Oath, you know it for truth."

He frowned at her despite his best efforts to keep his face straight. She had said it, and she could not lie, yet how could she know? He was sure she could not Foretell; he was certain he had heard her disavow the Talent. But she had said it. Burn the woman! "Why should I go to Tanchico?" She could do without titles.

"To protect Elayne? Morgase's daughter?"

“I have not seen Morgase in fifteen years. Elayne was an infant when I left Caemlyn.”

She hesitated, but when she spoke her voice was unrelentingly firm. “And your reason for leaving Andor? A nephew named Owyn, I believe. One of those poor fools you spoke of who can channel. The Red sisters were supposed to bring him to Tar Valon, as any such man is, but instead they gentled him on the spot and abandoned him to the . . . mercies of his neighbors.”

Thom knocked his chair over standing up, then had to hold on to the table because his knees were shaking. Owyn had not lived long after being gentled, driven from his home by supposed friends who could not bear to let even a man who could no longer channel live among them. Nothing Thom did could stop Owyn not want-ing to live, or stop his young wife from following him to the grave inside the month.

“Why . . . ?” He cleared his throat roughly, tried to make his voice less husky. “Why are you telling me this?”

There was sympathy on Moiraine’s face. And could it be regret? Surely not. Not from an Aes Sedai. The sympathy had to be false as well. “I would not have done, had you been willing to go simply to help Elayne and Nynaeve.”

“Why, burn you! Why?”

“If you go with Elayne and Nynaeve, I will tell you the names of those Red sisters when I see you next, as well as the name of the one who gave them their orders. They did not act on their own. And I will see you again. You will survive Tarabon.”

He drew an uneven breath. “What good will their names do me?” he asked in a flat voice. “Aes Sedai names, wrapped in all the power of the White Tower.”

“A skilled and dangerous player of the Game of Houses might find a use for them,” she replied quietly. “They should not have done what they did. They should not have been excused for it.”

“Will you leave me, please?”

“I will teach you that not all Aes Sedai are like those Reds, Thom. You must learn that.”

“Please?”

He stood leaning on the table until she was gone, unwilling to let her see him sink awkwardly to his knees, see the tears trickling down his weathered face. Oh, Light, Owyn. He had buried it all as deeply as he could. I couldn’t get there in time. I was too busy. Too busy with the bloody Game of Houses. He scrubbed at his face testily. Moiraine could play the Game with the best. Wrenching him around this way, tugging every string he had thought perfectly hidden. Owyn. Elayne. Morgase’s daughter. Only fondness remained for Morgase, perhaps a little more than that, but it was hard to walk away from a child you had bounced on your knee. That girl in Tanchico? That city would eat her alive even without a war. It must be a pit of rabid wolves, now. And Moiraine will give me the names. All he had to do was leave Rand in Aes Sedai hands. Just as he had left Owyn. She had him like a snake in a deft stick, damned however he writhed. Burn the woman!

Looping the embroidery basket’s handle over her arm, Min gathered her skirts with her other hand and strolled out of the dining hall after breakfast in a gliding pace, her back straight. She could have balanced a full goblet of wine on her head without spilling a drop. Partly that was because she could not take a proper stride in her dress, all pale blue silk with a snug bodice and sleeves and a full skirt that would drag its embroidered hem on the ground if she did not hold it up. It was also partly because she was sure she could feel Laras’s eyes on her.

A glance back proved her right. The Mistress of the Kitchens, a winecask on legs, was beaming after her approvingly from the dining hall doorway. Who would have thought the woman had been a beauty in her youth, or would have a

place in her heart for pretty, flirtatious girls? “Lively,” she called them. Who would have suspected she would decide to take “Elmindreda” under her stout wing? It was hardly a comfortable position. Laras kept a protective eye on Min, an eye that seemed to find her anywhere in the Tower grounds. Min smiled back and patted her hair, now a round black cap of curls. Burn the woman! Doesn’t she have something to cook, or some scullion to yell at?

Laras waved to her, and she waved in return. She could not afford to offend someone who watched her so closely, not when she had no idea how many mistakes she might be making. Laras knew every trick of “lively” women, and expected to teach Min any she did not already know.

One real mistake, Min reflected as she took a seat on a marble bench beneath a tall willow, had been the embroidery. Not from Laras’s point of view, but her own. Pulling her embroidery hoop from the basket, she ruefully examined yesterday’s work, a number of lopsided yellow oxeyes and something she had meant to be a pale yellow rosebud, though no one would know unless she told them. With a sigh she set to picking the stitches out. Leane was right, she supposed; a woman could sit for hours with an embroidery hoop, watching everyone and everything, and nobody thought it strange. It would have helped, though, if she had any skill at all.

At least it was a perfect morning for being out-of-doors. A golden sun had just cleared the horizon in a sky where the few fluffy white clouds seemed arrayed to emphasize the perfection. A light breeze caught the scent of roses and ruffled tall calma bushes with their big red or white blossoms. Soon enough the gravel-covered paths near the tree would be full of people on one errand or another, everyone from Aes Sedai to stablemen. A perfect morning, and a perfect place from which to watch unobserved. Perhaps today she would have a useful viewing.

“Elmindreda?”

Min jumped, and stuck her pricked finger in her mouth. Twisting ‘round on the bench, she prepared to assail Gawyn for sneaking up on her, but the words froze in her throat. Galad was with him. Taller than Gawyn, with long legs, he moved with a dancer’s grace and a lean, sinewy strength. His hands were long, too, elegant yet strong. And his face . . . He was, quite simply, the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

“Stop sucking your finger,” Gawyn said with a grin. “We know you are a pretty little girl; you do not need to prove it to us.”

Blushing, she hastily pulled her hand down, and barely restrained herself from a furious glare that would not have been at all in keeping with Elmindreda. He had needed no threats or commands from the Amyrlin to keep her secret, only her asking, but he did take any opportunity to tease that presented itself.

“It is not right to mock, Gawyn,” Galad said. “He did not mean to offend, Mistress Elmindreda. Your pardon, but can it be we have met before? When you frowned at Gawyn so fiercely just then, I almost thought I knew you.”

Min dropped her eyes demurely. “Oh, I could never forget meeting you, my Lord Galad,” she said in her best foolish-girl voice. The simpering tone, and anger at her own slip, sent a tide of heat to her hairline, improving her disguise.

She did not look anything like herself, and the dress and the hair were only a part of it. Leane had acquired creams and powders and an incredible assortment of mysterious scented things in the city and drilled her until she could have used them in her sleep. She had cheekbones, now, and more color in her lips than nature had put there. A dark cream lining her eyelids and a fine powder that emphasized her lashes made her eyes seem larger. Not at all like herself. Some of the novices had told her admiringly how beautiful she was, and even a few Aes Sedai had called her “a very pretty child.” She hated it. The dress was quite pretty, she admitted, but she hated the rest of it. Yet there was no point in donning a disguise if she did not keep it up.

“I am sure you would remember,” Gawyn said dryly. “I did not mean to interrupt you at your embroidery - swallows, are they? Yellow swallows?” Min thrust the hoop back into the basket. “But I wanted to ask you to comment on this.” He pushed a small, leather-bound book, old and tattered, into her hands, and suddenly his voice was serious. “Tell my brother this is nonsense. Perhaps he will listen to you.”

She examined the book. *The Way of the Light*, by Lothair Mantelar. Opening it, she read at random. "Therefore abjure all pleasure, for goodness is a pure abstract, a perfect crystalline ideal which is obscured by base emotion. Pamper not the flesh. Flesh is weak but spirit is strong; flesh is useless where spirit is strong. Right thought is drowned in sensation, and right action hindered by passions. Take all joy from rightness, and rightness only." It seemed to be dry nonsense.

Min smiled at Gawyn, and even managed a titter. "So many words. I fear I know little of books, my Lord Gawyn. I always mean to read one - I do." She sighed. "But there is so little time. Why, just fixing my hair properly takes hours. Do you think it is, pretty?" The outraged startlement on his face nearly made her laugh, but she changed it to a giggle. It was a pleasure to turn the tables on him for a change; she would have to see if she could do it more often. There were possibilities in this disguise she had not considered. This stay in the Tower had turned out to be all boredom and irritation. She deserved some amusement.

"Lothair Mantelar," Gawyn said in a tight voice, "founded the Whitecloaks. The Whitecloaks!"

"He was a great man," Galad said firmly. "A philosopher of noble ideals. If the Children of the Light have sometimes been . . . excessive . . . since his day, it does not change that."

"Oh, my. Whitecloaks," Min said breathlessly, and added a little shudder. "They are such rough men, I hear. I cannot imagine a Whitecloak dancing. Do you think there is any chance of a dance here? Aes Sedai do not seem to care for dancing either, and I do so love to dance." The frustration in Gawyn's eyes was delightful.

"I do not think so," Galad said, taking the book from her. "Aes Sedai are too busy with . . . with their own affairs. If I hear of a suitable dance in the city, I will escort you, if you wish it. You need have no fear of being annoyed by those two louts." He smiled at her, unconscious of what he was doing, and she suddenly found herself breathless in truth. Men should not be allowed smiles like that.

It actually took her a moment to remember what two louts he was talking about. The two men who had supposedly asked for Elmindreda's hand in marriage, nearly fighting each other because she could not make up her mind, pressing her to the point of seeking sanctuary in the Tower because she could not stop encouraging them both. Just the entire excuse for her being there. It's this dress, she told herself. I could think straight if I had on my proper clothes.

"I've noticed the Amyrlin speaks to you every day," Gawyn said suddenly. "Has she mentioned our sister Elayne? Or Egwene al'Vere? Has she said anything of where they are?"

Min wished she could black his eye. He did not know why she was pretending to be someone else, of course, but he had agreed to help her be accepted as Elmindreda, and now he was linking her to women too many in the Tower knew were friends of Min. "Oh, the Amyrlin Seat is such a wonderful woman," she said sweetly, baring her teeth in a smile. "She always asks how I am passing the time, and compliments my dress. I suppose she hopes I'll make a decision soon between Darvan and Goemal, but I just cannot." She widened her eyes, hoping it made her look helpless and confused. "They are both so sweet. Who did you say? Your sister, my Lord Gawyn? The Daughter-Heir herself? I do not think I've ever heard the Amyrlin Seat mention her. What was the other name?" She could hear Gawyn grinding his teeth.

"We should not bother Mistress Elmindreda with that," Galad said. "It is our problem, Gawyn. It is up to us to find the lie and deal with it."

She barely heard him, because suddenly she was staring at a big man with long dark hair curling around slumped shoulders, wandering aimlessly down one of the graveled paths through the trees, under the watchful eyes of an Accepted. She had seen Logain before, a sad-faced, once-hearty man, always with an Accepted for companion. The woman was meant to keep him from killing himself as much as to prevent his escape; despite his size, he truly did not seem up to anything of the latter sort. But she had never before seen a flaring halo around his head, radiant in gold and blue. It was only there for a moment, but that was enough.

Logain had proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn, had been captured and gentled. Whatever glory he might have had as a false Dragon was far behind him now. All that remained for him was the despair of the gentled, like a man who had been robbed of sight and hearing and taste, wanting to die, waiting for the death that inevitably came to such men

in a few years. He glanced at her, perhaps not seeing her; his eyes looked hopelessly inward. So why had he worn a halo that shouted of glory and power to come? This was something she had to tell the Amyrlin.

“Poor fellow,” Gawyn muttered. “I cannot help pitying him. Light, it would be a mercy to let him end it. Why do they make him keep on living?”

“He deserves no pity,” Galad pronounced. “Have you forgotten what he was, what he did? How many thousands died before he was taken? How many towns were burned? Let him live on as a warning to others.”

Gawyn nodded, but reluctantly. “Yet men followed him. Some of those towns were burned after they declared for him.”

“I have to go,” Min said, getting to her feet, and Galad was instantly all solicitude.

“Forgive us, Mistress Elmindreda. We did not mean to frighten you. Logain cannot harm you. I give you my assurance.”

“I . . . Yes, he’s made me feel faint. Do excuse me. I really must go lie down.”

Gawyn looked extremely skeptical, but he scooped up her basket before she could touch it. “Let me see you part of the way, at least,” he said, his voice oozing false concern. “This basket must be too heavy for you, dizzy as you are. I’d not want you to swoon.”

She wanted to snatch the basket and hit him with it, but that was not how Elmindreda would react. “Oh, thank you, my Lord Gawyn. You are so kind. So kind. No, no, my Lord Galad. Do not let me encumber both of you. Do sit down here and read your book. Do say you will. I just could not bear it, otherwise.” She even fluttered her eyelashes.

Somehow she managed to ensconce Galad on the marble bench and get away, though with Gawyn right beside her. Her skirts were an irritant; she wanted to pull them up to her knees and run, but Elmindreda would never run, and never expose so much of her legs except when dancing. Laras had lectured her severely on that very point; one time running, and she would nearly destroy the image of Elmindreda completely. And Gawyn . . . !

“Give me that basket, you muscle-brained cretin,” she snarled as soon as they were out of Galad’s sight, and pulled it away from him before he could comply. “What do you mean by asking me about Elayne and Egwene in front of him? Elmindreda never met them. Elmindreda does not care about them. Elmindreda doesn’t want to be mentioned in the same sentence with them! Can’t you understand that?”

“No,” he said. “Not since you won’t explain. But I am sorry.” There was hardly enough repentance in his voice to suit her. “It is just that I am worried. Where are they? This news coming upriver about False Dragon in Tear makes me no easier in my mind. They are out there, somewhere, the Light knows where, and I keep asking myself, what if they are in the middle of the sort of bonfire Logain made out of Ghealdan?”

“What if he isn’t a false Dragon?” she asked cautiously.

“You mean because the stories in the streets say he’s taken the Stone of Tear? Rumor has a way of magnifying events. I will believe that when I see it, and in any case, it will take more to convince me. Even the Stone could fall. Light, I don’t really believe Elayne and Egwene are in Tear, but the not knowing eats at my belly like acid. If she is hurt. . . .”

Min did not know which “she” he meant, and suspected he did not either. In spite of his teasing, her heart went out to him, Where was nothing she could do. “If you could only do as I say and - ”

“I know. Trust the Amyrlin. Trust!” He exhaled a long breath. “Do you know Galad has been drinking in the taverns with Whitecloaks? Anyone can cross the bridges if they come in peace, even Children of the bloody Light.”

“Galad?” she said incredulously. “In taverns? Drinking?”

“No more than a cup or two, I’m sure. He would not unbend more than that, not for his own nameday.” Gawyn frowned as if unsure whether that might be a criticism of Galad. “The point is that he is talking with Whitecloaks. And now this book. According to the inscription, Eamon Valda himself gave it to him. ‘In the hope you will find the way.’ Valda, Min. The man commanding the Whitecloaks on the other side of the bridges. Not knowing is eating Galad up, too. Listening to Whitecloaks. If anything happens to our sister, or to Egwene . . .” He shook his head. “Do you know where they are, Min? Would you tell me if you did? Why are you hiding?”

“Because I drove two men mad with my beauty and cannot make up my mind,” she told him acidly.

He gave a bitter half-laugh, then masked it with a grin. “Well, that at least I can believe.” He chuckled, and stroked under her chin with a finger. “You are a very pretty girl, Elmindreda. A pretty, clever little girl.”

She doubled a fist and tried to punch him in the eye, but he danced back, and she stumbled over her skirts and nearly fell. “You bloody ox of a thimble-brained man!” she growled.

“Such grace of movement, Elmindreda,” he laughed. “Such a dulcet voice, as a nightingale, or a cooing dove of the evening. What man would not grow starry-eyed at the sight of Elmindreda?” The mirth slid away, and he faced her soberly. “If you learn anything, please tell me. Please? I will beg on my knees, Min.”

“I will tell you,” she said. If I can. If it’s safe for them. Light, but I hate this place. Why can’t I just go back to Rand?

She left Gawyn there and entered the Tower proper by herself, keeping an eye out for Aes Sedai or Accepted who might question why she was above the ground floor and where she was going. The news of Logain was too important to wait until the Amyrlin encountered her, seemingly by accident, some time in the late afternoon as usual. At least, that was what she told herself. Impatience threatened to pop out through her skin.

She only saw a few Aes Sedai, turning a corner ahead of her or entering a room in the distance, which was all to the good. No one simply dropped in on the Amyrlin Seat. The handful of servants she passed, all bustling about their work, did not question her, of course, or even look at her twice except to drop quick curtsies almost without pausing.

Pushing open the door to the Amyrlin’s study, she had a simpering tale ready in case anyone was with Leane, but the antechamber was empty. She hurried to the inner door and put her head in. The Amyrlin and the Keeper were seated on either side of Suan’s table, which was littered with small strips of thin paper. Their heads swiveled toward her sharply, a stare like four nails.

“What are you doing here?” the Amyrlin snapped. “You are supposed to be a silly girl claiming sanctuary, not a friend of my childhood. There is to be no contact between us except the most casual, in passing. If necessary, I’ll name Laras to watch over you like a nurse over a child. She would enjoy that, I think, but I doubt you would.”

Min shivered at the thought. Suddenly Logain did not seem so urgent; it was hardly likely he could achieve any glory in the next few days. He was not really why she had come, though, only an excuse, and she would not turn back now. Closing the door behind her, she stammered out what she had seen and what it meant. She still felt uncomfortable doing so in front of Leane.

Suan shook her head wearily. “Another thing to worry about. Starvation in Cairhien. A sister missing in Tarabon. Trolloc raids increasing in the Borderlands again. This fool who calls himself the Prophet, stirring up riots in Ghealdan. He’s apparently preaching that the Dragon has been Reborn as a Shienaran lord,” she said incredulously. “Even the small things are bad. The war in Arad Doman has stopped trade from Saldaea, and the pinch is making unrest in Maradon. Tenobia may even be forced off the throne by it. The only good news I have heard is that the Blight has retreated for some reason. Two miles or more of green beyond the borderstones, without a hint of corruption or pestilence, all the way from Saldaea to Shienar. The first time in memory it has done that. But I suppose good news has to be balanced by bad. When a boat has one leak it is sure to have others. I only wish it was a balance. Leane, have the watch on Logain increased. I can’t see what trouble he could cause now, but I do not want to find out.” She turned those piercing blue eyes on Min. “Why did you come flapping up here with this like a startled gull? Logain could have waited. The man is hardly likely to find power and glory before sunset.”

The near echo of her own thoughts made Min shift uncomfortably. "I know," she said. Leane's eyebrows rose warningly, and she added a hasty, "Mother." The Keeper nodded approvingly.

"That does not tell me why, child," Sivan said.

Min steeled herself. "Mother, nothing I've viewed since the first day has been very important. I certainly have not seen anything that points to the Black Ajah." That name still gave her a chill. "I've told you everything I know about whatever disaster you Aes Sedai are going to face, and the rest of it is just useless." She had to stop and swallow, with that penetrating gaze on her. "Mother, there is no reason I should not go. There's reason I should. Perhaps Rand could make real use of what I can do. If he has taken the Scone Mother, he may heed me." At least I need him, burn me for a fool!

The Keeper shuddered openly at the mention of Rand's name. Sivan, on the other hand, snorted loudly. "Your viewings have been very useful. It's important to know about Logain. You found the groom who was stealing before suspicion could land on anyone else. And - that fire-haired novice who was going to get herself with child . . . ! Sheriam cut that short - the girl won't even think of men until she's finished her training - but we'd not have known until it was too late, without you. No, you cannot go. Sooner or later your viewings will draw me a chart to the Black Ajah, and until they do, they still more than pay their passage."

Min sighed, and not only because the Amyrlin meant to hold on to her. The last time she had seen that redheaded novice, the girl had been sneaking off to a wooded part of the grounds with a muscular guard. They would be married, maybe before the end of summer; Min had known that as soon as she saw them together, though the Tower never let a novice leave until the Tower was ready, even one who could not go any further in her training. There was a farm in that pair's future, and a swarm of children, but it was pointless to tell the Amyrlin that.

"Could you at least let Gawyn and Galad know that Egwene and their sister are all right, Mother?" Asking irked her, and her tone of voice did, too. A child denied a slice of cake begging for a cookie instead. "At least tell them something besides that ridiculous tale about doing penance on a farm."

"I have told you that is none of your concern. Do not make me tell you again."

"They don't believe it any more than I do," Min got out before the Amyrlin's dry smile quieted her. It was not an amused smile.

"So you suggest I change where they are supposed to be? After letting everyone think them on a farm? Do you suppose that might raise a few eyebrows? Everyone but those boys accepts it. And you. Well, Coulin Gaidin will just have to work them that much harder. Sore muscles and enough sweat will take most men's minds off other troubles. Women's minds, too. You ask many more questions, and I'll see what a few days scrubbing pots will do for you. Better to lose your services for two or three days than have you poking your nose where it does not belong."

"You don't even know if they are in trouble, do you? Or Moiraine." It was not Moiraine she meant.

"Girl," Leane said warningly, but Min was not to be stopped now.

"Why haven't we heard? Rumors reached here two days ago. Two days! Why doesn't one of those slips on your desk contain a message from her? Doesn't she have pigeons? I thought you Aes Sedai had people with messenger pigeons everywhere. If there isn't one in Tear, there should be. A man on horseback could have reached Tar Valon before now. Why-?"

The flat crack of Sivan's palm on the table cut her off. "You obey remarkably well," she said wryly. "Child, until we hear something to the contrary, assume the young man is well. Pray that he is." Leane shivered again. "There's a saying in the Maule, child," the Amyrlin went on. "'Do not trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.' Mark it well, child."

There was a timid knock at the door.

The Amyrlin and the Keeper exchanged glances; then two sets of eyes shifted to Min. Her presence was a problem. There was certainly nowhere to hide; even the balcony was dearly visible from the room in its entirety.

“A reason for you to be here,” Suan muttered, “that doesn’t make you any more than the fool girl you’re supposed to be. Leane, stand ready at the door.” She and the Keeper were on their feet together, Suan coming around the table while Leane moved to the door. “Take Leane’s seat, girl. Move your feet, child; move your feet. Now look sulky. Not angry, sulky! Stick your lower lip out and stare at the floor. I may make you wear ribbons in your hair, huge red bows. That’s it. Leane.” The Amyrlin put her fists on her hips and raised her voice. “And if you ever walk in on me unannounced again, child, I will”

Leane pulled the door open to reveal a dark novice who flinched at Suan’s continuing tirade, then dropped a deep curtsy. “Messages for the Amyrlin, Aes Sedai,” the girl squeaked. “Two pigeons arrived at the loft.” She was one of those who had told Min she was beautiful, and she tried to stare past the Keeper with wide eyes.

“This does not concern you, child,” Leane said briskly, taking the tiny cylinders of bone out of the girl’s hand. “Back to the loft with you.” Before the novice finished rising, Leane shut the door, then leaned against it with a sigh. “I have jumped at every unexpected sound since you told me” Straightening, she came back to the table. “Two more messages, Mother. Shall I . . . ?”

“Yes. Open them,” the Amyrlin said. “No doubt Morgase has decided to invade Cairhien after all. Or Trollocs have overrun the Borderlands. It would be of a piece with everything else.” Min kept her seat; Suan had sounded all too realistic with some of those threats.

Leane examined the red wax seal on the end of one of the small cylinders, no larger than her own finger joint, then broke it open with a thumbnail when she was satisfied it had not been tampered with. The rolled paper inside she extracted with a slim ivory pick. “Nearly as bad as Trollocs, Mother,” she said almost as soon as she began reading. “Mazrim Taim has escaped.”

“Light!” Suan barked. “How?”

“This only says he was taken away by stealth in the night, Mother. Two sisters are dead.”

“The Light illumine their souls. But we’ve little time to mourn the dead while the likes of Taim are alive and ungentled. Where, Leane?”

“Denhvir, Mother. A village east of the Black Hills on the Maradon Road, above the headwaters of the Antaeo and the Luan.”

“It had to be some of his followers. Fools. Why won’t they know when they are beaten? Choose out a dozen reliable sisters, Leane” The Amyrlin grimaced. “Reliable,” she muttered. “If I knew who was more reliable than a silverpike, I’d not have the problems I do. Do the best you can, Leane. A dozen sisters. And five hundred of the guards. No, a full thousand.”

“Mother,” the Keeper said worriedly. “The Whitecloaks - ”

“ - would not try to cross the bridges if I left them unwatched entirely. They would be afraid of a trap. There is no telling what is going on up there, Leane. I want whoever I send to be ready for anything. And Leane . . . Mazrim Taim is to be gentled as soon as he is taken again.”

Leane’s eyes opened wide with shock. “The law.”

“I know the law as well as you, but I will not risk having him freed again ungentled. I’ll not risk another Guaire Amalasan, not on top of every thing else.”

“Yes, Mother,” Leane said faintly.

The Amyrlin picked up the second bone cylinder and snapped it in two with a sharp crack to get the message out. "Good news at last," she breathed, a smile blooming on her face. "Good news. 'The sling has been used. The shepherd holds the sword.' "

"Rand?" Min asked, and Sivan nodded.

"Of course, girl. The Stone has fallen. Rand al'Thor, the shepherd, has Callandor. Now I can move. Leane, I want the Hall of the Tower convened this afternoon. No, this morning."

"I don't understand," Min said. "You knew the rumors were about Rand. Why are you calling the Hall now? What can you do that you could not before?"

Sivan laughed like a girl. "What I can do now is tell them right out that I have received word from an Aes Sedai that the Stone of Tear has fallen and a man has drawn Callandor. Prophecy fulfilled - Enough of it for my purpose, at least. The Dragon is Reborn. They'll flinch, they'll argue, but none can oppose my pronouncement that the Tower must guide this man. At last I can involve myself with him openly. Openly for the most part."

"Are we doing the right thing, Mother?" Leane said abruptly. "I know. . . . If he has Callandor, he must be the Dragon Reborn, but he can channel, Mother. A man who can channel. I only saw him once, but even then there was something strange about him. Something more than being ta'veren. Mother, is he so very different from Taim when it comes down to it?"

"The difference is that he is the Dragon Reborn, daughter," the Amyrlin said quietly. "Taim is a wolf, and maybe rabid. Rand al'Thor is the wolfhound we will use to defeat the Shadow. Keep his name to yourself, Leane. Best not to reveal too much too soon."

"As you say, Mother," the Keeper said, but she still sounded uneasy.

"Off with you now. I want the Hall assembled in an hour." Sivan thoughtfully watched the taller woman go. "There may be more resistance than I would wish," she said when the door clicked shut.

Min looked at her sharply. "You don't mean"

"Oh, nothing serious, child. Not as long as they don't know how long I have been involved with the al'Thor boy." She looked at the slip of paper again, then dropped it onto the table. "I could wish Moiraine had told me more."

"Why didn't she say more? And why have we not heard from her before this?"

"More questions with you. That one you must ask Moiraine. She has always gone her own way. Ask Moiraine, child."

Sahra Covenry worked the hoe in desultory fashion, frowning at the tiny sprouts of threadleaf and hensfoot poking up in the rows of cabbages and beets. It was not that Mistress Elward was a harsh taskmistress - she was no more stern than Sahra's mother, and certainly easier than Sheriam - but Sahra had not gone to the White Tower to end up back on a farm hoeing vegetables with the sun barely up. Her white novice dresses were packed away; she wore brown wool her mother might have sewn, the skirt tied up to her knees to keep it out of the dirt. It was all so unfair. She had not done anything.

Wriggling her bare toes in the turned soil, she glared at a stubborn hensfoot and channeled, meaning to burn it out of the ground. Sparks flashed around the leafy sprout, and it wilted. Hurriedly she sliced the thing out of the dirt and her mind. If there was any fairness in the world, Lord Galad would come to the farm while out hunting.

Leaning on the hoe, she lost herself in a daydream of Healing Galad's injuries, received in a fall from his horse - not his fault, of course; he was a wonderful horseman - and him lifting her up in front of him on his saddle, declaring he would be her Warder - she would be Green Ajah, of course - and

"Sahra Covenry?"

Sahra jumped at the sharp voice, but it was not Mistress Elward. She curtsied as best she could, with her skirts gathered up. "The day's greeting, Aes Sedai. Have you come to take me back to the Tower?"

The Aes Sedai moved closer, not caring that her skirts dragged through the dirt of the vegetable patch. Despite the summer warmth of the morning, she wore a cloak, the hood pulled up to shadow her face. "Just before you left the Tower, you took a woman to the Amyrlin Seat. A woman calling herself Elmindreda."

"Yes, Aes Sedai," Sahra said, a slight question in her voice. She did not like the way the Aes Sedai had said that, as if she had left the Tower for good.

"Tell me everything that you heard or saw, girl, from the moment you took the woman in charge. Everything."

"But I heard nothing, Aes Sedai. The Keeper sent me away as soon as - " Pain racked her, digging her toes into the dirt, arching her back; the spasm lasted only moments, but it seemed eternal. Struggling for breath, she realized her cheek was pressed to the ground, and her still trembling fingers dug into the soil. She did not remember falling. She could see Mistress Elward's laundry basket lying on its side near the stone farmhouse, damp linens spilled out in a heap. Dazed, she thought that that was odd; Moria Elward would never leave her washing lying like that.

"Everything, girl," the Aes Sedai said coldly. She was standing over Sahra now, making no move to help her. She had hurt her; it was not supposed to be that way. "Every person this Elmindreda spoke to, every word she said, every nuance and expression."

"She spoke to Lord Gawyn, Aes Sedai," Sahra sobbed into the earth. "That is all I know, Aes Sedai. All." She began to weep in earnest, sure that was not enough to satisfy this woman. She was right. She did not stop screaming for a long time, and when the Aes Sedai left there was not a sound around the farmhouse except for the chickens, not even breathing.

Chapter 18 - Into the Ways

Buttoning up his coat, Perrin paused, looking at the axe, still secured on the wall as he had left it since drawing it out of the door. He did not like the idea of carrying the weapon again, but he untied the belt from the peg and buckled it around his waist anyway. The hammer he tied to his already stuffed saddlebags. Draping saddlebags and blanket roll over his shoulder, he gathered a filled quiver and his unstrung longbow from the corner.

The rising sun poured heat and light through the narrow windows. The rumpled bed was the only proof that anyone had stayed here. Already the room had lost the feel of him; it even seemed to smell empty, despite his own scent on the sheets. He never stayed anywhere long enough to make that feel cling past his readiness to leave. Never long enough to put down roots, make it any kind of home. Well, I'm going home now.

Turning his back on the already unoccupied room, he went out.

Gaul rose easily from where he had been squatting against the wall beneath a tapestry of men on horseback hunting lions. He bore all of his weapons, with two leather water bottles, and a rolled blanket and a small cookpot were strapped beside the worked-leather bow case on his back. He was alone.

"The others?" Perrin asked, and Gaul shook his head.

"Too long away from the Three-fold Land. I warned you of that, Perrin. These lands of yours are too wet; the air is like breathing water. There are too many people, too close together. They have seen more than they want of strange places."

"I understand," Perrin said, though what he understood was that there would be no rescue after all, no company of Aiel to drive the Whitecloaks out of the Two Rivers. He kept his disappointment inside. It was sharp after thinking he had escaped his fate, but he could not say he had not prepared himself for the alternative. No point in crying when the iron split; you just reforged it. "Did you have any trouble doing what I asked?"

"None. I told one Tairen to take each thing you want to the Dragonwall Gate stable and tell no one of it; they will have seen one another there, but they will think the things are for me, and they will keep silent. The Dragonwall Gate. You would think the Spine of the World was just over the horizon, instead of a hundred leagues or more off." The Aiel hesitated. "The girl and the Ogier make no secret of their preparations, Perrin. She has been trying to find the gleeman, and telling everyone she means to travel the Ways."

Scratching his beard, Perrin breathed heavily, close to a growl. "If she gives me away to Moiraine, I vow she'll not sit down for a week."

"She is very handy with those knives," Gaul said in a neutral tone.

"Not handy enough. Not if she's given me away." Perrin hesitated. No company of Aiel. The gallows still waited. "Gaul, if anything happens to me, if I give you the word, take Faile away. She might not want to go, but take her anyway. See her safely out of the Two Rivers. Will you promise me that?"

"I will do what I can, Perrin. For the blood debt I owe you, I will." Gaul sounded doubtful, but Perrin did not think Faile's knives would be enough to stop him.

They took back passages as much as possible, and narrow stairs meant to carry servants unobtrusively. Perrin thought it too bad the Tairens had not given servants their own corridors, as well. Still, they saw few people even in the broad hallways with their gilded lamp stands and ornate hangings, and no nobles at all.

He commented on the absence, and Gaul said, "Rand al'Thor has called them to the Heart of the Stone."

Perrin only grunted, but he hoped Moiraine had been among those summoned. He wondered whether this was Rand's way of helping him escape her. Whatever the reason, he was glad enough to take advantage of it.

They stepped out of the last cramped stairway onto the ground floor of the Stone, where cavernous hallways as wide as roads led to all the outer gates. There were no wall hangings here. Black iron lamps in iron brackets high on the walls lit the windowless passages, and the floor was paved with broad, rough stones able to stand long wear from horses' shod hooves. Perrin picked his pace up to a trot. The stables lay just in sight ahead down the great tunnel, the wide Dragonwall Gate itself standing open beyond and only a handful of Defenders for guard. Moiraine could not intercept them now, not without the Dark One's own luck.

The stable's open doorway was an arch fifteen paces across. Perrin took one step inside and stopped.

The air was heavy with the smell of straw and hay, underlaid with grain and oats, leather and horse manure. Stalls filled with fine Tairen horses, prized everywhere, lined the walls, with more in rows across the wide floor. Dozens of grooms were at work, currying and combing, mucking out, mending tack. Without pausing, one or another sometimes glanced at where Faile and Loial stood, booted and ready for travel. And beside them, Bain and Chiad, accoutered like Gaul with weapons and blankets, water bottles and cooking pot.

"Are they why you only said you would try?" Perrin asked quietly.

Gaul shrugged. "I will do what I can, but they will take her side. Chiad is Goshien."

"Her clan makes a difference?"

"Her clan and mine have blood feud, Perrin, and I am no spear-sister to her. But perhaps the water oaths will hold her. I will not dance spears with her unless she offers."

Perrin shook his head. A strange people. What were water oaths? What he said, though, was "Why are they with her?"

"Bain says they wish to see more of your lands, but I think it is the argument between you and Faile which fascinates them. They like her, and when they heard of this journey, they decided to go with her instead of you."

"Well, as long as they keep her out of trouble." He was surprised when Gaul threw back his head and laughed. It made him scratch his beard worriedly.

Loial came toward them, long eyebrows sagging anxiously. His coat pockets bulged, as was usual when he was traveling, mainly with the angular shapes of books. At least his limp seemed better. "Faile is becoming impatient, Perrin. I think she might insist on leaving any minute. Please hurry. You could not even find the Waygate without me. Not that you should try, certainly. You humans make me leap about so I can hardly find my own head. Please hurry."

"I will not leave him," Faile called. "Not even if he is yet too stubborn and foolish to ask a simple favor. Should that be the case, he may still follow me like a lost puppy. I promise to scratch his ears and take care of him." The Aiel women doubled over laughing.

Gaul leaped straight up suddenly, kicking higher, two paces or more above the floor, while twirling one of his spears. "We will follow like stalking ridgecats," he shouted, "like hunting wolves." He landed easily, lightly. Loial stared at him in amazement.

Bain, on the other hand, lazily combed her short, fiery hair with her fingers. "I have a fine wolfskin with my bedding in the hold," she told Chiad in a bored voice. "Wolves are easily taken."

A growl rose in Perrin's throat, pulling both women's eyes to him. For a moment Bain looked on the point of saying something more, but she frowned at his yellow stare and held her peace, not afraid, but suddenly wary.

"This puppy is not well housebroken yet," Faile confided to the Aiel women.

Perrin refused to look at her. Instead he went to the stall that held his dun stallion, as tall as any of the Tairen animals but heavier in shoulder and haunch. Waving away a groom, he bridled Stepper and led him out himself. The grooms had walked the horse, of course, but he had been confined enough to frisk in the quick steps that had made Perrin give

him his name. Perrin soothed him with the sure confidence of a man who had shod many horses. It was no trouble at all putting his high-cantled saddle on and lashing his saddlebags and blanket roll behind.

Gaul watched with no expression. He would not ride a horse unless he had to, and then not a step farther than absolutely necessary. None of the Aiel would. Perrin did not understand why. Pride, perhaps, in their ability to run for long distances. The Aiel made it seem more than that, but he suspected none of them could have explained.

The packhorse had to be readied too, of course, but that was quickly done, since everything Gaul had ordered was waiting in a neat pile. Food and waterskins. Oats and grain for the horses. None of that would be available in the Ways. A few other things, like hobbles, some horse medicines just in case, spare tinderbox and such.

Most of the space in the wicker hampers went for leather bottles like those the Aiel used for water, only larger and filled with lamp oil. Once the lanterns, on long poles, were strapped atop the rest, it was done.

Thrusting his unstrung bow under the saddle girth, he swung up into Stepper's saddle with the pack animal's lead in hand. And then had to wait, seething.

Loial was already mounted, on a huge, hairy-fetlocked horse, taller than any other in the stable by hands yet reduced nearly to pony size by the Ogier's long legs hanging down. There had been a time when the Ogier was almost as unwilling a rider as the Aiel, but he was at home on a horse now. It was Faile who took her time, examining her mount almost as if she had never seen the glossy black mare before, though Perrin knew she had put the horse through her paces before buying, soon after they came to the Stone. The horse, Swallow by name, was a fine animal of Tairen breeding, with slender ankles and an arched neck, a prancer with the look of speed and endurance both, though shod too lightly for Perrin's taste. Those shoes would not last. It was all another effort to put him in his place, whatever she thought that was.

When Faile finally mounted, in her narrow divided skirts, she reined closer to Perrin. She rode well, woman and horse moving as one. "Why can you not ask, Perrin?" she said softly. "You tried to keep me away from where I belong, so now you have to ask. Can such a simple thing be so difficult?"

The Stone rang like a monstrous bell, the stable floor leaping, the ceiling quivering on the point of coming down. Stepper leaped, too, screaming, head flailing; it was all Perrin could do to keep his seat. Grooms scrambled off the floor where they had fallen and ran desperately to quiet horses rearing, shrieking, attempting to climb out of their stalls. Loial dung to the neck of his huge mount, but Faile sat Swallow surely as the mare danced and squealed wildly.

Rand. Perrin knew it was him. The pull of ta'veren dragged at him, two whirlpools in a stream drawing one another. Coughing in the falling dust, he shook his head as hard as he could, straining not to dismount and run back up into the Stone. "We ride!" he shouted while tremors still shook the fortress. "We ride now, Loial! Now!"

Faile seemed to see no more point to delay; she heeled her mare out of the stable beside Loial's taller horse, their two pack animals pulled along, all galloping before they reached the Dragonwall Gate. The Defenders took one look and scattered, some still on hands and knees; it was their duty to keep people out of the Stone, and they had no orders to keep these in. Not that they would necessarily have been able to think straight enough to do so if they had had orders, not with the tremors just subsiding and the Stone still groaning above them.

Perrin was right behind with his own packhorse, wishing the Ogier's animal could run faster, wishing he could leave Loial's lumbering mount behind and outrun the suction trying to draw him back, that pull of ta'veren to ta'veren. They galloped together through the streets of Tear, toward the rising sun, barely slowing to avoid carts and carriages. Men in tight coats and women with layered aprons, still shaken by the upheaval, stared at them, dazed, sometimes barely leaping out of the way.

At the walls of the inner city paving stones gave way to dirt, shoes and coats to bare feet and bare chests above baggy breeches held up by broad sashes. The folk here dodged no less assiduously, though, for Perrin would not let Stepper slow until they had galloped past the city's outer wall, past the simple stone houses and shops that clustered outside the city proper, into a countryside of scattered farms and thickets and beyond the pull of ta'veren. Only then, breathing almost as hard as his lathered horse, he reined Stepper to a walk.

Loial's ears were stiff with shock. Faile licked her lips and, stared from the Ogier to Perrin, white-faced. "What happened? Was that . . . him?"

"I don't know," Perrin lied. I have to go, Rand. You know that. You looked me in the face when I told you, and said I had to do what I thought I must.

"Where are Bain and Chiad?" Faile said. "It will take them an hour to catch up now. I wish they would ride. I offered to buy them horses, and they looked offended. Well, we need to walk the horses anyway after that, to let them cool down."

Perrin held back from telling her she did not know as much of Aid as she thought she did. He could see the city walls behind them, and the Stone rearing above like a mountain. He could even make out the sinuous shape on the banner waving over the fortress, and the displaced birds swirling about; neither of the others could have. It was no difficulty at all to see three people running toward them in long, ground-eating strides, their flowing ease belying the pace. He did not think he could have run that fast, not for long, but the Aid had to have maintained their speed from the Stone to be this close behind.

"We'll not have to wait that long," he said.

Faile frowned back toward the city. "Is that them? Are you certain?" Abruptly the frown shifted to him for a moment, daring him to answer. Asking him had been too much like admitting he was part of her party, of course. "He is very boastful of his eyesight," she told Loial, "but his memory is not very good. At times I think he would forget to light a candle at night if I did not remind him. I expect he's seen some poor family running from what they think is an earthquake, don't you?"

Loial shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, sighing heavily, and muttered something about humans that Perrin doubted was complimentary. Faile did not notice, of course.

Not too many minutes later, Faile stared at Perrin as the three Aiel drew close enough for her to make out, but she said nothing. In this mood, she was not about to admit he had been right about anything, not if he said the sky was blue. The Aiel were not even breathing hard when they slowed to a halt beside the horses.

"It is too bad it was not a longer run." Bain shared a smile with Chiad, and both gave Gaul a sly look.

"Else we could have run this Stone Dog into the ground," Chiad said as if finishing the other woman's sentence. "That is why Stone Dogs take their vows not to retreat. Stone bones and stone heads make them too heavy to run."

Gaul took no offense, though Perrin noticed he stood where he could keep an eye on Chiad. "Do you know why Maidens are so often used as scouts, Perrin? Because they can run so far. And that comes from being afraid some man might want to marry them. A Maiden will run a hundred miles to avoid that."

"Very wise of them," Faile said tartly. "Do you need to rest?" she asked the Aiel women, and looked surprised when they denied it. She turned to Loial anyway. "Are you ready to go on? Good. Find me this Waygate, Loial. We have stayed here too long. If you let a stray puppy stay close to you, it begins to think you will take care of it, and that will never do."

"Faile," Loial protested, "are you not carrying this too far?"

"I will carry it as far as I must, Loial. The Waygate?"

Ears sagging, Loial puffed out a heavy breath and turned his horse eastward again. Perrin let him and Faile get a dozen paces ahead before he and Gaul followed. He must play by her rules, but he would play them at least as well as she.

The farms, cramped little places with rough stone houses Perrin would not have used to shelter animals, grew more scattered the farther east they rode, and the thickets smaller, until there were neither farms nor thickets, only a rolling, hilly grassland. Grass as far as the eye could see, unbroken except for patches of bush here and there on a hill.

Horses dotted the green slopes, too, in dumps of a dozen or herds of a hundred, the famed Tairen stock. Large or small, each gathering of horses was under the eyes of a shoeless boy or two, mounted bareback. The boys carried long-handled whips that they used to keep the horses together, or turn them, cracking the whips expertly to turn a stray without ever coming close to the animal's hide. They kept their charges dear of the strangers, moving them back if necessary, but they watched the passage of this odd company - two humans and an Ogier mounted, plus three of the fierce Aid that stories said had taken the Stone - with the bold curiosity of the young.

It was all a pleasing sight to Perrin. He liked horses. Part of the reason he had asked to be apprenticed to Master Luhhan had been the chance to work with horses, not that there were so many as this in Emond's Field, nor so fine.

Not so Loial. The Ogier began muttering to himself, louder the farther they rode across the grassy hills, until at last he burst out in a deep bass rumble. "Gone! All gone, and for what? Grass. Once this was an Ogier grove. We did no great works here, not to compare with Manetheren, or the city you call Caemlyn, but enough that a grove was planted. Trees of every kind, from every land and place. The Great Trees, towering a hundred spans into the sky. All tended devotedly, to remind my people of the steding they had left to build things for men. Men think it is the stonework we prize, but that is a trifling thing, learned during the Long Exile, after the Breaking. It is the trees we love. Men thought Manetheren my people's greatest triumph, but we knew it to be the grove there. Gone, now. Like this. Gone, and it will not come again."

Loial stared at the hills, bare save for grass and horses, with a hard face, his ears drawn back tight to his head. He smelled of . . . fury. . . Peaceful, most stories called Ogier, almost as pacific as the Traveling People, but some, a few, named them implacable enemies. Perrin had only seen Loial angry once before. Perhaps he had been angry last night, defending those children. Looking at Loial's face, an old saying came back to him. "To anger the Ogier and pull the mountains down on your head." Everyone took its meaning as to try to do something that was impossible. Perrin thought maybe the meaning had changed with the years. Maybe in the beginning, it had been "Anger the Ogier, and you pull the mountains down on your head." Difficult to do, but deadly if accomplished. He did not think he would ever want Loial - gentle, fumbling Loial with his broad nose always in a book - to become angry with him.

It was Loial who took the lead once they reached the site of the vanished Ogier grove, bending their path a little southward. There were no landmarks, but he was sure of his direction, surer with every pace of the horses. Ogier could feel a Waygate, sense it somehow, find it as certainly as a bee could find the hive. When Loial finally dismounted, the grass was little more than knee-high on him. There was only a thick clump of brush to be seen, taller than most, leafy shrubs as tall as the Ogier. He ripped it all away almost regretfully, stacking it to one side. "Perhaps the boys with the horses can use it for firewood when it dries."

And there was the Waygate.

Rearing against the side of the hill, it appeared more a length of gray wall than a gate, and the wall of a palace at that, thickly carved in leaves and vines so finely done that they seemed almost as alive as the bushes had been. Three thousand years at least it had stood there, but not a trace of weathering marred its surface. Those leaves could have rippled with the next breeze.

For a moment they all stared at it silently, until Loial took a deep breath and put his hand on the one leaf that was different from any other on the Waygate. The trefoil leaf of Avendesora, the fabled Tree of Life. Until the moment his huge hand touched it, it seemed as much a part of the carving as all the rest, but it came away easily.

Faile gasped loudly, and even the Aiel murmured. The air was full of the smell of unease; there was no saying who it came from. All of them, perhaps.

The stone leaves did seem to stir from an unfelt breeze now; they took a tinge of green, of life. Slowly a split appeared down the middle, and the halves of the Waygate opened out, revealing not the hill behind, but a dull shimmering that faintly reflected their images.

“Once, it is said,” Loial murmured, “the Waygates shone like mirrors, and those who walked the Ways walked through the sun and the sky. Gone, now. Like this grove.”

Hastily pulling one of the filled pole-lanterns from his packhorse, Perrin got it alight. “It is too hot out here,” he said. “A little shade would be good.” He booted Stepper toward the Waygate. He thought he heard Faile gasp again.

The dun stallion balked, approaching his own dim reflection, but Perrin heeled him onward. Slowly, he remembered. It should be done slowly. The horse’s nose touched its image hesitantly, then merged in as though walking into a mirror. Perrin moved closer to himself, touched . . . Icy cold slid along his skin, enveloping him hair by hair; time stretched out.

The cold vanished like a pricked bubble, and he was in the midst of endless blackness, the light of his pole-lantern a crushed pool around him. Stepper and the packhorse whickered nervously.

Gaul stepped through calmly and began preparing another lantern. Behind him was what seemed like a sheet of smoked glass. The others were visible out there, Loial getting back on his horse, Faile gathering her reins, all of them creeping, barely moving. Time was different inside the Ways.

“Faile is upset with you,” Gaul said once he had his lantern alight. It did not add much illumination. The darkness drank in light, swallowed it. “She seems to think you have broken some sort of agreement. Bain and Chiad . . . Do not let them get you alone. They mean to teach you a lesson, for Faile’s sake, and you will not sit on that animal so easily if they manage what they plan.”

“I agreed to nothing, Gaul. I do what she’s forced me to do through trickery. We will have to follow Loial as she wants soon enough, but I mean to take the lead for as long as I can.” He pointed to a thick white line under Stepper’s hooves. Broken and heavily pitted, it led off ahead, vanishing in the blackness only a few feet away. “That leads to the first guidepost. We will need to wait there for Loial to read it and decide which bridge to take, but Faile can follow us that far.”

“Bridge,” Gaul murmured thoughtfully. “I know that word. There is water in here?”

“No. It isn’t exactly that kind of bridge. They look the same, sort of, but . . . Maybe Loial can explain it.”

The Aielman scratched his head. “Do you know what you are doing, Perrin?”

“No,” Perrin admitted, “but there’s no reason for Faile to know that.”

Gaul laughed. “It is fun to be so young, is it not, Perrin?”

Frowning, uncertain whether the man was laughing at him, Perrin heeled Stepper on, drawing the packhorse behind. The lantern light would not be visible at all in here twenty or thirty paces from its edge. He wanted to be completely out of sight before Faile came through. Let her think he had decided to go on without her. If she worried for a few minutes, until she found him at the guidepost, it was the least she deserved.

Chapter 19 - The Wavedancer

With the golden sun barely over the horizon, the shiny black-lacquered carriage rocked to a halt at the foot of the wharf behind a team of four matched grays, and the lanky dark-haired driver in his black-and-gold striped coat leaped down to open the door. No sigil adorned the door panel, of course; Tairen nobles gave aid to Aes Sedai only under duress, no matter how effusive the smiles, and none wanted their names or houses linked to the Tower.

Elayne got down gratefully without waiting for Nynaeve, straightening her blue linen summer traveling cloak; the streets of the Maule were rutted by carts and wagons, and the carriage's leather springs had not been very good. A breeze slanting across the Erinin actually seemed cool after the heat of the Stone. She had intended to show no effects of the rough ride, but once upright she could not help knuckling the small of her back. At least last night's rain still holds the dust down, she thought. She suspected that they had been given a carriage without curtains on purpose.

North and south of her, more docks like wide stone fingers stretched into the river. The air smelled of tar and rope, fish and spices and olive oil, of nameless things rotting in the stagnant water between the piers and peculiar long yellow-green fruits in huge bunches heaped in front of the stone warehouse behind her. Despite the early hour, men wearing leather vests on shirtless shoulders scurried about, toting large bundles on bent backs or pushing handcarts piled with barrels or crates. None spared her more than a passing sullen glance, dark eyes falling quickly, forelock touched grudgingly; most did not raise their heads at all. She was sad to see it.

These Tairen nobles had handled their people badly. Mishandled them was more like it. In Andor she could have expected cheerful smiles and a respectful word of greeting, freely given by straight-backed men who knew their worth as well as hers. It was almost enough to make her regret leaving. She had been raised to lead and one day govern a proud people, and she felt the urge to teach these folk dignity. But that was Rand's job, not hers. And if he doesn't do it properly, I will give him a piece of my mind. A bigger piece. At least he had begun, by following her advice. And she had to admit he knew how to treat his people. It would be interesting to see what he had done by the time she returned. If there's a point to coming back.

A dozen ships were dearly visible from where she stood, and more beyond, but one, moored across the end of the dock she faced, sharp bow upriver, filled her eyes. The Sea Folk raker was easily a hundred paces long, half again as large as the next vessel in sight, with three great towering masts amidships, and one shorter on the raised deck at the stern. She had been on ships before, but never one so big, and never on one going to sea. Just the name of the ship's owners spoke of distant lands and strange ports. The Atha'an Miere. The Sea Folk. Stories meant to be exotic always contained the Sea Folk, unless they were about the Aiel.

Nynaeve climbed out of the carriage behind her, tying a green traveling cloak at her neck and grumbling to herself and to the driver. "Tumbled about like a hen in a windstorm! Thumped like a dusty rug! How did you manage to find every last rut and hole between here and the Stone, goodman? That took true skill. A pity none of it goes into handling horses." He tried to hand her down, his narrow face sullen, but she refused his aid.

Sighing, Elayne doubled the number of silver pennies she was taking from her purse. "Thank you for bringing us safely and swiftly." She smiled as she pressed the coins into his hand. "We told you to go fast, and you did as we asked. The streets are not your fault, and you did an excellent job under poor conditions."

Without looking at the coins, the fellow gave her a deep bow, a grateful look, and a murmured "Thank you, my Lady," as much for the words as the money, she was sure. She had found that a kind word and a little praise were usually received as well as silver was, if not better. Though the silver itself was seldom unappreciated, to be sure.

"The Light send you a safe journey, my Lady," he added. The merest flicker of his eyes toward Nynaeve said that wish was for Elayne alone. Nynaeve had to learn how to make allowances and give consideration; truly she did.

When the driver had handed their bundles and belongings out of the carriage, turned his team and started away, Nynaeve said grudgingly, "I shouldn't have snapped at the man, I suppose. A bird could not make an easy way over those streets. Not in a carriage, at any rate. But after bouncing about all the way here, I feel as if I'd been on horseback a week."

“It isn’t his fault you have a sore . . . back,” Elayne said, with a smile to take away any sting, as she took up her things.

Nynaeve barked a wry laugh. “I said that, didn’t I? You will not expect me to go running after him to apologize, I hope. That handful of silver you gave him should soothe any wounds short of mortal. You really must learn to be more careful with money, Elayne. We do not have the Realm of Andor’s resources for our own use. A family could live comfortably for a month on what you hand out to everyone who does the work they’ve been paid to do for you.” Elayne gave her a quietly indignant look - Nynaeve always seemed to think they should live worse than servants unless there was reason not to, instead of the other way around, as made sense - but the older woman did not appear to notice the expression that always put Royal Guardsmen on their toes. Instead, Nynaeve hoisted her bundles and sturdy cloth bags and turned down the dock. “At least this ship will be a smoother ride than that. I do hope smooth. Shall we go aboard?”

As they picked their way down the pier, between working men and stacked barrels and carts full of goods, Elayne said, “Nynaeve, the Sea Folk can be touchy until they know you, or so I was taught. Do you think you might try to be a little . . . ?”

“A little what?”

“Tactful, Nynaeve.” Elayne skipped a step as someone spat on the dock in front of her. There was no telling which fellow had done it; when she looked around they all had their heads down and were hard at work. Mishandling by the High Lords or no, she would have said a few quietly sharp words that the culprit would not have soon forgotten if she could have found him. “You might try to be a little tactful for once.”

“Of course.” Nynaeve started up the raker’s rope-railed gangway. “As long as they do not bounce me about.”

Elayne’s first thought on reaching the deck was that the raker appeared very narrow for its length; she did not know a great deal about ships, in truth, but to her it seemed a huge splinter. Oh, Light, this thing will toss worse than the carriage, however big it is. Her second was for the crew. She had heard stories about the Atha’an Miere, but had never seen one before. Even the stories told little, really. A secretive people who kept to themselves, almost as mysterious as the Aiel. Only the lands beyond the Waste could possibly be more strange, and all anyone knew of them was that the Sea Folk brought ivory and silk from there.

These Atha’an Miere were dark, barefoot and bare-chested men, all cleanly shaven, with straight black hair and tattooed hands, moving with the sureness of those who knew their tasks well enough to do them with half a mind but were putting their whole minds to it. There was a rolling grace to their movements, as though, with the ship still, they yet felt the motions of the sea. Most wore gold or silver chains around their necks, and rings in their ears, sometimes two or three in each, and some with polished stones.

There were women among the crew, too, as many as the men, hauling ropes and coiling lines right with the men, with the same tattooed hands, in the same baggy breeches of some dark, oiled cloth, held by colorful narrow sashes and hanging open at the ankle. But the women wore loose colorful blouses, too, all brilliant reds and blues and greens, and they had at least as many chains and earrings as the men. Including, Elayne noticed with a small shock, two or three women with rings in one side of their noses.

The grace of the women outshone even that of the men, and put Elayne in mind of some stories she had heard as a child by listening where she was not supposed to. Women of the Atha’an Miere were, in those tales, the epitome of alluring beauty and temptation, pursued by all men. The women on this ship were no more beautiful than any others, really, but watching them move, she could believe those tales.

Two of the women, on the raised deck at the stern, were obviously not ordinary crew. They were barefoot, too, and their garb of the same cut, but one was clothed entirely in brocaded blue silks, the other in green. The older of the pair, the one in green, wore four small gold rings in each ear and one in the left side of her nose, all worked so they sparkled in the morning sunlight. A fine chain ran from her tiny nose ring to one earring, supporting a row of tiny dangling gold medallions, and one of the chains around her neck held a pierced golden box, like ornate gold lace, that she lifted to sniff from time to time. The other woman, the taller, had only six earrings in total, and fewer medallions. The pierced

box she sniffed at was just as finely wrought gold, though. Exotic, indeed. Elayne winced just thinking about the nose rings. And that chain!

Something odd about the sterndeck itself caught her eye, but at first she could not tell what. Then she saw. There was no tiller for the rudder. Some sort of spoked wheel stood behind the women, lashed down so it could not turn, but no tiller. How do they steer? The smallest riverboat she had seen had had a tiller. There had been tillers on all the others ships lining the nearby docks. More and more mysterious, these Sea Folk.

“Remember what Moiraine told you,” she cautioned as they approached the sterndeck. That had not been much; even Aes Sedai knew little about the Atha’an Miere. Moiraine had imparted the proper phrasings, though; the things that had to be said for good manners. “And remember tact,” she added in a firm whisper.

“I will remember,” Nynaeve replied sharply. “I can be tactful.” Elayne truly hoped she would.

The two Sea Folk women waited for them at the top of the stairs - ladder, Elayne remembered, even when they were stairs. She did not understand why ships had to have different names for common things. A floor was a floor, in a barn or an inn or a palace. Why not on a ship? A cloud of perfume surrounded the two, a slightly musky scent, wafting from the lacy gold boxes. The tattoos on their hands were stars and seabirds surrounded by the curls and whirls of stylized waves.

Nynaeve inclined her head. “I am Nynaeve al’Meara, Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. I seek the Sailmistress of this vessel, and passage, if it pleases the Light. This is my companion and friend, Elayne Trakand, also Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. The Light illumine you and your vessel, and send the winds to speed you.” That was almost exactly the way Moiraine had instructed them to speak. Not about Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah - Moiraine had seemed resigned to that more than anything else, and amused at their choice of Ajah - but the rest.

The older woman, with gray touches in her black hair and fine wrinkles at the corners of her large brown eyes, inclined her head just as formally. Nevertheless, she seemed to be taking them in from head to foot, especially the Great Serpent ring each wore on her right hand. “I am Coine din Jubai Wild Winds, Sailmistress of Wavedancer. This is Jorin din Jubai White Wing, my sister of the blood and Windfinder of Wavedancer. There may be passage available, if it pleases the Light. The Light illumine you, and see you safe to your journey’s end.”

It was a surprise that the two were sisters. Elayne could see the resemblance, but Jorin looked much younger. She wished the Windfinder were the one they had to deal with; both women had the same reserve, but something about the Windfinder reminded her of Aviendha. It was absurd, of course. These women were no taller than she herself, their coloring could not have been more different from the Aiel woman’s, and the only weapon either had in sight was the stout knife tucked in her sash, looking very workmanlike despite carvings and gold-wire inlays on the handle. But Elayne could not help feeling some similarity, between Jorin and Aviendha, anyway.

“Let us talk then, Sailmistress, if it pleases you,” Nynaeve said, following Moiraine’s formula, “of sailings and ports, and the gift of passage.” The Sea Folk did not charge for passage, according to Moiraine; it was a gift, which just coincidentally would be exchanged for a gift of equal value.

Coine glanced away, then, astern toward the Stone and the white banner rippling over it. “We will talk in my cabin, Aes Sedai, if it pleases you.” She motioned toward an open hatch behind that strange wheel. “The welcome of my ship to you, and the grace of the Light be upon you until you leave his decks.”

Another narrow ladder - staircase - led down into a neat room, larger and taller than Elayne had expected from her experiences on smaller vessels, with windows across the stem and gimballed lamps on the walls. Almost everything seemed to have been built into the room except for a few lacquered chests of various sizes. The bed was large and low, right under the sternwindows, and a narrow table surrounded by armchairs stood across the middle of the room.

There was very little clutter. Rolled charts lay on the table, a few ivory carvings of strange animals stood on railed shelves, and half a dozen bare-bladed swords of different shapes, some that Elayne had never seen before, rested on hooks on the walls. An oddly worked square brass gong hung from a beam over the bed, while right before the

sternwindows, as if in a place of honor, a helmet sat on a featureless wooden head carved for the purpose, a helmet like the head of some monstrous insect, lacquered in red and green, with a narrow white plume to either side, one broken.

The helmet Elayne recognized. "Seanchan," she gasped before thinking. Nynaeve gave her a vexed look, and deservedly; they had agreed it would make more sense, and ring more true, if Nynaeve, as the older, took the lead and did most of the talking.

Coine and Jorin exchanged unreadable glances. "You know of them?" the Sailmistress said. "Of course. One must expect Aes Sedai to know these things. This far east we hear a score of stories, the truest less than half-true."

Elayne knew she should leave it at that, but curiosity tickled her tongue. "How did you come by the helmet? If I may ask."

"Wavedancer encountered a Seanchan ship last year," Coine replied. "They wished to take him, but I did not wish to give him up." She shrugged slightly. "I have the helmet to remind me, and the sea took the Seanchan, the Light be merciful to all who sail. I will not go close to a vessel with ribbed sails again."

"You were lucky," Nynaeve said curtly. "The Seanchan hold captive women who can channel, and make them channel as a weapon. If they had had one on that ship, you would be regretting ever having seen it."

Elayne grimaced at her, though it was too late. She could not tell whether the Sea Folk women were offended by Nynaeve's tone. The pair kept the same neutral expressions, but Elayne was beginning to realize they did not show very much on their faces, not to strangers, anyway.

"Let us speak of passage," Coine said. "If it pleases the Light, we may call where you wish to go. All things are possible, in the Light. Let us sit."

The chairs around the table did not slide back; they and the table were fastened to the floor-deck. Instead the arms swung out like gates and latched in place once you had sat. The arrangement seemed to bear out Elayne's dire predictions of heaving and pitching. She did very well with it herself, of course, but too much rolling on a riverboat set Nynaeve's stomach jumping. It must be worse on the ocean than on a river, however fierce the wind, and the worse Nynaeve's stomach, the worse her temper. Nynaeve sicking up and in a bad choler at the same time: there were few things more dreadful, in Elayne's experience.

She and Nynaeve were placed together on one side of the table, with the Sailmistress and the Windfinder at the ends. At first it seemed strange, until she realized they would both look at whichever of the two was talking, allowing the other to watch them unobserved. Do they always deal with passengers this way, or is it because we're Aes Sedai? Well, because they think we are. It was a caution that everything might not be as simple as they hoped with these people. She hoped Nynaeve was taking notice.

Elayne had not seen any order passed, but a slender young woman with only one ring in each ear appeared, bearing a tray with a square white brass-handled teapot and large handle-less cups, not of Sea Folk porcelain as might have been expected, but thick pottery. Less likely to be broken in heavy weather, she decided bleakly. It was the young woman who took her attention, though, and nearly brought a gasp. She was bare to the waist, just like the men above. Elayne hid her shock very well, she thought, but Nynaeve sniffed loudly.

The Sailmistress waited until the girl had poured tea brewed to blackness, then said, "Have we sailed, Dorele, when I did not see? Is there no land in sight?"

The slender woman blushed furiously. "There is land, Sailmistress." It was a miserable whisper.

Coine nodded. "Until there is no land in sight, and has been none for one full day, you will work at cleaning the bilges, where garments are a hindrance. You may leave."

"Yes, Sailmistress," the girl said, even more woefully. She turned away, undoing her red sash dejectedly as she went through the door at the far end of the room.

“Share this tea, if it please you,” the Sailmistress said, “that we may talk in peace.” She sipped at her own and continued while Elayne and Nynaeve were tasting theirs. “I ask that you forgive any offense, Aes Sedai. This is Dorele’s first voyage except between the islands. The young often forget the ways of the shorebound. I will punish her further, if you are affronted.”

“There is no need,” Elayne said hastily, taking the excuse to set her cup down. The tea was even stronger than it looked, very hot, unsweetened and quite bitter. “Truly, we were not offended. There are different ways among different peoples.” The Light send not too many more as different as that! Light, what if they don’t wear any clothes at all once they get out to sea? Light! “Only a fool takes offense at customs different from her own. “

Nynaeve gave her a level look, bland enough for the Aes Sedai they were pretending to be, and took a deep swallow from her cup. All she said was “Please think no more of it.” It was not possible to tell if she meant it for Elayne or the Sea folk women.

“Then we will speak of passage, if it pleases you,” Coine said. “To what port do you wish to sail?”

“Tanchico,” Nynaeve said, a bit more briskly than she should have. “I know you may not mean to sail there, but we need to go quickly, as quickly as only a raker can, and without stopping, if that is possible. I offer this small gift, for the inconvenience.” She took a paper from her belt pouch and unfolded it, pushing it down the table to the Sailmistress.

Moiraine had given that to them, and another like it, letters-of-rights. Each allowed the bearer to draw up to three thousand gold crowns from bankers and moneylenders in various cities, though it was not likely any of those men and women knew it was White Tower money they held. Elayne had goggled at the amount, -Nynaeve had gaped openly - but Moiraine said it might be needed to make the Sailmistress forsake her intended ports of call.

Coine touched the letter-of-rights with one finger, read. “A vast sum for the gift of passage; she murmured, “even counting that you ask me to alter my sailing plans. I am more surprised now than before. You know that we very seldom carry Aes Sedai on our ships. Very seldom. Of all who ask passage, only Aes Sedai may be refused, and almost always are, as from the first day of the first sailing. Aes Sedai know this, and so almost never ask.” She was looking into her teacup, not at them, but Elayne glanced the other way and caught the Windfinder studying their hands lying on the table. No, their rings.

Moiraine had not said anything about this. She had pointed out the raker as the swiftest ship available and encouraged them to make use of it. Then again, she had given them these letters-of-rights, very likely sufficient to buy a fleet of ships like this one. Well, several ships, at the least. Because she knew it would take that much to bribe them to carry us? But why had she kept secrets? A foolish question; Moiraine always kept secrets. But why waste their time?

“Do you mean to refuse us passage?” Nynaeve had abandoned tact for bluntness. “If you do not carry Aes Sedai, why did you bring us down here? Why not tell us up above and be done with it?”

The Sailmistress unlatched one arm of her chair, rose and went to peer out of the sternwindows at the Stone. Her earrings and the medallions across her left cheek glittered in the light of the rising sun. “He can wield the One Power, so I have heard, and he holds the Sword That Cannot Be Touched. The Aiel have come over the Dragonwall to his call; I have seen several in the streets, and it is said they fill the Stone. The Stone of Tear has fallen, and war breaks over the nations of the land. Those who once ruled have returned, and been driven back for the first time. Prophecy is being fulfilled.”

Nynaeve looked as confounded as Elayne felt at this change of subject. “The Prophecies of the Dragon?” Elayne said after a moment. “Yes, they are being fulfilled. He is the Dragon Reborn, Sailmistress.” He’s a stubborn man who hides his feelings so deeply I cannot find them, that is what he is!

Coine turned. “Not the Prophecies of the Dragon, Aes Sedai. The Jendai Prophecy, the prophecy of the Coramoor. Not the one you wait for and dread; the one we seek, herald of a new Age. At the Breaking of the World our ancestors fled to the safety of the sea while the land heaved and broke as storm waves do. It is said they knew nothing of the ships they took to flee, but the Light was with them, and they survived. They did not see the land again until it was still once

more, and by then, much had changed. All - everything - the world - drifted on the water and the wind. It was in the years after that the Jendai Prophecy was first spoken. We must wander the waters until the Coramoor returns, and serve him at his coming.

“We are bound to the sea; the salt water courses in our veins. Most of us set no foot on the land except to await another ship, another sailing. Strong men weep when they must serve ashore. Women ashore go onto a ship to bear their children - into a rowboat if no more is at hand - for we must be born on the water, as we must die on it, and be given to it in death.

“The Prophecy is being fulfilled. He is the Coramoor. Aes Sedai serve him. You are proof of that, that you are here in this city. That is in the Prophecy as well. ‘The White Tower shall be broken by his name, and Aes Sedai shall kneel to wash his feet and dry them with their hair.’ ”

“You will have a long wait if you expect to see me wash any man’s feet,” Nynaeve said wryly. “What does this have to do with our passage? Will you take us, or not?”

Elayne cringed, but the Sailmistress came back just as directly. “Why do you wish to journey to Tanchico? It is an unpleasant port of call now. I docked there last winter. Shorefolk nearly swarmed my vessel seeking passage out, to anywhere. They did not care, so long as it was away from Tanchico. I cannot believe conditions are any better now.”

“Do you always question your passengers so?” Nynaeve said. “I’ve offered you enough to buy a village. Two villages! If you want more, name your price.”

“Not a price,” Elayne hissed in her ear. “A gift!”

If Coine was offended, or even had heard, she gave no sign. “Why?”

Nynaeve took a tight grip on her braid, but Elayne laid a hand on her arm. They had planned to keep a few secrets themselves, but surely they had learned enough since sitting down to alter any plan. There was a time for secrecy and a time for truth. “We hunt the Black Ajah, Sailmistress. We believe some of them are in Tanchico.” She met Nynaeve’s angry stare calmly. “We must find them, else they may harm . . . the Dragon Reborn. The Coramoor.”

“The Light see us safe to docking,” the Windfinder breathed. It was the first time she had spoken, and Elayne stared at her in surprise. Jorin was frowning, and not looking at anyone, but she spoke to the Sailmistress. “We can take them, my sister. We must.” Coine nodded.

Elayne exchanged looks with Nynaeve and saw her own questions mirrored in the other woman’s eyes. Why was it the Windfinder who decided? Why not the Sailmistress? She was the captain, whatever her title. At least they were going to get passage after all. For how much? Elayne wondered. How large a ‘gift’? She wished Nynaeve had not revealed that they had more than was in that one letter-of-rights. And she accuses me of tossing gold about.

The door opened and a heavy-shouldered gray-haired man in loose green silk breeches and sash came in, ruffling through a sheaf of papers. Four gold rings decorated each ear, and three heavy gold chains hung at his neck, including one with a perfume box. A long puckered scar down his cheek, and two curved knives tucked in his sash, gave him something of a dangerous air. He was fastening a peculiar wire framework over his ears to hold clear lenses in front of his eyes. The Sea Folk made the best looking glasses and burning lenses and the like, of course, somewhere on their islands, but Elayne had never seen anything like this device. He peered through the lenses at the papers and began talking without looking up.

“Coine, this fool is willing to trade me five hundred snowfox pelts from Kandor for those three small barrels of Two Rivers tabac I got in Ebou Dar. Five hundred! He can have them here by midday.” His eyes rose, and he gave a start. “Forgive me, my wife. I did not know you had guests. The Light be with you all.”

“By midday, my husband,” Coine said, “I will be falling downriver. By nightfall I will be at sea.”

He stiffened. “Am I still Cargomaster, wife, or has my place been taken while I did not see?”

“You are Cargomaster, husband, but the trading must stop now and preparations begin for getting under way. We sail for Tanchico.”

“Tanchico!” The papers crumpled in his fist, and he brought himself under control with an effort. “Wife - No! Sailmistress, you told me our next port was Mayene, and then eastward to Shara. I have traded with that in mind. Shara, Sailmistress, not Tarabon. What I have in my holds will bring little in Tanchico. Perhaps nothing! May I ask why my trade is to be ruined and Wavedancer impoverished?”

Coine hesitated, but when she spoke her voice was still formal. “I am Sailmistress, my husband. Wavedancer sails when and where and I say. It must be enough, for now. “

“As you say, Sailmistress,” he rasped, “so it is.” He touched his heart - Elayne thought Coine flinched - and padded out with his back stiff as one of the ship’s masts.

“I must make this up to him,” Coine murmured softly, staring at the door. “Of course, it is pleasant making up with him. Usually. He saluted me like a deckboy, sister.”

“We regret being a cause of trouble, Sailmistress,” Elayne said carefully. “And we regret having witnessed this. If we have caused any embarrassment, to anyone, please accept our apologies.”

“Embarrassment?” Coine sounded startled. “Aes Sedai, I am Sailmistress. I doubt your presence embarrassed Toram, and I would not apologize to him for that if it did. Trade is his, but I am Sailmistress. I must make up to him - and it will not be easy, since I must keep the reason secret still - because he is right, and I could not think quickly enough to give him a reason beyond what I would give a raw hand. That scar on his face he earned clearing the Seanchan from Wavedancer’s decks. He has older scars earned defending my ship, and I have only to put out my hand to have gold placed in it because of his trading. It is the things I cannot tell him I must make up to him, because he deserves to know.”

“I do not understand,” Nynaeve said. “We would ask you to keep the Black Ajah secret . . .” - she shot a hard look at Elayne, one that promised hard words once they were alone; Elayne intended a few words of her own, about the meaning of tact - “. . . but surely three thousand crowns is reason enough to take us to Tanchico.”

“I must keep you secret, Aes Sedai. What you are, and why you travel. Many among my crew consider Aes Sedai bad luck. If they knew they not only carried Aes Sedai, but toward a port where other Aes Sedai may serve the Father of Storms The grace of the Light shone on us that none was close enough to hear me call you so above. Will it offend if I ask you to keep below as much as possible, and not to wear your rings when on deck?”

For answer, Nynaeve plucked her Great Serpent ring off and dropped it into her pouch. Elayne did the same, a bit more reluctantly; she rather enjoyed having people see her ring. Not quite trusting Nynaeve’s remaining store of diplomacy at this point, she spoke up before the other woman could. “Sailmistress, we have offered you a gift of passage, if it pleases you. If it does not, may I ask what would?”

Coine came back to the table to look at the letter-of-rights again, then pushed it back to Nynaeve. “I do this for the Coramoor. I will see you safe ashore where you wish, if it pleases the Light. It shall be done.” She touched the fingers of her right hand to her lips. “It is agreed, under the Light.”

Jorin made a strangled sound. “My sister, has a Cargomaster ever mutinied against his Sailmistress?”

Coine gave her a flat-eyed stare. “I will put in the gift of passage from my own chest. And if Toram ever hears of it, my sister, I will put you in the bilges with Dorele. For ballast, perhaps.”

That the two Sea Folk women had dropped formality was confirmed when the Windfinder laughed aloud. “And then your next port would be in Chachin, my sister, or Caemlyn, for you could not find the water without me.”

The Sailmistress addressed Elayne and Nynaeve regretfully. “Properly, Aes Sedai, since you serve the Coramoor, I should honor you as I would Sailmistress and Windfinder of another ship. We should bathe together and drink honeyed wine and tell each other stories to make ourselves laugh and weep. But I must make ready to sail, and - ”

Wavedancer rose like his name, leaping, pounding against the dock. Elayne whipped back and forth in her chair, wondering as it continued whether this was really better than being thrown to the deck.

Then, finally, it was over, the leaps slowing, growing smaller. Coine scrambled to her feet and raced for the ladder, Jorin at her heels, already shouting orders to look for damage to the hull.

Chapter 20 - Winds Rising

Elayne struggled to open the latch on an arm of her chair and darted after them, almost colliding with Nynaeve at the ladder. The ship still rocked, if not as violently as before. Uncertain whether they were sinking, she pushed Nynaeve ahead of her, prodding her to climb faster.

On the deck the crew dashed about, checking the rigging or peering over the side to inspect the hull, shouting about earthquakes. The same shouts were rising from the dockmen, too, but Elayne knew better, despite the tumbled things on the piers and the ships yet pitching at their moorings.

She stared toward the Stone. The huge fortress was still except for masses of startled birds swirling about and that pale banner waving, almost lazily, in an isolated breeze. No sign that anything had ever touched the mountainous mass. That had been Rand, though. She was sure of it.

She turned to find Nynaeve looking at her, and for a long moment their eyes met. "A fine pickling; if he's damaged the ship," Elayne said finally. "How are we supposed to get to Tanchico if he goes tossing all the ships about?" Light, he has to be all right. I can do nothing if he isn't. He a all right. He u.

Nynaeve touched her arm reassuringly. "No doubt that second letter of yours touched a nerve. Men always overreact when they let their emotions go; it's the price for holding them in the way they do. He may be the Dragon Reborn, but he must learn, man to woman, that-What are they doing here?"

"They" were two men standing amid the bustling Sea Folk on the deck. One was Thom Merrill, in his gleeman's cloak, with leather-cased harp and flute on his back and a bundle lying at his feet beside a battered wooden box with a lock. The other was a lean handsome Tairen in his middle years, a hard dark man wearing a flat conical straw hat and one of those commoner's coats that fit snugly to the waist, then

flared like a short skirt. A notched sword-breaker hung at a belt worn over his coat, and he leaned on a pale staff of nobbly, jointed wood exactly his own height and no thicker than his thumb. A square-tied parcel dangled by a loop from his shoulder. Elayne knew him: his name was Juilin Sandar.

It was obvious the two men were strangers despite standing almost side by side; they held themselves with stiff reticence. Their attentions were directed the same way, though, split between following the Sailmistress's progress toward the sterndeck and peering at Elayne and Nynaeve, plainly uncertain and masking it behind a brisk show of confidence. Thom grinned and stroked his long white mustaches and nod-ded every time he looked up at the two of them; Sandar made solemn, self-assured bows.

"He is not damaged," Coine said, climbing the ladder. "I can sail within the hour, if it pleases you. Well within, if a Tairen pilot can be found. I will sail without him, if not, though it means never returning to Tear." She followed their gaze to the two men. "They ask passage, the gleeman to Tanchico, and the thief-catcher to wherever you travel. I cannot refuse them, and yet . . ." Her dark eyes came back to Elayne and Nynaeve. "I will do so, if you ask it." Reluctance to break custom battled in her voice with . . . Desire to help them? To serve the Coramoor? "The thief-catcher is a good man, even considering that he is shorebound. No offense to you, under the Light. The gleeman I do not know, yet a gleeman can enliven a voyage and lighten tired hours."

"You know Master Sandar?" Nynaeve said.

"Twice he has found those who pilfered from us, and found them quickly. Another shoreman would have taken longer so he might ask more for the work. It is obvious that you know him, as well. Do you wish me to refuse passage?" Her reluctance was still there.

"Let us see why they are here first," Nynaeve said in a flat voice that did not bode well for either man.

“Perhaps I should do the talking,” Elayne suggested, gently but firmly. “That way, you can watch to see if they are hiding anything.” She did not say that that way Nynaeve’s temper would not get the better of her, but the wry smile the other woman gave her said she had heard it anyway.

“Very well, Elayne. I will watch them. Perhaps you might study how I keep calm. You know .how you are when you become overwrought.”

Elayne had to laugh.

The two men straightened as she and Nynaeve approached. Around them the crew bustled, swarming into the rigging, hauling ropes, lashing some things down and unlashng others, to orders relayed from the Sailmistress. They moved around the four shorepeople with barely a glance.

Elayne frowned at Thom Merrilin thoughtfully. She was sure she had never seen the gleeman before his appearance in the Stone, yet even then she had been struck by something familiar about him. Not that that was likely. Gleemen were village performers, in the main; her mother had certainly never had one at the palace in Caemlyn. The only gleemen Elayne could remember seeing had been in the villages near her mother’s country estates, and this white-haired hawk of a man had surely never been there.

She decided to speak to the thief-catcher first. He insisted on that, she remembered; what was a thief-taker elsewhere was a thief-catcher in Tear, and the distinction seemed important to him.

“Master Sandar,” she said gravely. “You may not remember us. I am Elayne Trakand, and this is my friend, Nynaeve al’Meara. I understand that you wish to travel to the same destination as we. Might I ask why? The last time we saw you, you had not served us very well.”

The man did not blink at the suggestion he might not remember them. His eyes flickered across their hands, noting the absence of rings. Those dark eyes noted everything, and recorded it indelibly. “I do remember, Mistress Trakand, and well. But, if you will forgive me, the last time I served you was in the company of Mat Cauthon, when we pulled you both out of the water before the silverpike could get you.”

Nynaeve harrumphed, but not loudly. It had been a cell, not the water, and the Black Ajah, not silverpike. Nynaeve in particular did not like being reminded that they had needed help that time. Of course, they would not have been in that cell without Juilin Sandar. No, that was not entirely fair. True, but not completely fair.

“That is all very well,” Elayne said briskly, “but you still haven’t said why you want to go to Tanchico.”

He drew a deep breath and eyed Nynaeve warily. Elayne was not sure that she liked him being more careful of the other woman than of her. “I was roused out of my house no more than half an hour gone,” he said carefully, “by a man you know, I think. A tall, stone-faced man calling himself Lan.” Nynaeve’s eyebrows rose slightly. “He came on behalf of another man you know. A . . . shepherd, I was told. I was given a great quantity of gold and told to accompany you. Both of you. I was told that if you do not return safely from this journey Shall we just say it would be better to drown myself than come back? Lan was emphatic, and the . . . shepherd no less so in his message. The Sailmistress tells me I cannot have passage unless you agree. I am not without certain skills that can be useful.” The staff whirled in his hands, a whistling blur, and was still. His fingers touched the sword-breaker on his hip, like a short sword but unsharpened, its slots meant to catch a blade.

“Men will find ways to get ‘round what you tell them to do,” Nynaeve murmured, sounding not displeased.

Elayne only frowned vexedly. Rand had sent him? He must not have read the second letter before he did. Burn him! Why does he leap about so? No time to send another letter, and it would probably only confuse him more if I did. And make me look a bigger fool. Burn him!

“And you, Master Merrilin?” Nynaeve said. “Did the shepherd send a gleeman after us, too? Or the other man? To keep us amused with your juggling and fire-eating, perhaps.”

Thom had been scrutinizing Sandar closely, but he shifted his attentions smoothly and made an elegant bow, only spoiling it with a too-elaborate flourish of that patch-covered cloak. "Not the shepherd, Mistress al'Meara. A lady of our mutual acquaintance asked - asked - me to accompany you. The lady who found you and the shepherd in Emond's Field."

"Why?" Nynaeve said suspiciously.

"I, too, have useful skills," Thom told her with a glance at the thief-catcher. "Other than juggling, that is. And I have been to Tanchico several times. I know the city well. I can tell you where to find a good inn, and what districts are dangerous in daylight as well as after dark, and who must be bribed so the Civil Watch does not take too dose an interest in your doings. They are keen on watching outlanders. I can help you with a good many things."

That familiarity tickled at Elayne's mind again. Before she realized what she was doing, she reached up and tugged at one of his long white mustaches. He gave a start, and she dapped both hands to her mouth, flushing crimson. "Forgive me. I . . . I seemed to remember doing that before. I mean. . . . I am sorry." Light, why did I do that? He must think me an imbecile.

"I . . . would remember," he said, very stiffly.

She hoped he was not affronted. It was hard to tell from his expression. Men could be offended when they should be amused, and amused when they should be offended. If they were going to be traveling together That was the first time she realized that she had decided they could come. "Nynaeve?" she said.

The other woman understood the unspoken question, of course. She studied the two men thoroughly, then nodded. "They may come. As long as they agree to do as they are told. I'll not have some wool-brained man going his own way and endangering us."

"As you command, Mistress al'Meara," Sandar said immediately, with a bow, but Thom said, "A gleeman is a free soul, Nynaeve, but I can promise I will not endanger you. Far from it."

"As you are told," Nynaeve said pointedly. "Your word on it, or you will watch this ship sail from the dock."

"The Atha'an Miere do not refuse passage to anyone, Nynaeve."

"Do you think not? Was the thief-taker" - Sandar winced - "the only one told he needed our permission? As you are told, Master Merrillin."

Thom tossed his white head like a fractious horse and breathed heavily, but finally he nodded. "My word on it, Mistress al'Meara."

"Very well then," Nynaeve said in a bracing voice. "It is settled. You two find the Sailmistress now, and tell her I said to find the pair of you a cubbyhole somewhere if she can, out of our way. Off with you, now. Quickly."

Sandar bowed again and left; Thom quivered visibly before joining him, stiff-backed.

"Are you not being too hard on them?" Elayne said as soon as they were out of earshot. That was not far, with all the hurly-burly on deck. "We do have to travel together, after all. 'Smooth words make smooth companions.'"

"Best to begin as we mean to go on. Elayne, Thom Merrillin knows very well we are not full Aes Sedai." She lowered her voice and glanced around as she said it. None of the crew was even looking at them, except for the Sailmistress, back near the sterndeck where she was listening to the tall gleeman and the thief-catcher. "Men talk - they always do - so Sandar will know it soon enough, as well. They'd present no trouble to Aes Sedai, but two Accepted . . . ? Given half a chance, they would both be doing things they thought for the best no matter what we said. I do not mean to give them even that half-chance."

"Perhaps you are right. Do you think they know why we are going to Tanchico?"

Nynaeve sniffed. "No, or they'd not be so sanguine, I think. And I would rather not tell them until we must." She gave Elayne a meaningful look; there was no need for her to say she would not have told the Sailmistress, either, had it been left to her. "Here is a saying for you. 'Borrow trouble, and you repay tenfold.'"

"You speak as if you don't trust them, Nynaeve." She would have said the other woman was behaving like Moiraine, but Nynaeve would not appreciate the comparison.

"Can we? Juilin Sandar betrayed us once before. Yes, yes, I know no man could have avoided it, but there it is just the same. And Liandrin and the others know his face. We will have to put him in different clothes. Perhaps make him let his hair grow longer. Perhaps a mustache, like that thing infesting the gleeman's face. It might do."

"And Thom Merrilin?" Elayne asked. "I think we can trust him. I don't know why, but I do."

"He admitted being sent by Moiraine," Nynaeve said wearily. "What has he not admitted, though? What did she tell him that he hasn't told us? Is he meant to help us, or something else? Moiraine plays her own game so often, I trust her this much more than I do Liandrin." She held her thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. "She will use us - you and me both - use us up, if it helps Rand. Or rather, if it helps whatever she has planned for Rand. She would leash him for a lapdog if she could."

"Moiraine knows what has to be done, Nynaeve." For once she was reluctant to admit that. What Moiraine knew had to be done might well speed Rand on his way toward Tarmon Gai'don that much faster. On his way toward death, perhaps. Rand balanced against the world. It was silly - foolish and childish - that those scales should tremble so evenly for her. Yet she did not dare make them swing, even in her mind, because she was not sure which way she would send them. "She knows it better than he does," she said, making her voice firm. "Better than we."

"Perhaps." Nynaeve sighed. "But I do not have to like it."

Ropes were cast off at the bow, where triangular sails suddenly broke out, and Wavedancer heeled away from the dock. More sails appeared, great white squares and triangles, the sternlines were cast off, and the ship curled out into the river in a great arc through the anchored ships awaiting their turn at the docks, a smooth curve that ended heading south, downriver. The Sea Folk handled their ship as a master horseman would a fine steed. That peculiar spoked wheel worked the rudder, somehow, as one of the bare-chested crewmen turned it. A man, Elayne was relieved to see. Sailmistress and Windfinder stood to one side of the wheel, Coine issuing occasional orders, sometimes after a murmured consultation with her sister. Toram watched for a time, with a face that might, have been carved from a deck plank, then stalked below.

There was a Tairen on the sterndeck, a plump, dejected-looking man in a dull yellow coat with puffy gray sleeves, rubbing his hands nervously. He had been hustled aboard just as the gangway was being hauled up, a pilot who was supposed to guide Wavedancer downriver; according to Tairen law, no ship could pass through the Fingers of the Dragon without a Tairen pilot aboard. His dejection certainly came from doing nothing, for if he gave any directions, the Sea Folk paid them no heed.

Muttering about seeing what their cabin was like, Nynaeve went downstairs - below - but Elayne was enjoying the breeze across the deck and the feel of starting out. To travel, to see places she had not seen before, was a joy in itself. She had never expected to, not like this. The Daughter-Heir of Andor might make a few state visits, and she would make more once she succeeded to the throne, but they would be bounded about with ceremony and propriety. Not like this at all. Barefoot Sea Folk and a ship headed to sea.

The riverbank slid by quite quickly as the sun climbed, an occasional duster of huddled stone farmhouses and barns, bleak and lonely, appearing and vanishing behind. No villages, though. Tear would not allow the smallest village on the river between the city and the sea, for even the tiniest might one day become competition for the capital. The High Lords controlled the size of villages and towns throughout the country with a buildings tax that grew heavier the more buildings there were. Elayne was sure they would never have allowed Godan to thrive, on the Bay of Remara, if not for the supposed necessity of a strong presence overlooking Mayene. In a way it was a relief to be leaving such foolish people behind. If only she did not have to leave one foolish man behind as well.

The number of fishing boats, most small and all surrounded by clouds of hopeful gulls and fisher-birds, increased the farther south Wavedancer went, especially once the vessel entered the maze of waterways called the Fingers of the Dragon. Often the birds overhead and the long poles that held the nets were all that was visible besides plains of reeds and knifegrass rippling in the breezes, dotted with low islands where odd, twisted trees grew with spidery tangles of roots exposed to the air. Many boats worked right in the reeds, though not with nets. Once Elayne saw some of them close to dear water, men and women dropping hooked lines into the watery growth and pulling up wriggling, dark-striped fish as long as a man's arm.

The Tairen pilot began to pace anxiously once they were in the delta, with the sun overhead, turning up his nose at an offered bowl of thick spicy fish stew and bread. Elayne ate hers hungrily, wiping her pottery bowl with the last scrap of bread, though she shared his unease. Passages broad and narrow ran in every direction. Some ended abruptly, in plain sight, against a wall of reeds. There was no way to tell which of the others might not vanish just as suddenly around the next bend. Coine did not slow Wavedancer, regardless, or hesitate at choosing a way. Obviously she knew the channels to take, or the Windfinder did, but the pilot still muttered to himself as if he expected to run aground any moment.

It was late afternoon when the river mouth suddenly appeared ahead, and the endless stretch of the Sea of Storms beyond. The Sea Folk did something with the sails, and the ship shuddered softly to a dead halt. It was only then that Elayne noticed a large rowboat skittering like a many-legged waterbug out from an island where a few forlorn stone buildings stood around the base of a tall narrow tower where men stood small at the top beneath the banner of Tear, three white crescents on a field of red and gold. The pilot took the purse Coine proffered without a word and scrambled down a rope ladder to the boat. As soon as he was aboard, the sails were swung about again, and Wavedancer breasted the first rollers of open sea, rising slightly, slicing through. Sea Folk scampered through the rigging, setting more sails, as the ship sped south and west, away from the land.

When the last thin strip of land dropped below the horizon, the Sea Folk women doffed their blouses. All of them, even the Sailmistress and the Windfinder. Elayne did not know where to look. All those women walking about half-dressed and completely unconcerned by the men all around them. Juilin Sandar seemed to be having as hard a time as she was, alternating between staring at the women wide-eyed and staring at his feet until he finally all but ran below. Elayne would not let herself be routed that way. She opted for staring over the side at the sea, instead.

Different customs, she reminded herself. As long they don't expect me to do the same. The very thought nearly made her laugh hysterically. Somehow, the Black Ajah was easier to contemplate than that. Different customs. Light!

The sky grew purple, with a dull golden sun on the horizon. Scores of dolphins escorted the vessel, rolling and arching alongside, and farther out some sort of sparkling silver-blue fish rose above the surface in schools, gliding on outstretched fins a span across for fifty paces or more before plunging back into the swelling gray-green water. Elayne watched in amazement for a dozen flights before they did not appear again.

But the dolphins, great sleek shapes, were wondrous enough, a guard of honor taking Wavedancer back where he belonged. Those she recognized from descriptions in books; it was said if they found you drowning, they would push you to shore. She was not sure she believed it, but it was a pretty story. She followed them along the side of the ship, to the bow, where they frolicked in the bow wave, rolling on their sides to look up at her without losing an inch.

She was almost in the narrowest point of the bow before she realized Thom Merrilin was there before her, smiling down at the dolphins a bit sadly, his cloak catching the wind like the cloud of sails above. He had rid himself of his belongings. He did seem familiar; truly he did. "Are you not happy, Master Merrilin?"

He glanced at her sideways. "Please, call me Thom, my Lady."

"Thom, then. But not my Lady. I am only Mistress Trakand here."

"As you say, Mistress Trakand," he said with a hint of a smile.

"How can you look at these dolphins and be unhappy, Thom?"

“They are free,” he murmured, in such a tone that she was not sure he was answering her. “They have no decisions to make, no prices to pay. Not a worry in the world, except finding fish to eat. And sharks, I suppose. And lionfish. And likely a hundred more things I don’t know. Perhaps it is not such an enviable life at that.”

“Do you envy them?” He did not answer, but that was the wrong question anyway. She needed to make him smile again. No, laugh. For some reason she was sure if she could make him laugh, she would remember where she had seen him before. She chose another topic, one that should be nearer his heart. “Do you mean to compose the epic of Rand, Thom?” Epics were for bards, not gleemen, but there could be no harm in a little flattery. “The epic of the Dragon Reborn. Loial means to write a book, you know.”

“Perhaps I will, Mistress Trakand. Perhaps. But neither my composing nor the Ogier’s book will make much difference in the long run. Our stories will not survive, in the long run. When the next Age comes - ” He grimaced, and tugged one of his mustaches. “Come to think of it, that may be no more than a year or two off. How is the end of an Age marked? It cannot always be a cataclysm on the order of the Breaking. But then, if the Prophecies are to be believed, this one will be. That is the trouble with prophecy. The original is always in the Old Tongue, and maybe High Chant as well: if you don’t know what a thing means beforehand, there’s no way to puzzle it out. Does it mean what it says, or is it a flowery way of saying something entirely different?”

“You were talking of your epic,” she said, trying to guide him back, but he shook his shaggy white head.

“I was talking of change. My epic, if I compose it - and Loial’s book - will be no more than seed, if we are both lucky. Those who know the truth will die, and their grandchildren’s grandchildren will remember something different. And their grand-children’s grandchildren something else again. Two dozen generations, and you may be the hero of it, not Rand.”

“Me?” she laughed.

“Or maybe Mat, or Lan. Or even myself.” He grinned at her, warming his weathered face. “Thom Merrillin. Not a gleeman - but what? Who can say? Not eating fire, but breathing it. Hurling it about like an Aes Sedai.” He flourished his cloak. “Thom Merrillin, the mysterious hero, toppling mountains and raising up kings.” The grin became a rich belly laugh. “Rand al’Thor may be lucky if the next Age remembers his name correctly.”

She was right; it was not just a feeling. That face, that mirth-filled laugh; she did remember them. But from where? She had to keep him talking. “Does it always happen that way? I do not think anyone doubts, say, that Artur Hawkwing conquered an empire. The whole world, or near enough.”

“Hawkwing, young Mistress? He made an empire, all right, but do you think he did everything the books and stories and epics say he did? The way they say he did it? Killed the hundred best men of an opposing army, one by one? The two armies just stood there while one of the generals - a king - fought a hundred duels?”

“The books say he did.”

“There isn’t time between sunrise and sunset for one man to fight a hundred duels, girl.” She almost stopped him short - girl? She was Daughter-Heir of Andor, not girl - but he had the bit in his teeth. “And that is only a thousand years back. Go back further, back to the oldest tales I know, from the Age before the Age of Legends. Did Mosk and Merk really fight with spears of fire, and were they even giants? Was Elsbet really queen of the whole world, and was Anla really her sister? Was Anla truly the Wise Counselor, or was it someone else? As well ask what sort of animal ivory comes from, or what kind of plant grows silk. Unless that comes from an animal, too.”

“I do not know about those other questions,” Elayne said a bit stiffly; being called girl still rankled, “but you could ask the Sea Folk about ivory and silk.”

He laughed again - as she had hoped, though it still did no more than drive home the certainty that she knew him - but instead of calling her foolish, as she half-expected and was prepared for, he said, “Practical and to the point, just like your mother. Both feet on the earth and few flights of fancy.”

She lifted her chin a little, made her face cooler. She might be passing herself off as simple Mistress Trakand, but this was something else. He was an amiable old man, and she did want to reason out the puzzle of him, but he was a gleeman after all, and he should not speak of a queen in such familiar tones. Oddly, infuriatingly, he appeared amused. Amused!

“The Atha’an Miere do not know, either,” he said. “They see no more of the lands beyond the Aiel Waste than a few miles around the handful of harbors where they are permitted to land. Those places are walled high, and the walls guarded so they cannot even climb up to see what is on the other side. If one of their ships makes landfall anywhere else - or any ship not theirs; only the Sea Folk are allowed to come there - that ship and its crew are never seen again. And that is almost as much as I can tell you after more years of asking than I like to think of. The Atha’an Miere keep their secrets, but I do not believe they know much to keep here. From what I have been able to learn, the Cairhienin were treated the same, when they still had the right to travel the Silk Path across the Waste. Cairhienin traders never saw anything but one walled town, and those who wandered from it vanished.”

Elayne found herself studying him much as she had the dolphins. What kind of man was this? Twice now he might have laughed at her - he had been amused just then, as much as she hated to admit it - but instead he talked to her as seriously as . . . Well, as father to daughter. “You might find a few answers on this ship, Thom. They were bound east until we convinced the Sailmistress to take us to Tanchico. To Shara, the Cargomaster said, east of Mayene; that must mean beyond the Waste.”

He stared at her for a moment. “Shara, you say? I have never heard any such name before. Is Shara city or nation or both? Perhaps I will learn a little more.”

What did I say? she wondered. I said something to make him think. Light! I told him we convinced Coine to change her plans. It could not make any difference, but she scolded herself severely. A careless word to this nice old man might do no harm, but the same might kill her in Tanchico, and Nynaeve, too, not to mention the thief-catcher and Thom himself. If he was such a nice old man. “Thom, why did you come with us? Just because Moiraine asked?”

His shoulders shook; she realized he was laughing at himself. “As to that, who can say? Aes Sedai asking favors are not easily resisted. Perhaps it was the prospect of your pleasant company for the voyage. Or perhaps I decided Rand is old enough to look after himself for a while.”

He laughed out loud, and she had to laugh with him. The idea of this white-haired old fellow looking after Rand. The feeling that she could trust him came back, stronger than ever, as he looked at her. Not because he could laugh at himself, or not only that. She could not have given a reason beyond the fact that, looking up into those blue eyes, she could not make herself believe this man would ever do anything to harm her.

The urge to pull one of his mustaches again was almost overwhelming, but she schooled her hands to stillness. She was not a child, after all. A child. She opened her mouth - and suddenly everything went out of her head.

“Please excuse me, Thom,” she said hurriedly. “I must. . . . Excuse me.” She started toward the stern quickly, not waiting for a reply. He probably thought the ship’s motion had upset her stomach. Wavedancer was pitching more rapidly, moving faster through the great sea swells as the wind freshened.

Two men stood at the wheel on the sterndeck, the muscle of both needed to hold the vessel on course. The Sailmistress was not on deck, but the Windfinder was, standing at the rail beyond the wheelmen, bare to the waist like the men, studying the sky where billowing clouds rolled more fiercely than the ocean. For once it was not Jorin’s state of dress - or undress - that bothered Elayne. The glow of a woman embracing saidar surrounded her, dearly visible despite the lurid light. That was what she had felt, what had drawn her. A woman channeling.

Elayne stopped short of the sterndeck to study what she was doing. The flows of Air and Water the Windfinder handled were cable-thick, yet her weaving was intricate, almost delicate, and it reached as far as the eye could see across the waters, a web drawn across the sky. The wind rose higher, higher; the wheelmen strained, and Wavedancer flew through the sea. The weaving stopped, the glow of saidar vanished, and Jorin slumped at the rail, leaning on her hands.

Elayne climbed the ladder quietly, yet the Sea Folk woman spoke in a soft voice without turning her head as soon as she was near enough to hear. "In the middle as I worked, I thought that you were watching me. I could not stop then; there might have been a storm even Wavedancer could not survive. The Sea of Storms is well named; it will throw up bad winds enough without my help. I meant not to do this at all, but Coine said we must go quickly. For you, and for the Coramoor." She raised her eyes to peer at the sky. "This wind will hold until morning, if it pleases the Light."

"This is why the Sea Folk do not carry Aes Sedai?" Elayne said, taking a place beside her at the rail. "So the Tower won't learn Windfinders can channel. That is why it was your decision to let us aboard, not your sister's. Jorin, the Tower will not try to stop you. There is no law in the Tower to stop any woman channeling, even if she is not Aes Sedai."

"Your White Tower will interfere. It will try to reach onto our ships, where we are free of the land and landsmen. It will try to tie us to itself, binding us away from the sea." She sighed heavily. "The wave that has passed cannot be called back."

Elayne wished she could tell her it was not so, but the Tower did seek out women and girls who could learn to channel, both to bolster the numbers of Aes Sedai, dwindling now compared to what they once had been, and because of the danger of learning unguided. In truth, a woman who could be taught to touch the True Source usually found herself in the Tower whatever she wanted, at least until she was trained enough not to kill herself or others by accident.

After a moment Jorin went on. "It is not all of us. Only some. We send a few girls to Tar Valon so Aes Sedai will not come looking among us. No ship will carry Aes Sedai whose Windfinder can weave the winds. When you first named yourselves, I thought you must know me, but you did not speak, and you asked passage, and I hoped perhaps you were not Aes Sedai despite your rings. A foolish hope. I could feel the strength of you both. And now the White Tower will know."

"I cannot promise to keep your secret, but I will do what I can." The woman deserved more. "Jorin, I swear by the honor of House Trakand of Andor that I will do my best to keep your secret from any who would harm you or your people, and that if I must reveal it to anyone, I will do all in my ability to protect your people from interference. House Trakand is not without influence, even in the Tower." And I will make mother use it, if need be. Somehow.

"If it pleases the Light," Jorin said fatalistically, "all will be well. All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well, if it pleases the Light."

"There was a damane on that Seanchan ship, wasn't there?" The Windfinder gave her a quizzical look. "One of the captive women who can channel."

"You see deeply for one so young. That is why I first thought you might not be Aes Sedai, because you are so young; I have daughters older than you, I think. I did not know she was a captive; that makes me wish we could have saved her. Wavedancer outran the Seanchan vessel easily at first - we had heard of the Seanchan and their vessels with ribbed sails, that they demanded strange oaths and punished those who would not give them - but then the - damane? - broke two of his masts, and they boarded him with swords. I managed to start fires on the Seanchan vessel - weaving Fire is difficult for me beyond lighting a lamp, but it pleased the Light to make it enough - and Toram led the crew to fight the Seanchan back to their own decks. We cut loose the boarding hooks, and their ship drifted away, burning. They were too occupied with trying to save him to bother us as we limped away. I regretted seeing him burn and sink, then; he was a fine ship, I think, for heavy seas. Now I regret it because we might have saved the woman, the damane. Even if she damaged him, perhaps she would not have, free. The Light illumine her soul, and the waters take her peacefully."

Telling the story had saddened her. She needed to be distracted. "Jorin, why do the Atha'an Miere call ships 'he'? Everyone else I've ever met calls them 'she.' I don't suppose it makes any difference, but why?"

"The men will give you a different answer," the Windfinder said, smiling, "speaking of strength and grandness and the like as men will, but this is the truth. A ship is alive, and he is like a man, with a true man's heart." She rubbed the rail fondly, as if stroking something alive, something that could feel her caress. "Treat him well and care for him properly, and he will fight for you against the worst sea. He will fight to keep you alive even after the sea has long since given

him his own deathstroke. Neglect him, though, ignore the small warnings he gives of danger, and he will drown you in a flat sea beneath a cloudless sky.”

Elayne hoped Rand was not as fickle as that. Then why does he hop about, glad to see me go one minute and sending Juilin Sandar after me the next? She told herself to stop thinking about him. He was a long way away. There was nothing to be done about him now.

She glanced over her shoulder toward the bow. Thom was gone. She was sure she had found the key to his puzzle, just before she had felt the Windfinder channeling. Something to do with his smile. It was gone, whatever it was. Well, she meant to find it again before they reached Tanchico, if she had to sit on him. But he would still be there in the morning. “Jorin, how long before we reach Tanchico? I have been told rakers are the fastest ships in the world, but how fast?”

“To Tanchico? To serve the Coramoor, we will not stop at any port between. Perhaps ten days, if I can weave the winds well enough, if it pleases the Light that I find the proper currents. Perhaps as few as seven or eight, with the grace of the Light.”

“Ten days?” Elayne gasped. “It cannot be possible.” She had seen maps, after all.

The other woman’s smile was half pride, half indulgence. “As you yourself said, the fastest ships in the world. The next quickest take half again as long over any stretch, and most more than twice as long. Coasting craft that hug the shore and anchor in the shallows each night . . .” She sniffed contemptuously. “. . . require ten times as much.”

“Jorin, would you teach me to do what you were just doing?”

The Windfinder stared, her dark eyes wide and shining in the fading light. “Teach you? But you are Aes Sedai.”

“Jorin, I have never woven a flow half as thick as those you were handling. And the scope of it! I am astounded, Jorin.”

The Windfinder stared a moment more, no longer in amazement, but as if trying to fix Elayne’s face in her mind. Finally she kissed the fingers of her right hand and pressed them to Elayne’s lips. “If it pleases the Light, we both shall learn.”

Chapter 21 - Into the Heart

Tairen nobility filled the great vaulted chamber with its huge polished redstone columns, ten feet thick, rising into shadowed heights above golden lamps hanging on golden chains. The High Lords and Ladies were arrayed in a thick hollow circle under the great dome at the chamber's heart with the lesser nobles ranked behind, row on row back into the forest of columns, all in their best velvets and silks and laces, wide sleeves and ruffed collars and peaked hats, all murmuring uneasily so the towering ceiling echoed the sounds of nervous geese. Only the High Lords themselves had ever before been bidden to this place, called the Heart of the Stone, and they had come only four times a year, at the twin demands of law and custom. They came now, all who were not out in the countryside somewhere, at the summons of their new lord, the maker of law and breaker of custom.

The packed crowd gave way before Moiraine as soon as they saw who she was, so she and Egwene moved in a pocket of open space. Lan's absence irritated Moiraine. It was not like the man to vanish when she might need him; his way usually was to watch over her as if she could not fend for herself without a guardian. Had she not been able to feel the bond linking them and known he could not be very far from the Stone, she might have worried.

He fought the strings Nynaeve was tying to him as hard as he had ever fought Trollocs in the Blight, but much as he might deny it, that young woman had bound him as tightly as she herself did, though in other ways. He might as well try tearing steel with his hands as those ties. She was not jealous, exactly, but Lan had been her sword arm, her shield and companion for too many years for her to give him up lightly. I have done what had to be done, there. She will have him if I die, and not before. Where is the man? What is he doing?

One red-gowned lace-ruffed woman, a horse-faced Lady of the Land called Leitha, drew her skirts away a bit too assiduously, and Moiraine looked at her. Merely looked, without slowing her step, but the woman shuddered and dropped her eyes. Moiraine nodded to herself. She could accept that these people hated Aes Sedai, but she would not endure open rudeness on top of veiled slights. Besides, the rest shied back another step after seeing Leitha faced down.

"Are you certain he said nothing of what he means to announce?" she asked quietly. In this gabble, no one three paces away could have made out a word. The Tairens kept about that distance now. She did not like being overheard.

"Nothing," Egwene said just as softly. She sounded as irritated as Moiraine felt.

"There have been rumors."

"Rumors? What sort of rumors?"

The girl was not that good at controlling her face and voice; dearly she had not heard the tales of doings in the Two Rivers. Betting that Rand had not, though, might be putting her horse at a ten-foot fence. "You should bring him to confide in you. He needs an attentive ear. It will help him, to talk out his troubles with someone he can trust." Egwene gave her a sidelong glance. She was becoming too sophisticated for such simple methods. Still, Moiraine had spoken unadorned truth - the boy did need someone to listen and by listening lighten his burdens - and it might work.

"He will not confide in anyone, Moiraine. He hides his pains, and hopes he can deal with them before anyone notices." Anger flashed across Egwene's face. "The wool-brained mule!"

Moiraine felt a momentary sympathy. The girl could not be expected to accept Rand's strolling about arm in arm with Elayne, kissing in corners where they thought themselves unseen. And Egwene did not know the half, yet. Commiseration did not last. There was too much of importance to deal with for the girl to be fretting over what she could not have in any case.

Elayne and Nynaeve should be aboard the raker by now, out of the way. Their voyage might eventually tell her if her suspicions about the Windfinders were correct. That was a minor point, though. At worst the pair had enough gold to buy a ship and hire a crew - which might be necessary given the rumors of Tanchico - with enough left for the bribes so often necessary with Taraboner officials. Thom Merrilin's room was empty, and her informants had reported him muttering about Tanchico on his way out of the Stone; he would see they got a good crew and found the right officials.

The purported plan with Mazrim Taim was much the more likely of the two, but her messages to the Amyrlin should have taken care of that. The two young women could handle the much less likely eventuality of a mysterious danger hidden in Tanchico, and they were out of her hair and away from Rand. She only regretted that Egwene had refused to go with them. Tar Valon would have been best for all three, but Tanchico would do.

“Speaking of wool-brained, do you mean to continue with this plan to go into the Waste?”

“I do,” the girl said firmly. She needed to be back in the Tower, training her strength. What was Sivan thinking of? She will probably give me one of those sayings about boats and fish, when I can ask her.

At least Egwene would be out of the way, too, and the Aiel girl would look after her. Perhaps the Wise Ones really could teach her something of Dreaming. That had been the most astounding letter from them, not that she could afford to heed most of it. Egwene’s journey into the Waste might be useful in the long run.

The last line of Tairens gave way, making a little hollow, and she and Egwene faced the open area under the vast dome. The nobles’ ill ease was most evident here; many studied their feet like sulky children, and others stared at nothing, looking at anything but where they were. Here was where Callandor had been kept before Rand took it. Here beneath this dome, untouched by any hand for more than three thousand years, untouchable by any hand but that of the Dragon Reborn. Tairens did not like admitting that the Heart of the Stone existed.

“Poor woman,” Egwene murmured.

Moiraine followed the girl’s gaze. The High Lady Alteima, already gowned and ruffed and capped in shimmering white as Tairen widows were though her husband still lingered, was perhaps the most composed of all the nobles. She was a slender, lovely woman, made more so by her small sad smile, with large brown eyes and long black hair hanging halfway to her waist. A tall woman, though Moiraine admitted she did tend to judge such things by her own height, and rather too full-bosomed. Cairhienin were not a tall people, and she had been considered short even among them.

“Yes, a poor woman,” she said, but she did not mean it for sympathy. It was good to see Egwene had not yet grown sophisticated enough to see beneath the surface all the time. The girl was already far less malleable than she should have been for years yet. She needed to be shaped before she was hardened.

Thom had missed, with Alteima. Or perhaps he had not wanted to see; he seemed to have a strange reluctance to move against women. The High Lady Alteima was far more dangerous than her husband or her lover, both of whom she had manipulated without either knowing it. Perhaps more dangerous than anyone else in Tear, man or woman. She would find others to use soon enough. It was Alteima’s style to remain in the background and pull strings. Something would have to be done about her.

Moiraine shifted her gaze along the rows of High Lords and Ladies, until she found Estanda, in brocaded yellow silks with a large ivory lace ruff and a tiny matching cap. A certain sternness marred the beauty of her face, and the occasional glances she gave Alteima were iron hard. Feelings between the two went beyond mere rivalry; had they been men, one would have shed the other’s blood in a duel years since. If that antagonism could be sharpened, Alteima would be too busy to make trouble for Rand.

For an instant she regretted sending Thom away. She did not like having to waste her time with these petty affairs. But he had too much influence with Rand; the boy had to depend on her counsel. Hers, and hers alone. The Light knew he was difficult enough without interference. Thom had been settling the boy down to rule Tear when he needed to be moving on to greater things. But that was dealt with for now. The problem of bringing Thom Merrill to heel could be managed later. Rand was the dilemma now. What did he mean to announce?

“Where is he? He has learned the first art of kings, it seems. Making people wait.”

She did not realize she had spoken aloud until Egwene gave her a startled look. She smoothed the irritation from her face immediately. Rand would appear eventually, and she would learn what he meant to do. Learn along with everyone else. She nearly ground her teeth. That blind fool of a boy, running headlong through the night with never a care for cliffs, never thinking he could carry the world over as well as himself.

If only she could keep him from rushing back to save his village. He would want to, but he could not afford to do so now. Perhaps he did not know; it could be hoped.

Mat stood across from them, uncombed and slouching with his hands in the pockets of his high-collared green coat. It was half-unbuttoned, as usual, and his boots were scuffed, in sharp contrast to the precise elegance around him. He shifted nervously as he saw her looking at him, then gave one of his rudely defiant grins. At least he was here, under her eye. Mat Cauthon was an exhausting young man to keep track of, avoiding her spies with ease; he never gave any sign that he knew they were there, but her eyes-and-ears reported that he seemed to slide out of sight whenever they got too close.

"I think he sleeps in his coats," Egwene said disapprovingly. "On purpose. I wonder where Perrin is." She went on tiptoes, trying to search over the heads of the assemblage. "I don't see him."

Frowning, Moiraine scanned the crowd, not that she could make out much beyond the front row. Lan could have been back among the columns. She would not strain, though, or jump up on her toes like an anxious child. Lan was due a talking-to he would not soon forget when she laid hands on him. With Nynaeve tugging at him one way and ta'veren - Rand, at least - seemingly pulling another, she sometimes wondered how well their bond still held. At least his time with Rand was useful; it gave her another string to the young man.

"Perhaps he is with Faile," Egwene said. "He won't have run away, Moiraine. Perrin has a strong sense of duty."

Almost as strong as a Warder's, Moiraine knew, which was why she did not keep eyes-and-ears on him as she tried to with Mat. "Faile has been trying to talk him into leaving, girl." Quite possibly he was with her; he usually was. "Do not look so surprised. They often talk - and argue - where they can be overheard."

"I am not surprised you know," Egwene said dryly, "only that Faile would try to talk him out of what he knows he has to do."

"Perhaps she does not believe it as he does." Moiraine had not believed it herself, at first, had not seen it. Three ta'veren, all the same age, coming out of one village; she must have been blind not to realize they had to be connected. Everything had become much more complicated with that knowledge. Like trying to juggle three of Thom's colored balls one-handed and blindfolded; she had seen Thom do that, but she would not want to try. There was no guide to how they were connected, or what they were supposed to do; the Prophecies never mentioned companions.

"I like her," Egwene said. "She is good for him, just what he needs. And she cares for him deeply."

"I suppose she does." If Faile became too troublesome, Moiraine would have to have a talk with her, about the secrets Faile had been keeping from Perrin. Or have one of her eyes-and-ears do it. That should settle her down.

"You say it as if you don't believe it. They love each other, Moiraine. Can't you see that? Can't you even recognize a human emotion when you see one?"

Moiraine gave her a firm look, one that settled her on her heels in a satisfactory manner. The girl knew so little and thought she knew so much. Moiraine was about to tell her so in withering fashion when startled, even fearful, gasps rose from among the Tairens.

The crowd gave way hurriedly, more than eagerly, those in front ruthlessly forcing those behind farther back, opening a wide passage to the space beneath the dome. Rand strode down that corridor, looking straight ahead, imperious in a red coat embroidered with golden scrolls up his sleeves, cradling Callandor in his right arm like a scepter. It was not only he that made the Tairens give way, though. Behind him came perhaps a hundred Aiel, spears and arrow-nocked bows in hand, shoufa wrapped around their heads, black veils hiding everything but their eyes. Moiraine thought she recognized Rhuarc at the front, just behind Rand, but only by the way he moved. They were anonymous. Ready for killing. Plainly, whatever he meant to say, Rand intended to quell any resistance before it had a chance to coalesce.

The Aiel halted, but Rand kept on until he stood centered under the dome, then ran his eye around the gathering. He seemed surprised, and perhaps upset, at the sight of Egwene, but he gave Moiraine an infuriating smile, and Mat one that made the pair of them look like boys when Mat returned it. The Tairens were white-faced, not knowing whether to stare at Rand and Callandor or the veiled Aiel; either could be death in their midst.

“The High Lord Sunamon,” Rand said suddenly, and loudly, making that plump fellow jump, “has guaranteed me a treaty with Mayene, strictly following lines I gave him. He has guaranteed this with his life.” He laughed as if he had made a joke, and most of the nobles laughed with him. Not Sunamon, who looked distinctly ill. “If he fails,” Rand announced, “he has agreed to be hanged, and he will be obliged.” The laughter stopped. Sunamon’s face took on a sickly tinge of green. Egwene gave Moiraine a troubled glance; she was gripping her skirt with both hands. Moiraine only waited; he had not brought every noble within ten miles together to tell them of a treaty or threaten a fat fool. She made her hands let go of her own skirts.

Rand turned in a circle, weighing the faces he saw. “Because of this treaty, ships will soon be available to carry Tairen grain west, to find new markets.” There were a few appreciative murmurs at that, quickly stifled. “But there is more. The armies of Tear are to march.”

A cheer rose, tumultuous shouts ringing from the ceilings. Men capered, even the High Lords, and shook their fists over their heads, and tossed up peaked velvet hats. Women, smiling as rapturously as the men, bestowed kisses on the cheeks of those who would go to war, and delicately sniffed the tiny porcelain bottles of smelling salts no Tairen noblewoman would be without, pretending to be made faint by the news. “Illian shall fall!” someone cried, and hundreds of voices seized it like thunder. “Illian shall fall! Illian shall fall! Illian shall fall!”

Moiraine saw Egwene’s lips moving, the words crushed beneath the jubilation. She could read them, though. “No, Rand. Please, no. Please don’t.” On the far side of Rand, Mat was frowning in disapproving silence. They and she were the only ones not celebrating, aside from the ever-watchful Aiel and Rand himself. Rand’s smile was twisted contemptuously, and never touched his eyes. There was fresh sweat on his face. She met his sardonic stare and waited. There would be more, and not, she suspected, to her liking.

Rand raised his left hand. Slowly quiet fell, those in front anxiously shushing those behind. He waited for absolute silence. “The armies will move north, into Cairhien. The High Lord Meilan will command, and under him, the High Lords Gueyam, Aracome, Hearne, Maraconn and Simaan. The armies will be generously financed by the High Lord Torean, the wealthiest of you, who will accompany the armies to see that his money is spent wisely.”

Dead silence greeted this pronouncement. No one moved, though plain-faced Torean seemed to be having trouble standing.

Moiraine had to give Rand a mental bow for his choices. Sending those seven out of Tear neatly eviscerated the seven most dangerous plots against him, and none of those men trusted each other enough to scheme among themselves. Thom Merrill had given him good advice; obviously her spies had missed some of the notes he had had slipped into Rand’s pockets. But the rest? It was madness. He could have not have had this for an answer on the other side of that ter’angreal. It was not possible, surely.

Meilan obviously agreed with her, if not for the same reasons. He stepped forward hesitantly, a lean hard man but so frightened that the whites of his eyes showed all the way around. “My Lord Dragon . . .” He stopped, swallowed, and began again in a marginally stronger voice. “My Lord Dragon, intervening in a civil war is stepping into a bog. A dozen factions contend for the Sun Throne, with as many shifting alliances, each one betrayed every day. Besides that, bandits infest Cairhien as fleas on a wild boar. Starving peasants have stripped the land bare. I am reliably informed that they eat bark and leaves. My Lord Dragon, ‘a quagmire’ barely begins to describe - ”

Rand cut him off. “You do not want to extend Tear’s sway all the way to Kinslayer’s Dagger, Meilan? That is all right. I know who I mean to sit on the Sun Throne. You do not go to conquer, Meilan, but to restore order, and peace. And to feed the hungry. There is more grain in the granaries now than Tear could sell, and the farmers will harvest as much more this year, unless you disobey me. Wagons will carry it north behind the armies, and those peasants . . . Those peasants will not have to eat bark any longer, my Lord Meilan.” The tall High Lord opened his mouth again, and Rand

swung Callandor down, grounding its crystal point in front of him. "You have a question, Meilan?" Shaking his head, Meilan backed into the crowd as though trying to hide.

"I knew he would not start a war," Egwene said fiercely. "I knew it."

"You think there will be less killing in this?" Moiraine muttered. What was the boy up to? At least he was not running off to save his village while the Forsaken had their way with the rest of the world. "The corpses will be piled as high, girl. You will not know the difference between this and a war."

Attacking Illian and Sammael would have gained him time even if it grew into a stalemate. Time to learn his power, and perhaps to bring down one of his strongest enemies, to cow the rest. What did he gain by this? Peace for the land of her birth, starving Cairhienin fed; she would have applauded another time. It was laudably humane - and utterly senseless, now. Useless bloodshed, rather than confronting an enemy who would destroy him given the slightest opening. Why? Lanfear. What had Lanfear said to him? What had she done? The possibilities chilled Moiraine's heart. Rand would take closer watching than ever now. She would not allow him to turn to the Shadow.

"Ah, yes," Rand said as if just remembering something. "Soldiers don't know much about feeding hungry people, do they? For that, I think a kind, woman's heart is needed. My Lady Alteima, I regret intruding on your grief, but will you undertake to oversee distributing the food? You will have a nation to feed."

And power to gain, Moiraine thought. This was his first slip. Aside from deciding on Cairhien over Illian, of course. Alteima would certainly return to Tear on an equal footing with Meilan or Gueyam, ready for more plotting. She would have Rand assassinated before that, if he was not careful. Perhaps an accident could be arranged in Cairhien.

Alteima swept a graceful curtsy, spreading her full white skirts, only a touch of her surprise showing. "As my Lord Dragon commands, so do I obey. It will please me greatly to serve the Lord Dragon."

"I was sure it would," Rand said wryly. "As much as you love your husband, you'll not want him with you in Cairhien. Conditions will be hard, for a sick man. I took the liberty of having him moved to the High Lady Estanda's apartments. She will care for him while you are away, and send him to meet you in Cairhien when he is well." Estanda smiled, a tight smile of triumph. Alteima's eyes rolled back in her head, and she crumpled in a heap.

Moiraine shook her head slightly. He truly was harder than he had been. More dangerous. Egwene started toward the fallen woman, but Moiraine put a hand on her arm. "I think she was only overcome by emotion. I can recognize it, you see. The ladies are tending her." Several of them had clustered around, patting Alteima's wrists and passing smelling salts under her nose. She coughed and opened her eyes, and looked ready to faint again when she saw Estanda standing over her.

"Rand just did something very clever, I think," Egwene said in a flat voice. "And very cruel. He has a right to look ashamed."

Rand did look it at that, grimacing at the floorstones under his boots. Perhaps he was not as hard as he was trying to be.

"Not undeserved, however," Moiraine observed. The girl showed promise, picking up on what she did not understand. But she still needed to learn to control her emotions, to see what had to be done as well as she saw what she wished could be done. "Let us hope he is finished with being clever for today."

Very few in the great chamber understood exactly what had happened, only that Alteima's fainting had upset the Lord Dragon. A few in the back raised shouts of "Cairhien shall fall!" but the cry did not take hold.

"With you to lead us, my Lord Dragon, we shall conquer the world!" a lumpy-faced young man shouted, half-supporting Torean. Estanda, Torean's eldest son; the lumpy-faced resemblance was clear, though the father was still mumbling to himself.

Jerking his head up, Rand appeared startled. Or perhaps angry. "I will not be with you. I am . . . going away for a time." That certainly brought silence again. Every eye was on him, but his attentions were all on Callandor. The crowd

flinched as he lifted the crystal blade before his face. Sweat rolled down his face, much more sweat than before. "The Stone held Callandor before I came. The Stone should hold it again, until I return."

Suddenly the transparent sword blazed in his hands. Whirling it hilt uppermost, he drove it down. Into the stone floor. Bluish lightning arced wildly toward the dome above. The stone rumbled loudly, and the Stone shook, dancing, heaving screaming people from their feet.

Moiraine pushed Egwene off of her while tremors still reverberated through the chamber, and scrambled erect. What had he done? And why? Going away? It was the worst of all her nightmares.

The Aiel had already regained their feet. Everyone else lay stunned or huddled on hands and knees. Except for Rand. He was on one knee, both hands holding Callandor's hilt, with the blade driven halfway into the floorstones. The sword was clear crystal again. Sweat glistened on his face. He pried his hands away one finger at a time, held them cupped around the hilt yet not touching it. For a moment Moiraine thought he was going to take hold of it again, but instead he forced himself to his feet. He did have to force himself; she was certain of it.

"Look at this while I am gone." His voice was lighter, more the way it had been when she first found him in his village, but no less sure or firm than it had been moments before. "Look at it, and remember me. Remember I will come back for it. If anyone wants to take my place, all they have to do is pull it out." He wagged a finger at them, grinning almost mischievously. "But remember the price of failure."

Turning on his heel, he marched out of the chamber, the Aiel falling in behind him. Staring at the sword rising out of the floor of the Heart, the Tairens got to their feet more slowly. Most looked ready to run, but too frightened to.

"That man!" Egwene grumbled, dusting off her green linen dress. "Is he mad?" She dapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh, Moiraine, he isn't, is he? Is he? Not yet."

"The Light send he is not," Moiraine muttered. She could not take her eyes from the sword any more than the Tairens could. The Light take the boy. Why could he not have remained the amenable youngling she had found in Emond's Field? She made herself start after Rand. "But I will find out."

Half-running, they caught up quickly in a broad, tapestry-lined hallway. The Aiel, veils hanging loose now but easily raised if needed, moved aside without slowing. They glanced at her, and at Egwene, hard faces unchanging but eyes touched by the wariness Aiel always had around Aes Sedai.

How they could be uneasy at her while calmly following Rand, she did not understand. Learning more than fragments about them was difficult. They answered questions freely-about anything that was of no interest to her. Her informants and her own eavesdropping overheard nothing, and her network of eyes-and-ears would no longer try. Not since one woman had been left bound and gagged, hanging by her ankles from battlements and staring wild-eyed at the four-hundred-foot drop beneath her, and not since the man who had simply disappeared. The man was just gone; the woman, refusing to go higher than the ground floor, had been a constant reminder until Moiraine sent her into the country.

Rand did not slow down any more than the Aiel when she and Egwene fell in on either side of him. His glance was wary, too, but in a different way, and touched with exasperated anger. "I thought you were gone," he said to Egwene. "I thought you went with Elayne and Nynaeve. You should have. Even Tanchico is . . . Why did you stay?"

"I won't be staying much longer," Egwene said. "I am going to the Waste with Aviendha, to Rhuidean, to study with the Wise Ones."

He missed a step as the girl mentioned the Waste, glancing at her uncertainly, then strode on. He seemed composed now, too much so, a boiling teakettle with the lid strapped down and the spout plugged. "Do you remember swimming in the Waterwood?" he said quietly. "I used to float on my back in a pool and think the hardest thing I'd ever have to do was plow a field, unless maybe it was shearing sheep. Shearing from sunup till bedtime, hardly stopping to eat until the clip was in."

“Spinning,” Egwene said. “I hated it worse than scrubbing floors. Twisting the threads makes your fingers so sore.”

“Why did you do it?” Moiraine demanded before they could go on with this childhood reminiscing.

He gave her a sidelong look, and a smile mocking enough to belong to Mat. “Could I really have hung her, for trying to kill a man who was plotting to kill me? Would there be more justice in that than in what I did?” The grin slid from his face. “Is there justice in anything I do? Sunamon will hang if he fails. Because I said so. He’ll deserve it after the way he’s tried to take advantage, with never a care if his own people starved, but he’ll not go to the gallows for that. He will hang because I said he would. Because I said it.”

Egwene laid a hand on his arm, but Moiraine would not allow him to sidestep. “You know that is not what I mean.”

He nodded; this time his smile had a frightening, rictus quality. “Callandor. With that in my hands, I can do anything. Anything. I know I can do anything. But now, it’s a weight off my shoulders. You don’t understand, do you?” She did not, though it nettled her that he saw it. She kept silent, and he went on. “Perhaps it will help if you know it comes from the Prophecies.

“Into the heart he thrusts his sword,

into the heart, to hold their hearts.

Who draws it out .shall follow after,

What hand can grasp that fearful blade?

“You see? Straight from the Prophecies.”

“You forget one thing,” she told him tightly. “You drew Callandor in fulfillment of prophecy. The safeguards that held it awaiting you for three thousand years and more are gone. It is the Sword That Cannot Be Touched no longer. I could channel it free myself. Worse, any of the Forsaken could. What if Lanfear returns? She could use Callandor no more than I, but she could take it.” He did not react to the name. Because he did not fear her - in which case he was a fool - or for another reason? “If Sammael or Rahvin or any male Forsaken puts his hand on Callandor, he can wield it as well as you. Think of facing the power you give up so casually. Think of that power in the hands of the Shadow.”

“I almost hope they’ll try.” A threatening light shone in his eyes; they seemed gray storm clouds. “There is a surprise awaiting anyone who tries to channel Callandor out of the Stone, Moiraine. Do not think of taking it to the Tower for safekeeping; I could not make the trap pick and choose. The Power is all it needs to spring and reset, ready to trap again. I am not giving Callandor up forever. Just until I . . .” He took a deep breath. “Callandor will stay there until I come back for it. By being there, reminding them of who I am and what I am, it makes sure I can come back without an army. A haven of sorts, with the likes of Alteima and Sunamon to welcome me home. If Alteima survives the justice her husband and Estanda will mete out, and Sunamon survives mine. Light, what a wretched tangle.”

He could not make it selective, or would not? She was determined not to underrate what he might be capable of. Callandor belonged in the Tower, if he would not wield it as he should, in the Tower till he would wield it. “Just until” what? He had been intending to say something other than “until I come back.” But what?

“And where are you going? Or do you mean to keep it a mystery?” She was quietly vowing not to let him escape again, to turn him somehow if he meant to go running off to the Two Rivers, when he surprised her.

“Not a mystery, Moiraine. Not from you and Egwene, anyway.” He looked at Egwene and said one word. “Rhuidean.”

Wide-eyed, the girl appeared as astounded as if she had never heard the name before. For that matter, Moiraine felt scarcely less. There was a murmur among the Aiel, but when she glanced back they were striding along with no expression whatsoever. She wished she could make them leave, but they would not go at her command, and she would not ask Rand to send them away. It would not help her with him to ask favors, especially when he might well refuse.

“You are not an Aiel clan chief, Rand,” she said firmly, “and have no need to be one. Your struggle is on this side of the Dragonwall. Unless.... Does this come from your answers in the ter’angreal? Cairhien, and Callandor, and Rhuidean? I told you those answers can be cryptic. You could be misunderstanding them, and that could prove fatal. To more than you.”

“You must trust me, Moiraine. As I have so often had to trust you.” His face might as well have belonged to an Aiel for all she could read in it.

“I will trust you for now. Just do not wait to seek my guidance until it is too late.”

I will not let you go to the Shadow. I have worked too long to allow that. Whatever it takes.

Chapter 22 - Out of the Stone

It was a strange procession Rand led out of the Stone and eastward, with white clouds shading the midday sun and a breath of air stirring across the city. By his order there had been no announcement, no proclamation, but slowly word spread of something: citizens stopped whatever they were doing and ran for vantage points. The Aiel were marching through the city, marching out of the city. People who had not seen them come in the night, who had only half-believed they were in the Stone at all, increasingly lined the streets along the route, filled the windows, even climbed onto slate rooftops, straddling roof peaks and upturned corners. Murmurs ran as they counted the Aiel. These few hundred could never have taken the Stone. The Dragon banner still flew above the fortress. There must yet be thousands of Aiel in there. And the Lord Dragon.

Rand rode easily in his shirtsleeves, sure none of the onlookers could take him for anyone out of the ordinary. An outlander, rich enough to ride - and on a superb dappled stallion, best of the Tairen bloodstock - a rich man traveling in the oddest of odd company, but surely just another man for that. Not even the leader of this strange company; that title was surely assigned to Lan or Moiraine despite the fact that they rode some little distance behind him, directly ahead of the Aiel. The soft awed susurrant that accompanied his passing certainly rose for the Aiel, not him. These Tairen folk might even take him for a groom, riding his master's horse. Well, no, not that; not out in front as he was. It was a fine day, anyway. Not sweltering, merely warm. No one expected him to mete out justice, or rule a nation. He could simply enjoy riding in anonymity, enjoy the rare breeze. For a time he could forget the feel of his heron-branded palms on the reins. For a little longer anyway, he thought. A little longer.

"Rand," Egwene said, "do you really think it was right to let the Aiel take all those things?" He looked around as she heeled her gray mare, Mist, up beside him. From

somewhere she had gotten a dark green dress with narrow divided skirts, and a green velvet band held her hair at the nape of her neck.

Moiraine and Lan still hung back half a dozen strides, she on her white mare in a full-skirted blue silk riding dress slashed with green, her dark hair caught in a golden net, he astride his great black warhorse, in a color-shifting Warder's cloak that probably brought as many oohs and aahs as the Aiel. When the breeze stirred the cloak, shades of green and brown and gray rippled across it; when it hung still it somehow seemed to fade into whatever was beyond it, so the eye appeared to be seeing through parts of Lan and his mount. It was not comfortable to look at.

Mat was there, too, slumped in his saddle and looking resigned, trying to keep apart from the Warder and Aes Sedai. He had chosen a nondescript brown gelding, an animal he called Pips; it took a good eye to notice the deep chest and strong withers that promised blunt-nosed Pips could likely match Rand's stallion or Lan's for speed and endurance. Mat's decision to come had been a surprise; Rand still did not know why. Friendship, maybe, and then again, maybe not. Mat could be odd in what he did and why.

"Didn't your friend Aviendha explain to you about 'the fifth'?" he asked.

"She mentioned something, but . . . Rand, you don't think she . . . took . . . things, too?"

Behind Moiraine and Lan, behind Mat, behind Rhuarc at their head, the Aiel walked in long lines to either side of loaded pack mules, rank on rank four abreast. When Aiel took one of the holds of an enemy clan in the Waste, by custom - or maybe law; Rand did not understand it exactly - they carried away one fifth of all it contained, excepting only food. They had seen no reason not to treat the Stone the same. Not that the mules held more than the barest fraction of a fraction of a fifth of the Stone's treasures. Rhuarc said greed had killed more men than steel. The wickerwork pack hampers, topped with rolled carpets and wall hangings, were lightly laden. Ahead lay an eventual hard crossing of the Spine of the World, and then a far harder trek across the Waste.

When do I tell them? he wondered. Soon, now; it has to be soon. Moiraine would doubtless think it daring, a bold stroke; she might even approve. Maybe. She thought she knew his whole plan, now, and made no bones of disapproving that; no doubt she wanted it over and done as soon as possible. But the Aiel. . . . What if they refuse? Well, if they refuse, they refuse. I have to do it. As for the fifth . . . He did not think it would have been possible to

stop the Aiel from taking it even had he wanted to, and he had not; they had earned their rewards, and he had no care to help Tairen lords keep what they had wrung from their people over generations.

“I saw her showing Rhuarc a silver bowl,” he said aloud. “From the way her sack clinked when she stuffed the bowl in, there was more silver in there. Or maybe gold. Do you disapprove?”

“No.” She drew the word out slowly, with a touch of doubt, but then her voice firmed. “I just hadn’t thought of her The Tairens would not have stopped at a fifth if the positions had been reversed. They’d have carted away whatever wasn’t part of the stonework, and stolen all the carts to haul it. Just because a people’s ways are different doesn’t mean they are wrong, Rand. You should know that.”

He laughed softly. This was almost like old times, he ready to explain why and how she was wrong, and she snatching his position and tossing his own unvoiced explanation at him. His stallion danced a few steps, catching his mood. He patted the dapple’s arched neck. A good day.

“That’s a fine horse,” she said. “What have you named him?”

“Jeade’en,” he said cautiously, losing some of his good spirits. He was a little ashamed of the name, of his reasons for choosing it. One of his favorite books had always been *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, and that great traveler had named his horse Jeade’en - True Finder, in the Old Tongue - because the animal had always been able to find the way home. It would have been nice to think Jeade’en might carry him home one day. Nice, but not likely, and he did not want anyone suspecting the cause for the name. Boyish fancies had no place in his life now. There was not much room for anything but what he had to do.

“A fine name,” she said absently. He knew she had read the book, too, and half-expected her to recognize the name, but she seemed to be mulling over something else, chewing her lower lip pensively.

He was content with silence. The last dregs of the city gave way to country and pitiful scattered farms. Not even a Congar or a Coplin, Two River folk notorious for laziness among other things, would keep a place as run-down and ramshackle as these rough stone houses, walls slanting as if about to topple over on the chickens scratching in the dirt. Sagging beams leaned against laurels or spicewoods. Roofs of cracked and broken slates all looked as if they leaked. Goats bleated disconsolately in stone pens that might have been thrown together hastily that morning. Barefoot men and women hoed stoop-shouldered in unfenced fields, not looking up even when the large party was passing. Redbeaks and thrushes warbling in the small thickets were not enough to lighten the feel of oppressive gloom.

I have to do something about this. I No, not now. First things first. I’ve done what I could for them in a few weeks. I can’t do anything more now. He tried not to look at the tumbledown farms. Were the olive groves in the south as bad? The people who worked those did not even own the land; it all belonged to High Lords. No. The breeze. Nice, the way it cuts the heat. I can enjoy it a bit longer. I have to tell them, soon now.

“Rand,” Egwene said abruptly, “I want to talk to you.” Something serious by her expression; those big dark eyes, fixed on him, held a light reminiscent of Nynaeve’s when she was about to lecture. “I want to talk about Elayne.”

“What about her?” he asked warily. He touched his pouch, where two letters crinkled against a small hard object. If they had not both been in the same elegantly flowing hand, he would not have believed they came from the same woman. And after all that kissing and snuggling. The High Lords were easier to understand than women.

“Why did you let her go in that way?”

Puzzled, he stared at her. “She wanted to go. I’d have had to tie her up to stop her. Besides, she’ll be safer in Tanchico than near me - or Mat - if we are going to attract bubbles of evil the way Moiraine says. You would be, too.”

“That isn’t what I mean at all. Of course she wanted to go. And you had no right to stop her. But why didn’t you tell her you wished she would stay?”

“She wanted to go,” he repeated, and grew more confused when she rolled her eyes as if he were speaking gibberish. If he had no right to stop Elayne, and she wanted to go, why was he supposed to try to talk her out of it? Especially when she was safer gone.

Moiraine spoke, right behind him. “Are you ready to tell me the next secret? It has been clear you were keeping something from me. At the least I might be able to tell you if you are leading us over a diff.”

Rand sighed. He had not heard her and Lan closing up on him. And Mat as well, although still holding a distance between himself and the Aes Sedai. Mat’s face was a study, doubt and reluctance and grim determination all running across it by turns, especially when he glanced at Moiraine. He never looked at her directly, only from the edge of his eye.

“Are you sure you want to come, Mat?” Rand asked.

Mat shrugged and affected a grin, not a very confident one. “Who could pass up a chance to see bloody Rhuidean?” Egwene raised her eyebrows at him. “Oh, pardon my language, Aes Sedai. I’ve heard you say as bad, and for less cause, I’ll wager.” Egwene stared at him indignantly, but spots of color in her cheeks said he had scored a hit.

“Be glad Mat is here,” Moiraine said to Rand, her voice cool, and not pleased. “You made a grave error letting Perrin run off, hiding his going from me. The world rests on your shoulders, but they must both support you or you will fall, and the world with you.” Mat flinched, and Rand thought he very nearly turned his gelding and rode away on the spot.

“I know my duty,” he told her. And I know my fate, he thought, but he did not say that aloud; he was not asking sympathy. “One of us had to go back, Moiraine, and Perrin wanted to. You’re willing to let anything go to save the world. I . . . I do what I have to.” The Warder nodded, though he said nothing; Lan would not disagree with Moiraine in front of others.

“And the next secret?” she said insistently. She would not give up until she had ferreted it out, and he had no reason to keep it secret any longer. Not this part of it.

“Portal Stones,” he said simply. “If we are lucky.”

“Oh, Light!” Mat groaned. “Bloody flaming Light! Don’t grimace at me, Egwene! Lucky? Isn’t once enough, Rand? You almost killed us, remember? No, worse than killed. I would rather ride back to one of those farms and ask for a job slopping pigs the rest of my life.”

“You can go your own way if you want, Mat,” Rand told him. Moiraine’s calm face was a mask over fury, but he ignored the icy stare that tried to still his tongue. Even Lan looked disapproving, for all his hard face did not change very much; the Warder believed in duty before anything else. Rand would do his duty, but his friends . . . He did not like making people do things; he would not do it to his friends. That much he could avoid, surely. “You’ve no reason to come to the Waste.”

“Oh, yes I do. At least. . . . Oh, burn me! I’ve one life to give away, don’t I? Why not like this?” Mat laughed nervously, and a bit wildly. “Bloody Portal Stones! Light!”

Rand frowned; he was the one they all said was supposed to go mad, but Mat was the one who seemed on the edge of it now.

Egwene blinked at Mat worriedly, but it was Rand she leaned toward. “Rand, Verin Sedai told me a little about Portal Stones. She told me about the . . . journey you took. Do you really mean to do this?”

“It’s what I have to do, Egwene.” He had to move quickly, and there was no quicker way than Portal Stones. Remnants of an Age older than the Age of Legends; even Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends had not understood them, it seemed. But there was no quicker way. If it worked the way he hoped.

Moiraine had listened to the exchange patiently. Especially to Mat's part of it, though Rand could not see why. Now she said, "Verin also told me of your journey using Portal Stones. That was only a few people and horses, not hundreds, and if you did not almost kill everyone as Mat says, it yet sounded an experience no one would wish to repeat. Nor did it turn out as you expected. It also required a great deal of the Power; almost enough to kill you at least, Verin said. Even if you leave most of the Aiel behind, do you dare risk the attempt?"

"I have to," he said, feeling at his belt pouch, at the small hard shape behind the letters, but she went right on as if he had not spoken.

"Are you even certain there is a Portal Stone in the Waste? Verin certainly knows more of them than I, but I have never heard of one. If there is, will it place us any closer to Rhuidean than we are right now?"

"Some six hundred or so years ago," he told her, "a peddler tried to get a look at Rhuidean." Another time it would have been a pleasure to be able to lecture her for a change. Not today. There was too much he did not know. "This fellow apparently didn't see anything of it; he claimed to have seen a golden city up in the clouds, drifting over the mountains."

"There are no cities in the Waste," Lan said, "in the clouds or on the ground. I've fought the Aiel. They have no cities."

Egwene nodded. "Aviendha told me she had never seen a city until she left the Waste."

"Maybe so," Rand said. "But the peddler also saw something sticking out of the side of one of those mountains. A Portal Stone. He described it perfectly. There isn't anything else like a Portal Stone. When I described one to the chief librarian in the Stone . . ." Without naming what he was after, he did not add. ". . . he recognized it, even if he didn't know what it was, enough to show me four on an old map of Tear - "

"Four?" Moiraine sounded startled. "All in Tear? Portal Stones are not so common as that."

"Four," Rand said definitely. The bony old librarian had been certain, even digging out a tattered yellowed manuscript telling of efforts to move the "unknown artifacts of an earlier Age" to the Great Holding. Every attempt had failed, and the Tairens had finally given up. That was confirmation to Rand; Portal Stones resisted being moved. "One lies not an hour's ride from where we are," he continued. "The Aiel allowed the peddler to leave, since he was a peddler. With one of his mules and as much water as he could carry on his back. Somehow he made it as far as a stedding in the Spine of the World, where he met a man named Soran Milo, who was writing a book called *The Killers of the Black Veil*. The librarian brought me a battered copy when I asked for books on the Aiel. Milo apparently based it all on Aiel who came to trade at the stedding, and he got almost everything wrong anyway, according to Rhuarc, but a Portal Stone can't be anything but a Portal Stone." He had examined other maps and manuscripts, dozens of them, supposedly studying Tear and its history, learning the land; no one could have had a clue what he intended before a few minutes ago.

Moiraine sniffed, and her white mare, Aldieb, frisked a few steps, picking up her irritation. "A supposed story told by a supposed peddler who claimed to have seen a golden city floating in the clouds. Has Rhuarc seen this Portal Stone? He has actually been to Rhuidean. Even if this peddler did go into the Waste, and did see a Portal Stone, it could have been anywhere. A man telling a story usually tries to better what really happened. A city floating in the clouds?"

"How do you know it doesn't?" he said. Rhuarc had been willing to laugh at all the wrong things Milo had written about Aiel, but he had not been very forthcoming about Rhuidean. No, more than that; or less, rather. The Aielman had refused even to comment on the parts of the book supposedly about Rhuidean. Rhuidean, in the lands of the Jenn Aiel, the clan which is not; that was almost the extent of what Rhuarc would say about it. Rhuidean was not to be spoken of.

The Aes Sedai was not best pleased with his flippant remark, but he did not care. She had kept too many secrets herself, made him follow her on blind trust too often. Let it be her turn. She had to learn that he was not a puppet. I'll take her advice when I think it's right, but I won't dance on Tar Valon's strings again. He would die on his own terms.

Egwene moved her gray horse closer, riding almost knee-to-knee with him. "Rand, do you really mean to risk our lives on a . . . a chance? Rhuarc did not tell you anything, did he? When I ask Aviendha about Rhuidean, she shuts up tight as a hickory nut." Mat looked sick.

Rand kept his face still, not letting his flash of shame show. He had not meant to frighten his friends. "There is a Portal Stone there," he maintained. He rubbed the hard shape in his pouch again. This had to work.

The librarian's maps had been old, but in a way that was a help. The grasslands they rode now had been forest when those maps were drawn, but few trees remained, far-scattered scraggly copses of white oak and pine and maidenhair, tall solitary trees he did not recognize, with gnarled spindly trunks. He could make out the shape of the land easily, hills shrouded mainly in high grass now.

On the maps two tall bent ridges, one dose behind the other, had pointed to the duster of round hills where the Portal Stone was. If the maps had been well made. If the librarian really had recognized his description, and the green diamond mark actually meant ancient ruins as he claimed. Why would he lie? I'm getting too suspicious. No, I have to be suspicious. As trusting as a viper, and as cold. He did not like it, though.

To the north he could just make out hills with no trees at all, speckled with moving shapes that must be horses. The High Lords' herds, grazing across the site of the old Ogier grove. He hoped Perrin and Loial had gotten away safely. Help them, Perrin, he thought. Help them somehow, because I can't.

The Ogier grove meant the folded ridges must be dose, and soon he spotted them a little to the south, like two arrows one inside the other, a few trees along the top making a thin line against the sky. Beyond, low round hills like grass-covered bubbles ran into one another. More hills than on the old map. Too many, for all the patch encompassed less than a square mile. If they did not correspond to the map, which one held the Portal Stone on its side?

"The Aiel have numbers," Lan said quietly, "and sharp eyes."

With a nod of gratitude, Rand reined Jeade'en in, falling back to put the problem before Rhuarc. He only described the Portal Stone, not saying what it was; there would be time enough for that when it was found. He was good at keeping secrets now. Rhuarc probably had no idea what a Portal Stone was, anyway. Few did except for Aes Sedai. He had not known until someone told him.

Striding along beside the dapple stallion, the Aielman frowned slightly - as much as a worried grimace from most other men - then nodded. "We can find this thing." He raised his voice. "Aethan Dor! Far Aldazar Din! Duadhe Mahdi'in! Far Dareir Mai! Seia Doon! Sha'mad Conde!"

As he called out, members of the named warrior societies trotted forward, until a good quarter of the Aiel clustered around him and Rand. Red Shields. Brothers of the Eagle. Water Seekers. Maidens of the Spear. Black Eyes. Thunder Walkers.

Rand picked out Egwene's friend, Aviendha, a tall, pretty woman with a haughty unsmiling stare. Maidens had guarded his door, but he did not think he had seen her before the Aiel gathered to leave the Stone. She looked back at him, proud as a green-eyed hawk, then tossed her head and turned her attention to the clan chief.

Well, I wanted to be ordinary again, he thought, a touch ruefully. The Aiel certainly gave him that. They offered even the clan chief only a respectful hearing, without any of the elaborate deference a lord would exact, and obedience that seemed between equals. He could hardly expect more for himself.

Rhuarc gave instructions in few words, and the listening Aiel fanned out ahead into the patch of hills, running easily, some veiling themselves just in case. The rest waited, standing or squatting beside the loaded pack mules.

They represented almost every clan - except the Jenn Aiel, of course; Rand could not get it straight whether the Jenn really existed or not, since the way the Aiel mentioned them, which they seldom did, it could be either way-including some clans that had blood feuds, and others that often fought each other. He had learned that much about them. Not for the first time, he wondered what had held them together so far. Was it just their prophecies of the Stone falling, and the search for He Who Comes With the Dawn?

“More than that,” Rhuarc said, and Rand realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud. “Prophecy brought us over the Dragonwall, and the name that is not spoken drew us to the Stone of Tear.” The name he meant was “People of the Dragon,” a secret name for the Aiel; only clan chiefs and Wise Ones knew or used it, apparently seldom and only with each other. “For the rest? No one may shed the blood of another of the same society, of course, yet mixing Shaarad with Goshien, Taardad and Nakai with Shaido Even I might have danced the spears with the Shaido, if the Wise Ones had not made everyone who crossed the Dragonwall swear water oath to treat any Aiel as of the same society on this side of the mountains. Even sneaking Shaido” He shrugged slightly. “You see? It is not easy, even for me.”

“These Shaido are enemies of yours?” Rand fumbled the name; in the Stone, the Aiel had gone by societies, not clans.

“We have avoided blood feud,” Rhuarc said, “but Taardad and Shaido have never been friendly; the septs sometimes raid each other, steal goats or cattle. But the oaths have held with us all against three blood feuds and a dozen old hatreds between clans or septs. It helps now that we journey toward Rhuidean, even if some will leave us before. None may shed the blood of one traveling to or from Rhuidean.” The Aielman looked up at Rand, face completely expressionless. “It may be that soon no one of us will shed another’s blood.” It was impossible to say whether he found the prospect pleasing.

An ululating cry came from one of the Maidens, standing atop a hill and waving her arms over her head.

“They have found your stone column, it seems,” Rhuarc said.

Gathering her reins, Moiraine gave Rand a level look as he rode past her, eagerly heeling Jeade’en to a gallop. Egwene reined her mare near to Mat, leaning from her saddle with a hand on the high pommel of his to engage him in close conversation. She seemed to be trying to make him tell her something, or admit something, and from the vehemence of Mat’s gestures, he was either innocent as a babe or lying in his teeth.

Flinging himself out of the saddle, Rand hurriedly climbed up the gentle slope to examine what the Maiden - it was Aviendha - had found half-buried in the ground and obscured by long grass. A weathered gray stone column, at least three spans long and a pace thick. Strange symbols covered every exposed inch, each surrounded by a narrow line of markings he thought were writing. Even if he could have read the language - if it was one - the script - if that was what it was - had long since worn to illegibility. The symbols he could make out a little better. Some of them; many might as well have been the marks of rain and wind.

Pulling grass by the handful so he could see better, he glanced at Aviendha. She had dropped her shoufa around her shoulders, baring short reddish hair, and was watching him with a flat, hard expression. “You don’t like me,” he said. “Why?” There was one symbol he had to find, the only one he knew.

“Like you?” she said. “You may be He Who Comes With the Dawn, a man of destiny. Who can like or dislike such? Besides, you walk free, a wetlander despite your face, yet going to Rhuidean for honor, while I”

“While you what?” he asked when she stopped. He searched his way slowly upslope. Where was it? Two parallel wavy lines crossed at an angle by an odd squiggle. Light, if it’s buried, it’ll take us hours to turn this over. Abruptly he laughed. Not hours. He could channel and lift the thing out of the ground, or Moiraine could, or Egwene. A Portal Stone might resist being moved, but surely they could move it that much. Channeling would not help him find the wavy lines, though. Only feeling his way along the stone would do that.

Instead of answering, the Aiel woman squatted easily with her short spears across her knees. “You have treated Elayne badly. I would not care, but Elayne is near sister to Egwene, who is my friend. Yet Egwene likes you still, so for her sake I will try.”

Still searching the thick column, he shook his head. Elayne again. Sometimes he thought women all belonged to a guild, the way craftsmen in cities did. Put a foot wrong with one, and the next ten you met knew of it, and disapproved.

His fingers stopped, returned to the bit he had just examined. It was weathered almost beyond making out, but he was sure it was the wavy lines. They represented a Portal Stone on Toman Head, not in the Waste, but they located what had been the base of the thing when it stood upright. Symbols at the top represented worlds; those at the bottom, Portal

Stones. With a symbol from the top and one from the bottom, he could supposedly travel to a given Portal Stone in a given world. With just one from the bottom, he knew he could reach a Portal Stone in this world. The Portal Stone near Rhuidean, for instance. If he knew the symbol for it. Now was when he needed luck, needed that ta'veren tugging at chance to favor him.

A hand reached over his shoulder, and Rhuarc said in a reluctant voice, "These two are used for Rhuidean in old writings. Long ago, even the name was not written." He traced two triangles, each surrounding what appeared to be forked lightnings, one pointing left, one right.

"Do you know what this is?" Rand asked. The Aielman looked away. "Burn me, Rhuarc, I have to know. I know you don't want to talk of it, but you have to tell me. Tell me, Rhuarc. Have you ever seen its like before?"

The other man took a deep breath before answering. "I have seen its like." Each word came as if dragged. "When a man goes to Rhuidean, Wise Ones and clansmen wait on the slopes of Chaendaer near a stone like this." Aviendha stood up and walked away stiffly; Rhuarc glanced after her, frowning. "I know no more of it, Rand al'Thor. May I never know shade if I do."

Rand traced the unreadable script surrounding the triangles. Which one? Only one would take him where he wanted to go. The second might land him on the other side of the world, or the bottom of the ocean.

The rest of the Aiel had gathered at the foot of the hill with their pack mules. Moiraine and the others dismounted and climbed the easy slope, leading their horses. Mat had Jeade'en as well as his own brown gelding, keeping the stallion well away from Lan's Mandarb. The two stallions eyed one another fiercely now that they had no riders.

"You truly don't know what you are doing, do you?" Egwene protested. "Moiraine, stop him. We can ride to Rhuidean. Why are you letting him go on with this? Why don't you say something?"

"What would you suggest I do?" the Aes Sedai said dryly. "I can hardly drag him away by his ear. We may be about to see how useful Dreaming really is."

"Dreaming?" Egwene said sharply. "What does Dreaming have to do with this?"

"Will you two be quiet?" Rand made himself sound patient. "I am trying to decide." Egwene stared at him indignantly; Moiraine showed no emotion at all, but she watched intently.

"Do we have to do it this way?" Mat said. "What do you have against riding?" Rand only looked at him, and he shrugged uncomfortably. "Oh, burn me. If you're trying to decide . . ." Taking both horses' reins in one hand, he dug a coin from his pocket, a gold Tar Valon mark, and sighed. "It would be the same coin, wouldn't it." He rolled the coin across the backs of his fingers. "I'm . . . lucky sometimes, Rand. Let my luck choose. Head, the one that points to your right; flame, the other. What do you say?"

"This is the most ridiculous," Egwene began, but Moiraine silenced her with a touch on the arm.

Rand nodded. "Why not?" Egwene muttered something; all he caught were "men" and "boys," but it did not sound a compliment.

The coin spun into the air off Mat's thumb, gleaming dully in the sun. At its peak, Mat snatched it back and slapped it down on the back of his other hand, then hesitated. "It's a bloody thing to be trusting to the toss of a coin, Rand."

Rand laid his palm on one of the symbols without looking. "This one," he said. "You chose this one."

Mat peeked at the coin and blinked. "You're right. How did you know?"

"It has to work for me sooner or later." None of them understood - he could see that - but it did not matter. Lifting his hand, he looked at what he and Mat had picked. The triangle pointed left. The sun had slid down from its apex. He had to do this right. A mistake, and they could lose time, not gain it. That had to be the worst outcome. It had to be.

Standing, he dug into his pouch and pulled out the small hard object, a carving of shiny dark green stone that fit easily into his hand, a round-faced round-bodied man sitting cross-legged with a sword across his knees. He rubbed a thumb over the figure's bald head. "Gather everyone close. Everyone. Rhuarc, have them bring those pack animals up here. Everyone has to be as close to me as possible."

"Why?" the Aielman asked.

"We're going to Rhuidean." Rand bounced the carving on his palm and bent to pat the Portal Stone. "To Rhuidean. Right now."

Rhuarc gave him a long flat look, then straightened, already calling to the other Aiel.

Moiraine took a step closer up the grassy slope. "What is that?" she asked curiously.

"An angreal," Rand said, turning it in his hand. "One that works for men. I found it in the Great Holding when I was hunting that doorway. It was the sword that made me pick it up, and then I knew. If you are wondering how I mean to channel enough of the Power to take us all - Aiel, pack mules, everybody and everything - this is it."

"Rand," Egwene said anxiously, "I am sure you think you are doing what is best, but are you certain? Are you certain that angreal is strong enough? I can't even be sure it is one. I believe you if you say it is, but angreal vary, Rand. At least, those that women can use do. Some are more potent than others, and size or shape is no guide."

"Of course I'm certain," he lied. There had been no way to test it, not for this purpose, not without letting half of Tear know he was up to something, but he thought it would do. Just. And as small as it was, no one would know it was gone from the Stone unless they decided to inventory the Holding. Not likely, that.

"You leave Callandor behind and bring this," Moiraine murmured. "You seem to have considerable knowledge of using Portal Stones. More than I would have thought."

"Verin told me a good bit," he said. Verin had, but it had been Lanfear who first explained them to him. He had known her as Selene, then, but he did not intend explaining that to Moiraine any more than he would tell her of the woman's offer of help. The Aes Sedai had taken the news of Lanfear's appearance too calmly, even for her. And she had that weighing look in her eyes, as if she had him on balance scales in her mind.

"Take a care, Rand al'Thor," she said in that icy, musical voice. "Any ta'veren shapes the Pattern to one degree or another, but a ta'veren such as you might rip the Age Lace for all of time."

He wished he knew what she was thinking. He wished he knew what she was planning.

The Aiel climbed the hill with their pack mules, covering the slope as they crowded dose around him and the Portal Stone, crowding in shoulder to shoulder on everyone but Moiraine and Egwene. Those two they left a little space. Rhuarc nodded at him as if saying, It is done, it is in your hands now.

Hefting the shiny green angreal, he thought of telling the Aiel to leave the animals, but there was the question of whether they would, and he wanted to arrive with all of them, with all feeling he had done well by them. Goodwill might be in short supply in the Waste. They watched him with imperturbable faces. Some had veiled themselves, though. Mat, nervously rolling that Tar Valon mark across the backs of his fingers over and over, and Egwene, sweat beading on her face, were the only ones who seemed anxious. There was no point in waiting any longer. He had to move faster than anyone thought he could.

He wrapped himself in the Void and reached out for the True Source, that sickly flickering light that was always there, just over his shoulder. The Power filled him, breath of life, wind to uproot oaks, summer wind sweetened with flowers, foul waftings from a midden heap. Floating in emptiness, he fixed the lightning-laced triangle before him and reached through the angreal, drew deeply at the raging torrent of saidin. He had to carry them all. It had to work. Holding that symbol, he pulled at the One Power, pulled it into him until he was sure he would burst. Pulled more. More.

The world seemed to wink out of existence.

Chapter 23 - Beyond the Stone

Egwene stumbled, flinging her arms around Mist's neck as the ground tilted under her feet. All about her, Aiel contended with braying, sliding pack mules on a steep rocky slope where nothing grew. Heat remembered from Tel'aran'rhiod hammered her. The air shimmered before her eyes: the ground burned her feet through the soles of her shoes. Her skin prickled painfully for a moment, then sweat gushed from every pore. It only dampened her dress, and the sweat seemed to evaporate immediately.

The struggling mules and tall Aiel nearly hid the surroundings from her, but she saw a bit in flashes between them. A thick gray stone column angled out of the ground not three paces from her, scoured by windblown sand until there was no telling whether it had ever been twin to the Portal Stone in Tear. Rugged slab-sided mountains that looked carved by a mad giant's axe broiled beneath a blazing sun in a cloudless sky. Yet in the center of the long, barren valley far below, a mass of dense fog hung, billowing like clouds; that scalding sun should surely have burned it off in moments, but the fog rolled untouched. And out of that roiling gray stuck the tops of towers, some spired, some ending abruptly as though the masons still worked.

"He was right," she murmured to herself. "A city in clouds."

Clutching his gelding's bridle, Mat was staring around wide-eyed. "We made it!" He laughed at her. "We made it, Egwene, and without any . . . Burn me, we made it!" He tugged open his shirt laces at the neck. "Light, it's hot. Burn me for true!"

Abruptly she realized Rand was on his knees, head down, supporting himself with one hand on the ground. Pulling her mare behind her, she pushed through the milling Aiel to him just as Lan helped him to his feet. Moiraine was already there, studying Rand with apparent calm - and the slight tightness at the corners of her mouth that meant she would like to box his ears.

"I did it," Rand panted, looking around. The Warder was all that was holding him upright; his face was drained and drawn, like a man on his deathbed.

"You came dose," Moiraine said coolly. Very coolly. "The angreal was not sufficient to the task. You must not do this again. If you take chances, they must be reasoned and for a strong purpose. They must be."

"I don't take chances, Moiraine. Mat's the fellow for chances." Rand forced his right hand open; the angreal, the fat little man, had driven the point of its sword into his flesh, right into the branded heron. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I did need one a little stronger. A little bit, maybe . . ." He gave a huffing laugh. "It worked, Moiraine. That is what's important. I've outrun them all. It worked."

"That is what matters," Lan said, nodding.

Egwene made a vexed tsk. Men. One almost killed himself, then tried to make a joke of it, and another told him he had done the right thing. Did they never grow up?

"The fatigue of channeling is not like other tiredness," Moiraine said. "I cannot rid you of it completely, not when you have channeled as much as you did, but I will do what I can. Perhaps what remains will remind you to be more careful in future." She was angry; there was a definite hint of satisfaction in her voice.

The glow of saidar surrounded the Aes Sedai as she reached up to take Rand's head in her hands. A shuddering gasp burst out of him, and he shivered uncontrollably, then jerked back from her, pulling free of Lan as well.

"Ask, Moiraine," Rand said coldly, stuffing the angreal into his belt pouch. "Ask, first. I'm not your pet dog that you can do whatever you want to whenever you want." He scrubbed his hands together to rub away the tiny trickle of blood.

Egwene made that vexed sound again. Childish, and ungrateful to boot. He could stand by himself now, though his eyes still looked weary, and she did not have to see his palm to know the tiny puncture was gone as if it had never been. Purely ungrateful. Surprisingly, Lan did not call him down for speaking to Moiraine in that fashion.

It came to her that the Aiel had gone absolutely still now that they had the mules quieted. They stared outward warily, not toward the valley and the fog-shrouded city that must be Rhuidean, but at two camps, one to either side of them perhaps half a mile away. The two dusters of dozens upon dozens of low, open-sided tents, one twice as large as the other, clung to the mountain slope and very nearly disappeared against it, but the gray-brown Aiel in each camp were dearly visible, short spears and arrow-nocked horn bows in hand, veiling themselves if they were not already. They seemed poised on the balls of their feet, ready to attack.

“The peace of Rhuidean,” a woman’s voice called from upslope, and Egwene could feel the tension leaving the Aiel surrounding her. Those among the tents began lowering their veils, though they still watched cautiously.

There was a third, much smaller encampment farther up the mountain, she realized, a few of the low tents on a small level patch. Four women were walking down from that camp, sedate and dignified in dark bulky skirts and loose white blouses, with brown or gray shawls around their shoulders despite heat that was beginning to make Egwene feel light-headed, and many necklaces and bracelets of ivory and gold. Two had white hair, one hair the color of the sun, flowing down their backs to the waist and held back from their faces by folded kerchiefs tied around the forehead.

Egwene recognized one of the white-haired women: Amys, the Wise One she had met in Tel’aran’rhod. Again she was struck by the contrast between Amys’s sun-darkened features and her snowy hair; the Wise One just did not look old enough. The second white-haired woman had a creased grandmotherly face, and one of the others, with gray-streaked dark hair, seemed almost as old. She was sure all four were Wise Ones, very likely the same who had signed that letter to Moiraine.

The Aiel women stopped ten paces upslope from the gathering around the Portal Stone, and the grandmotherly woman spread her open hands, speaking in an aged yet powerful voice. “The peace of Rhuidean be on you. Who comes to Chaendaer may return to their holds in peace. There shall be no blood on the ground.”

With that the Aiel from Tear began to separate, quickly apportioning the pack animals and the contents of the hampers. They were not dividing by societies now; Egwene saw Maidens going with several groups, some of which immediately began making their way around the mountain, avoiding each other and the camps, peace of Rhuidean or no. Others strode toward one or the other large duster of tents, where finally weapons were being put down.

Not everyone had been sure of the peace of Rhuidean. Lan released the hilt of his still-sheathed sword, although Egwene had not seen him put his hands on it, and Mat hastily slipped a pair of knives back into his sleeves. Rand stood with his thumbs tucked behind his belt, but there was dear relief in his eyes.

Egwene looked for Aviendha, to ask a few questions before she approached Amys. Surely the Aiel woman would be a little more forthcoming about the Wise Ones here, in her own land. She spotted the Maiden, carrying a large clinking jute sack, and two rolled wall hangings over her shoulder, as she started briskly for one of the big encampments.

“You will stay, Aviendha,” the Wise One with gray streaks in her hair said loudly. Aviendha stopped in her tracks, not looking at anyone.

Egwene started to go to her, but Moiraine murmured, “Best not to interfere. I doubt she will want sympathy, or see anything else if you offer it.”

Egwene nodded in spite of herself. Aviendha did look as if she wanted to be left alone. What did the Wise Ones want with her? Had she broken some rule, some law?

She herself would not have minded some more company. She felt very exposed standing there with no Aiel around her, and all those among the tents watching. The Aiel who had come from the Stone had been courteous even when not exactly friendly; the watchers looked neither. It was a temptation to embrace saidar. Only Moiraine, serene and cool as ever despite perspiration on her face, and Lan, as unperturbed as the rocks around them, kept her from it. They would

know if there was danger. As long as they accepted the situation, she would. But she did wish those Aiel would stop staring.

Rhuarc climbed the slope with a smile. "I am come back, Amys, though not by the way you expected, I will wager."

"I knew you would be here today, shade of my heart." She reached up to touch his cheek, letting her brown shawl fall down onto her arms. "My sister-wife sends her heart to you."

"That's what you meant about Dreaming," Egwene said softly to Moiraine. Lan was the only other close enough to hear. "That's why you were willing to let Rand try to bring us here by Portal Stone. They knew about it, and told you in that letter. No, that doesn't make sense. If they had mentioned a Portal Stone, you wouldn't have tried talking him out of it. They knew we'd be here, though."

Moiraine nodded without taking her eyes from the Wise Ones. "They wrote that they would meet us here, on Chaendaer, today. I thought it . . . unlikely . . . until Rand mentioned the Stones. When he was sure - certain beyond my dissuading- - that one existed here Let us just say it suddenly seemed very likely we would reach Chaendaer today."

Egwene took a deep breath of hot air. So that was one of the things Dreamers could do. She could not wait to start learning. She wanted to go after Rhuarc and introduce herself to Amys - reintroduce herself - but Rhuarc and Amys were looking into one another's eyes in a way that excluded intruders.

A man had come out from each of the camps, one tall and broad-shouldered, flame-haired and still short of his middle years, the other older and darker, no less tall but more slender. They stopped a few paces to either side of Rhuarc and the Wise Ones. The older, leathery-faced man carried no visible weapon except his heavy--bladed belt knife, but the other carried spears and hide buckler, and held his head high with a fiercely prideful scowl directed at Rhuarc.

Rhuarc ignored him, turning to the older man. "I see you, Heirn. Has one of the sept chiefs decided I am already dead? Who seeks to take my place?"

"I see you, Rhuarc. No one of the Taardad has entered Rhuidean, or seeks to. Amys said she would come meet you here today, and these other Wise Ones traveled with her. I brought these men of the Jindo sept to see they arrived safely."

Rhuarc nodded solemnly. Egwene had the feeling something important had just been said, or hinted at. The Wise Ones did not look at the fiery-haired man, and neither did Rhuarc or Heim, but from the color rising in the fellow's cheeks, they might as well have been staring at him. She glanced at Moiraine and got a tiny shake of the head; the Aes Sedai did not understand either.

Lan leaned down between them, speaking quietly. "A Wise One can go anywhere safely, into any hold regardless of clan. I think not even blood feud touches a Wise One. This Heirn came to protect Rhuarc from whoever the other camp is, but it would not be honorable to say it." Moiraine lifted one eyebrow a trifle, and he added, "I don't know much of them, but I fought them often before I met you. You have never asked me about them."

"I will remedy that," the Aes Sedai said dryly.

Turning back to the Wise Ones and the three men made Egwene's head swim. Lan pushed an unstopped leather water bottle into her hands, and she tilted her head back to drink gratefully. The water was lukewarm and smelled of leather, but in the heat it tasted fresh from the spring. She offered the half-empty bottle to Moiraine, who drank sparingly and handed it back. Egwene was glad to gulp down the rest, dosing her eyes; water splashed over her head, and she opened them again quickly. Lan was emptying another water bottle over her, and Moiraine's hair already dripped.

"This heat can kill if you are not used to it," the Warder explained as he wet down a pair of plain white linen scarves pulled from his coat. At his instructions, she and Moiraine tied the soaked cloths around their foreheads. Rand and Mat were doing the same. Lan left his own head unprotected to the sun; nothing seemed to faze the man.

The silence between Rhuarc and the Aielmen with him had stretched out, but the clan chief finally turned to the flame-haired man. "Do the Shaido lack a clan chief, then, Couladin?"

"Suladric is dead," the man answered. "Muradin has entered Rhuidean. Should he fail, I will enter."

"You have not asked, Couladin," the grandmotherly Wise One said in that reedy yet strong voice. "Should Muradin fail, ask then. We are four, enough to say yes or no."

"It is my right, Bair," Couladin said angrily. He had the look of a man not used to being balked.

"It is your right to ask," the thin-voiced woman replied. "It is ours to answer. I do not think you will be allowed to enter, whatever happens to Muradin. You are flawed within, Couladin." She shifted her gray shawl, rewrapping it around her angular shoulders in a way that suggested she had said more than she considered necessary.

The flame-haired man's face grew red. "My first-brother will return marked as clan chief, and we will lead the Shaido to great honor! We mean to - !" He snapped his mouth shut, almost quivering.

Egwene thought she would keep an eye on him if he remained anywhere close to her. He reminded her of the Congars and the Coplins back home, full of boasts and trouble. She had certainly never before seen any Aiel display so much raw emotion.

Amys seemed to have dismissed him already. "There is one who came with you, Rhuarc," she said. Egwene expected the woman to speak to her, but Amys's eyes swept straight to Rand. Moiraine was obviously not surprised. Egwene wondered what had been in that letter from these four Wise Ones that the Aes Sedai had not revealed.

Rand looked taken aback for a moment, hesitating, but then he strode up the slope to stand near Rhuarc at eye level to the women. Sweat plastered his white shirt to his body and made darker patches on his breeches. With a twisted white cloth tied around his head, he certainly did not look so grand as he had in the Heart of the Stone. He made an odd bow, left foot advanced, left hand on knee, right hand outstretched palm upward.

"By the right of blood," he said, "I ask leave to enter Rhuidean, for the honor of our ancestors and the memory of what was."

Amys blinked in evident surprise, and Bair murmured, "An ancient form, but the question has been asked. I answer yes."

"I also answer yes, Bair," Amys said. "Seana?"

"This man is no Aiel," Couladin broke in angrily. Egwene suspected he was very nearly always angry. "It is death for him to be on this ground! Why has Rhuarc brought him? Why - ?"

"Do you wish to be a Wise One, Couladin?" Bair asked, a frown deepening the creases on her face. "Put on a dress and come to me, and I will see if you can be trained. Until then, be silent when Wise Ones speak!"

"My mother was Aiel," Rand said in a strained voice.

Egwene stared at him. Kari al'Thor had died while Egwene was barely out of her cradle, but if Tam's wife had been Aiel, Egwene would certainly have heard of it. She glanced at Moiraine; the Aes Sedai was watching, smooth-faced, calm. Rand did look a great deal like the Aielmen, with his height and gray-blue eyes and reddish hair, but this was ridiculous.

"Not your mother," Amys said slowly. "Your father." Egwene shook her head. This approached madness. Rand opened his mouth, but Amys did not let him speak. "Seana, how do you say?"

"Yes," the woman with gray-streaked hair said. "Melaine?"

The last of the four, a handsome woman with golden-red hair, no more than ten or fifteen years older than Egwene, hesitated. "It must be done," she said finally, and unwillingly. "I answer yes."

"You have been answered," Amys told Rand. "You may go into Rhuidean, and -" She cut off as Mat scrambled up to copy Rand's bow awkwardly.

"I also ask to enter Rhuidean," he said shakily.

The four Wise Ones stared at him. Rand's head whipped around in surprise. Egwene thought no one could be more shocked than she was, but Couladin proved her wrong. Lifting one of his spears with a snarl, he stabbed at Mat's chest.

The glow of saidar surrounded Amys and Melaine, and flows of Air lifted the fiery-haired man and flung him back a dozen paces.

Egwene stared, wide-eyed. They could channel. At least, two of them could. Suddenly Amys's youthfully smooth features beneath that white hair leaped out at her for what they were, something very close to Aes Sedai agelessness. Moiraine was absolutely still. Egwene could almost hear her thoughts buzzing, though. This was plainly as much of a surprise to the Aes Sedai as to herself.

Couladin scrambled to his feet in a crouch. "You accept this outlander as one of us," he rasped, pointing at Rand with the spear he had attempted to use on Mat. "If you say it, then so be it. He is still a soft wetlander, and Rhuidean will kill him." The spear swung to Mat, who was trying to slip a knife back up his sleeve without being noticed. "But he - it is death for him to be here, and sacrilege for him to even ask to enter Rhuidean. None but those of the blood may enter. None!"

"Go back to your tents, Couladin," Melaine said coldly. "And you, Heirn. And you, as well, Rhuarc. This is business of Wise Ones, and none of men save those who have asked. Go!" Rhuarc and Heirn nodded and walked away toward the smaller set of tents, talking together. Couladin glared at Rand and Mat, and at the Wise Ones, before jerking around and stalking off toward the larger camp.

The Wise Ones exchanged glances. Troubled glances, Egwene would have said, though they were almost as good as Aes Sedai at keeping their faces blank when they wanted to.

"It is not permitted," Amys said finally. "Young man, you do not know what you have done. Go back with the others." Her eyes brushed across Egwene and Moiraine and Lan, standing alone now with the horses near the wind-scoured Portal Stone. Egwene could not find any recognition for her in that glance.

"I can't." Mat sounded desperate. "I've come this far, but this doesn't count, does it? I have to go to Rhuidean."

"It is not permitted," Melaine said sharply, her long red-gold hair swinging as she shook her head. "You have no Aiel blood in your veins."

Rand had been studying Mat all this time. "He comes with me," he said suddenly. "You gave me permission, and he can come with me whether you say he can or not." He stared back at the Wise Ones, not defiantly, merely determined, set in his mind. Egwene knew him like this; he would not back down whatever they said.

"It is not permitted," Melaine said firmly, addressing her sisters. She pulled her shawl up to cover her head. "The law is clear. No woman may go to Rhuidean more than twice, no man more than once, and none at all save they have the blood of Aiel."

Seana shook her head. "Much is changing, Melaine. The old ways. . . ."

"If he is the one," Bair said, "the Time of Change is upon us. Aes Sedai stand on Chaendaer, and Aan'allein with his shifting cloak. Can we hold to the old ways still? Knowing how much is to change?"

“We cannot hold,” Amys said. “All stands on the edge of change, now. Melaine?” The golden-haired woman looked at the mountains around them, and the fog-shrouded city below, then sighed and nodded. “It is done,” Amys said, turning to Rand and Mat. “You,” she began, then paused. “By what name do you call yourself?”

“Rand al’Thor.”

“Mat. Mat Cauthon.”

Amys nodded. “You, Rand al’Thor, must go into the heart of Rhuidean, to the very center. If you wish to go with him, Mat Cauthon, so be it, but know that most men who enter Rhuidean’s heart do not come back, and some return mad. You may carry neither food nor water, in remembrance of our wanderings after the Breaking. You must go to Rhuidean unarmed, save with your hands and your own heart, to honor the Jenn. If you have weapons, place them on the ground before us. They will be here for you when you return. If you return.”

Rand unsheathed his belt knife and laid it at Amys’s feet, then after a moment added the green stone carving of the round little man. “That is the best I can do,” he said.

Mat began with his belt knife and kept right on, pulling knives from his sleeves and under his coat, even one from down the back of his neck, fashioning a pile that seemed to impress even the Aiel women. He made as if to stop, looked at the women, then took two more from each boot top. “I forgot them,” he said with a grin and shrug. The Wise Ones’ unblinking looks wiped his grin away.

“They are pledged to Rhuidean,” Amys said formally, looking over the men’s heads, and the other three responded together, “Rhuidean belongs to the dead.”

“They may not speak to the living until they return,” she intoned, and again the others answered. “The dead do not speak to the living.”

“We do not see them, until they stand among the living once more.” Amys drew her shawl across her eyes, and one by one the other three did the same. Faces hidden, they spoke in unison. “Begone from among the living, and do not haunt us with memories of what is lost. Speak not of what the dead see.” Silent then, they stood there, holding their shawls up, waiting.

Rand and Mat looked at one another. Egwene wanted to go to them, to speak to them - they wore the fixed too - steady faces of men who did not want anyone to know they were uneasy or afraid - but that might break the ceremony.

Finally Mat barked a laugh. “Well, I suppose the dead can talk to each other, at least. I wonder if this counts for. . . No matter. Do you suppose it’s all right if we ride?”

“I don’t think so,” Rand said. “I think we have to walk.”

“Oh, burn my aching feet. We might as well get on with it then. It’ll take half the afternoon just to get there. If we’re lucky.”

Rand gave Egwene a reassuring smile as they started down the mountain, as if to convince her there was no danger, nothing untoward. Mat’s grin was the sort he wore when doing something particularly foolish, like trying to dance on the peak of a roof.

“You aren’t going to do anything . . . crazy . . . are you?” Mat said. “I mean to come back alive.”

“So do I,” Rand replied. “So do I.”

They passed from hearing, growing smaller and smaller as they descended. When they had dwindled to tiny shapes, barely distinguishable as people, the Wise Ones lowered their shawls.

Straightening her dress, and wishing she were not so sweaty, Egwene climbed the short distance to them leading Mist. "Amys? I am Egwene al'Vere. You said I should -"

Amys cut her off with a raised hand, and looked to where Lan was leading Mandarb and Pips and Jeade'en, behind Moiraine and Aldieb. "This is women's business, now, Aan'allein. You must stand aside. Go to the tents. Rhuarc will offer you water and shade."

Lan waited for Moiraine's slight nod before bowing and walking off in the direction Rhuarc had gone. The shifting cloak hanging down his back sometimes gave him the appearance of a disembodied head and arms floating across the ground ahead of the three horses.

"Why do you call him that?" Moiraine asked when he was out of earshot. "One Man. Do you know him?"

"We know of him, Aes Sedai." Amys made the title sound an address between equals. "The last of the Malkieri. The man who will not give up his war against the Shadow though his nation is long destroyed by it. There is much honor in him. I knew from the dream that if you came, it was almost certain Aan'allein would as well, but I did not know he obeyed you."

"He is my Warder," Moiraine said simply.

Egwene thought the Aes Sedai was troubled despite her tone, and she knew why. Almost certain Lan would come with Moiraine? Lan always followed Moiraine; he would follow her into the Pit of Doom without blinking. Nearly as interesting to Egwene was "if you came." Had the Wise Ones known they were coming or not? Perhaps interpreting the Dream was not as straightforward as she hoped. She was about to ask, when Bair spoke.

"Aviendha? Come here."

Aviendha had been squatting disconsolately off to one side, arms wrapped around her knees, staring at the ground. She stood slowly. If Egwene had not known better, she would have thought the other woman was afraid. Aviendha's feet dragged as she climbed to where the Wise Ones stood and set her bag and rolled wall hangings at her feet.

"It is time," Bair said, not ungently. Still, there was no compromise in her pale blue eyes. "You have run with the spears as long as you can. Longer than you should have."

Aviendha flung up her head defiantly. "I am a Maiden of the Spear. I do not want to be a Wise One. I will not be"

The Wise Ones' faces hardened. Egwene was reminded of the Women's Circle back home confronting a woman who was heading off into some foolishness.

"You have already been treated more gently than it was in my day," Amys said in a voice like stone. "I, too, refused when called. My spear sisters broke my spears before my eyes. They took me to Bair and Coedelin bound hand and foot and wearing only my skin."

"And a pretty little doll tucked under your arm," Bair said dryly, "to remind you how childish you were. As I remember, you ran away nine times in the first month."

Amys nodded grimly. "And was made to blubber like a child for each of them. I only ran away five times the second month. I thought I was as strong and hard as a woman could be. I was not smart, though; it took me half a year to learn you were stronger and harder than I could ever be, Bair. Eventually I learned my duty, my obligation to the people. As you will, Aviendha. Such as you and I, we have that obligation. You are not a child. It is time to put away dolls - and spears - and become the woman you are meant to be."

Abruptly, Egwene knew why she had felt such a kinship with Aviendha from the first, knew why Amys and the others meant her to be a Wise One. Aviendha could channel. Like herself, like Elayne and Nynaeve - and Moiraine, for that matter - she was one of those rare women who not only could be taught to channel, but who had the ability born in her, so she would touch the True Source eventually whether she knew what she was doing or not. Moiraine's face was still,

calm, but Egwene saw confirmation in her eyes. The Aes Sedai had surely known from the first time she came within arm's reach of the Aiel woman. Egwene realized she could feel that same kinship with Amys and Melaine. Not with Bair or Seana, though. Only the first two could channel; she was sure of it. And now she could sense the same in Moiraine. It was the first time she had ever felt that. The Aes Sedai was a distant woman.

Some of the Wise Ones, at least, apparently saw more in Moiraine's face. "You meant to take her to your White Tower," Bair said, "to make her one of you. She is Aiel, Aes Sedai."

"She can be very strong if she is trained properly," Moiraine replied. "As strong as Egwene will be. In the Tower, she can reach that strength."

"We can teach her as well, Aes Sedai." Melaine's voice was smooth enough, but contempt tinged her unwavering green-eyed stare. "Better. I have spoken with Aes Sedai. You coddle women in the Tower. The Three-fold Land is no place for coddling. Aviendha will learn what she can do while you would still have her playing games."

Egwene gave Aviendha a concerned look; the other woman was staring at her feet, defiance gone. If they thought training in the Tower was coddling She had been worked harder and disciplined more strictly as a novice than ever before in her life. She felt a true pang of sympathy for the Aiel woman.

Amys held out her hands, and Aviendha reluctantly laid her spears and buckler in them, flinching when the Wise One threw them aside to clatter on the ground. Slowly Aviendha slid her cased bow from her back and surrendered it, unbuckled the belt holding her quiver and sheathed knife. Amys took each offering and tossed it away like rubbish; Aviendha gave a little jerk each time. A tear trembled at the corner of one blue-green eye.

"Do you have to treat her this way?" Egwene demanded angrily. Amys and the others turned flat stares on her, but she was not about to be intimidated. "You are treating things she cares about as trash"

"She must see them as trash," Seana said. "When she returns - if she returns - she will burn them and scatter the ashes. The metal she will give to a smith to make simple things. Not weapons. Not even a carving knife. Buckles, or pots, or puzzles for children. Things she will give away with her own hands when they are made."

"The Three-fold land is not soft, Aes Sedai," Bair said. "Soft things die, here."

"The cadin'sor, Aviendha." Amys gestured to the discarded weapons. "Your new clothes will await your return."

Mechanically, Aviendha stripped, tossing coat and breeches, soft boots, everything onto the pile. Naked, she stood without wriggling a toe, though Egwene thought her own feet would blister through her shoes. She remembered watching as the clothes she had worn to the White Tower were burned, a severing of ties to an earlier life, but it had not been like this. Not this stark.

When Aviendha started to add the sack and the wall hangings to the pile, Seana took them from her. "These you can have back. If you return. If not, they will go to your family, for remembrance."

Aviendha nodded. She did not seem afraid. Reluctant, angry, even sullen, but not afraid.

"In Rhuidean," Amys said, "you will find three rings, arranged so." She drew three lines in the air, joining together in the middle. "Step through any one. You will see your future laid before you, again and again, in variation. They will not guide you wholly, as is best, for they will fade together as do stories heard long ago, yet you will remember enough to know some things that must be, for you, despised as they may be, and some that must not, cherished hopes that they are. This is the beginning of being called wise. Some women never return from the rings; perhaps they could not face the future. Some who survive the rings do not survive their second trip to Rhuidean, to the heart. You are not giving up a hard and dangerous life for a softer, but for a harder and more dangerous."

A ter'angreal, Amys was describing a ter'angreal. What kind of place was this Rhuidean? Egwene found herself wanting to go down there herself, to find out. That was foolish. She was not here to take unnecessary risks with ter'angreal she knew nothing about.

Melaine cupped Aviendha's chin and turned the younger woman's face to her. "You have the strength," she said with quiet conviction. "A strong mind and a strong heart are your weapons now, but you hold them as surely as you ever held a spear. Remember them, use them, and they will see you through anything."

Egwene was surprised. Of the four, she would have picked the sun-haired woman last to show compassion.

Aviendha nodded, and even managed a smile. "I will beat those men to Rhuidean. They cannot run."

Each Wise One in turn kissed her lightly on each cheek, murmuring, "Come back to us."

Catching Aviendha's hand, Egwene squeezed it and got a squeeze in return. Then the Aid woman was running down the mountainside in leaps. It seemed she might well catch up to Rand and Mat. Egwene watched her go worriedly. This was something like being raised to Accepted, it seemed, but without any novice training first, without anyone to give small comfort afterward. What would it have been like to be raised Accepted on her first day in the Tower? She thought she might have gone mad. Nynaeve had been raised so, because of her strength; she thought at least some of Nynaeve's distaste for Aes Sedai came from what she had experienced then. Come back to us, she thought. Be steadfast.

When Aviendha passed out of sight, Egwene sighed and turned back to the Wise Ones. She had her own purpose here, and holding back from it would help no one. "Amys, in Tel'aran'rhiod you told me I should come to you to learn. I have."

"Haste," the white-haired woman said. "We have been hasty, because Aviendha struggled so long against her toh, because we feared the Shaido might don veils, even here, if we did not send Rand al'Thor into Rhuidean before they could think."

"You believe they'd have tried to kill him?" Egwene said. "But he's the one you sent people over the Dragonwall to find. He Who Comes With the Dawn."

Bair shifted her shawl. "Perhaps he is. We shall see. If he lives."

"He has his mother's eyes," Amys said, "and much of her in his face as well as something of his father, but Couladin could see only his clothes, and his horse. The other Shaido would have as well, and perhaps the Taardad, too. Outlanders are not allowed on this ground, and now there are five of you. No, four; Rand al'Thor is no outlander, wherever he was raised. But we have already allowed one to enter Rhuidean, which is also forbidden. Change comes like an avalanche whether we want it or not."

"It must come," Bair said, not sounding happy. "The Pattern plants us where it will. "

"You knew Rand's parents?" Egwene asked cautiously. Whatever they said, she still thought of Tam and Kari al'Thor as Rand's parents.

"That is his story," Amys said, "if he wants to hear it." By the firmness of her mouth, she would not say another word on the subject.

"Come," Bair said. "There is no need for haste, now. Come. We offer you water and shade."

Egwene's knees nearly buckled at the mention of shade. The once-sopping kerchief around her forehead was almost dry; the top of her head felt baked, and the rest of her scarcely less. Moiraine seemed just as grateful to follow the Wise Ones up to one of the small dusters of low, open-sided tents.

A tall man in sandals and hooded white robes took their horses' reins. His Aiel face looked odd in the deep soft cowl, with downcast eyes.

“Give the animals water,” Bair said before ducking into the low, unwallied tent, and the man bowed to her back, touching his forehead.

Egwene hesitated over letting the man lead Mist away. He seemed confident, but what would an Aiel know of horses? Still, she did not think he would harm them, and it did look wonderfully darker inside the tent. It was, and delightfully cool compared to outside.

The roof of the tent rose to a peak around a hole, but even under that there was barely room to stand. As if to make up for the drab colors the Aid wore, large gold-tasseled red cushions lay scattered over brightly colored carpets layered thickly enough to pad the hard ground beneath. Egwene and Moiraine imitated the Wise Ones, sinking to the carpet and leaning on one elbow on a cushion. They were all in a circle, nearly close enough to touch the next woman.

Bair struck a small brass gong, and two young women entered with silver trays, bending gracefully, robed in white, with deep cowls and downturned eyes, like the man who had taken the horses. Kneeling in the middle of the tent, one filled a small silver cup with wine for each of the women reclining on a cushion, and the other poured larger cups of water. Without a word, they backed out bowing, leaving the gleaming trays and pitchers, beaded with condensation.

“Here is water and shade,” Bair said, lifting her water, “freely given. Let there be no constraints between us. All here are welcome, as first-sisters are welcome.”

“Let there be no constraints,” Amys and the other two murmured. After one sip of water, the Aiel women named themselves formally. Bair, of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel. Amys, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. Melaine, of the Jhirad sept of the Goshien Aiel. Seana, of the Black Cliff sept of the Nakai Aiel.

Egwene and Moiraine followed the ritual, though Moiraine’s mouth tightened when Egwene called herself an Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah.

As if the sharing of water and names had broken down a wall, the mood in the tent changed palpably. Smiles from the Aiel women, a subtle relaxation, and said formalities were done.

Egwene was more grateful for the water than for the wine. It might be cooler in the tent than outside, but just breathing still dried her throat. At Amys’s gesture she eagerly poured a second cup.

The people in white had been surprise. It was foolish, but she realized she had been thinking that except for the Wise Ones Aiel were all like Rhuarc and Aviendha, warriors. Of course they had blacksmiths and weavers and other craftsmen; they must. Why not servants? Only, Aviendha had been disdainful of the servants in the Stone, not letting them do anything for her that she could avoid. These people with their humble demeanor did not act like Aiel at all. She did not recall seeing any white in the two large camps. “Is it only Wise Ones who have servants?” she asked.

Melaine choked on her wine. “Servants?” she gasped. “They are gai’shain, not servants.” She sounded as if that should explain everything.

Moiraine frowned slightly over her winecup. “Gai’shain? How does that translate? ‘Those sworn to peace in battle?’”

“They are simply gai’shain,” Amys said. She seemed to realize they did not understand. “Forgive me, but do you know of ji’e’toh?”

“Honor and obligation,” Moiraine replied promptly. “Or perhaps honor and duty.”

“Those are the words, yes. But the meaning. We live by ji’e’toh, Aes Sedai.”

“Do not try to tell them all, Amys,” Bair cautioned. “I once spent a month trying to explain ji’e’toh to a wetlander, and at the end she had more questions than at the beginning.”

Amys nodded. “I will stay to the core. If you wish it explained, Moiraine.”

Egwene would as soon have begun talk of Dreaming, and training, but to her irritation, the Aes Sedai said, "Yes, if you will."

With a nod to Moiraine, Amys began. "I will follow the line of gai'shain simply. In the dance of spears, the most ji, honor, is earned by touching an armed enemy without killing, or harming in any way."

"The most honor because it is so difficult," Seana said, bluish gray eyes crinkling wryly, "and thus so seldom done."

"The smallest honor comes from killing," Amys continued. "A child or a fool can kill. In between is the taking of a captive. I pare it down, you see. There are many degrees. Gai'shain are captives taken so, though a warrior who has been touched may sometimes demand to be taken gai'shain to reduce his enemy's honor and his own loss."

"Maidens of the Spear and Stone Dogs especially are known for this," Seana put in, bringing a sharp look from Amys.

"Do I tell this, or do you? To continue. Some may not be taken gai'shain, of course. A Wise One, a blacksmith, a child, a woman with child or one who has a child under the age of ten. A gai'shain has toh to his or her captor. For gai'shain, this is to serve one year and a day, obeying humbly, touching no weapon, doing no violence."

Egwene was interested in spite of herself. "Don't they try to escape? I certainly would." I'll never let anyone make me a prisoner again!

The Wise Ones looked shocked. "It has happened," Seana said stiffly, "but there is no honor in it. A gai'shain who ran away would be returned by his or her sept to begin the year and a day anew. The loss of honor is so great that a first-brother or first-sister might go as gai'shain as well to discharge the sept's toh. More than one, if they feel the loss of ii is great."

Moiraine seemed to be taking it all in calmly, sipping her water, but it was all Egwene could do not to shake her head. The Aiel were insane; that was all there was to it. It got worse.

"Some gai'shain now make an arrogance of humbleness," Melaine said disapprovingly. "They think they earn honor by it, taking obedience and meekness to the point of mockery. This is a new thing and foolish. It has no part in ji'e'toh."

Bair laughed, a startling rich sound compared to her reedy voice. "There have always been fools. When I was a girl, and the Shaarad and the Tomanelle were stealing each other's cattle and goats every night, Chenda, the roofmistress of Mainde Cut, was pushed aside by a young Haido Water Seeker during a raid. She came to Bent Valley and demanded the boy make her gai'shain; she would not allow him to gain the honor of having touched her because she had a carving knife in her hand when he did. A carving knife! It was a weapon, she claimed, as if she were a Maiden. The boy had no choice but to do as she demanded, for all the laughter when he did. One does not send a roofmistress barefoot back to her hold. Before the year and a day was done, the Haido sept and the Jenda sept exchanged spears, and the boy soon found himself married to Chenda's eldest daughter. With his second-mother still gai'shain to him. He tried to give her to his wife as part of his bride gift, and both women claimed he was trying to rob them of honor. He nearly had to take his own wife as gai'shain. It came close to raiding between Haido and Jenda again before the toh was discharged." The Aiel women almost fell over laughing, Amys and Melaine wiping their eyes.

Egwene understood little of the story - certainly not why it was funny - but she managed a polite laugh.

Moiraine set her water aside for the small silver cup of wine. "I have heard men speak of fighting the Aiel, but I have never heard of this before. Certainly not of an Aiel surrendering because he was touched."

"It is not surrender," Amys said pointedly. "It is ji'e'toh."

"No one would ask to be made gai'shain to a wetlander," Melaine said. "Outlanders do not know of ji'e'toh."

The Aiel women exchanged looks. They were uncomfortable. Why? Egwene wondered. Oh. To the Aiel, not to know *ji'e'toh* must be like not knowing manners, or not being honorable. "There are honorable men and women among us," Egwene said. "Most of us. We know right from wrong."

"Of course you do," Bair murmured in a tone that said that was not the same thing at all.

"You sent a letter to me in Tear," Moiraine said, "before I ever reached there. You said a great many things, some of which have proven true. Including that I would - must - meet you here today; you very nearly commanded me to be here. Yet earlier you said if I came. How much of what you wrote did you know to be true?"

Amys sighed and set aside her cup of wine, but it was Bair who spoke. "Much is uncertain, even to a dreamwalker. Amys and Melaine are the best of us, and even they do not see all that is, or all that can be."

"The present is much dearer than the future even in *Tel'aran'rhiod*," the sun-haired Wise One said. "What is happening or beginning is more easily seen than what will happen, or may. We did not see Egwene or Mat Cauthon at all. It was no more than an even chance that the young man who calls himself Rand al'Thor would come. If he did not, it was certain that he would die, and the Aiel too. Yet he has come, and if he survives Rhuidean, some of the Aiel at least will survive. This we know. If you had not come, he would have died. If *Aan'allein* had not come, you would have died. If you do not go through the rings -" She cut off as if she had bitten her tongue.

Egwene leaned forward intently. Moiraine had to enter Rhuidean? But the Aes Sedai appeared to give no notice, and Seana spoke up quickly to cover Melaine's slip.

"There is no one set path to the future. The Pattern makes the finest lace look coarse woven sacking, or tangled string. In *Tel'aran'rhiod* it is possible to see some ways the future may be woven. No more than that."

Moiraine took a sip of wine. "The Old Tongue is often difficult to translate." Egwene stared at her. The Old Tongue? What about the rings, the *ter'angreal*? But Moiraine went blithely on. "*Tel'aran'rhiod* means the World of Dreams, or perhaps the Unseen World. Neither is really exact; it is more complex than that. *Aan'allein*. One Man, but also The Man Who Is an Entire People, and two or three other ways to translate it as well. And the words we have taken for common use, and never think of their meanings in the Old Tongue. Warders are called '*Gaidin*,' which was 'brothers to battle.' Aes Sedai meant 'servant of all.' And '*Aiel*.' 'Dedicated,' in the Old Tongue. Stronger than that; it implies an oath written into your bones. I have often wondered what the Aiel are dedicated to." The Wise Ones' faces had gone to iron, but Moiraine continued. "And *Jenn Aiel*.' 'The true dedicated,' but again stronger. Perhaps 'the only true dedicated.' The only true Aiel?" She looked at them questioningly, just as if they did not suddenly have eyes of stone. None of them spoke.

What was Moiraine doing? Egwene did not intend to allow the Aes Sedai to ruin her chances of learning whatever the Wise Ones could teach her. "Amys, could we talk of Dreaming now?"

"Tonight will be time enough," Amys said.

"But -"

"Tonight, Egwene. You may be Aes Sedai, but you must become a pupil again. You cannot even go to sleep when you wish yet, or sleep lightly enough to tell what you see before you wake. When the sun begins to set, I will begin to teach you."

Ducking her head, Egwene peered under the edge of the tent roof. From that deep shade, the light outside glared piercingly through heat shimmers in the air; the sun stood no more than halfway to the mountaintops.

Abruptly Moiraine rose to her knees; reaching behind her, she began undoing her dress. "I presume that I must go as *Aviendha* did," she said, not as a question.

Bair gave Melaine a hard stare that the younger woman met only for a moment before dropping her eyes. Seana said in a resigned voice, "You should not have been told. It is done, now. Change. One not of the blood has gone to Rhuidean, and now another."

Moiraine paused. "Does that make a difference, that I have been told?"

"Perhaps a great difference," Bair said reluctantly, "perhaps none. We often guide, but we do not tell. When we saw you go to the rings, each time it was you who brought up going, who demanded the right though you have none of the blood. Now one of us has mentioned it first. Already there are changes from anything we saw. Who can say what they are?"

"And what did you see if I do not go?"

Bair's wrinkled face was expressionless, but sympathy touched her pale blue eyes. "We have told too much already, Moiraine. What a dreamwalker sees is what is likely to happen, not what surely will. Those who move with too much knowledge of the future inevitably find disaster, whether from complacency at what they think must come or in their efforts to change it."

"It is the mercy of the rings that the memories fade," Amys said. "A woman knows some things - a few - that will happen; others she will not recognize until the decision is upon her, if then. Life is uncertainty and struggle, choice and change; one who knew how her life was woven into the Pattern as well as she knew how a thread was laid into a carpet would have the life of an animal. If she did not go mad. Humankind is made for uncertainty, struggle, choice and change."

Moiraine listened with no outward show of impatience, though Egwene suspected it was there; the Aes Sedai was used to lecturing, not being lectured. She was silent while Egwene helped her out of her dress, not speaking until she crouched naked at the edge of the carpets, peering down the mountainside toward the fog-shrouded city in the valley. Then she said, "Do not let Lan follow me. He will try, if he sees me."

"It will be as it will be," Bair replied. Her thin voice sounded cold and final.

After a moment, Moiraine gave a grudging nod and slipped out of the tent into the blazing sunlight. She began to run immediately, barefoot down the scorching slope.

Egwene grimaced. Rand and Mat, Aviendha, now Moiraine, all going into Rhuidean. "Will she . . . survive? If you dreamed of this, you must know."

"There are some places one cannot enter in Tel'aran'rhiod," Seana said. "Rhuidean. Ogier steddin. A few others. What happens there is shielded from a dreamwalker's eyes."

That was not an answer - they could have seen whether she came out of Rhuidean - but it was obviously all she was going to get. "Very well. Should I go, too?" She did not relish the thought of experiencing the rings; it would be like being raised to Accepted again. But if everyone else was going

"Do not be foolish," Amys said vigorously.

"We saw nothing of this for you," Bair added in a milder tone. "We did not see you at all."

"And I would not say yes if you asked," Amys went on. "Four are required for permission, and I would say no. You are here to learn to dreamwalk."

"In that case," Egwene said, settling back on her cushion, "teach me. There must be something you can begin with before tonight."

Melaine frowned at her, but Bair chuckled dryly. "She is as eager and impatient as you were once you decided to learn, Amys."

Amys nodded. "I hope she can keep her eagerness and lose the impatience, for her sake. Hear me, Egwene. Though it will be hard, you must forget that you are Aes Sedai if you are to learn. You must listen, remember, and do as you are told. Above all, you must not enter Tel'aran'rhiod again until one of us says you may. Can you accept this?"

It would not be hard to forget she was Aes Sedai when she was not. For the rest, it sounded ominously like becoming a novice again. "I can accept it." She hoped she did not sound doubtful.

"Good," Bair said. "I will now tell you about dreamwalking and Tel'aran'rhiod, in a very general way. When I am done, you will repeat back to me what I have said. If you fail to touch all points, you will scrub the pots in place of the gai'shain tonight. If your memory is so poor that you cannot repeat what I say after a second hearing Well, we will discuss that when it happens. Attend.

"Almost anyone can touch Tel'aran'rhiod, but few can truly enter it. Of all the Wise Ones, we four alone can dreamwalk, and your Tower has not produced a dreamwalker in nearly five hundred years. It is not a thing of the One Power, though Aes Sedai believe it is. I cannot channel, nor can Seana, yet we dreamwalk as well as Amys or Melaine. Many people brush the World of Dreams in their sleep. Because they only brush against it, they wake with aches or pains where they should have broken bones or mortal hurts. A dreamwalker enters the dream fully, therefore her injuries are real on waking. For one who is fully in the dream, dreamwalker or not, death there is death here. To enter the dream too completely, though, is to lose touch with the flesh; there is no way back, and the flesh dies. It is said that once there were those who could enter the dream in the flesh, and no longer be in this world at all. This was an evil thing, for they did evil; it must never be attempted, even if you believe it possible for you, for each time you will lose some part of what makes you human. You must learn to enter Tel'aran'rhiod when you wish, to the degree you wish. You must learn to find what you need to find and read what you see, to enter the dreams of another dose by in order to aid healing, to recognize those who are in the dream fully enough to harm you, to"

Egwene listened intently. It fascinated her, hinting at things she had never suspected were possible, but beyond that she had no intention of ending up scrubbing pots. It did not seem fair, somehow. Whatever Rand and Mat and the others faced in Rhuidean, they were not going to be sent off to scrub pots. And I agreed to it! It just was not fair. But then, she doubted they could get any more out of Rhuidean than she would from these women.

Chapter 24 - Rhuidean

The smooth pebble in Mat's mouth was not making moisture anymore, and had not been for some time. Spitting it out, he squatted beside Rand and stared at the billowing gray wall maybe thirty paces in front of them. Fog. He hoped at least it was cooler in there than out here. And some water would be appreciated. His lips were cracking. He pulled the scarf from around his head and wiped his face, but there was not much sweat to dampen the cloth. Not much sweat remained in him to come out. A place to sit down. His feet felt like cooked sausages inside his boots; he felt pretty well cooked all over, for that matter. The fog stretched left and right better than a mile and bulked over his head like a towering diff. A cliff of thick mist in the middle of a barren blistered valley. There had to be water in there.

Why doesn't it burn off? He did not like that part of it. Fooling with the Power had brought him here, and now it seemed he had to fool with it again. Light, I want free of the Power and Aes Sedai. Burn me, I do! Anything not to think of stepping into that fog, for just a minute more. "That was Egwene's Aiel friend I saw running," he croaked. Running! In this heat. Just thinking of it made his feet hurt worse. "Aviendha. Whatever her name is."

"If you say so," Rand said, studying the fog. He sounded as if he had a mouthful of dust, his face was sunburned, and he wavered unsteadily in his crouch. "But what would she be doing down here? And naked?"

Mat let it go. Rand had not seen her - he had hardly taken his eyes off the roiling mist since starting down the mountain - and he did not believe Mat had seen her either. Running like a madwoman and keeping wide of the two of them. Heading for this strange fog, it had seemed to him. Rand appeared no more eager to step into that than he was. He wondered whether he looked as bad as Rand did. Touching his cheek, he winced. He expected he did.

"Are we going to stay out here all night? This valley is pretty deep. It'll be dark down here in another couple of hours. Might be cooler then, but I don't think I would like to meet whatever runs around this place in the night. Lions, probably. I've heard there are lions in the Waste."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Mat? You heard what the Wise Ones said. You can die in there, or go mad. You can make it back to the tents. You left waterbottles and a waterbag on Pips's saddle."

He wished Rand had not reminded him. Best not to think about water. "Burn me, no, I don't want to. I have to. What about you? Isn't being the bloody Dragon Reborn enough for you? Do you have to be a flaming Aid clan chief, too? Why are you here?"

"I have to be, Mat. I have to be." Resignation came through the parch in his voice, but something else, too. A hint of eagerness. The man really was mad; he wanted to do this.

"Rand, maybe that's the answer they give everybody. Those snake people, I mean. Go to Rhuidean. Maybe we don't have to be here at all." He did not believe it, but with that fog staring him in the face

Rand turned his head to look at him, not speaking. Finally he said, "They never mentioned Rhuidean to me, Mat."

"Oh, bum me," he muttered. Somehow or other he meant to find a way back through that twisted doorway in Tear. Absently he pulled the gold Tar Valon mark from his coat pocket, rolled it across the backs of his fingers and thrust it back. Those snaky folk were going to give him a few more answers whether they wanted to or not. Somehow.

Without another word, Rand rose and started toward the fog in an unsteady stride, his eyes fixed straight ahead. Mat hurried after him. Burn me. Burn me. I do not want to do this.

Rand plunged right into the dense mist, but Mat hesitated a moment before following. It had to be the Power maintaining the fog, after all, with its edge boiling so but never advancing or retreating an inch. The bloody Power, and no bloody choice. That first step was a blessed relief, cool and damp; he opened his mouth to let the mist moisten his tongue. Three steps more and he began to worry. Beyond the tip of his nose was only featureless gray. He could not make out even a shadow that could be Rand.

“Rand?” The sound might as well not have come from his mouth; the murk seemed to swallow it before it reached his own ears. He was not even sure of his direction anymore, and he could always remember his way. Anything might be ahead of him. Or under his feet. He could not see his feet; the fog shrouded him completely below the waist. He picked up his pace regardless. And suddenly stepped out beside Rand into a peculiar shadowless light.

The fog made an enormous hollow dome hiding the sky, its bubbling inner surface glowing in a pale sharp blue. Rhuidean was not nearly so big as Tear or Caemlyn, but the empty streets were broad as any he had ever seen, with wide strips of bare dirt down their centers as if trees had grown there once, and great fountains with statues. Huge buildings flanked the streets, odd flat-sided palaces of marble and crystal and cut glass, ascending hundreds of feet in steps or sheer walls. There was not a small building to be seen, nothing that might have been a simple tavern or an inn or a stable. Only immense palaces, with gleaming columns fifty feet thick climbing a hundred paces in red or white or blue, and grand towers, fluted and spiraled, some piercing the glowing clouds above.

For all its grandeur, the city had never been finished. Many of those tremendous structures ended in the saw-teeth of abandoned construction. Colored glass made images in some huge windows: serenely majestic men and women thirty feet tall or more, sunrises and starry night skies; others gaped empty. Unfinished and long deserted. No water splashed in any fountain. Silence covered the city as completely as the dome of fog. The air was cooler than outside, but just as arid. Dust grated under foot on pale smooth paving stones.

Mat trotted to the nearest fountain anyway, just on the off chance, and leaned on the waist-high white rim. Three unclothed women, twice as tall as he and supporting an odd wide-mouthed fish over their heads, peered down into a wide dusty basin no dryer than his mouth.

“Of course,” Rand said behind him. “I should have thought of this before.”

Mat looked over his shoulder. “Thought of what?” Rand was staring at the fountain, shaking with silent laughter. “Get hold of yourself, Rand. You didn’t go crazy in the last minute. You should have thought of what?”

A hollow gurgling whipped Mat’s eyes back to the fountain. Abruptly water gushed out of the fish’s mouth, a stream as thick as his leg. He scrambled into the basin and ran to stand under the downpour, head back and mouth open. Cold sweet water, cold enough to make him shiver, sweeter than wine. It soaked his hair, his coat, his breeches. He drank until he thought he would drown, finally staggering over to lean panting against a woman’s stone leg.

Rand was still standing there staring at the fountain, face red and lips cracked, laughing softly. “No water, Mat. They said we couldn’t bring water, but they did not say anything about what was already here.”

“Rand? Aren’t you going to drink?”

Rand gave a start, then stepped into the now ankle-deep basin and splashed across to stand where Mat had been, drinking in the same way, eyes dosed and face tilted up to let the water pour over him.

Mat watched worriedly. Not mad, exactly; not yet. But how long would Rand have stood there laughing while thirst turned his throat to stone if he had not spoken? Mat left him there and climbed out of the fountain. Some of the water drenching his clothes had seeped down into his boots. He ignored the squish he made at every step; he was not sure he could get his boots back on if he pulled them off. Besides, it felt good.

Peering at the city, he wondered what he was doing there. Those people had said he would die, otherwise, but was just being in Rhuidean enough? Do I have to do something? What?

The empty streets and half-finished palaces, were shadowless in the pale azure light. A prickling grew between his shoulder blades. All those empty windows looking down on him, all those gap-toothed lines of forsaken stonework. Anything could be hiding in there, and in a place like this, anything could be Any bloody thing at all. He wished he still had his boot knives, at least. But those women, those Wise Ones, had stared at him as if they knew he was holding out on them. And they had channeled, one or all of them. It was not wise to step on the wrong side of women who could channel if you could avoid it. Burn me, if I could get shut of Aes Sedai, I’d never ask for another thing. Well, not for a good long while, anyway. Light, I wonder if anything is hiding in here.

“The heart has to be that way, Mat.” Rand was climbing out of the basin, dripping wet.

“The heart?”

“The Wise Ones said I had to go to the heart. They must mean the center of the city.” Rand looked back at the fountain and suddenly the flow dwindled to a trickle, then ceased. “There’s an ocean of good water down there. Deep. So deep I nearly didn’t find it. If I could bring it up . . . No need to waste it, though. We can get another good drink when it’s time to leave.”

Mat shifted his feet uncomfortably. Fool! Where did you think it came from? Of course he bloody channeled. Did you think it just started flowing again after the Light knows how long? “Center of the city. Of course. Lead on.”

They kept to the middle of the wide street, walking along the edge of the bare strips of dirt, past more dry fountains, some with only the stone basin and a marble base where the statues should have been. Nothing was broken in the city, only . . . incomplete. The palaces loomed to either side like cliffs. There had to be things inside. Furniture, maybe, if it had not rotted. Maybe gold. Knives. Knives would not rust away in this dry air no matter how long they had been there.

There could be a bloody Myrddraal in there for all you know. Light, why did I have to think of that? If only he had thought to bring a quarterstaff with him when he left the Stone. Maybe he could have convinced the Wise Ones it was a walking staff. No use thinking of it, now. A tree would do, if he had a way to cut a good branch and trim it. If, again. He wondered whether whoever built this city had managed to grow any trees. He had worked on his father’s farm too long not to know good dirt when he saw it. These long ribbons of exposed soil were poor, no good for growing anything besides weeds, and not many of those. None, now.

After they had walked a mile, the street suddenly ended at a great plaza, perhaps as far across as they had walked and surrounded by those palaces of marble and crystal. Startlingly, a tree stood in the huge square, a good hundred feet tall and spreading its thick, leafy limbs over a hide of dusty white paving stones, near what appeared to be concentric rings of dear, glittering glass columns, thin as needles compared to their height, nearly as much as the tree’s. He would have wondered how a tree could grow here, without sunlight, if he had not been too busy staring at the astounding jumble filling the rest of the square.

A clear lane led from each street Mat could see, straight to the columned rings, but in the spaces between, statues stood haphazardly, life-sized down to half that, in stone or crystal or metal, set right down on the pavement. All among them were . . . He did not know what to call them, at first. A flat silvery ring, ten feet across and thin as a blade. A tapering crystal plinth a pace tall that might have held one of the smaller statues. A shiny black metal spire, narrow as a spear and no longer, yet standing on end as if rooted. Hundreds of things, maybe thousands, in every shape imaginable, every material imaginable, dotting the huge plaza with no more than a dozen feet between any two.

It was the black metal spear, so unnaturally erect, that suddenly told him what they must be. Ter’angreal. Some sort of things to do with the Power, anyway. Some of them had to be. That twisted stone doorway in the Stone’s Great Holding had resisted falling over, too.

He was ready to rum around and go back right then, but Rand continued on, barely looking at what lined his way. Once Rand paused, staring down at two figurines that hardly seemed to deserve a place with the other things. Two statuettes maybe a foot tall, a man and a woman, each holding a crystal sphere aloft in one hand. He half-bent as if to touch them, but straightened so quickly it could almost have been Mat’s imagination.

After a minute, Mat followed, hurrying to catch up. The closer they came to the scintillating rings of columns, the more he tensed. Those things all around them had to do with the Power, and so did the columns. He just knew it. Those impossibly tall thin shafts sparkled in the bluish light, dazzling the eye. All they said was I had to come here. Well, I’m here. They didn’t say anything about the bloody Power.

Rand stopped so suddenly that Mat went three strides nearer the columned rings before realizing it. Rand was staring at the tree, Mat saw. The tree. Mat found himself moving toward it as if drawn. No tree had those trefoil leaves. No tree but one; a tree of legend.

“Avendesora,” Rand said softly. “The Tree of Life. It’s here.”

Under the spreading branches, Mat leaped to catch one of those leaves; his outstretched fingers fell a good pace short of the lowest. He satisfied himself with walking deeper beneath that leafy roof and leaning back against the thick bole. After a moment he slid down to sit against it. The old stories were true. He felt . . . Contentment. Peace. Well-being. Even his feet did not bother him much.

Rand sat down cross-legged nearby. “I can believe the stories. Ghoetam, sitting beneath Avendesora for forty years to gain wisdom. Right now, I can believe.”

Mat let his head fall back against the trunk. “I don’t know that I’d trust birds to bring me food, though. You’d have to get up sometime.” But an hour or so would not be bad. Even all day. “It doesn’t make sense anyway. What kind of food could birds bring in here? What birds?”

“Maybe Rhuidean wasn’t always like this, Mat. Maybe . . . I don’t know. Maybe Avendesora was somewhere else, then.”

“Somewhere else,” Mat murmured. “I would not mind being somewhere else.” It feels . . . good . . . though.

“Somewhere else?” Rand twisted around to look at the tall thin columns, shining so close. “Duty is heavier than a mountain,” he sighed.

That was part of a saying he had picked up in the Borderlands. “Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain.” It sounded like pure foolishness to Mat, but Rand was getting up. Mat copied him reluctantly. “What do you think we’ll find in there?”

“I think I have to go on alone from here,” Rand said slowly.

“What do you mean?” Mat demanded. “I’ve come this far, haven’t I? I am not going to turn tail now.” Wouldn’t I just like to, though!

“It isn’t that, Mat. If you go in there, you come out a clan chief, or you die. Or come out mad. I don’t believe there’s any other choice. Unless maybe the Wise Ones go in there.”

Mat hesitated. To die and live again. That was what they had said. He had no intention of trying to be an Aiel clan chief, though; the Aiel would probably stick spears through him. “We’ll leave it to luck,” he said, pulling the Tar Valon mark from his pocket. “Getting to be my lucky coin. Flame, I go in with you; head, I stay out.” He flipped the gold coin quickly, before Rand could object.

Somehow he missed grabbing it; the mark careened off his fingertips, clinked to the pavement, bounced twice . . . And landed on edge.

He glared at Rand accusingly. “Do you do this sort of thing on purpose? Can’t you control it?”

“No.” The coin fell over, showing an ageless woman’s face surrounded by stars. “It looks like you stay out here, Mat.”

“Did you just . . . ?” He wished Rand would not channel around him. “Oh, burn me, if you want me to stay out here, I’ll stay.” Snatching the coin up, he stuffed it back into his pocket. “Listen, you go in, do whatever it is you have to, and get back out. I want to leave this place, and I am not going to stand here forever twiddling my thumbs waiting for you. And you needn’t think I’ll come in after you, either, so you had best be careful.”

“I wouldn’t think that of you, Mat,” Rand said.

Mat stared at him suspiciously. What was he grinning at? “So long as you understand I won’t. Aaah, go on and be a bloody Aiel chief. You have the face for it.”

“Don’t come in there, Mat. Whatever happens, don’t.” He waited until Mat nodded before turning away.

Mat stood, watching him walk in among the glittering columns. In the shifting dazzle he seemed to vanish almost immediately. A trick of the eye, Mat told himself. That was all it was. A bloody trick of the eye.

He started around the array, keeping well back, peering in in an effort to spot Rand again. “You look out what you’re bloody doing,” he shouted. “You leave me alone in the Waste with Moiraine and the bloody Aiel, and I’ll strangle you, Dragon Reborn or no!” After a minute, he added, “I’m not coming in there after you if you get yourself in trouble! You hear me?” There was no answer. If he’s not out of there in an hour “He’s mad just going in there,” he muttered. “Well, I’ll not be the one to pull his bacon off the coals. He’s the one who can channel. If he’s put his head in a hornets’ nest, he can bloody channel his way out of it.” I’ll give him an hour. And then he would leave, whether Rand was back or not. Just turn around and leave. Just go. That was what he would do. He would.

The way those thin shafts of glass caught the bluish light, refracting and reflecting, merely looking too hard was enough to give him a headache. He turned away, wandering back the way he had come, uneasily eyeing the ter’angreal - or whatever they were - filling the plaza. What was he doing there? Why?

Suddenly he stopped dead, staring at one of those strange objects. A large doorframe of polished redstone, twisted in some way he could not quite catch so his eye seemed to slip trying to follow it around. Slowly he made his way to it, between glittering faceted spires as tall as his head and low golden frames filled with what appeared to be sheets of glass, barely noticing them, never taking his eyes off the doorway.

It was the same. The same polished redstone, the same size, the same eye-wrenching corners. Along each upright ran three lines of triangles, points down. Had the one in Tear had those? He could not remember; he had not been trying to remember all the details last time. It was the same; it had to be. Maybe he could not step through the other again, but this one . . . ? Another chance to get at those snake people, make them answer a few more questions.

Squinting against the glitters, he peered back toward the columns. An hour, he had given Rand. In an hour, he could be through this thing and back with time to spare. Maybe it would not even work for him, since he had used its twin. They are the same. Then again, maybe it would. It just meant rubbing up against the Power one more time.

“Light,” he muttered. “Ter’angreal. Portal Stones. Rhuidean. What difference can one more time make?”

He stepped through. Through a wall of blinding white light, through a roar so vast it annihilated sound.

Blinking, he looked around and bit back the vilest oath he knew. Wherever this was, it was not where he had gone before.

The twisted doorway stood in the middle of a huge chamber that appeared to be star-shaped, as near as he could make out through a forest of thick columns, each deeply fluted with eight ridges, the sharp edges yellow and glowing softly for light. Glossy black except for the glowing bits, they rose from a dull white floor into murky gloom far overhead where even the yellow stripes faded away. The columns and floor almost looked to be glass, but when he bent to rub a hand across the floor, it felt like stone. Dusty stone. He wiped his hand on his coat. The air had a musty smell, and his own footprints were the only marks in the dust. No one had been here in a very long time.

Disappointed, he turned back to the ter’angreal.

“A very long time.”

Mat spun back, snatching at his coatsleeve for a knife that was lying back on the mountainside. The man standing among the columns looked nothing at all like the snaky folk. He made Mat regret giving up those last blades to the Wise Ones.

The fellow was tall, taller than an Aiel, and sinewy, but with shoulders too wide for his narrow waist, and skin as white as the finest paper. Pale leather straps studded with silver crisscrossed his arms and bare chest, and a black kilt hung to

his knees. His eyes were too big and almost colorless, set deep in a narrow-jawed face. His short-cut, palely reddish hair stood up like a brush, and his ears, lying flat against his head, had a hint of a point at the top. He leaned toward Mat, inhaling, opening his mouth to pull in more air, flashing sharp teeth. The impression he gave was of a fox about to leap on a cornered chicken.

“A very long time,” he said, straightening. His voice was rough, almost a growl. “Do you abide by the treaties and agreements? Do you carry iron, or instruments of music, or devices for making light?”

“I have none of those things,” Mat replied slowly. This was not the same place, but this fellow asked the same questions. And he behaved the same, with all that smelling. Rummaging through my bloody experiences, was he? Well, let him. Maybe he’ll jog some loose, so I can remember them, too. He wondered if he was speaking the Old Tongue again. It was uncomfortable, not knowing, not being able to tell. “If you can take me to where I can get a few questions answered, lead the way. If not, I will be going, with apologies for bothering you.”

“No!” Those big colorless eyes blinked in agitation. “You must not go. Come. I will take you where you may find what you need. Come.” He backed away, gesturing with both hands. “Come.”

Glancing at the ter’angreal, Mat followed. He wished the man had not grinned at him just then. Maybe he meant to be reassuring, but those teeth . . . Mat decided he would never give up all of his knives again, not for Wise Ones or the Amyrlin Seat herself. ‘

The large five-sided doorway looked more like a tunnel mouth, for the corridor beyond was exactly the same size and shape, with those softly glowing yellow strips running along the bends, edging floor and ceiling. It seemed to stretch ahead forever, fading into a murky distance, broken at intervals by more of the great five-sided doorways. The kilted man did not turn to lead until they were both in the hallway, and even then he kept glancing over a wide shoulder as if to make certain Mat was still there. The air was no longer musty; instead it held a faint hint of something unpleasant, something tickling familiarity but not strong enough to recognize.

At the first of the doorways, Mat glanced through in passing, and sighed. Beyond star-shaped black columns, a twisted redstone doorway stood on a dull glassy white floor where dust showed the marks of one set of boots coming from the ter’angreal, led toward the corridor by the prints of narrow bare feet. He looked over his shoulder. Instead of ending fifty paces back in another chamber like this, the hallway ran back as far as he could see, a mirror image of what lay ahead. His guide gave him a sharp-toothed smile; the fellow looked hungry.

He knew he should have expected something of the sort after what he had seen on the other side of the doorway in the Stone. Those spires moving from where they should be to where they could not, logically. If spires, why not rooms. I should have stayed out there waiting for Rand, is what I should have done. I should have done a lot of things. At least he would have no trouble finding the ter’angreal again, if all of the doorways ahead were the same.

He peered into the next and saw black columns, the redstone ter’angreal, his footprints and his guide’s in the dust. When the narrow-jawed man looked over his shoulder again, Mat gave him a toothy grin. “Never think you have caught a babe in your snare. If you try to cheat me, I will have your hide for a saddlecloth.”

The fellow started, pale eyes widening, then shrugged and adjusted the silver--studded straps across his chest; his mocking smile seemed tailored to draw attention to what he was doing. Suddenly Mat found himself wondering where that pale leather came from. Surely not. . . . Oh, Light, I think it is. He managed to stop himself from swallowing, but only just. “Lead, you son of a goat. Your hide is not worth silver studding. Take me where I want to go.”

With a snarl, the man hurried on, stiff-backed. Mat did not care if the fellow was offended. He did wish he had just one knife, though. I’ll be burned if I’ll let some fox-faced goat-brain make a harness out of my hide.

There was no way of telling how long they walked. The corridor never changed, with its bent walls and its glowing yellow strips. Every doorway showed the identical chamber, ter’angreal, footprints and all. The sameness made time slip into formlessness. Mat worried about how long he had been there. Surely longer than the hour he had given himself. His clothes were only damp now; his boots no longer made squishing noises. But he walked, staring at his guide’s back, and walked.

Suddenly the corridor ended ahead in another doorway. Mat blinked. He could have sworn that a moment before the hall had stretched on as far as he could see. But he had been watching the sharp-toothed fellow more than what lay ahead. He looked back, and nearly swore. The corridor ran back until the glowing yellow strips seemed to come together in a point. And there was not an opening to be seen anywhere along it.

When he turned, he was alone in front of the big five-sided doorway. Burn me, I wish they wouldn't do that. Taking a deep breath, he walked through.

It was another white-floored star-shaped chamber, not so large as the one - or ones - with columns. An eight-pointed star with a glassy black pedestal standing in each point, like a two-span slice out of one of those columns. Glowing yellow strips ran up the sharp edges of room and pedestals. The unpleasant smell was stronger here; he recognized it now. The smell of a wild animal's lair. He hardly noticed it, though, because the chamber was empty except for him.

Turning slowly, he frowned at the pedestals. Surely someone should be up on them, whoever was supposed to answer his questions. He was being cheated. If he could come here, he should be able to get answers.

Suddenly he spun in a circle, searching not the pedestals but the smooth gray walls. The doorway was gone; there was no way out.

Yet before he completed a second turn there was someone standing on each pedestal, people like his guide, but dressed differently. Four were men, the others women, their stiff hair rising in a crest before spilling down their backs. All wore long white skirts that hid their feet. The women had on white blouses that fell below their hips, with high lace necks and pale ruffles at their wrists. The men wore even more straps than the guide, wider and studded with gold. Each harness supported a pair of bare-bladed knives on the wearer's chest. Bronze blades, Mat judged from the color, but he would have given all the gold in his possession for just one of them.

"Speak," one of the women said in that growling voice. "By the ancient treaty, here is agreement made. What is your need? Speak."

Mat hesitated. That was not what the snaky people had said. They were all staring at him like foxes staring at dinner. "Who is the Daughter of the Nine Moons and why do I have to marry her?" He hoped they would count that as one question.

No one answered. None of them spoke. They just continued to stare at him with those big pale eyes.

"You are supposed to answer," he said. Silence. "Burn your bones to ash, answer me! Who is the Daughter of the Nine Moons and why do I have to marry her? How will I die and live again? What does it mean that I have to give up half the light of the world? Those are my three questions. Say something!"

Dead silence. He could hear himself breathing, hear the blood throbbing in his ears.

"I have no intention of marrying. And I have no intention of dying, either, whether I am supposed to live again or not. I walk around with holes in my memory, holes in my life, and you stare at me like idiots. If I had my way, I would want those holes filled, but at least answers to my questions might fill some in my future. You have to answer - !"

"Done," one of the men growled, and Mat blinked.

Done? What was done? What did he mean? "Burn your eyes," he muttered.

"Burn your souls! You are as bad as Aes Sedai. Well, I want a way to be free of Aes Sedai and the Power, and I want to be away from you and back to Rhuidean, if you will not answer me. Open up a door, and let me - "

"Done," another man said, and one of the women echoed, "Done."

Mat scanned the walls, then glared, turning to take them all in, standing up there on their pedestals staring down at him.
“Done? What is done? I see no door. You lying goat-fathered -”

“Fool,” a woman said in a whispered growl, and others repeated it. Fool. Fool. Fool.

“Wise to ask leavetaking, when you set no price, no terms.”

“Yet fool not to first agree on price.”

“We will set the price.”

They spoke so quickly he could not tell which said what.

“What was asked will be given.”

“The price will be paid.”

“Burn you,” he shouted, “what are you talking -”

Utter darkness dosed around him. There was something around his throat. He could not breathe. Air. He could not. . . .

Chapter 25 - The Road to the Spear

Not hesitating at the first row of columns, Rand made himself walk in among them. There could be no turning back now, no looking back. Light, what is supposed to happen in here? What does it really do?

Clear as the finest glass, perhaps a foot thick and standing three paces or more apart, the columns were a forest of dazzling light filled with cascading ripples and glares and odd rainbows. The air was cooler here, enough to make him wish he had a coat, but the same gritty dust covered the smooth white stone under his boots. Not a breeze stirred, yet something made each hair on his body shift, even under his shirt.

Ahead and to the right he could just see another man, in the grays and browns of Aiel, stiff and statue-still in the changing lights. That must be Muradin, Couladin's brother. Stiff and still; something was happening. Strangely, considering the brilliance, Rand could make out the Aiel's face dearly. Eyes wide and staring, face tight, mouth quivering on the brink of a snarl. Whatever he was seeing, he did not like it. But Muradin had survived that far, at least. If he could do it, Rand could. The man was six or seven paces ahead of him at best. Wondering why he and Mat had not seen Muradin go in, he took another step.

He rode behind a set of eyes, feeling but not controlling a body. The owner of those eyes crouched easily among boulders on a barren mountainside, beneath a sun-blasted sky, peering down at strange half-made stone structures - No! Less than half-made. That's Rhuidean, but without any fog, and only just begun - peering down contemptuously. He was Mandein, young for a sept chief at forty. Separateness faded; acceptance came. He was Mandein.

"You must agree," Sealdre said, but for the moment he ignored her.

The Jenn had made things to draw up water and spill it into great stone basins. He had fought battles over less water than one of those tanks held, with people walking by as though water was of no consequence. A strange forest of glass rose in the center of all their activity, glittering in the sun, and near it the tallest tree he had ever seen, at least three spans high. Their stone structures looked as if each was meant to contain an entire hold, an entire sept, when done. Madness. This Rhuidean could not be defended. Not that anyone would attack the Jenn, of course. Most avoided the Jenn as they avoided the accursed Lost Ones, who wandered searching for the songs they claimed would bring back lost days.

A procession snaked out of Rhuidean toward the mountain, a few dozen Jenn and two palanquins, each carried by eight men. There was enough wood in each of those palanquins for a dozen chief's chairs. He had heard there were still Aes Sedai among the Jenn.

"You must agree to whatever they ask, husband," Sealdre said.

He looked at her then, wanting for a moment to run his hands through her long golden hair, seeing the laughing girl who had laid the bridal wreath at his feet and asked him to marry her. She was serious now, though, intent and worried. "Will the others come?" he asked.

"Some. Most. I have talked to my sisters in the dream, and we have all dreamed the same dream. The chiefs who do not come, and those who do not agree . . . Their septs will die, Mandein. Within three generations they will be dust, and their holds and cattle belong to other septs. Their names will be lost."

He did not like her talking to the Wise Ones of other septs, even in dreams. But the Wise Ones dreamed true. When they knew, it was true. "Stay here," he told her. "If I do not return, help our sons and daughters to hold the sept together."

She touched his cheek. "I will, shade of my life. But remember. You must agree."

Mandein motioned, and a hundred veiled shapes followed him down the slope, ghosting from boulder to boulder, bows and spears ready, grays and browns blending with the barren land, vanishing even to his eyes. They were all men; he had left all the women of the sept who carried the spear with the men around Sealdre. If anything went wrong and she decided on something senseless to save him, the men would probably follow her in it; the women would see her back to the hold whatever she wanted, to protect the hold and the sept. He hoped they would. Sometimes they could be fiercer than any man, and more foolish.

The procession from Rhuidean had stopped on the cracked clay flat by the time he reached the lower slope. He motioned his men to ground and went on alone, lowering his veil. He was aware of other men moving out from the mountain to his right and left, coming across the baked ground from other directions. How many? Fifty? Maybe a hundred? Some faces he had expected to see were missing. Sealdre was right as usual; some had not listened to their Wise Ones' dream. There were faces he had never seen before, and faces of men he had tried to kill, men who had tried to kill him. At least none were veiled. Killing in front of a Jenn was almost as bad as killing a Jenn. He hoped the others remembered that. Treachery from one, and the veils would be donned; the warriors each chief had brought would come down from the mountains, and this dry clay would be muddied with blood. He half-expected to feel a spear through his ribs any moment.

Even trying to watch a hundred possible sources of death, it was hard not to stare at the Aes Sedai as the bearers lowered their ornately carved chairs to the ground. Women with hair so white it almost seemed transparent. Ageless faces with skin that looked as if the wind might tear it. He had heard the years did not touch Aes Sedai. How old must these two be? What had they seen? Could they remember when his greatfather Comran first found Ogier steddin in the Dragonwall and began to trade with them? Or maybe even when Comran's greatfather Rhodric led the Aiel to kill the men in iron shirts who had crossed the Dragonwall? The Aes Sedai fumed their eyes on him - sharp blue and dark, dark brown, the first dark eyes he had ever seen - and seemed to see inside his skull, inside his thoughts. He knew himself chosen out, and did not know why. With an effort he pulled away from those twin gazes, which knew him better than he knew himself.

A gaunt white-haired man, tall if stooped, came forward from the Jenn flanked by two graying women who might have been sisters, with the same deep-set green eyes and the same way of tilting their heads when they looked at anything. The rest of the Jenn stared uneasily at the earth rather than at the Aiel, but not these three.

"I am Dermon," the man said in a deep strong voice, his blue-eyed scrutiny as steady as any Aiel's. "These are Mordaine and Narris." He gestured to the women beside him in turn. "We speak for Rhuidean, and the Jenn Aiel."

A stir ran through the men around Mandein. Most of them liked the Jenn claiming to be Aiel no better than he did. "Why have you called us here?" he demanded, though it burned his tongue to admit being summoned.

Instead of answering, Dermon said, "Why do you not carry a sword?" That brought angry mutters.

"It is forbidden," Mandein growled. "Even Jenn should know that." He lifted his spears, touched the knife at his waist, the bow on his back. "These are weapons enough for a warrior." The mutters became approving, including some from men who had sworn to kill him. They still would, given the chance, but they approved of what he had said. And they seemed content to let him talk, with those Aes Sedai watching.

"You do not know why," Mordaine said, and Narris added, "There is too much you do not know. Yet you must know."

"What do you want?" Mandein demanded.

"You." Dermon ran his eyes across the Aiel, making that one word fit them all. "Whoever would lead among you must come to Rhuidean and learn where we came from, and why you do not carry swords. Who cannot learn, will not live."

"Your Wise Ones have spoken to you," Mordaine said, "or you would not be here. You know the cost to those who refuse."

Charendin pushed his way to the front, alternately glaring at Mandein and the Jenn. Mandein had put that long puckered scar down his face; they had nearly killed each other three times. "Just come to you?" Charendin said. "Whichever of us comes to you will lead the Aiel?"

"No." The word came thin as a whisper, but strong enough to fill every ear. It came from the dark-eyed Aes Sedai sitting in her carved chair with a blanket across her legs as if she felt cold under the broiling sun. "That one will come later," she said. "The stone that never falls will fall to announce his coming. Of the blood, but not raised by the blood, he will come from Rhuidean at dawn, and tie you together with bonds you cannot break. He will take you back, and he will destroy you."

Some of the sept chiefs moved as if to leave, but none took more than a few steps. Each had listened to the Wise One of his sept. Agree, or we will be destroyed as if we never were. Agree, or we will destroy ourselves.

"This is some trick," Charendin shouted. Under Aes Sedai stares he lowered his voice, but it held anger yet. "You mean to gain control of the septs. Aiel bend knee to no man or woman." He jerked his head, avoiding the Aes Sedai's eyes. "To no one," he muttered.

"We seek no control," Narisse told them.

"Our days dwindle," Mordaine said. "A day will come when the Jenn are no more, and only you will remain to remember the Aiel. You must remain, or all is for nothing, and lost."

The flatness of her voice, the calm sureness, silenced Charendin, but Mandein had one more question. "Why? If you know your doom, why do this?" He gestured toward the structures rising in the distance.

"It is our purpose," Dermon replied calmly. "For long years we searched for this place, and now we prepare it, if not for the purpose we once thought. We do what we must, and keep faith."

Mandain studied the man's face. There was no fear in it. "You are Aiel," he said, and when some of the other chiefs gasped, he raised his voice. "I will go to the Jenn Aiel."

"You may not come to Rhuidean armed," Dermon said.

Mandain laughed aloud at the temerity of the man. Asking an Aiel to go unarmed. Shedding his weapons, he stepped forward. "Take me to Rhuidean, Aiel. I will match your courage."

Rand blinked in the flickering lights. He had been Mandain; he could still feel contempt for the Jenn fading into admiration. Were the Jenn Aiel, or were they not? They had looked the same, tall, with light-colored eyes in sun-darkened faces, dressed in the same clothes except for lacking veils. But there had not been a weapon among them save for simple belt knives, suitable for work. There was no such thing as an Aiel without weapons.

He was farther into the columns than a single step could account for, and closer to Muradin than he had been. The Aiel's fixed stare had become a dire frown.

Gritty dust crunched under Rand's boots as he stepped forward.

His name was Rhodric, and he was nearly twenty. The sun was a golden blister in the sky, but he kept his veil up and his eyes alert. His spears were ready - one in his right hand, three held with his small bullhide buckler - and he was ready. Jeordam was down on the brown grass flat to the south of the hills, where most of the bushes were puny and withered. The old man's hair was white, like that thing called snow the old ones talked of, but his eyes were sharp, and watching the welldiggers haul up filled waterbags would not occupy all of his attention.

Mountains rose to the north and east, the northern range tall and sharp and white-tipped but dwarfed by the eastern monsters. Those looked as if the world was trying to touch the heavens, and perhaps did. Maybe that white was snow? He would not find out. Faced with this, the Jenn must decide to turn east. They had trailed north along that mountainous wall for long months, painfully dragging their wagons behind them, trying to deny the Aiel that followed them. At least there had been water when they crossed a river, even if not much. It had been years since Rhodric had seen a river he could not wade across; most were only cracked dry day away from the mountains. He hoped the rains would come again, and make things green once more. He remembered when the world was green.

He heard the horses before he saw them, three men riding across the brown hills in long leather shirts sewn all over with metal discs, two with lances. He knew the one on the lead, Garam, son of the chief of the town just out of sight back the way they came and not much older than himself. They were blind, these townsmen. They did not see the Aiel who stirred after they passed, then settled back to near invisibility in the sere land. Rhodric lowered his veil; there would be no killing unless the riders began it. He did not regret it - not exactly - but he could not make himself trust men who lived in houses and towns. There had been too many battles with that kind. The stories said it had always been so.

Garam drew rein, raising his right hand in salute. He was a slight dark-eyed man, like his two followers, but all three looked tough and competent. "Ho, Rhodric. Have your people finished filling their waterskins, yet?"

"I see you, Garam." He kept his voice level and expressionless. It made him uneasy, seeing men on horses, even more so than their carrying swords. The Aiel had pack animals, but there was something unnatural about sitting atop a horse. A man's legs were good enough. "We are close. Does your father withdraw his permission for us to take water on his lands?" No other town had ever given permission before. Water had to be fought for if men were near, just like everything else, and if there was water, then men were near. It would not be easy to take these three by himself. He shifted his feet in readiness to dance, and likely die.

"He does not," Garam said. He had not even noticed Rhodric's shift. "We have a strong spring in the town, and my father says that when you go, we will have the new wells you have dug until we go ourselves. But your grandfather seemed to want to know if the others started to move, and they have." He leaned an elbow on the front of his saddle. "Tell me, Rhodric, are they truly the same people as yourselves?"

"They are the Jenn Aiel; we, the Aiel. We are the same, yet not. I cannot explain it further, Garam." He did not really understand it himself.

"Which way do they move?" Jeordam asked.

Rhodric bowed to his greatfather calmly; he had heard a footfall, the sound of a soft boot, and had known it for an Aiel's. The townsmen had not noticed Jeordam's approach, though, and they jerked their reins in surprise. Only Garam's upflung hand stopped the other two from lowering their lances. Rhodric and his greatfather waited.

"East," Garam said when he had his horse under control again. "Across the Spine of the World." He gestured to the mountains that stabbed the sky.

Rhodric winced, but Jeordam said coolly, "What lies on the other side?"

"The end of the world, for all I know," Garam replied. "I am not sure there is a way across." He hesitated. "The Jenn have Aes Sedai with them. Dozens, I have heard. Does it not make you uneasy traveling close to Aes Sedai? I have heard the world was different once, but they destroyed it."

The Aes Sedai made Rhodric very nervous, though he kept his face blank. They were only four, not dozens, but enough to make him remember stories that the Aiel had failed the Aes Sedai in some way that no one knew. The Aes Sedai must know; they had seldom left the Jenn's wagons in the year since their arrival, but when they did, they looked at the Aiel with sad eyes. Rhodric was not the only one who tried to avoid them.

"We guard the Jenn," Jeordam said. "It is they who travel with Aes Sedai."

Garam nodded as if that made a difference, then leaned forward again, lowering his voice. "My father has an Aes Sedai advisor, though he tries to keep it from the town. She says we must leave these hills and move east. She says the dry rivers will run again, and we will build a great city beside one. She says many things. I hear the Aes Sedai plan to build a city - they have found Ogier to build it for them. Ogier!" He shook his head, pulling himself from legends back to reality. "Do you think they mean to rule the world once more? The Aes Sedai? I think we should kill them before they can destroy us again."

"You must do as you think best." Jeordam's voice gave no hint of his own thoughts. "I must ready my people to cross those mountains."

The dark-haired man straightened in his saddle, plainly disappointed. Rhodric suspected he had wanted Aiel help in killing Aes Sedai. "The Spine of the World," Garam said brusquely. "It has another name. Some call it the Dragonwall."

"A fitting name," Jeordam replied.

Rhodric stared at the towering mountains in the distance. A fitting name for Aiel. Their own secret name, told to no one, was People of the Dragon. He did not know why, only that it was not spoken aloud except when you received your spears. What lay beyond this Dragonwall? At least there would be people to fight. There always were. In the whole world there were only Aiel, Jenn, and enemies. Only that. Aiel, Jenn, and enemies.

Rand drew a deep breath that rasped as if he had not breathed for hours. Eye-splitting rings of light ran up the columns around him. The words still echoed in his mind. Aiel, Jenn, and enemies; that was the world. They had not been in the Waste, certainly. He had seen - lived - a time before the Aiel came to their Three-fold Land.

He was nearer still to Muradin. The Aiel's eyes shifted uneasily, and he seemed to struggle against taking another step.

Rand moved forward.

Squatting easily on the white-cloaked hillside, Jeordam ignored the cold as he watched five people tramp toward him. Three cloaked men, two women in bulky dresses, making hard work of the snow. Winter should have been over long since, according to the old ones, but then they told stories of the seasons changing from what they had always been. They claimed the earth used to shake, too, and mountains rose or sank like the water in a summer pond when you threw a rock in. Jeordam did not believe it. He was eighteen, born in the tents, and this was the only life he had ever known. The snow, the tents, and the duty to protect.

He lowered his veil and stood slowly, leaning on his long spear so as not to frighten the wagon folk, but they stopped abruptly anyway, staring at the spear, at the bow slung across his back and the quiver at his waist. None appeared any older than himself. "You have need of us, Jenn?" he called.

"You name us that to mock us," a tall, sharp-nosed fellow shouted back, "but it is true. We are the only true Aiel. You have given up the Way."

"That is a lie!" Jeordam snapped. "I have never held a sword!" He drew a deep breath to calm himself. He had not been put out here to grow angry with Jenn. "If you are lost, your wagons are that way." He pointed southward with his spear.

One woman placed a hand on sharp-nose's arm and spoke quietly. The others nodded, and finally sharp-nose did, too, if reluctantly. She was pretty, with yellow wisps of hair escaping the dark shawl wrapped around her head. Facing Jeordam, she said, "We are not lost." She peered at him suddenly, seeming to see him for the first time, and tightened her shawl around her.

He nodded; he had not thought they were. The Jenn usually managed to avoid anyone from the tents even when they needed help. The few who did not came only in desperation, for the help they could not find elsewhere. "Follow me."

It was a mile across the hills to his father's tents, low shapes partially covered by the last snowfall, clinging to the slopes. His own people watched the new arrivals cautiously, but did not stop what they were doing, whether cooking or tending weapons or tossing snowballs with a child. He was proud of his sept, nearly two hundred people, largest of the ten camps scattered north of the wagons. The Jenn did not seem much impressed, though. It irritated him that there were so many more Jenn than Aiel.

Lewin came out of his tent, a tall, graying man with a hard face; Lewin never smiled, they said, and Jeordam had certainly never seen it. Maybe he had before Jeordam's mother died of a fever, but Jeordam did not believe it.

The yellow-haired woman - her name was Morin - told a story much as Jeordam had expected. The Jenn had traded with a village, a place with a log wall, and then men from the village had come in the night, taking back what had been traded for, taking more. The Jenn always thought they could trust people who lived in houses, always thought the Way would protect them. The dead were listed - fathers, a mother, first-brothers. The captives - first-sisters, a sister-mother, a daughter. That last surprised Jeordam; it was Morin who spoke bitterly of a five-year-old daughter carried off to be raised by some other woman. Studying her more closely, he mentally added a few years to her age.

"We will bring them back," Lewin promised. He took a bundle of spears handed to him and thrust them point-down into the ground. "You may stay with us if you wish, so long as you are willing to defend yourselves and the rest of us. If you stay, you will never be allowed back among the wagons." The sharp-nosed fellow turned at that and hurried back the way they had come. Lewin went on; it was seldom that only one left at this point. "Those who wish to come with us to this village, take a spear. But remember, if you take the spear to use against men, you will have to stay with us." His voice and eyes were stone. "You will be dead as far the Jenn are concerned."

One of the remaining men hesitated, but each finally pulled a spear from the ground. So did Morin. Jeordam gaped at her, and even Lewin blinked.

"You do not have to take a spear just to stay," Lewin told her, "or for us to bring back your people. Taking the spear means a willingness to fight, not just to defend yourself. You can put it down; there is no shame."

"They have my daughter," Morin said. .

To Jeordam's shock, Lewin barely paused before nodding. "There is a first time for all things. For all things. So be it." He began tapping men on the shoulder, walking through the camps, naming them to visit this log-walled village. Jeordam was the first tapped; his father had always chosen him first since the day he was old enough to carry a spear. He would have had it no other way.

Morin was having problems with the spear, the haft tangling in her long skirts.

"You do not have to go," Jeordam told her. "No woman ever has before. We will bring your daughter to you."

"I mean to bring Kirin out of there myself," she said fiercely. "You will not stop me." A stubborn woman.

"In that case, you must dress like this." He gestured to his own gray-brown coat and breeches. "You cannot walk cross-country in the night in a dress." He took the spear away from her before she could react. "The spear is not easily learned." The two men who had come with her, awkwardly receiving instruction and nearly falling over their own feet, were proof of that. He found a hatchet and chopped a piece from the spear shaft, leaving four feet, counting nearly a foot of steel point. "Stab with it. No more than that. Just stab. The haft is used for blocking, too, but I will find you something to use as a shield in your other hand."

She looked at him strangely. "How old are you?" she asked, even more oddly. He told her, and she only nodded thoughtfully.

After a moment, he said, "Is one of those men your husband?" They were still tripping over their spears.

“My husband mourns Kirin already. He cares more for the trees than his own daughter.”

“The trees?”

“The Trees of Life.” When he still looked at her blankly, she shook her head. “Three little trees planted in barrels. They care for them almost as well as they do for themselves. When they find a place of safety, they mean to plant them; they say the old days will return, then. They. I said they. Very well. I am not Jenn anymore.” She hefted the shortened spear. “This is my husband now.” Eyeing him closely, she asked, “If someone stole your child, would you talk of the Way of the Leaf and suffering sent to test us?” He shook his head, and she said, “I thought not. You will make a fine father. Teach me to use this spear.”

An odd woman, but pretty. He took the spear back and began to show her, working out what he was doing while he did. With the short haft, it was quick and agile.

Morin was watching him with that strange smile, but the spear had caught him up. “I saw your face in the dream,” she said softly, but he did not really hear. With a spear like this, he could be quicker than a man with a sword. In his mind’s eye he could see the Aiel defeating all the men with swords. No one would stand against them. No one.

Lights flashed through the glass columns, half-blinding Rand. Muradin was only a pace or two ahead, staring straight in front of him, teeth bared, snarling silently. The columns were taking them back, into the time-lost history of the Aiel. Rand’s feet moved of their own accord. Forward. And back in time.

Lewin adjusted the dustveil across his face and peered down into the small camp where the coals of a dying fire still glowed beneath an iron cookpot. The wind brought him a smell of half-burned stew. Mounds of blankets surrounded the coals in the moonlight. There were no horses in sight. He wished he had brought some water, but only the children were allowed water except with meals. He vaguely remembered a time when there had been more water, when the days were not so hot and dusty and the wind had not blown all the time. Night was only a small relief, trading a dull, fiery red sun for cold. He wrapped himself tighter in the cape of wild goatskins he used for a blanket.

His companions scrambled closer, bundled as he was, kicking rocks and muttering until he was sure they would wake the men below. He did not complain; he was no more used to this than they. Dustveils hid their faces, but he could make out who was who. Luca, with his shoulders half again as wide as anyone else’s; he liked to play tricks. Gearan, lanky as a stork and the best runner among the wagons. Charlin and Alijha, alike as reflections except for Charlin’s habit of tilting his head when he was worried, as he was now; their sister Colline was down in that camp. And Maigran, Lewin’s sister.

When the girls’ gathering bags were found on ground torn by a struggle, everyone else was ready to mourn and go on as they had done so many times before. Even Lewin’s greatfather. If Adan had known what the five of them planned, he would have stopped them. All Adan did now was mutter about keeping faith with the Aes Sedai Lewin had never seen, that and try to keep the Aiel alive. The Aiel as a people, but not any one given Aiel. Not even Maigran.

“They are four,” Lewin whispered. “The girls are this side of the fire. I will wake them – quietly - and we will sneak them away while the men sleep.” His friends looked at each other, nodded. He supposed they should have made a plan before this, but all they had been able to think of was coming to get the girls, and how to leave the wagons without being seen. He had not been certain they could follow these men, or find them before they reached the village they came from, a collection of rough huts where the Aiel had been driven away with stones and sticks. There would be nothing to be done if the takers got that far.

“What if they do wake?” Gearan asked.

“I will not leave Colline,” Charlin snapped, right on top of his brother’s quieter “We are taking them back, Gearan.”

“We are,” Lewin agreed. Luca poked Gearan’s ribs, and Gearan nodded.

Making their way down in the darkness was no easy task. Drought-dried twigs snapped under their feet; rocks and pebbles showered down the dry slope ahead of them. The harder Lewin tried to move silently, the more noise he seemed to make. Luca fell into a thornbush that cracked loudly, but managed to extract himself with no more than heavy breathing. Charlin slipped, and slid halfway to the bottom. But nothing moved below.

Short of the camp Lewin paused, exchanging anxious looks with his friends, then tiptoed in. His own breath sounded thunderous in his ears, as loud as the snores coming from one of the four large mounds. He froze as the rough snorts stopped and one of the mounds heaved. It settled, the snoring began again, and Lewin let himself breathe.

Carefully he crouched beside one of the smaller heaps and flipped aside a rough woolen blanket stiff with dirt. Maigran stared up at him, face bruised and swollen, her dress torn to little better than rags. He clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her from crying out, but she only continued to stare blankly, not even blinking.

“I am going to carve you like a pig, boy.” One of the larger mounds tumbled aside, and a wild-bearded man in filthy clothes got to his feet, the long knife in his hand glittering dully in the moonlight, picking up the red glow of the coals. He kicked the mounds to either side of him, producing grunts and stirrings. “Just like a pig. Can you squeal, boy, or do you people just run?”

“Run,” Lewin said, but his sister only stared dully. Frantic, he seized her shoulders, pulled to try starting her toward where the others were waiting. “Run!” She came out of the blankets stiffly, almost a dead weight. Colline was awake - he could hear her whimpering - but she seemed to be drawing her dirty blankets around her even more tightly, trying to hide in them. Maigran stood there, staring at nothing, seeing nothing.

“Seems you cannot even do that.” Grinning, the man was coming around the fire, his knife held low. The others were sitting up in their blankets now, laughing, watching the fun. ,

Lewin did not know what to do. He could not leave his sister. All he could was die. Maybe that would give Maigran a chance to run. “Run, Maigran! Please run!” She did not move. She did not even seem to hear him. What had they done to her?

The bearded man came closer, taking his time, chuckling, enjoying his slow advance.

“Nooooooooooooooooo!” Charlin came hurtling out of the night, throwing his arms around the man with the knife, carrying him to the ground. The other men bounded to their feet. One, his head shaved and shining in the pale light, raised a sword to slash at Charlin.

Lewin was not sure exactly how it happened. Somehow he had the heavy kettle by its iron handle, swinging; it struck the shaved head with a loud crunch. The man collapsed as if his bones had melted. Off balance, Lewin stumbled trying to avoid the fire, and fell beside it, losing the cookpot. A dark man with his hair in braids lifted another sword, ready to skewer him. He scrambled away on his back like a spider, eyes on the sword’s sharp point, hands searching frenziedly for something to fend the man off, a stick, anything. His palm fell on rounded wood. He jerked it around, pushed it at the snarling man. The man’s dark eyes widened, the sword dropped from his grasp; blood poured from his mouth. Not a stick. A spear.

Lewin’s hands sprang away from the haft as soon as he realized what it was. Too late. He crawled backward to avoid the man as he fell, stared at him, trembling. A dead man. A man he had killed. The wind felt very cold.

After a time it came to him to wonder why one of the others had not killed him. He was surprised to see the rest of his friends there around the coals. Gearan and Luca and Alijha, all panting and wild-eyed above their dustveils. Colline still emitted soft sniffing sobs from beneath her blankets, and Maigran still stood staring. Charlin was huddled on his knees, holding himself. And the four men, the villagers Lewin stared from one motionless bloody shape to another.

“We . . . killed them.” Luca’s voice shook. “We Mercy of the Light, be with us now.”

Lewin crawled to Charlin and touched his shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

Charlin fell over. Red wetness slicked his hands, gripping the hilt of the knife driven into his belly. "It hurts, Lewin," he whispered. He shuddered once, and the light went out of his eyes.

"What are we going to do?" Gearan asked. "Charlin is dead, and we . . . Light, what have we done? What do we do?"

"We will take the girls back to the wagons." Lewin could not pull his eyes away from Charlin's glazed stare. "We will do that."

They gathered up everything that was useful, the cookpot and the knives, mainly. Metal things were hard to come by. "We might as well," Alijha said roughly. "They certainly stole it from someone just like us."

When Alijha started to pick up one of the swords, though, Lewin stopped him. "No, Alijha. That is a weapon, made to kill people. It has no other use." Alijha said nothing, only ran his eyes over the four dead bodies, looked at the spears Luca was winding with blankets to carry Charlin's body on. Lewin refused to look at the villagers. "A spear can put food in the pots, Alijha. A sword cannot. It is forbidden by the Way."

Alijha was still silent, but Lewin thought he sneered behind his dustveil. Yet when they finally started away into the night, the swords remained by the dying coals and the dead men.

It was a long walk back through the darkness, carrying the makeshift stretcher bearing Charlin, the wind sometimes gusting to raise choking clouds of dust. Maigran stumbled along, staring straight ahead; she did not know where she was, or who they were. Colline seemed half-terrified, even of her own brother, jumping if anyone touched her. This was not how Lewin had imagined their return. In his mind the girls had been laughing, happy to return to the wagons; they had all been laughing. Not carrying Charlin's corpse. Not hushed by the memory of what they had done.

The lights of the cook fires came into view, and then the wagons, harnesses already spread for men to take their places at sunrise. No one left the shelter of the wagons after dark, so it surprised Lewin to see three shapes come hurrying toward them. Adan's white hair stood out in the night. The other two were Nerrine, Colline's mother, and Saralin, his and Maigran's. Lewin lowered his dustveil with foreboding.

The women rushed to their daughters with comforting arms and soft murmurs. Colline sank into her mother's embrace with a welcoming sigh; Maigran hardly appeared to notice Saralin who looked close to tears at the bruises on her daughter's face.

Adan frowned at the young men, permanent creases of worry deepening in his face. "In the name of the Light, what happened? When we found you were gone, too . . ." He trailed off when he saw the stretcher holding Charlin. "What happened?" he asked again, as if dreading the answer.

Lewin opened his mouth slowly, but Maigran spoke first.

"They killed them." She was staring at something in the distance, her voice as simple as a child's. "The bad men hurt us. They . . . Then Lewin came and killed them."

"You must not say things like that, child," Saralin said soothingly. "You -" She stopped, peering into her daughter's eyes, then turned to stare uncertainly at Lewin. "Is it . . . ? Is it true?"

"We had to," Alijha said in a pained voice. "They tried to kill us. They did kill Charlin."

Adan stepped back. "You . . . killed? Killed men? What of the Covenant? We harm no one. No one! There is no reason good enough to justify killing another human being. None!"

"They took Maigran, greatfather," Lewin said. "They took Maigran and Colline, and hurt them. They -"

“There is no reason!” Adan roared, shaking with rage. “We must accept what comes. Our sufferings are sent to test our faithfulness. We accept and endure! We do not murder! You have not strayed from the Way, you have abandoned it. You are Da’shain no longer. You are corrupt, and I will not have the Aiel corrupted by you. Leave us, strangers. Killers! You are not welcome in the wagons of the Aiel.” He turned his back and strode away as if they no longer existed. Saralin and Nerrine started after him, guiding the girls.

“Mother?” Lewin said, and flinched when she looked back at him with cold eyes. “Mother, please - ”

“Who are you that addresses me so? Hide your face from me, stranger. I had a son, once, with a face like that. I do not wish to see it on a killer.” And she led Maigran after the others.

“I am still Aiel,” Lewin shouted, but they did not look back. He thought he heard Luca crying. The wind rose, picking up dust, and he veiled his face. “I am Aiel!”

Wildly darting lights bored into Rand’s eyes. The pain of Lewin’s loss still hung to him, and his mind tumbled furiously. Lewin had not carried a weapon. He had not known how to use a weapon. Killing terrified him. It did not make sense.

He was almost abreast of Muradin now, but the man was not aware of him. Muradin’s snarl was a rictus; sweat beaded on his face; he quivered as though wanting to run.

Rand’s feet took him forward, and back.

Chapter 26 - The Dedicated

Forward, and back.

Adan lay in the sandy hollow clutching his dead son's weeping children, shielding their eyes against his ragged coat. Tears rolled down his face, too, but silently, as he peered cautiously over the edge. At five and six, Maigran and Lewin deserved the right to cry; Adan was surprised he had any tears left, himself.

Some of the wagons were burning. The dead lay where they had fallen. The horses had already been driven off, except for those still hitched to a few wagons that had been emptied onto the ground. For once he took no notice of the crated things the Aes Sedai had given into Aiel charge, toppled carelessly into the dirt. It was not the first time he had seen that, or dead Aiel, but this time he could not care. The men with the swords and spears and bows, the men who had done the killing, were loading those empty wagons. With women. He watched Rhea, his daughter, shoved up into a wagon box with the others, crowded together like animals by laughing killers. The last of his children. Elwin dead of hunger at ten, Sorelle at twenty of fever her dreams told her was coming, and Jaren, who threw himself off a cliff a year ago, at nineteen, when he found he could channel. Marind, this morning.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to rush out there and stop them from taking his last child. Stop them, somehow. And if he did rush out? They would kill him, and take Rhea anyway. They might well kill the children, too. Some of those bodies sprawled in their own blood were small.

Maigran clutched at him as if she sensed he might leave her, and Lewin stiffened as if he wanted to hold tighter but thought himself too old. Adan smoothed their hair and kept their faces pressed against his chest. He made himself watch, though, until the wagons wheeled away surrounded by whooping riders, after the horses that were already almost out of sight toward the smoking mountains that lined the horizon.

Only then did he stand up, prying the children loose. "Wait here for me," he told them. "Wait until I come back." Clinging to each other, they stared at him with tear-stained white faces, nodded uncertainly.

He walked out to one of the bodies, rolled her over gently. Siedre could have been asleep, her face just the way it appeared beside him when he woke each morning. It always surprised him to notice gray in her red-gold hair; she was his love, his life, and ever young and new to him. He tried not to look at the blood soaking the front of her dress or the gaping wound below her breasts.

"What do you mean to do now, Adan? Tell us that! What?"

He brushed Seidre's hair from her face - she liked to be neat - and stood, turning slowly to confront the knot of angry, frightened men. Sulwin was the leader, a tall man with deep-set eyes. He had let his hair grow, Sulwin had, as if to hide being Aiel. A number of men had. It had made no difference, to these last raiders or those who had come before.

"I mean to bury our dead and go on, Sulwin." His eyes drifted back to Siedre. "What else is there?"

"Go on, Adan? How can we go on? There are no horses. There is almost no water, no food. All we have left are wagons full of things the Aes Sedai will never come for. What are they, Adan? What are they that we should give our lives to haul them across the world, afraid to touch them even. We cannot go on as before!"

"We can!" Adan shouted. "We will! We have legs; we have backs. We will drag the wagons, if need be. We will be faithful to our duty!" He was startled to see his own brandished fist. A fist. His hand trembled as he unclenched it and put it down by side.

Sulwin stepped back, then held his ground with his companions. "No, Adan. We are supposed to find a place of safety, and some of us mean to do that. My grandfather used to tell me stories he heard as a boy, stories of when we lived in safety and people came to hear us sing. We mean to find a place where we can be safe, and sing again."

“Sing?” Adan scoffed. “I have heard those old stories, too, that Aiel singing was a wondrous thing, but you know those old songs no more than I do. The songs are gone, and the old days are gone. We will not give up our duty to the Aes Sedai to chase after what is lost forever.”

“Some of us will, Adan.” The others behind Sulwin nodded. “We mean to find that safe place. And the songs, too. We will!”

A crash whipped Adan’s head around. More of Sulwin’s cronies were unloading one of the wagons, and a large flat crate had fallen, half breaking open to reveal what looked like a polished doorframe of dark red stone. Other wagons were being emptied, too, and by more than Sulwin’s friends. At least a quarter of the people he saw were hard at work clearing wagons of everything but food or water.

“Do not try to stop us,” Sulwin cautioned.

Adan made his fist loosen again. “You are not Aiel,” he said. “You betray everything. Whatever you are, you are no longer Aiel!”

“We keep the Way of the Leaf as well as you, Adan.”

“Go!” Adan shouted. “Go! You are not Aiel! You are lost! Lost! I do not want to look at you! Go!” Sulwin and the others stumbled in their haste to get away from him.

His heart sank lower as he surveyed the wagons, and the dead lying among the litter. So many dead, so many wounded moaning as they were tended. Sulwin and his lost ones were taking some care in their unloading. The men with the swords had broken open crates until they realized there was no gold inside, no food. Food was more precious than gold. Adan studied the stone doorframe, tumbled piles of stone figurines, odd shapes in crystal standing among the potted chora cuttings Sulwin’s folk had no use for. Was there a use for any of it? Was this what they were being faithful for? If it was, then so be it. Some could be saved. There was no way to tell what Aes Sedai might consider most important, but some could be saved.

He saw Mairan and Lewin clutching their mother’s skirts. He was glad Saralin was alive to look after them; his last son, her husband, the children’s father, had died from the very first arrow that morning. Some could be saved. He would save the Aiel, whatever it took.

Kneeling, he gathered Siedre in his arms. “We are still faithful, Aes Sedai,” he whispered. “How long must we be faithful?” Putting his head down on his wife’s breast, he wept.

Tears stung Rand’s eyes; silently, he mouthed, “Siedre.” The Way of the Leafy That was no Aiel belief. He could not think dearly; he could hardly think at all. The lights spun faster and faster. Beside him, Muradin’s mouth was open in a soundless howl; the Aiel’s eyes bulged as if witnessing the death of everything. They stepped forward together.

Jonai stood at the edge of the cliff staring out westward over the sun-sparkled water. A hundred leagues in that direction lay Comelle. Had lain Comelle. Comelle had clung to the mountains overlooking the sea. A hundred leagues west, where the sea now ran. If Alnora were still alive, perhaps it would have been easier to take. Without her dreams, he scarcely knew where to go or what to do. Without her, he hardly cared to live. He felt every gray hair as he turned to trudge back to the wagons, waiting a mile away. Fewer wagons, now, and showing wear. Fewer people, too, a handful of thousands where there had been tens. But too many for the remaining wagons. No one rode now save children too small to walk.

Adan met him at the first wagon, a tall young man, his blue eyes too wary. Jonai always expected to see Willim if he looked around quickly enough. But Willim had been sent away, of course, years ago, when he began to channel no

matter how hard he tried to stop. The world had too many men channeling, still; they had to send away boys who showed the signs. They had to. But he wished he had his children back. When had Esole died? So little to be laid in a hastily dug hole, wasted with sickness there was no Aes Sedai to Heal.

“There are Ogier, father,” Adan said excitedly. Jonai suspected his son had always thought his stories of the Ogier were just that, stories. “They came from the north.”

It was a bedraggled band Adan led him to, no more than fifty in number, hollow-cheeked, sad-eyed, tufted ears drooping. He had become accustomed to his own people’s drawn faces and worn, patched clothing, but seeing the same on Ogier shocked him. Yet he had people to care for, and duties to discharge for the Aes Sedai.

How long since he had seen an Aes Sedai? Just after Alnora died. Too late for Alnora. The woman had Healed the sick who still lived, taken some of the sa’angreal, and gone on her way, laughing bitterly when he asked her where there was a place of safety. Her dress had been patched, and worn at the hem. He was not sure she had been sane. She claimed one of the Forsaken was only partly trapped, or maybe not at all; Ishamael still touched the world, she said. She had to be as mad as the remaining male Aes Sedai.

He pulled his mind back to the Ogier as they stood, unsteady on their great legs. His thoughts wandered too much since Alnora’s death. They had bread and bowls in their hands. He was shocked to feel a prick of anger that someone had shared their meager stock of food. How many of his people could eat on what fifty Ogier could consume? No. To share was the way. To give freely. A hundred people? Two hundred?

“You have chora cuttings,” one of the Ogier said. His thick fingers gently brushed the trefoil leaves of the two potted plants tied to the side of a wagon.

“Some,” Adan said curtly. “They die, but the old folk keep new cuttings before they do.” He had no time for trees. He had a people to look after. “How bad is it in the north?”

“Bad,” an Ogier woman replied. “The Blighted Lands have grown southward, and there are Myrddraal and Trollocs.”

“I thought they were all dead.” Not north, then. They could not turn north. South? The Sea of Jeren lay ten days south. Or did it, any longer? He was tired. So tired.

“You have come from the east?” another Ogier asked. He wiped his bowl with a heel of bread and gulped it down. “How is it to the east?”

“Bad,” Jonai replied. “Perhaps not so bad for you, though. Ten - no, twelve days ago, some people took a third of our horses before we could escape. We had to abandon wagons.” That pained him. Wagons left behind, and what was in them. The things the Aes Sedai had placed in Aiel charge, abandoned. That it was not the first time only made it worse. “Almost everyone we meet takes things, whatever they want. Perhaps they will not be so with Ogier, though.”

“Perhaps,” an Ogier woman said as if she did not believe it. Jonai was not certain he did either; there was no safe place. “Do you know where any of the stedding are?”

Jonai stared at her. “No. No, I do not. But surely you can find the stedding.”

“We have run so far, so long,” an Ogier back in the huddle said, and another added in a mournful rumble, “The land has changed so much.”

“I think we must find a stedding soon or die,” the first Ogier woman said. “I feel a . . . longing . . . in my bones. We must find a stedding. We must.”

“I cannot help you,” Jonai said sadly. He felt a tightness in his chest. The land changed beyond knowing, changing still so the plain traveled last year might be mountains this. The Blighted Lands growing. Myrddraal and Trollocs still alive. People stealing, people with faces like animals, people who did not recognize Da’shain or know them. He could barely

breathe. The Ogier, lost. The Aiel, lost. Everything lost. The tightness broke in pain, and he sank to his knees, doubled over, clutching his chest. A fist held his heart, squeezing.

Adan knelt beside him worriedly. "Father, what is it? What is the matter? What can I do?"

Jonai managed to seize his son's frayed collar and pull his face close. "Take-the people-south." He had to force the words out between spasms that seemed to be ripping his heart out.

"Father, you are the one who - "

"Listen. Listen! Take them - south. Take - the Aiel - to safety. Keep - the Covenant. Guard - what the Aes Sedai - gave us - until they - come for it. The Way - of the Leaf. You must - " He had tried. Solinda Sedai must understand that. He had tried. Alnora.

Alnora. The name faded, the pain in Rand's chest loosened. No sense. It made no sense. How could these people be Aiel?

The columns flashed in blinding pulses. The air stirred, swirling.

Beside him, Muradin's mouth stretched wide in an effort to scream. The Aiel clawed at his veil, clawed at his face, leaving deep bloody scratches.

Forward.

Jonai hurried down the empty streets, trying not to look at shattered buildings and dead chora trees. All dead. At least the last of the long abandoned jo-cars had been hauled away. Aftershocks still troubled the ground beneath his feet. He wore his work clothes, his cadin'sor, of course, though the work he had been given was nothing he had been trained for. He was sixty-three, in the prime of life, not yet old enough for gray hairs, but he felt a tired old man.

No one questioned his entering the Hall of the Servants; there was no one at the great columned entrance to question anyone, or give greeting. Plenty of people darted about inside, arms filled with papers or boxes, eyes anxious, but none so much as looked at him. There was a feel of panic about them, and it grew by increments every time the ground shook. Distressed, he crossed the anteroom and trotted up the broad stairs. Mud stained the silvery white elstone. No one could spare time. Perhaps no one cared.

There was no need to knock at the door he sought. Not one of the great gilded doors to an ingathering hall, but a door plain and unobtrusive. He slipped in quietly, though, and was glad he had. Half a dozen Aes Sedai stood around the long table, arguing, apparently not noticing when the building trembled. They were all women.

He shivered, wondering if men would ever stand in a meeting such as this again. When he saw what was on the table, the shiver became a shudder. A crystal sword - perhaps an object of the Power, perhaps only an ornament; he had no way of telling - held down the Dragon banner of Lews Therin Kinslayer, spread out like a tablecloth and spilling onto the floor. His heart clenched. What was that doing here? Why had it not been destroyed, and memory of the cursed man as well?

"What good is your Foretelling," Oselle was almost shouting, "if you cannot tell us when?" Her long black hair swayed as she shook with anger. "The world rests on this! The future! The Wheel itself?"

Dark-eyed Deindre faced her with a more usual calm. "I am not the Creator. I can only tell you what I Foretell."

"Peace, sisters." Solinda was the calmest of them all, her old-fashioned streith gown only a pale blue mist. The sun-red hair falling to her waist was nearly the color of his own. His greatfather had served her as a young man, but she looked

younger than he; she was Aes Sedai. “The time for contention among ourselves is past. Jaric and Haindar will both be here by tomorrow.”

“Which means we cannot afford mistakes, Solinda.”

“We must know”

“Is there any chance of . . . ?”

Jonai stopped listening. They would see him when they were ready. He was not the only one in the room besides the Aes Sedai. Someshta sat against the wall near the door, a great shape seemingly woven of vines and leaves, his head a little above Jonai’s even so. A fissure of withered brown and charred black ran up the Nym’s face and furrowed the green grass of his hair, and when he looked at Jonai, his hazelnut eyes seemed troubled.

When Jonai nodded to him, he fingered the rift and frowned. “Do I know you?” he said softly.

“I am your friend,” Jonai replied sadly. He had not seen Someshta in years, but he had heard of this. Most of the Nym were dead, he had heard. “You rode me on your shoulders when I was a child. Do you remember nothing of it?”

“Singing,” Someshta said. “Was there singing? So much is gone. The Aes Sedai say some will return. You are a Child of the Dragon, are you not?”

Jonai winced. That name had caused trouble, no less for not being true. But how many citizens now believed the Da’shain Aiel had once served the Dragon and no other Aes Sedai?

“Jonai?”

He turned at the sound of Solinda’s voice, went to one knee as she approached. The others were still arguing, but more quietly.

“All is in readiness, Jonai?” she said.

“All, Aes Sedai. Solinda Sedai” He hesitated, took a deep breath. “Solinda Sedai, some of us wish to remain. We can serve, still.”

“Do you know what happened to the Aiel at Tzora?” He nodded, and she sighed, reaching out to smooth his short hair as if he were a child. “Of course you do. You Da’shain have more courage than Ten thousand Aiel linking arms and singing, trying to remind a madman of who they were and who he had been, trying to turn him with their bodies and a song. Jaric Mondoran killed them. He stood there, staring as though at a puzzle, killing them, and they kept closing their lines and singing. I am told he listened to the last Aiel for almost an hour before destroying him. And then Tzora burned, one huge flame consuming stone and metal and flesh. There is a sheet of glass where the second greatest city in the world once stood.”

“Many people had time to flee, Aes Sedai. The Da’shain earned them time to flee. We are not afraid.”

Her hand tightened painfully in his hair. “The citizens have already fled Paaren Disen, Jonai. Besides, the Da’shain yet have a part yet to play, if Deindre could only see far enough to say what. In any case, I mean to save something here, and that something is you.”

“As you say,” he said reluctantly. “We will care for what you have given into our charge until you want them again.”

“Of course. The things we gave you.” She smiled at him and loosened her grip, smoothing his hair once more before folding her hands. “You will carry the . . . things . . . to safety, Jonai. Keep moving, always moving, until you find a place of safety, where no one can harm you.”

“As you say, Aes Sedai.”

“What of Coumin, Jonai? Has he calmed?”

He did not know any way but to tell her; he would rather have bitten his tongue out. “My father is hiding somewhere in the city. He tried to talk us into . . . resisting. He would not listen, Aes Sedai. He would not listen. He found an old shocklance somewhere, and . . .” He could not go on. He expected her to be angry, but her eyes glistened with tears.

“Keep the Covenant, Jonai. If the Da’shain lose everything else, see they keep the Way of the Leaf. Promise me.”

“Of course, Aes Sedai,” he said, shocked. The Covenant was the Aiel, and the Aiel were the Covenant; to abandon the Way would be to abandon what they were. Coumin was an aberration. He had been strange since he was a boy, it was said, hardly Aiel at all, though no one knew why.

“Go now, Jonai. I want you far from Paaren Disen by tomorrow. And remember - keep moving. Keep the Aiel safe.”

He bowed where he knelt, but she was already being drawn back into the argument.

“Can we trust Kodam and his fellows, Solinda?”

“We must, Oselle. They are young and inexperienced, but barely touched by the taint, and . . . And we have no choice.”

“Then we will do what we must. The sword must wait. Someshta, we have a task for the last of the Nym, if you will do it. We have asked too much of you; now we must ask more.”

Jonai bowed his way out formally as the Nym rose, his head brushing the ceiling. Already immersed in their plans, they were not looking at him, but he did them this last honor anyway. He did not think he would ever see them again.

He ran from the Hall of the Servants, all the way out of the city to where the great gathering waited. Thousands of wagons in ten lines stretching nearly two leagues, wagons loaded with food and water barrels, wagons loaded with the crated things the Aes Sedai had given into Aiel charge, angreal and sa’angreal and ter’angreal, all the things that had to be kept from the hands of men going mad while they wielded the One Power. Once there would have been other ways to carry them, jo-cars and jumpers, hoverflies and huge sho-wings. Now painfully assembled horses and wagons had to suffice. Among the wagons stood the people, enough to populate a city but perhaps all the Aiel left alive in the world.

A hundred came to meet him, men and women, the representatives demanding word of whether the Aes Sedai had granted leave for some to stay. “No,” he told them. Some frowned reluctantly, and he added, “We must obey. We are Da’shain Aiel, and we obey the Aes Sedai.”

They dispersed back to their wagons slowly, and he thought he heard Coumin’s name mentioned, but he could not let it trouble him. He hurried to his own wagon, at the head of one of the center lines. The horses were all nervous with the ground shaking at intervals.

His sons were already up on the seat - Willim, fifteen, with the reins, and Adan, ten, beside him, both grinning with nervous excitement. Little Esole lay playing with a doll on top of the canvas tied over their possessions - and, more important, their charges from the Aes Sedai. There was no room for any to ride but the young and the very old. A dozen rooted chora cuttings in day pots sat behind the wagon seat, to be planted when they found a place of safety. A foolish thing to carry, perhaps, but no wagon was without its potted cuttings. Something from a time long gone; symbol of a better time to come. People needed hope, and symbols.

Alnora waited beside the team, glossy black hair tumbling about her shoulders and reminding him of the first time he saw her as a girl. But worry had etched lines around her eyes now.

He managed a smile for her, hiding the worry in his own heart. “All will be well, wife of my heart.” She did not answer, and he added, “Have you dreamed?”

“Of no time soon,” she murmured. “All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.” Smiling tremulously, she touched his cheek. “With you I know it will be so, husband of my heart.”

Jonai waved his arms over his head, and the signal rippled down the lines. Slowly the wagons began to move, the Aiel leaving Paaren Disen.

Rand shook his head. Too much. Memories crowding together. The air seemed filled with sheet lightning. The wind swirled gritty dust into dancing whirlwinds. Muradin had clawed deep furrows in his face; he was digging at his eyes now. Forward.

Coumin knelt at the edge of the plowed ground in his working clothes, plain brownish gray coat and breeches and soft laced boots, in a line with others like him that surrounded the field, ten men of the Da’shain Aiel at twice stretched-arms’ length and then an Ogier, all the way around. He could see the next field, lined the same way, beyond the soldiers with their shocklances sitting atop armored jo-cars. A hoverfly buzzed overhead in its patrol, a deadly black metal wasp containing two men. He was sixteen, and the women had decided his voice was finally deep enough to join in the seed singing.

The soldiers fascinated him, men and Ogier, the way a colorful poisonous snake might. They killed. His father’s greatfather, Charn, claimed there had been no soldiers once, but Coumin did not believe it. If there were no soldiers, who would stop the Nightriders and the Trollocs from coming to kill everyone? Of course, Charn claimed there had not been any Myrddraal or Trollocs then, either. No Forsaken, no Shadowwrought. He had many stories he claimed were from a time before soldiers and Nightriders and Trollocs, when he said the Dark Lord of the Grave had been bound away, and no one knew his name, or the word “war.” Coumin could not imagine such a world; the war had been old when he was born.

He enjoyed Charn’s stories even if he could not make himself believe, but some earned the old man frowns and scoldings. Like when he claimed to have served one of the Forsaken, once. Not just any Forsaken, but Lanfear herself. As well say he had served Ishamael. If Charn had to make up stories, Coumin wished he could say he had served Lews Therin, the great leader himself. Of course, everyone would ask why he was not serving the Dragon now, but that would be better than the way things were. Coumin did not like the way citizens looked at Charn when he said that Lanfear had not always been evil.

A stir at the end of the field told him one of the Nym was approaching. The great form, head and shoulders and chest taller than any Ogier, stepped out onto the seeded ground, and Coumin did not have to see to know he left footprints filled with sprouting things. It was Someshta, surrounded by clouds of butterflies, white and yellow and blue. Excited murmurs rose from the townspeople and the folk whose fields these were, gathered to watch. Each field would have its Nym, now.

Coumin wondered if he could ask Someshta about Charn’s stories. He had spoken to him once, and Someshta was old enough to know if Charn was telling the truth; the Nym were older than anyone. Some said the Nym never died, not so long as plants grew. But this was no time to be thinking of questioning a Nym.

The Ogier began it, as was fitting, standing to sing, great bass rumbles like the earth singing. The Aiel rose, men’s voices lifting in their own song, even the deepest at a higher pitch than the Ogier’s. Yet the songs braided together, and Someshta took those threads and wove them into his dance, gliding across the field in swooping strides, arms wide, butterflies swirling about him, landing on his spread fingertips.

Coumin could hear the seed singing around the other fields, hear the women dapping to urge the men on, their rhythm the heartbeat of new life, but it was a distant knowledge. The song caught him up, and he almost felt that it was himself, not the sounds he made, that Someshta wove into the soil and around the seeds. Seeds no longer, though. Zemais sprouts covered the field, taller wherever the Nym’s foot had trod. No blight would touch those plants, nor any insect; seed sung, they would eventually grow twice as high as a man and fill the town’s grainbarns. This was what he had been born for, this song and the other seed songs. He did not regret the fact that the Aes Sedai had passed him over at ten, saying he lacked the spark. To have been trained as Aes Sedai would have been wondrous, but surely no more so than this moment.

The song faded slowly, the Aiel guiding its end. Someshta danced a few steps more after the last voices ceased, and it seemed the song still hung faintly in the air for as long as he moved. Then he stopped, and it was done.

Coumin was surprised to see that the townspeople were gone, but he had no time to wonder where they had gone or why. The women were coming, laughing, to congratulate the men. He was one of the men now, not a boy any longer, though the women alternated between kissing him on the lips and reaching up to ruffle his short red hair.

It was then that he saw the soldier, only a few steps away, watching them. He had left his shocklance and fancloth battle cape somewhere, but he still wore his helmet, like some monstrous insect's head, its mandibles hiding his face though his black shockvisor was raised. As if realizing he still stood out, the soldier pulled off the helmet, revealing a dark young man no more than four or five years older than Coumin. The soldier's unblinking brown eyes met his, and Coumin shivered. The face was only four or five years older, but those eyes The soldier would have been chosen to begin his training at ten, too. Coumin was glad Aiel were spared that choosing.

One of the Ogier, Tomada, came over, tufted ears slanted forward inquisitively. "Do you have news, warman? I saw excitement among the jo-cars while we sang."

The soldier hesitated. "I suppose I can tell you, though it is not confirmed. We have a report that Lews Therin led the Companions on a strike at Shayol Ghul this morning at dawn. Something is disrupting communications, but the report is the Bore has been sealed, with most of the Forsaken on the other side. Maybe all of them."

"Then it is over." Tomada breathed. "Over at last, the Light be praised."

"Yes." The soldier looked around, suddenly seeming lost. "I . . . suppose it is. I suppose. . . ." He peered at his hands, then let them fall to his sides again. He sounded weary. "The local folk could not wait to begin celebrating. If the news is true, it might go on for days. I wonder if . . . ? No, they will not want soldiers joining them. Will you?"

"For tonight, perhaps," Tomada said. "But we have three more towns to visit before our circuit is done."

"Of course. You still have work to do. You have that." The soldier looked around again. "There are still Trollocs. Even if the Forsaken are gone, there are still Trollocs. And Nightriders." Nodding to himself, he started back toward the jo-cars.

Tomada did not appear excited at all, of course, but Coumin felt as stunned as the young soldier. The war was over? What would the world be like without war? Suddenly he had to talk to Charn.

Sounds of merrymaking rolled out to meet him before he reached the town laughing, singing. The bells in the town-hall tower began ringing exuberantly. Townspeople danced in the streets, men and women and children. Coumin dodged between them, searching. Charn had elected to stay at one of the inns where the Aiel were putting up instead of coming to the singing - even the Aes Sedai could no longer do much for the aches in his aged knees - but surely he would be out for this.

Abruptly something struck Coumin in the mouth and his legs buckled; he was pushing himself to his knees before he realized he was down. A hand put to his mouth came away bloody. He looked up to find an angry-faced townsman standing over him, nursing a fist. "Why did you do that?" he asked.

The townsman spat at him. "The Forsaken are dead. Dead, do you hear? Lanfear will not protect you anymore. We will root out all of you who served the Forsaken while pretending to be on our side, and treat the lot of you as we treated that crazy old man. "

A woman was tugging at the man's arm. "Come away, Toma. Come away, and hold your foolish tongue! Do you want the Ogier to come for you?" Suddenly wary, the man let her pull him away into the crowd.

Struggling to his feet, Coumin began to run, heedless of the blood oozing down his chin.

The inn was empty, silent. Not even the innkeeper was there, or the cook, or her helpers. Coumin ran through the building shouting, "Charn? Charn? Charn?"

Out back, maybe. Charn liked to sit under the spiceapple trees behind the inn, and tell his stories of the days when he was young.

Coumin ran out the back door, and tripped, falling on his face. It was an empty boot that had caught his toe. One of Charn's red dress boots that he wore all the time, now that he no longer joined in the singing. Something made Coumin look up.

Charn's white-haired body hung from a rope pulled over the ridgepole, one foot bare where he had kicked his boot off, the fingers of one hand caught at his neck where he had tried to pull the rope free.

"Why?" Coumin said. "We are Da'shain. Why?" There was no one to answer. Clutching the boot to his chest, he knelt there, staring up at Charn, as the noise of revelry washed over him.

Rand quivered. The light from the columns was a shimmering blue haze that seemed solid, that seemed to claw the nerves out of his skin. The wind howled, one vast whirlwind sucking inward. Muradin had managed to veil himself; bloody sockets stared blindly above the black veil. The Aiel was chewing, and bloody froth dripped onto his chest. Forward.

Charn made his way down the side of the wide, crowded street beneath the spreading chora trees, their trefoil leaves spreading peace and contentment in the shadows of silvery buildings that touched the sky. A city without choras would seem bleak as wilderness. jo-cars hummed quietly down the street, and a great white sho-wing darted across the sky, carrying citizens to Comelle or Tzora or somewhere. He seldom used the sho-wings, himself - if he needed to go very far, an Aes Sedai usually Traveled with him - but tonight he would, to M'jinn. Today was his twenty-fifth naming day, and tonight he intended to accept Nalla's latest offer of marriage. He wondered if she would be surprised; he had been putting her off for a year, not wanting to settle down. It would mean changing his service to Zorelle Sedai, whom Nalla served, but Mierin Sedai had already given her blessing.

He rounded a corner and just had time to see a dark, wide-shouldered man with a fashionably narrow beard before the man's shoulder sent him crashing to his back, head bouncing on the walkway so he saw spots. Dazed, he lay there.

"Watch where you are going," the bearded man said irritably, adjusting his sleeveless red coat and flicking the lace at his wrists. His black hair, hanging to his shoulders, was gathered in back. That was the latest fashion, too, as near as anyone who had not sworn to the Covenant would come to imitating Aiel.

The pale-haired woman with him laid a hand on his arm, her dress of shimmery white streith becoming more opaque with her sudden embarrassment. "Jom, look at his hair. He is Aiel, Jom."

Feeling his head to see if it was cracked, Charn's fingers brushed through short-cut, reddish-gold hair. He gave the longer tail at his nape a tug in lieu of shaking his head. A bruise, he thought, but no more.

"So he is." The man's annoyance vanished in consternation. "Forgive me, Da'shain. I am the one who should be watching where he walks. Let me help you up." He was already suiting his words, hoisting Charn to his feet. "Are you all right? Let me call a jumper to take you where you are going."

"I am not hurt, citizen," Charn said mildly. "Truly, it was my fault." It had been, hurrying like that. He could have injured the man. "Did I harm you? Please, forgive me."

The man opened his mouth to protest - citizens always did; they seemed to think Aiel were made of spinglass - but before he could speak, the ground rippled under their feet. The air rippled, too, in spreading waves. The man looked

about uncertainly, pulling his stylish fancloth cloak around himself and his lady so their heads seemed to float disembodied. "What is it, Da'shain?"

Others who had seen Charn's hair were gathering around him anxiously asking the same questions, but he ignored them, not even thinking of whether he was being rude. He actually began to push through the crowd, his eyes fixed on the Sharom; the white sphere, a thousand feet in diameter, floated as high above the blue and silver domes of the Collam Daan.

Mierin had said today was the day. She said she had found a new source for the One Power. Female Aes Sedai and male would be able to tap the same source, not separate halves. What men and women could do united would be even greater now that there would be no differences. And today she and Beidomon would tap it for the first time - the last time men and women would work together wielding a different Power. Today.

What seemed a tiny chip of white spun away from the Sharom in a jet of black fire; it descended, deceptively slow, insignificant. Then a hundred goutts spurted everywhere around the huge white sphere. The Sharom broke apart like an egg and began to drift down, falling, an obsidian inferno. Darkness spread across the sky, swallowing the sun in unnatural night, as if the light of those flames was blackness. People were screaming, screaming everywhere.

With the first spurt of fire, Charn broke into a run toward the Collam Daan, but he knew he was too late. He was sworn to serve Aes Sedai, and he was too late. Tears rolled down his face as he ran.

Blinking to dispel the spots fluttering across his vision, Rand squeezed his head with both hands. The image still drifted through his head, that huge sphere, burning black, falling. Did I really see the hole being drilled into the Dark One's prison? Did I? He stood at the edge of the glass columns, staring out at Avendesora. A chora tree. A city in a wilderness without chorar. And now there's only one. The columns sparkled in the blue glow from the dome of fog above, but once again the light seemed only brilliant reflections. There was no sign of Muradin; he did not think the Aiel had come out of the glass forest. Or ever would.

Suddenly something caught his eye, low in the branches of the Tree of Life. A shape swinging slowly. A man, hanging from a pole laid across two branches by a rope around his neck.

With a wordless roar, he ran for the tree, grabbing at saidin, the fiery sword coming into his hands as he leaped, slashing at the rope. He and Mat hit the dusty white paving stones with twin thuds. The pole jarred free and clattered down beside them; not a pole, but an odd black-hafted spear with a short sword blade in place of a spearpoint, slightly curved and single-edged. Rand would not have cared if it was made of gold and cuendillar set with sapphires and firedrops.

Letting sword and Power go, he ripped the rope away from Mat's neck and pressed an ear to his friend's chest. Nothing. Desperately, he tore open Mat's coat and shirt, breaking the leather cord that held a silver medallion on Mat's chest. He tossed the medallion aside, listened again. Nothing. No heartbeat. Dead. No! He'd be all right if I hadn't let him follow me here. I can't let him be dead!

As hard as he could he pounded his fist against Mat's chest, listened. Nothing. Again he hammered, listened. Yes. There. A faint heartbeat. It was. So faint, so slow. And slowing. But Mat was still alive despite the heavy purple welt around his neck. He might yet be kept alive.

Filling his lungs, Rand scrambled around to breathe into Mat's mouth as strongly as he could. Again. Again. Then he leaped astride Mat, seized the waist of his breeches and heaved upward, lifting his hips off the pavement. Up and down, three times, and then back to breathing into his mouth. He could have channeled; he might have been able to do something that way. The memory of that girl in the Stone stopped him. He wanted Mat to live. Live, not be a puppet moved by the Power. Once back in Emond's Field he had seen Master Luhhan revive a boy who had been found floating in the Winespring Water. So he breathed and heaved, breathed and heaved and prayed.

Abruptly Mat jerked, coughed. Rand knelt beside him as he put both hands to his throat and rolled onto his side, sucking air in an agonized rattle.

Mat touched the piece of rope with one hand and shivered. "Those flaming sons - of goats," he muttered hoarsely. "They tried - to kill me."

"Who did?" Rand asked, looking around warily. Half-finished palaces around the great littered square stared back at him. Surely Rhuidean was empty except for the two of them. Unless Muradin was still alive, somewhere.

"The folk-on the other side - of that - twisted doorway." Swallowing painfully, Mat sat up and took a deep unsteady breath. "There's one here, too, Rand." He still sounded as if his throat had been rasped.

"You could go through it? Did they answer questions?" That could be useful. He desperately needed more answers. A thousand questions, and too few answers.

"No answers," Mat said huskily. "They cheat. And they tried to kill me." He picked up the medallion, a silver foxhead that almost filled his palm, and after a moment stuffed it into his pocket with a grimace. "I got something out of them, at least." Pulling the strange spear to him, he ran his fingers along the black shaft. A line of some strange cursive script ran its length, bracketed by a pair of birds inlaid in metal even darker than the wood. Ravens, Rand thought they were. Another pair were engraved on the blade. With a rough wry laugh, Mat levered himself to his feet, half-leaning on the spear, the sword blade beginning just level with his head. He did not bother to lace up his shirt or button his coat. "I'll keep this, too. Their joke, but I will keep it."

"A joke?"

Mat nodded. "What it says.

'Thus it our treaty written; thus is agreement made.

Thought is the arrow of time; memory never fades.

What was asked is given. The price is paid.'

"A pretty joke, you see. I'll slice them with their own wit if I ever get the chance. I'll give them 'thought and memory.' " He winced, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "Light, but my head hurts. It's spinning, like a thousand bits of dreams, and every one a needle. Do you think Moiraine will do something for it if I ask?"

"I am sure she will," Rand replied slowly. Mat had to be hurting badly if he sought the Aes Sedai's help. He looked at the dark spear shaft again. Most of the script was hidden by Mat's hand, but not all. Whatever it was, he had no idea what it said. How had Mat? Rhuidean's empty windows stared at him mockingly. We hide many secrets still, they seemed to say. More than you know. Worse than you know. "Let's go back now, Mat. I don't care if we have to cross the valley in the night. As you said, it will be cooler. I don't want to stay in here any longer."

"That sounds just fine to me," Mat said, coughing. "As long as we can get another drink of water at that fountain."

Rand kept his pace to Mat's, which was slow at first, hobbling along using the odd spear as a walking staff. He paused once to look at the two figurines of a man and a woman holding crystal spheres, but he left them there. Not yet. Not for a long time yet, if he was lucky.

When they left the square behind, the unfinished palaces rearing along the street had a threatening look, their jagged tops like the walls of great fortresses. Rand embraced saidin, though he saw no real threat. But he felt it, as though

murderous eyes were boring into his back. Rhuidean lay peaceful and empty, shadowless in the blue glow of its fog roof. The dust in the streets rippled in the wind The wind. There was no wind.

“Oh, burn me,” Mat muttered. “I think we’re in trouble, Rand. It’s what I get for staying around you. You always get me in trouble.”

The ripples came faster, sliding together to make thicker lines, quivering still.

“Can you walk faster?” Rand asked.

“Walk? Blood and ashes, I can run.” Slanting the spear across his chest, Mat suited his words with a lurching gallop.

Running alongside, Rand brought his sword back, uncertain of what he could do with it against shivering lines of dust, uncertain that there really was need. It was only dust. No, it bloody isn’t. It’s one of those bubbles. The Dark One’s evil, drifting along the Pattern, seeking out bloody ta’veren. I know it is.

All around them dust rippled and shivered ever thicker, bunching and gathering. Suddenly, right in front of them, a shape reared up in the basin of a dry fountain, a solid man shape, dark and featureless, with fingers like sharp claws. Silently it leaped at them.

Rand moved instinctively - the Moon Rises Over Water - and the blade of Power sliced through that dark figure. In a twinkling it was only a thick cloud of dust, drifting toward the pavement.

Others replaced it, though, black faceless shapes rushing in from all sides, no two alike, but all with reaching claws. Rand danced the forms among them, blade weaving intricate patterns in the air, leaving floating motes behind. Mat used his spear like a quarterstaff, a spinning blur, but bringing the sword blade into it as if he had always used the weapon. The creatures died - or at least returned to dust - but they were many, and quick. Blood poured down Rand’s face, and the old wound in his side burned on the point of splitting open. Red spread across Mat’s face, too, and down his chest. Too many, and too quick.

You do not do the tenth part of what you are capable of already. That was what Lanfear had told him. He laughed as he danced the forms. Learn from one of the Forsaken. He could do that, if not the way she intended. Yes, he could. He channeled, wove strands of the Power, and sent a whirlwind into the middle of each black shape. They exploded in clouds of dust that left him coughing. As far as he could see, dust settled from the air.

Hacking and panting, Mat leaned on his dark-shafted spear. “Did you do that?” he wheezed, wiping blood away from his eyes. “About time. If you knew how, why didn’t you bloody do it in the first place?”

Rand started to laugh again - Because I didn’t think of it. Because I didn’t know how until I did it - -but it froze in his mouth. Dust drifted out of the air, and as it settled on the ground, it began to ripple. “Run,” he said. “We have to get out of here. Run!”

Side by side they sped for the fog, slashing at any lines of dust that seemed to be thickening, kicking at them, anything to keep them from coalescing. Rand sent whirlwinds swirling wildly in every direction. Dispelled dust began shivering back together immediately, even before it reached the ground now. They kept running, into the fog and through, bursting out into dim, sharp-shadowed light.

Side aching, Rand spun, ready to try lightning, or fire, anything. Nothing came through the fog after them. Maybe the mist was a wall to those dark shapes. Maybe it held them in. Maybe. . . . He did not know. He did not really care, so long as the things could not follow.

“Burn me,” Mat muttered hoarsely, “we were in there all night. It’s nearly sunrise. I didn’t think it was that long.”

Rand stared at the sky. The sun had not topped the mountains yet; a painfully brilliant nimbus outlined the jagged peaks. Long shadows covered the valley floor. He will come from Rhuidean at dawn, and tie you together with bonds you cannot break. He will take you back, and he will destroy you.

“Let’s go back up the mountain,” he said quietly. “They will be waiting for us.”

For me.

Chapter 27 - Within the Ways

The darkness of the Ways compressed the light of Perrin's pole-lantern to a sharp-edged pool around himself and Gaul. The creak of his saddle, the gritty dick of hooves on stone, seemed to reach no further than light's rim. There was no smell to the air; nothing. The Aielman strode along beside Stepper easily, keeping an eye on the dimly seen lantern glow from Loial's party ahead. Perrin refused to call it Faile's. The Ways did not seem to bother Gaul, for all their reputation. Perrin himself could not help listening, as he had for nearly two days, or what passed for days in this lightless place. His ears would be first to catch the sound that meant they were all going to die or worse, the sound of wind rising where no wind ever blew. No wind but Machin Shin, the Black Wind that ate souls. He could not help thinking that traveling the Ways was slack-witted folly, but when need called, what was foolish changed.

The faint light ahead stopped, and he drew rein in the middle of what appeared to be an ancient stone bridge arching through utter blackness, ancient because of the breaks in the bridge walls, the pits and shallow ragged craters freckling the roadbed. Very likely it had stood close to three thousand years, but it seemed ready to fall, now. Maybe right now.

The packhorse crowded up behind Stepper: the animals whickered to each other and rolled their eyes uneasily at the surrounding dark. Perrin knew how the horses felt. A few more people for company would have lifted some of the endless night's weight. Still, he would not have gone any closer to the lanterns ahead even had he been alone. Not and risk a repeat of what happened back on that first Island, right after entering the Waygate in Tear. He scratched his curly beard irritably. He was not sure what he had expected, but not . . .

The pole-lantern bobbed as he stepped down from his saddle and led Stepper and the packhorse to the Guiding, a tall slab of white stone covered with cursive silver inlays vaguely reminiscent of vines and leaves, all pitted as if splashed with acid. He could not read it, of course - Loial had to do that; it was Ogier script - and after a moment he walked around it, studying the Island. It was the same as the others he had seen, with a chest-high wall of white stone, simple curves and rounds fitted in an intricate pattern. At intervals bridges pierced the wall, arching out into the darkness, and rail-less ramps running up or down with no means of support he could see. There were cracks everywhere, ragged pits and shallow craters, as though the stone were rotting. When the horses moved there was a grainy sound of stone flaking away beneath their hooves. Gaul peered into the dark with no visible nervousness, but then, he did not know what might be out there. Perrin did, too well.

When Loial and the others arrived, Faile immediately hopped from her black mare and strode straight to Perrin, eyes intent on his face. He was already regretting making her worry, but she did not look worried at all. He could not have said what her expression was, besides fixed.

"Have you decided to talk to me instead of over my head - ?"

Her full-armed slap made spots dance in front of his eyes. "What did you mean," she practically spat, "charging in here like a wild boar? You have no regard. None!"

He took a slow, deep breath. "I asked you before not to do that." Her dark, tilted eyes widened as if he had said something infuriating. He was rubbing his cheek when her second slap caught him on the other side, nearly unhinging his jaw. The Aiel were watching interestedly, and Loial with his ears drooping.

"I told you not to do that," he growled. Her fist was not very big, but her sudden punch to his shortribs drove most of the air from his lungs, hunching him over sideways, and she drew back her fist again. With a snarl, he seized her by the scruff of her neck and . . .

Well, it was her own fault. It was. He had asked her not to hit him, told her. Her own fault. He was surprised she had not tried to pull one of her knives, though; she seemed to carry as many as Mat.

She had been furious, of course. Furious with Loial for trying to intervene; she could take care of herself, thank you very much. Furious with Bain and Chiad for not intervening; she had been taken aback when they said they did not think she would want them to interfere in a fight she had picked. When you choose the fight, Bain had said, you must take the consequences, win or lose. But she did not seem even the tiniest bit angry with him any longer. That made him

nervous. She had only stared at him, her dark eyes glistening with unshed tears, which made him feel guilty, which in turn made him angry. Why should he be guilty? Was he supposed to stand there and let her hit him to her heart's content? She had mounted Swallow and sat there, very stiff-backed, refusing to sit gingerly, staring at him with an unreadable expression. It made him very nervous. He almost wished she had pulled a knife. Almost.

"They are moving again," Gaul said.

Perrin jerked back to the present. The other light was moving. Now it paused. One of them had noticed his light was not following yet. Probably Loial. Faile might not mind if he got lost, and the two Aiel women had twice tried to talk him into walking off a little way with them. He had not needed the slight shake of Gaul's head to refuse. He heeled Stepper forward, leading the packhorse.

The Guiding here was more pocked than most he had seen, but he rode on past it with only a glance. The light of the other lanterns was already starting down one of the gently sloping ramps, and he followed with a sigh. He hated the ramps. Sided only by darkness, it began to curve, down and around, with nothing discernible beyond the squashed light of the lantern swaying above his head. Something told him that a fall over the edge would never end. Stepper and the packhorse kept to the middle without any urging, and even Gaul avoided the brink. Worse, when the ramp ended on another Island, there was no way to escape the conclusion that it lay directly beneath the one they had just left. He was glad to see Gaul glancing upward, glad he was not alone in wondering what held the Islands up and whether it was still sound.

Once more Loial and Faile's lanterns had stopped by the Guiding, so he reined up again, just off the ramp. This time they did not move on, though. After a few moments, Faile's voice called, "Perrin."

He exchanged looks with Gaul, and the Aiel shrugged. She had not spoken to Perrin since he

"Perrin, come here." Not peremptory, exactly, but not asking, either.

Bain and Chiad were squatting easily beside the Guiding, and Loial and Faile sat their horses close by, pole-lanterns in hand. The Ogier had their packhorses' lead line; his ear tufts twitched as he looked from Faile to Perrin and back again. She, on the other hand, seemed completely absorbed in adjusting her riding gloves, of soft green leather with golden falcons embroidered on their backs. She had changed her dress, too. The new one was cut in the same fashion, with a high neck and narrow divided skirts, but it was a dark green brocaded silk, and somehow it seemed to emphasize her bosom. Perrin had never seen the dress before.

"What do you want?" he asked warily.

She looked up as if surprised to see him, tilted her head thoughtfully, then smiled as though it had just occurred to her. "Oh, yes. I wanted to see if you could be taught to come when I call." Her smile deepened; it had to be because she had heard his teeth grinding. He scrubbed at his nose; there was a faint rank smell here.

Gaul chuckled softly. "As well try to understand the sun, Perrin. It simply is, and it is not to be understood. You cannot live without it, but it exacts a price. So with women."

Bain leaned over to whisper in Chiad's ear, and they both laughed. From the way they looked at Gaul and him, Perrin did not think he would like hearing what the women found so funny.

"It is not that at all," Loial rumbled, ears shifting testily. He gave Faile an accusing look, which did not abash her at all; she smiled at him vaguely and went back to her gloves, snugging each finger all over again. "I am sorry, Perrin. She insisted on being the one to call you. This is why. We are there." He pointed to the base of the Guiding, where a wide pit-broken white line ran off, not to bridge or ramp, but into the darkness. "The Waygate at Manetheren, Perrin."

Perrin nodded, saying nothing. He was not about to suggest they follow the line, not and have Faile call him down for trying to take over. He rubbed his nose again absently; that almost imperceptible scent of rankness was irritating. He was not going to make even the most sensible suggestion. If she wanted to lead, let her. But she sat her saddle, fooling with her gloves, obviously waiting for him to speak so she could make some witty remark. She liked wittiness; he

preferred saying what he meant. Irritably, he turned Stepper, meaning to go on without her or Loial. The line led to the Waygate, and he could pick out the Avendesora leaf that opened it himself.

Suddenly his ear caught a muffled dick of hooves from the darkness, and the fetid smell slammed home in his mind. "Trollocs!" he shouted.

Gaul pivoted smoothly to slide a spear into the black-mailed chest of a wolf-snouted Trolloc dashing into the light with scythe-like sword upraised; in the same effortless motion the Aiel pulled his spearpoint free and sidestepped to let the huge shape fall. More came behind it, though, all goat-snouts and boar's tusks, cruel beaks and twisted horns, with curved swords and spiked axes and hooked spears. The horses danced and screamed.

Holding his pole-lantern high - the thought of facing these things in the dark gave him cold sweat - Perrin clawed for a weapon, swung at a face distorted by a sharp-toothed snout. He was surprised to realize he had pulled the hammer free of its lashings on his saddlebags, but if it did not have the axe's sharp edge, ten pounds of steel wielded by a blacksmith's arm still sent the Trolloc staggering back shrieking and clutching a ruined face.

Loial dashed his pole-lantern against a goat-horned head, and the lantern broke; bathed in burning oil, the Trolloc ran howling into the dark. The Ogier flailed about him with the stout pole, a switch in his huge hands, but one that landed with sharp cracks of splintering bone. One of Faile's knives blossomed in an all-too-human eye above a tusked snout. The Aiel danced the spears, having somehow found time to veil themselves. Perrin struck, and struck, and struck. A whirlwind of death that lasted A minute? Five? It seemed an hour. But suddenly the Trollocs were down, those not already dead kicking in their death throes.

Perrin sucked air into his lungs; his right arm felt as if the weight of the hammer might pull it off. There was a burning sensation on his face, a wetness trickling down his side, another on his leg, where Trolloc steel had gotten through. Each of the Aiel had at least one damp patch darkening their brown-and-gray clothes, and Loial wore a bloody gash down his thigh. Perrin's eyes went right past them, seeking Faile. If she was hurt She sat atop her black mare, a knife in her hand ready to throw. She had actually managed to pull off her gloves and tuck them neatly behind her belt. He could not see a wound on her. In all the blood smell - human, Ogier, Trolloc - he could not have picked out hers if she were bleeding, but he knew her scent, and she did not have the pained smell of injury. Bright lights hurt Trolloc eyes; they did not adapt quickly. Very likely the only reason they were still alive and the Trollocs dead was that abrupt entry from darkness into light.

That was all the time they had, a moment's respite, long enough to glance around, take breath. With a roar like a hundred pounds of bone falling into a huge meat grinder, a Fade leaped into the light, eyeless stare a stare of death, black sword flickering like lightning. The horses screamed, trying to bolt.

Gaul barely managed to turn that blade with his buckler, losing a slice from the side of it as if the layers of cured bullhide were only paper. He stabbed, eluded a thrust - barely - and stabbed again. Arrows sprouted in the Myrddraal's chest. Bain and Chiad had thrust their spears through the harness holding the cased bows on their backs and were using those curved horn bows. More arrows, pincushioning the Halfman's chest. Gaul's spear, darting, stabbing. One of Faile's knives suddenly stood out in that smooth maggot-white face. The Fade would not fall, would not stop trying to kill. Only the wildest dodging kept its sword from finding flesh.

Perrin bared his teeth in an unconscious snarl. He hated Trollocs as an enemy of his blood, but the Neverborn . . . ? It was worth dying to kill a Neverborn. To put my teeth in its throat . . . ! Careless of whether he blocked Bain and Chiad's arrows, he guided Stepper closer to the Neverborn's back, forcing the reluctant dun nearer with reins and knees. At the last instant, the creature spun away from Gaul, seemingly ignoring a spearpoint that thrust between its shoulders and came out below its throat, staring up at Perrin with the eyeless gaze that sent fear into every man's soul. Too late. Perrin's hammer fell, shattering head and eyeless gaze alike.

Even down and virtually headless, the Myrddraal still thrashed, lashing aimlessly with its Thakandar-wrought blade. Stepper danced back, whickering nervously, and suddenly Perrin felt as if he had been doused in icy water. That black steel made wounds even Aes Sedai found hard to Heal, and he had ridden in uncaring. My teeth in its Light, I have to keep hold of myself. I have to!

He could still hear smothered sounds from the darkness at the far end of the Island, the clatter of hooved feet, the scrape of boots, harsh breathing and guttural murmurs. More Trollocs; how many he could not say. A pity they had not been linked to the Myrddraal, yet perhaps they might hesitate to attack without it to drive them. Trollocs were usually cowards in their way, preferring strong odds and easy kills. But even lacking a Myrddraal they could work themselves up to come again eventually.

“The Waygate,” he said. “We have to get out before they decide what to do without that.” He used the bloody hammer to gesture to the still flailing Fade. Faile reined Swallow around immediately, and he was so surprised, he blurted, “You aren’t going to argue?”

“Not when you speak sense,” she said briskly. “Not when you speak sense. Loial?”

The Ogier took the lead on his tall, hairy-fetlocked mount. Perrin backed Stepper after Faile and Loial, hammer in hand, the Aiel siding him, all with bows ready now. Shuffling hooves and boots followed in the blackness, and harsh mutters in a language too rough for human tongues. Back and back, with the mutters edging closer, working up courage.

Another sound floated to Perrin, like silk sighing across silk. It sent shivers along his bones. Louder, a distant giant’s exhalation, rising, falling, rising higher. “Hurry!” he shouted. “Hurry!”

“I am,” Loial barked. “I - That sound! Is it - ? The Light illumine our souls, and the Creator’s hand shelter us! It’s opening. It is opening! I must be last. Out! Out! But not too - No, Faile!”

Perrin risked a glance over his shoulder. Twin gates of apparently living leaves were swinging open, revealing a smoked-glass view of mountainous country. Loial had dismounted to remove the Avendesora leaf to unlock the gate, and Faile had their pack animals’ leads and his huge mount’s reins. With a hasty shout of “Follow me! Quickly!” she booted Swallow’s ribs, and the Tairen mare sprang toward the opening.

“After her,” Perrin told the Aiel. “Hurry! You cannot fight this.” Wisely they hesitated only a heartbeat before peeling back, Gaul seizing the packhorse’s lead line. Stepper came abreast of Loial. “Can you lock it shut some way? Block it?” A frantic edge had entered the harsh mutterings; the Trollocs had recognized the sound too, now. Machin Shin was coming. Living meant getting out of the Ways.

“Yes,” Loial said. “Yes. But go. Go!”

Perrin reined Stepper back quickly toward the Gate, yet before he knew what he was doing he had thrown back his head and howled, defiance and challenge. Foolish, foolish, foolish! Still, he kept his eyes on that pitch dark and backed Stepper into the Waygate. An icy ripple slid across him hair by hair, and time stretched out. The jolt of leaving the Ways hit him, as if he had gone from a dead gallop to a stop in one step.

The Aiel were still turning to face the Waygate, spreading out across the slope with arrows nocked, among low bushes and stunted mountain trees, wind-twisted pine and fir and leatherleaf Faile was just picking herself up from where she had tumbled from Swallow’s saddle, the black mare nuzzling her. Galloping out of a Waygate was at least as bad as galloping in; she was lucky she had not broken her neck, and her horse’s, too. Loial’s tall horse and her packhorses were trembling as though hit between the eyes. Perrin opened his mouth, and she glared at him, daring him to make any comment at all, maybe a sympathetic one least of all. He grimaced wryly and wisely kept silent.

Abruptly Loial came hurtling out of the Waygate, leaping out of a dull silvery mirror with his own reflection growing behind him, and rolled across the ground. Almost on his heels, two Trollocs appeared, ram’s horns and snout, eagle’s beak and feathered crest, but before they were more than halfway out, the shimmering surface turned dead black, bubbling and bulging, clinging to them.

Voices whispered in Perrin’s head, a thousand babbling mad voices clawing at the inside of his skull. Bitter blood. Blood so bitter. Drink the blood and crack the bone. Crack the bone and suck the marrow. Bitter marrow, sweet the screams. Singing screams. Sing the screams. Tiny souls. Acrid souls. Gobble them down. So .Tweet the pain. On and on.

Shrieking, howling, the Trollocs beat at the blackness boiling around them, clawed to pull free as it sucked them deeper, deeper, till only one hairy hand remained, clutching frantically, then only darkness, bulging outward, seeking. Slowly the Waygates appeared, sliding together, squeezing the blackness so it oozed back inside between them. The voices in Perrin's head finally stopped. Loial rushed forward quickly to place not one but two three-lobed leaves among the myriad leaves and vines. The Waygate became stone again, a section of stone wall, carved in intricate detail, standing alone on a sparsely wooded mountainside. Among the myriad leaves and vines was not one, but two Avendesora leaves. Loial had replaced the trefoil leaf from inside on the outside.

The Ogier heaved a deep, relieved sigh. "That is the best I can do. It can only be opened from this side now." He gave Perrin a look at once anxious and firm. "I could have locked it forever by not replacing the leaves, but I will not ruin a Waygate, Perrin. We grew the Ways and tended them. Perhaps they can be cleansed someday. I cannot ruin a Waygate."

"It will do," Perrin told him. Had the Trollocs been coming to this Waygate, or had it just been a chance encounter? In either case, it would do.

"Was that - ?" Faile began unsteadily, then stopped to swallow. Even the Aiel looked shaken for once.

"Machin Shin," Loial said. "The Black Wind. A creature of the Shadow, or a thing grown of the Ways' own taint - no one knows. I pity the Trollocs. Even them."

Perrin was not sure he did, not even dying like that. He had seen what Trollocs left when they got their hands on humans. Trollocs ate anything, so long as it was meat, and sometimes they liked to keep their meat alive while they butchered. He would not let himself pity Trollocs.

Stepper's hooves crunched on gritty dirt as Perrin turned him to see where they were.

Cloud-capped mountains rose all around; it was the ever-present clouds that gave them their name, the Mountains of Mist. The air was cool at this altitude, even in summer, especially compared to Tear. The late-afternoon sun sat on the western peaks, glinting on streams running down to the river that coursed along the floor of the long valley below. The Manetherendrelle, it was called once it had traveled out of the mountains and much farther west and south, but Perrin had grown up calling the length of it that ran along the south edge of the Two Rivers the White River, an uncrossable stretch of rapids that churned its waters to froth. The Manetherendrelle. Waters of the Mountain Home.

Where bare rock showed in the valley below or on the surrounding slopes, it glittered like glass. Once a city had stood there, covering valley and mountains. Manetheren, city of soaring spires and splashing fountains, capital of a great nation of the same name, perhaps the most beautiful city in the world, according to old Ogier tales. Gone now without a trace, except for the all-but-indestructible Waygate that had stood in the Ogier grove. Burned to barren rock more than two thousand years ago, while the Trolloc Wars still raged, destroyed by the One Power after the death of its last king, Aemon al'Caar al'Thorin, in his last bloody battle against the Shadow. Aemon's Field, men had named that place, where the village called Emond's Field now stood.

Perrin shivered. That was long ago. Trollocs had come once since, on Winternight more than a year gone, the night before he and Rand and Mat were forced to flee in the darkness with Moiraine. That seemed long ago, too, now. It could not happen again, with the Waygate locked. It's Whitecloaks I have to worry about, not Trollocs.

A pair of white-winged hawks wheeled above the far end of the valley. Perrin's eyes barely caught the streak of arising arrow. One of the hawks cartwheeled and fell, and Perrin frowned. Why would anyone shoot a hawk up here in the mountains? Over a farm, if it was after the chickens or the geese, but up here? Why would anyone even be up here? Two Rivers people avoided the mountains.

The second hawk swooped on snowy wings toward where its mate had fallen, but suddenly it was climbing desperately. A black cloud of ravens burst from the trees, surrounding it in wild melee, and when they settled again, the hawk was gone.

Perrin made himself breathe. He had seen ravens, and other birds, attack a hawk that came too close to their nests before, but he could not make himself believe it that simple this time. The birds had burst up from about where the arrow had risen. Ravens. The Shadow used animals as spies, sometimes. Rats and others that fed on death, usually. Ravens, especially. He had sharp memories of running from sweeping lines of ravens that had hunted him as though they had intelligence.

“What are you staring at?” Faile asked, shading her eyes to peer down the valley. “Were those birds?”

“Just birds,” he said. Maybe they were. I can’t frighten everybody until I’m sure. Not while they’re still shaky from Machin Shin.

He was still holding his bloody hammer, he realized, slick with black Myrddraal blood. His fingers found drying blood on his cheek, matting in his short beard. When he climbed down, his side and his leg burned. He found a shirt in his saddlebags to clean the hammer before the Fade’s blood etched the metal. In a moment he would find out if there was anything to fear in these mountains. If it was more than men, the wolves would know.

Faile began unbuttoning his coat.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Tending your wounds,” she snapped back. “I’ll not have you bleeding to death on me. That would be just like you, to die and leave me the work of burying you. You have no consideration. Hold still.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and she looked surprised.

She made him strip off everything but his smallclothes, so she could wash his wounds, rub them with ointment fetched from her saddlebags. He could not see the cut on his face, of course, but it seemed small and shallow, if uncomfortably close to his eye. The slash across his left side was over a hand long, though, straight along a rib, and the hole a spear had made in his right thigh was deep. Faile had to put stitches in that, with needle and thread from her sewing kit. He took it stoically; she was the one who winced at every stitch. She muttered angrily under her breath the whole time she worked, especially while rubbing her dark stinging cream into his cheek, looking almost as if the hurts were hers, and his fault, yet she tied bandages around his ribs and his thigh with a gentle hand. It made a startling contrast, her soft touch and her furious grumbles. Purely confusing.

While he donned a clean shirt and a spare pair of breeches from his saddlebags, Faile stood fingering the slice in the side of his coat. Two inches to the right, and he would not have left that Island. Stamping his feet in his boots, he reached for his coat - and she flung it at him.

“You needn’t think I will sew that up for you. I’ve done all the sewing for you I mean to! Do you hear me, Perrin Aybara?”

“I didn’t ask - ”

“You needn’t think it! That’s all!” She stalked away to help the Aiel tend each other and Loial. That was an odd group, the Ogier with his baggy breeches off, Gaul and Chiad eyeing each other like strange cats, Faile spreading her ointment and wrapping bandages and all the while shooting accusing glares at him. What was he supposed to have done now?

Perrin shook his head. Gaul was right, he decided; as well try to understand the sun.

Even knowing what he had to do now, he was reluctant, especially after what had happened in the Ways, with the Fade. Once he had seen a man who had forgotten he was human. The same could happen to him. Fool. You only have to hold out a few more days. Just till you find the Whitecloaks. And he had to know. Those ravens.

He sent his mind questing across the valley for the wolves. There were always wolves where men were not, and if they were close, he could talk with them. Wolves avoided men, ignored them as much as possible, but they hated Trollocs

for unnatural things, and despised Myrddraal with a hatred too deep to hold. If Shadowspawn were in the Mountains of Mist, the wolves could tell him.

But he found no wolves. None. They should have been there, in this wilderness. He could see deer browsing down in the valley. Perhaps it was just that no wolves were close enough. They could talk over some distance, but even a mile was too far. Maybe it was less in mountains. That could be it.

His gaze swept across the cloud-capped peaks and settled on the valley's far end, where the ravens had come from. Maybe he would find wolves tomorrow. He did not want to think of the alternatives.

Chapter 28 - To the Tower of Ghenjei

With night so near, they had no choice but to camp there on the mountain near the Waygate. In two camps. Faile insisted on it.

“That is done with,” Loial told her in a displeased rumble. “We are out of the Ways, and I have kept my oath. It is finished.” Faile put on one of her stubborn expressions, with chin up and fists on hips.

“Leave it alone, Loial,” Perrin said. “I’ll camp over there a bit.” Loial glanced at Faile, who had turned to the two Aiel women as soon as she heard Perrin agree, then shook his huge head and made as if to join Perrin and Gaul. Perrin motioned him back, with a small gesture he hoped none of the women noticed.

He made it a small bit, less than twenty paces. The Waygate might be locked, but there were still the ravens, and whatever they might presage. He wanted to be near if needed. If Faile complained, she could just complain. He was so set to ignore her protests that it irked him when she made none.

Disregarding twinges from his leg and side, he unsaddled Stepper and unloaded the packhorse, hobbled both animals and fitted them with nose bags with a few handfuls of barley and some oats. There was certainly no grazing up here. As to what there was, though He strung his bow and laid it across his quiver near the fire, slipped the axe free of its belt loop.

Gaul joined him in making a fire, and they had a meal of bread and cheese and dried beef, eaten in silence and washed down with water. The sun slid behind the mountains, silhouetting the peaks and painting the undersides of the clouds red. Shadows blanketed the valley, and the air began to grow crisp.

Dusting crumbs from his hands, Perrin dug his good green wool cloak out of his saddlebags. Perhaps he had grown more accustomed to Tear’s heat than he had thought. The women were certainly not eating in silence around their shadow-shrouded fire; he could hear them laughing, and the bits of what they said that he picked up made his ears burn. Women would talk about anything; they had no restraint at all. Loial had moved as far away from them as he could and still be in the light, and was trying to bury himself in a book. They probably did not even realize they were embarrassing the Ogier; they probably thought they were talking quietly enough for Loial not to hear.

Muttering to himself, Perrin sat back down across the fire from Gaul. The Aiel seemed to be taking no notice of the chill. “Do you know any funny stories?”

“Funny stories? I cannot think of one, offhand.” Gaul’s eyes half-turned to the other fire, and the laughter. “I would if I could. The sun, remember?”

Perrin laughed noisily and made his voice loud enough to carry. “I do. Women!” The hilarity in the other camp faded for a moment before rising again. That should show them. Other people could laugh. Perrin stared glumly into the fire. His wounds ached.

After a moment, Gaul said, “This place begins to look more like the Three-fold Land than most of the wetlands. Too much water, still, and the trees are still too big and too many, but it is not so strange as the places called forests.”

The soil was poor here where Manetheren had died in fire, the widely scattered trees all stunted and thick-holed, odd wind-bent shapes, none as much as thirty feet high. Perrin thought it about as desolate a spot as he had ever seen.

“I wish I could see your Three-fold Land someday, Gaul.”

“Perhaps you will, when we are done here.”

“Perhaps.” Not much chance of it, of course. None, really. He could have told the Aielman that, but he did not want to talk of it now, or think of it.

“This is where Manetheren stood? You are of Manetheren’s blood?”

“This was Manetheren,” Perrin replied. “And I suppose I am.” It was hard to believe that the small villages and quiet farms of the Two Rivers held the last of Manetheren’s blood, but that was what Moiraine had said. The old blood runs strong in the Two Rivers, she had said. “That was a long time ago, Gaul. We are farmers, shepherds; not a great nation, not great warriors.”

Gaul smiled slightly. “If you say it. I have seen you dance the spears, and Rand al’Thor, and the one called Mat. But if you say it.”

Perrin shifted uncomfortably. How much had he changed since leaving home? Himself, and Rand, and Mat? Not his eyes, and the wolves, or Rand’s channeling; he did not mean that. How much of what was inside remained unchanged? Mat was the only one who still seemed to be just himself, only more so. “You know about Manetheren?”

“We know more of your world than you think. And less than we believed. Long before I crossed the Dragonwall I had read books brought by peddlers. I knew of ‘ships’ and ‘rivers’ and ‘forests,’ or thought I did.” Gaul made them sound like words in a strange tongue. “This is how I envisioned a ‘forest.’” He gestured at the sparse trees, dwarfed from the height they should have had. “To believe a thing is not to make it true. What of the Nightrunner, and Leafblighter’s get? Do you believe it just coincidence they came near this Waygate?”

“No.” Perrin sighed. “I saw ravens, down the valley. Maybe that’s all they were, but I don’t want to take the chance, not after the Trollocs.”

Gaul nodded. “They could have been Shadoweyes. If you plan for the worst, all surprises are pleasant.”

“I could do with a pleasant surprise.” Perrin felt for wolves again, and again found nothing. “I may be able to find out something tonight. Maybe. If anything happens here, you might have to kick me to wake me.” That sounded odd, he realized, but Gaul only nodded again. “Gaul, you’ve never mentioned my eyes, or even given them a second glance. None of the Aiel have.” He knew they were glowing golden now, in the firelight.

“The world is changing,” Gaul said quietly. “Rhuarc, and Jheran, my own clan chief - the Wise Ones, too - they tried to hide it, but they were uneasy when they sent us across the Dragonwall searching for He Who Comes With the Dawn. I think perhaps the change will not be what we have always believed. I do not know how it will be different, but it will be. The Creator put us in the Three-fold Land to shape us as well as to punish our sin, but for what have we been shaped?” He shook his head suddenly, ruefully. “Colinda, the Wise One of Hot Springs Hold, tells me I think too much for a Stone Dog, and Bair, the eldest Wise One of the Shaarad, threatens to send me to Rhuidean when Jheram dies whether I want to go or not. Beside all of that, Perrin, what does the color of a man’s eyes matter?”

“I wish everybody thought that way.” The merriment had finally stopped at the other fire. One of the Aiel women - Perrin could not tell which - was taking the first watch, her back to the light, and everyone else had settled down for sleep. It had been a tiring day. Sleep should be easy to find, and the dream he needed. He stretched out beside the fire, pulling his cloak around him. “Remember. Kick me awake, if need be.”

Sleep enfolded him while Gaul was still nodding, and the dream came at once.

It was daylight, and he stood alone near the Waygate, which looked like an elegantly carved length of wall, incongruous on the mountainside. Except for that there was no sign any human had ever set foot on that slope. The sky was bright and fine, and a soft breeze up the valley brought him the scent of deer and rabbits, quail and dove, a thousand distinct smells, of water and earth and trees. This was the wolf dream.

For a moment the sense of being a wolf rolled over him. He had paws, and . . . No! He ran his hands over himself, relieved to find only his own body, in his own coat and cloak. And the wide belt that normally held his axe, but with the hammer haft thrust through the loop instead.

He frowned at that, and surprisingly, for a moment, the axe flickered there instead, insubstantial and misty. Abruptly it was the hammer again. Licking his lips, he hoped it stayed that way. The axe might be a better weapon, but he preferred the hammer. He could not remember anything like that happening before, something changing, but he knew little of this strange place. If it could be called a place. It was the wolf dream, and odd things happened there, surely as odd as in any ordinary dream.

As though thinking of the oddities triggered one of them, a patch of sky against the mountains darkened suddenly, became a window to somewhere else. Rand stood amid swirling stormwinds, laughing wildly, even madly, arms upraised, and on the winds rode small shapes, gold-and-scarlet, like the strange figure on the Dragon banner; hidden eyes watched Rand, and there was no telling whether he knew it. The odd "window" winked out, only to be replaced by another farther over, where Nynaeve and Elayne stalked cautiously through a demented landscape of twisted, shadowed buildings, hunting some dangerous beast. Perrin could not have said how he knew it was dangerous, but he did. That vanished, and another black blotch spread across the sky. Mat, standing where a road forked ahead of him. He flipped a coin, started down one branch, and suddenly was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and walking with a staff bearing a short sword blade. Another "window," and Egwene and a woman with long white hair were staring at him in surprise while behind them the White Tower crumbled stone by stone. Then they were gone, too.

Perrin drew a deep breath. He had seen the like before, here in the wolf dream, and he thought the sightings were real in some way, or meant something. Whatever they were, the wolves never saw them. Moiraine had suggested that the wolf dream was the same as something called Tel'aran'rhiod, and then would say no more. He had overheard Egwene and Elayne speaking of dreams, once, but Egwene already knew too much about him and wolves, perhaps as much as Moiraine. It was not something he could talk about, not even with her.

There was one person he could have talked to. He wished he could find Elyas Machera, the man who had introduced him to the wolves. Elyas had to know about these things. When he thought of the man, it seemed for a moment he heard his own name whispered faintly in the wind, but when he listened, there was only the wind. It was a lonely sound. Here there was only himself.

"Hopper!" he called, and in his mind, Hopper! The wolf was dead, and yet not dead, here. The wolf dream was where wolves came when they died, to await being born again. It was more than that, to wolves; they seemed in some way to be aware of the dream even while awake. One was almost as real-maybe as real-as the other, to them. "Hopper!" Hopper! But Hopper did not come.

This was all useless. He was there for a reason, and he might as well get on with it. At best, getting down to where he had seen the ravens rise would take hours.

He took a step - the land around him blurred - and his foot came down near a narrow brook beneath stunted hemlock and mountain willow, with cloud-capped peaks towering above. For a moment he stared in amazement. He was at the far end of the valley from the Waygate. In fact, he was at the very spot he had been aiming for, the place where the ravens had come from, and the arrow that killed the first hawk. Such a thing had never happened to him before. Was he learning more of the wolf dream - Hopper had always said he was ignorant - or was it different this time?

He was more cautious with his next step, but it was only a step. There was no evidence of archer or ravens, no track, no feather, no scent. He was not sure what he had expected. There would be no sign unless they had been in the dream, too. But if he could find wolves in the dream, they could help him find their brothers and sisters in the waking world, and those wolves could tell him if there were Shadowspawn in the mountains. Perhaps if he were higher up they could hear him call.

Fixing his eye on the highest peak bordering the valley, just below the clouds, he stepped. The world blurred, and he was standing on the mountainside, with white billows not five spans overhead. In spite of himself, he laughed. This was fun. From here he could see the entire valley stretched out below.

"Hopper!" No answer.

He leaped to the next mountain, calling, and the next, and the next, eastward, toward the Two Rivers. Hopper did not answer. More troubling, Perrin did not sense any other wolves, either. There were always wolves in the wolf dream. Always.

From peak to peak he sped in blurred motion, calling, seeking. The mountains lay empty beneath him, except for deer and other game. Yet there were occasional signs of men. Ancient signs. Twice great carved figures took nearly an entire mountainside, and in another place strange angular letters two spans high had been incised across a cliff a shade too smooth and sheer. Weathering had worn away the figures' faces, and eyes less sharp than his might have taken the letters themselves for the work of wind and rain. Mountains and cliffs gave way to the Sand Hills, great rolling mounds sparsely covered with tough grass and stubborn bushes, once the shore of a great sea before the Breaking. And suddenly he saw another man, atop a sandy hill.

The fellow was too distant to see clearly, just a tall, dark-haired man, but plainly not a Trolloc or anything of the sort, in a blue coat with a bow on his back, stooping over something on the ground hidden by the low brush. Yet there was something familiar about him.

The wind rose, and Perrin caught his smell faintly. A cold scent, that was the only way to describe it. Cold, and not really human. Suddenly his own bow was in his hand, an arrow nocked, and the weight of a filled quiver tugged at his belt.

The other man looked up, saw Perrin. For a heartbeat he hesitated, then turned and became a streak, slashing away across the hills.

Perrin leaped down to where he had stood, stared at what had occupied the fellow, and without thought pursued, leaving the half-skinned corpse of a wolf behind. A dead wolf in the wolf dream. It was unthinkable. What could kill a wolf here? Something evil.

His prey ran ahead of him in strides that covered miles, never more than barely in sight. Out of the hills and across the tangled Westwood with its wide-scattered farms, over cleared farmland, a quilt of hedged fields and small thickets, and past Watch Hill. It was odd to see the thatched village houses covering the hill with no people in the streets, and farmhouses standing as if abandoned. But he kept his eye on the man fleeing ahead of him. He had become so used to this pursuit that he felt no surprise when one leaping stride put him down on the south bank of the River Taren and the next amid barren hills without trees or grass. North and east he ran, over streams and roads and villages and rivers, intent only on the man ahead. The land grew flat and grassy, broken by scattered thickets, without any sign of man. Then something glittered ahead, sparkling in the sun, a tower of metal. His quarry sped straight for it, and vanished. Two leaps brought Perrin there as well.

Two hundred feet the tower rose, and forty thick, gleaming like burnished steel. It might as well have been a solid column of metal. Perrin walked around it twice without seeing any opening, not so much as a crack, not even a mark on that smooth, sheer wall. The smell hung here, though, that cold, inhuman stink. The trail ended here. The man-if man he was-had gone inside somehow. He only had to find the way to follow.

Stop! It was a raw flow of emotion that Perrin's mind put a word to. Stop!

He turned as a great gray wolf as tall as his waist, grizzled and scarred, alighted as if he had just leaped down from the sky. He might well have. Hopper had always envied eagles their ability to fly, and here, he could too. Yellow eyes met yellow eyes.

"Why should I stop, Hopper? He killed a wolf."

Men have killed wolves, and wolves men. Why doer anger .seize your throat like fire this time?

"I don't know," Perrin said slowly. "Maybe because it was here. I didn't know it was possible to kill a wolf here. I thought wolves were safe in the dream."

You chase Slayer, Young Bull. He it here in the flesh, and he can kill.

“In the flesh? You mean not just dreaming? How can he be here in the flesh?”

I do not know. It is a thing dimly remembered from long ago, come again as so much else. Things of the Shadow walk the dream, now. Creatures of Heartfang. There a no safety.

“Well, he’s inside, now.” Perrin studied the featureless metal tower. “If I can find how he got in, I can put an end to him.”

Cub foolish, digging in a groundwasps’ nest. This place a evil. All know this. And you would chase evil into evil. Slayer can kill.

Perrin paused. There was a sense of finality to the emotions his mind attached the word “kill” to. “Hopper, what happens to a wolf who dies in the dream?”

The wolf was silent for a time. If we die here, we die forever, Young Bull. I do not know if the same is true for you, but I believe it is.

“A dangerous place, archer. The Tower of Ghenjei is a bad place for humankind.”

Perrin whirled, half-raising his bow before he saw the woman standing a few paces away, her golden hair in a thick braid to her waist, almost the way women wore it in the Two Rivers, but more intricately woven. Her clothes were oddly cut, a short white coat and voluminous trousers of some thin pale yellow material gathered at the ankles above short boots. Her dark cloak seemed to hide something that glinted silver at her side.

She shifted, and the metallic flicker vanished. “You have sharp eyes, archer. I thought that the first time I saw you.”

How long had she been watching? It was embarrassing that she had sneaked up without him hearing. At the least Hopper should have warned him. The wolf was lying down in the knee-high grass, muzzle on his forepaws, watching him.

The woman seemed vaguely familiar, though Perrin was certain he would have remembered her had he ever seen her before. Who was she, to be in the wolf dream? Or was it Moiraine’s Tel’aran’rhiod, too? “Are you Aes Sedai?”

“No, archer.” She laughed. “I only came to warn you, despite the prescripts. Once entered, the Tower of Ghenjei is hard enough to leave in the world of men. Here it is all but impossible. You have a bannerman’s courage, which some say cannot be told from foolhardiness.”

Impossible to leave? The fellow - Slayer - surely had gone in. Why would he do that if he could not leave? “Hopper said it’s dangerous, too. The Tower of Ghenjei? What is it?”

Her eyes widened, and she glanced at Hopper, who still lay stretched out on the grass ignoring her and watching Perrin. “You can talk to wolves? Now that is a thing long lost in legend. So that is how you are here. I should have known. The tower? It is a doorway, archer, to the realms of the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn.” She said the names as if he should recognize them. When he looked at her blankly, she said, “Did you ever play the game called Snakes and Foxes?”

“All children do. At least, they do in the Two Rivers. But they give it up when they get old enough to realize there’s no way to win.”

“Except to break the rules,” she said. “ ‘Courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to daze, iron to bind.’ ”

“That’s a line from the game. I don’t understand. What does it have to do with this tower?”

“Those are the ways to win against the snakes and the foxes. The game is a remembrance of old dealings. It does not matter so long as you stay away from the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn. They are not evil the way the Shadow is evil, yet

they are so different from humankind they might as well be. They are not to be trusted, archer. Stay clear of the Tower of Ghenjei. Avoid the World of Dreams, if you can. Dark things walk.”

“Like the man I was chasing? Slayer.”

“A good name for him. This Slayer is not old, archer, but his evil is ancient.” She almost appeared to be leaning slightly on something invisible; perhaps that silver thing he had never quite seen. “I seem to be telling you a great deal. I do not understand why I spoke in the first place. Of course. Are you ta’veren, archer?”

“Who are you?” She seemed to know a lot about the tower, and the wolf dream. But she was surprised I could talk to Hopper. “I’ve met you before somewhere, I think.”

“I have broken too many of the prescripts already, archer.”

“Prescripts? What prescripts?” A shadow fell on the ground behind Hopper, and Perrin turned quickly, angry at being caught by surprise again. There was no one there. But he had seen it; the shadow of a man with the hilts of two swords rising above his shoulders. Something about that image teased his memory.

“He is right,” the woman said behind him. “I should not be talking to you.”

When he turned back, she was gone. As far as he could see were only grassland and scattered thickets. And the gleaming, silvery tower.

He frowned at Hopper, who finally lifted his head from his paws. “It’s a wonder you aren’t attacked by chipmunks,” Perrin muttered. “What did you make of her?”

Her? A she? Hopper stood, looking around. Where?

“I was talking to her. Right here. Just now.”

You made noises at the wind, Young Bull. There was no she here. None but you and I.

Perrin scratched his beard irritably. She had been there. He had not been talking to himself. “Strange things can happen here,” he told himself. “She agreed with you, Hopper. She told me to stay away from this tower.”

She is wise. There was an element of doubt in the thought; Hopper still did not believe there had been any “she.”

“I’ve come awfully far afield from what I intended,” Perrin muttered. He explained his need to find wolves in the Two Rivers, or the mountains above, explained about the ravens, and the Trollocs in the Ways.

When he was done, Hopper remained silent for a long time, his bushy tail held low and stiff. Finally . . . Avoid your old home, Young Bull. The image Perrin’s mind called “home” was of the land marked by a wolfpack. There are no wolves there now. Those who were and did not flee are dead. Slayer walks the dream there.

“I have to go home, Hopper. I have to.”

Take care, Young Bull. The day of the Last Hunt draws near. We will run together in the Last Hunt.

“We will,” Perrin said sadly. It would be nice if he could come here when he died; he was half wolf already, it seemed sometimes. “I have to go now, Hopper.”

May you know good hunting, Young Bull, and shes to give you many cubs.

“Goodbye, Hopper.”

He opened his eyes to the dim light of dying coals on the mountainside. Gaul was squatting just beyond the edge of the light, watching the night. In the other camp, Faile was up, taking her turn at guard. The moon hung above the mountains, turning the clouds to pearly shadows. Perrin estimated he had been asleep two hours.

“I’ll keep guard awhile,” he said, tossing off his cloak. Gaul nodded and settled himself on the ground where he was. “Gaul?” The Aiel raised his head. “It may be worse in the Two Rivers than I thought.”

“Things often are,” Gaul replied quietly. “It is the way of life.” The Aielman calmly put his head down for sleep.

Slayer. Who was he? What was he? Shadowspawn at the Waygate, ravens in the Mountains of Mist, and this man called Slayer in the Two Rivers. It could not be coincidence, however much he wished it.

Chapter 29 - Homecoming

The journey into the Westwood that had taken him perhaps half a dozen strides or so in the wolf dream, out of the mountains and across the Sand Hills, lasted three long days on horses. The Aid had no trouble keeping up afoot, but then the animals themselves could not manage much speed with the land mostly up and down as it was. Perrin's wounds itched fiercely, healing; Faile's ointment seemed to be working.

It was a quiet journey by and large, broken more often by the bark of a hunting fox or the echoing cry of a hawk than by anyone speaking. At least they saw no more ravens. More than once he thought Faile was about to bring her mare over close to him, about to say something, but each time she restrained herself. He was glad of it; he wanted to talk to her more than anything, but what if he found himself making up with her? He berated himself for wanting to. She had tricked Loial, tricked him. She was going to make everything worse; make it harder. He wished he could kiss her again. He wished she would decide she had had her fill of him and go. Why did she have to be so stubborn?

She and the two Aiel women kept to themselves, Bain and Chiad striding along on either side of Swallow when one or the other was not ranging ahead. Sometimes the three of them murmured softly among themselves, after which they avoided looking at him so pointedly that they might as well have thrown rocks. Loial rode with them at Perrin's request, though the situation obviously upset him no end. Loial's ears twitched as if he wished he had never heard of humans. Gaul seemed to find the entire thing vastly amusing; whenever Perrin looked at him, he wore an inward grin.

For himself, Perrin traveled wrapped in worry, and kept his strung bow across the tall pommel of his saddle. Did this man called Slayer rove the Two Rivers only in the wolf dream, or was he in the waking world, too? Perrin suspected the latter, and that Slayer was the one who had shot the hawk for no reason. It was another complication he could do without, on top of the Children of the Light.

His family lived on a sprawling farm more than half a day beyond Emond's Field, almost to the Waterwood. His father and mother, his sisters, his baby brother. Paetram would be nine now, no doubt objecting more strenuously than ever to being called the baby, Deselle a plump twelve, and Adora sixteen, probably ready to braid her hair. Uncle Eward, his da's brother, and Aunt Magde, stout and looking nearly alike, and their children. Aunt Neain, who visited Uncle Carlin's grave every morning, and their children, and Great-Aunt Ealsin, who had never married, with her sharp nose and sharper eye for discovering what everyone for miles around was up to. Once apprenticed to Master Luhhan, he had seen them only on feastdays; the distance was too great for casual travel, and there had always been work to do. If the Whitecloaks hunted for Aybaras, they were easy to find. They were his responsibility, not this Slayer. He could only do so much. Protect his family, and Faile. That was first. Then came the village, and the wolves, and this Slayer last. One man could not manage everything.

The Westwood grew on stony soil broken by bramble-covered outcrops, a hard, thickly treed, land with few farms or paths. He had wandered these heavy woods as a boy, alone or with Rand and Mat, hunting with bow or sling, setting snares for rabbits or simply roaming for the sake of roaming. Bushy-tailed squirrels chittering in the trees, speckled thrushes warbling on branches imitated by black-winged mockers, bluebacked quail bursting up out of the brush in front of the travelers—all spoke to him of home. The very smell of the dirt the horses' hooves turned was a recognition.

He could have headed straight for Emond's Field, but instead he angled more northward through the forest, finally crossing the wide, rough track called the Quarry Road as the sun slanted down toward the treetops. Why "quarry" no one in the Two Rivers knew, and it scarcely looked a road at all, only a weedy stretch that you did not even notice was bare of trees until you saw the overgrown ruts from generations of wagons and carts. Sometimes shards of old pavement worked their way to the surface. Perhaps it had led to a quarry for Manetheren.

The farm Perrin sought lay not far from the road, beyond rows of apple and pear trees where fruit was setting. He smelled the farm before he saw it. The smell of char; not new, yet a full year would not soften that smell.

He reined in at the edge of the trees and sat staring before he made himself ride into what had been the al'Thor farm, the packhorse trailing behind his dun. Only the stone-walled sheep pen still stood, railed gate open and hanging by one hinge. The soot-blackened chimney cast a slanting shadow across the tumbled burned beams of the farmhouse. The

barn and the tabac-curing shed were only ashes. Weeds choked the tabac field and the vegetable garden, and the garden had a trampled look; most of what was not sawleaf or feathertop lay broken and brown.

He did not even think of nocking an arrow. The fire was weeks old, the burned wood slicked and dulled by past rains. Chokevine needed nearly a month to grow that tall. It had even enveloped the plow and harrow lying beside the field; rust showed under the pale, narrow leaves.

The Aiel searched carefully, though, spears ready and eyes wary, quartering the ground and poking through the ashes. When Bain clambered out of the ruins of the house, she looked at Perrin and shook her head. At least Tam al'Thor had not died in there.

They know. They know, Rand. You should have come. It was very nearly more than he could do to stop from putting Stepper to a gallop, keeping him there all the way to his family's farm. Trying to, at least; even Stepper would fall dead before he ran that far. Maybe this was Trolloc work. If it was Trollocs, maybe his family was still working their farm, still safe. He drew a deep breath, but the char obliterated any other smell.

Gaul stopped beside him. "Whoever did this is long gone. They killed some of the sheep and scattered the rest. Someone came later to gather the flock and drive it off north. Two men, I think, but the tracks are too old to be sure."

"Is there any clue to who did it?" Gaul shook his head. It could have been Trollocs. Strange, to wish for a thing like that. And foolish. The Whitecloaks knew his name, and they knew Rand's as well, it seemed. They know my name. He looked at the ashes of the al'Thor farmhouse, and Stepper moved as the reins trembled in his hands.

Loial had dismounted at the edge of the fruit trees, but his head was still in the branches. Faile rode toward Perrin, studying his face, her mare stepping delicately. "Is this . . . ? Do you know the people who lived here?"

"Rand and his father."

"Oh. I thought it might be" The relief and sympathy in her voice were enough to finish the sentence. "Does your family live near?"

"No," he said curtly, and she recoiled as if slapped. But she still watched him, waiting. What did he have to do to drive her away? More than he could bring himself to, if he had not managed it already.

The shadows were growing longer, the sun sitting on the treetops. He reined Stepper around, rudely turning his back on her. "Gaul, we will have to camp dose by tonight. I want to start early in the morning." He sneaked a glance over his shoulder; Faile was riding back to Loial, sitting stiff in her saddle. "In Emond's Field, they will know . . ." Where the Whitecloaks were, so he could turn himself in before they hurt his family. If his family was all right. If the farm where he had been born was not already like this. No. He had to be in time to stop that. "They'll know how things are."

"Early, then." Gaul hesitated. "You will not drive her off. That one is almost Far Dareis Mai, and if a Maiden loves you, you cannot escape her however hard you run."

"You let me worry about Faile." He softened his voice; it was not Gaul he wanted to be rid of. "Very early. While Faile is still asleep."

Both camps, beneath the apple trees, were quiet that night. Several times one or the other of the Aid women stood, staring toward the small fire where he and Gaul sat, but an owl hooting and the horses stamping were the only sounds. Perrin could not sleep, and it was still an hour short of first light, with the full moon setting, when he and Gaul slipped away, the Aiel silent in his soft boots and the horses' hooves making little more noise. Bain, or maybe Chiad, watched them go. He could not tell which, but she did not wake Faile, and he was grateful.

The sun had climbed well up by the time they came out of the Westwood a little below the village, amid cart tracks and paths, most bordered by hedges or low rough stone walls. Smoke made feathery gray plumes above farmhouse chimneys, goodwives doing the morning's baking, by the smell. Men dotted the fields of tabac or barley, and boys watched flocks of black-faced sheep in the pastures. Some people took note of their passing, but Perrin kept Stepper at

a fast walk and hoped none were close enough to recognize him or wonder at the strangeness of Gaul's clothes, or his spears.

People would be out and about in Emond's Field, too, so he circled around to the east, wide of the village, wide of the hard-packed dirt streets and thatched roofs clustered around the Green, where the Winespring itself gushed from a stone outcrop with enough force to knock a man down and gave birth to the Winespring Water. The damage he remembered from Winternight a year gone, the burned houses and charred roofs, were all rebuilt and repaired. The Trollocs might as well never have come back then. He prayed no one would have to live through that again. The Winespring Inn stood practically at the eastern end of Emond's Field, between the stout wooden Wagon Bridge across the rushing Winespring Water and a huge old stone foundation with a great oak growing up through the middle of it. Tables beneath the thick branches were where folk sat of a fine afternoon and watched the play at bowls. At this hour of the morning, the tables were empty, of course. There were only a few houses farther east. The inn itself was river rock on the first floor, with a whitewashed second story jutting out all the way around and a dozen chimneys rising above a glittering red tile roof, the only tile roof for miles.

Tying Stepper and the packhorse to a hitchpost near the kitchen door, Perrin glanced at the thatch-roofed stable. He could hear men working in there, probably Hu and Tad, mucking out the stalls where Master al'Vere kept the big Dhurran team he rented out for heavy hauling. There were sounds from the other side of the inn, too, the murmur of voices on the Green, geese honking, the rumble of a wagon. What was on the horses, he left; this would be a short stop. He motioned for Gaul to follow and hurried inside, carrying his bow, before either stableman could come out.

The kitchen was empty, both iron stoves and all but one fireplace cold, though the smell of baking still hung in the air. Bread and honeycakes. The inn seldom had guests except when merchants came down from Baerlon to buy wool or tabac, or a monthly peddler when snow had not made the road impassable, and the village folk who might come for a drink or a meal later in the day would all be hard at work at their own homes now. Someone might be there, though, so Perrin tiptoed along the short hallway leading from the kitchen to the common room and cracked the door to peek inside.

He had seen that square room a thousand times, with its fireplace of river stones stretching half the room's length, the lintel as high as a man's shoulder, Master al'Vere's polished tabac canister and prized dock sitting on the mantel. It all seemed smaller than it had, somehow. The tall-backed chairs in front of the fireplace were where the Village Council met. Brandelwyn al'Vere's books sat on a shelf opposite the fireplace - once, Perrin had been unable to imagine more books in one place than those few dozen mostly worn volumes - and casks of ale and wine lined another wall. Scratch, the inn's yellow cat, sprawled asleep as usual atop one.

Except for Bran al'Vere himself and his wife, Marin, in long white aprons, polishing the inn's silver and pewter at one of the tables, the common room stood empty. Master al'Vere was a wide, round man, with a sparse fringe of gray hair; Mistress al'Vere was slender and motherly, her thick, graying braid pulled over one shoulder. She smelled of baking, and under that of roses. Perrin remembered them as smiling people, but both looked intent now, and the Mayor wore a frown that surely had nothing to do with the silver cup in his hands.

"Master al'Vere?" He pushed open the door and went in. "Mistress al'Vere. It's Perrin."

They sprang to their feet, knocking their chairs over and making Scratch jump. Mistress al'Vere clapped her hands to her mouth; she and her husband gaped as much at him as they did at Gaul. It was enough to make Perrin shift his bow awkwardly from hand to hand. Especially when Bran hurried to one of the front windows - he moved with surprising lightness for a man of his bulk - and twitched the summer curtains aside to peer out, as though for more Aiel outside.

"Perrin?" Mistress al'Vere murmured disbelievingly. "It a you. I almost didn't know you, with that beard, and - Your cheek. Were you - ? Is Egwene with you?"

Perrin touched the half-healed slash across his cheek self-consciously, wishing he had cleaned up, or at least left the bow and axe in the kitchen. He had not considered how his appearance might frighten them. "No. This has nothing to do with her. She is safe." Safer on her way back to Tar Valon, perhaps, than if still in Tear with Rand, but safe in either case. He supposed he had to give Egwene's mother something more than that bald statement. "Mistress al'Vere, Egwene is studying to be Aes Sedai. Nynaeve, too."

“I know,” she said quietly, touching the pocket on her apron. “I have three letters from her in Tar Valon. From what she writes she sent more, and Nynaeve at least one, but only three of Egwene’s have reached us. She tells something of her training, which I must say sounds very hard.”

“It is what she wants.” Three letters? Guilt made him shrug uncomfortably. He had not written a letter to anyone, not since the notes he had left for his family and Master Luhhan the night Moiraine took him away from Emond’s Field. Not one.

“So it seems, though not what I had envisioned for her. It isn’t something I can tell many people about, now is it? She says she’s made friends, anyway, nice girls by the sound of them. Elayne, and Min. Do you know them?”

“We have met. I think you could call them nice girls.” How much had Egwene told in those letters? Not much, evidently. Let Mistress al’Vere think what she would; he had no intention of worrying her over things she could do nothing about. What was past, was past. Egwene was safe enough now.

Abruptly realizing that Gaul was just standing there, he made hasty introductions. Bran blinked when Gaul was named Aiel, and frowned at his spears and the black veil hanging down his chest from his shoufa, but his wife merely said, “Be welcome to Emond’s Field, Master Gaul, and to the Winespring Inn.”

“May you always have water and shade, roofmistress,” Gaul said formally, bowing to her. “I ask leave to defend your roof and hold.”

She barely hesitated before replying as if that were exactly what she was used to hearing. “A gracious offer. But you must allow me to decide when it is needed.”

“As you say, roofmistress. Your honor is mine.” From under his coat, Gaul produced a gold saltcellar, a small bowl balanced on the back of a cunningly made lion, and extended it to her. “I offer this small guest gift to your roof.”

Marin al’Vere made over it as she would have any gift, hardly showing her shock. Perrin doubted there was a piece to equal it in the whole Two Rivers, certainly not in gold. There was little enough gold coin in the Two Rivers, much less gold ornaments. He hoped she never found out it had been looted from the Stone of Tear; at least he would have wagered that it had.

“My boy,” Bran said, “perhaps I should be saying ‘welcome home,’ but why did you return?”

“I heard about the Whitecloaks, sir,” Perrin replied simply.

The Mayor and his wife shared somber looks, and Bran said, “Again, why did you return? You cannot stop anything, my boy, or change anything. Best that you go. If you don’t have a horse, I will give you one. If you do, climb back in your saddle and ride north. I thought the Whitedoaks were guarding Taren Ferry . . . Did they give you that decoration on your face?”

“No. It - ”

“Then it doesn’t matter. If you got past them coming in, you can get past to leave. Their main camp is up at Watch Hill, but their patrols can be anywhere. Do it, my boy. “

“Don’t wait, Perrin,” Mistress al’Vere added quietly but firmly, in that voice that usually ended with people doing as she said. “Not even an hour. I’ll make you a bundle to take with you. Some fresh bread and cheese, some ham and roast beef, pickles. You must go, Perrin.”

“I cannot. You know they are after me, or you’d not want me to go.” And they had not commented on his eyes, even to ask if he was ill. Mistress al’Vere had barely been surprised. They knew. “If I give myself up, I can stop some of it. I can keep my family - ” He jumped as the hall door banged open to admit Faile, followed by Bain and Chiad.

Master al'Vere ran a hand over his bald head; even taking in the Aiel women's garb and obviously identifying them with Gaul, he only seemed a little bemused that they were women. Mainly he looked irritated at the intrusion. Scratch sat up to stare suspiciously at all these strangers. Perrin wondered whether the cat considered him one, as well. He wondered how they had found him, too, and where Loial was. Anything to avoid wondering how he was going to manage Faile now.

She gave him little time to ponder, planting herself in front of him with fists on hips. Somehow she managed that trick women had, making herself seem taller through pure quivering outrage. "Give yourself up? Give yourself up! Have you been planning this from the start? You have, haven't you? You utter idiot! Your brain has frozen solid, Perrin Aybara. It was nothing but muscle and hair to begin, but now it isn't even that. If Whitecloaks are hunting you, they will hang you if you surrender to them. Why should they want you?"

"Because I killed Whitecloaks." Looking down at her, he ignored Mistress al'Vere's gasp. "Those the night I met you, and two before that. They know about those two, Faile, and they think I'm a Darkfriend." She would learn that much soon enough. Brought to the point of it, he might have told her why, had they been alone. At least two Whitecloaks, Geofram Bornhald and Jaret Byar, suspected something of his connection with wolves. Not nearly all, but for them the little was enough. A man who ran with wolves had to be a Darkfriend. Maybe one or both was with the Whitecloaks here. "They believe it for true."

"You are no more a Darkfriend than I," she whispered harshly. "The sun could be a Darkfriend first."

"It makes no difference, Faile. I have to do what I have to do."

"You addle-brained lummox! You don't have to do any such crackpate thing! You goose-brain! If you try it, I'll hang you myself!"

"Perrin," Mistress al'Vere said quietly, "would you introduce me to this young woman who thinks so highly of you?"

Faile's face went bright red when she realized she had been ignoring Master and Mistress al'Vere, and she began making elaborate curtsies and offered flowery apologies. Bain and Chiad did as Gaul had, asking leave to defend Mistress al'Vere's roof and giving her a small golden bowl worked in leaves and an ornate silver pepper mill bigger than Perrin's two fists, topped by some fanciful creature half horse, half fish.

Bran al'Vere stared and frowned, rubbed his head and muttered to himself. Perrin caught the word "Aiel" more than once in an incredulous tone. The Mayor kept glancing at the windows, too. Not wondering about more Aiel; he had been surprised to learn Gaul was Aiel. Maybe he was worried about Whitecloaks.

Marin al'Vere, on the other hand, took it all in stride, treating Faile and Bain and Chiad the same as any other young women travelers who came to the inn, commiserating with them over how tiring travel was, complimenting Faile on her riding dress-dark blue silk, today-and telling the Aid women how she admired the color and sheen of their hair. Perrin suspected that Bain and Chiad, at least, did not know quite what to make of her, but in short order, with a sort of calm motherly firmness, she had all three women settled at a table with damp towels to wipe journey dust from hands and faces, sipping tea she poured from a large red-striped pot he remembered well.

It might have been amusing seeing those fierce women - he certainly included Faile - suddenly eager to assure Mistress al'Vere that they were more than comfortable, was there nothing they could do to help, she was doing too much, all of them wide-eyed as children, with a child's chance of resisting her. It would have been amusing if she had not included himself and Gaul, sweeping them just as firmly to the table, insisting on clean hands and clean faces before they got a cup of tea. Gaul wore a small grin the whole time; Aiel had a strange sense of humor.

Surprisingly, she never glanced at his bow or axe, or the Aiel's weapons. People seldom carried even a bow in the Two Rivers, and she always insisted such be set aside before anyone took a place at one of her tables. Always. But she just ignored them now.

Another surprise came when Bran placed a silver cup of apple brandy at Perrin's elbow, not the small tot that men usually drank at the inn, barely enough to cover the last joint of the thumb, but half-full. When he had left he would

have been offered cider if not milk, or perhaps well-watered wine, a half-cup with a meal or a full one on a feastday. It was gratifying to be recognized as a grown man, but he only held it. He was used to wine now, but he seldom drank anything stronger.

“Perrin,” the Mayor said as he took a chair beside his wife, “no one believes you a Darkfriend. No one with any sense. There is no reason for you to let yourself be hanged.”

Faile nodded in fierce agreement, but Perrin ignored her. “I won’t be turned aside, Master al’Vere. The Whitecloaks want me, and if they do not get me, they might turn to the next Aybara they can find. Whitecloaks don’t need much to decide somebody is guilty. They are not pleasant people.”

“We know,” Mistress al’Vere said softly.

Her husband stared at his hands on the table. “Perrin, your family is gone.”

“Gone? You mean the farm is burned already?” Perrin’s fist tightened around the silver cup. “I hoped I was in time. I should have known better, I suppose. Too long before I heard. Maybe I can help my da and Uncle Eward rebuild. Who are they staying with? I want to see them first, at least.”

Bran grimaced, and his wife stroked his shoulder comfortingly. But strangely her eyes stayed on Perrin, all sadness and comfort.

“They are dead, my boy,” Bran said in a rush.

“Dead? No. They can’t be - ” Perrin frowned as wetness suddenly slopped over his hand, stared at the crumpled cup as though wondering where it had come from. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to - ” He pulled at the flattened silver, trying to force it back out with his fingers. That would not work. Of course not. Very carefully, he put the ruined cup in the middle of the table. “I will replace it. I can - ” He wiped his hand on his coat, and suddenly found he was caressing the axe hanging at his belt. Why was everyone looking at him so oddly? “Are you sure?” His voice sounded far away. “Adora and Deselle? Paet? My mother?”

“All of them,” Bran told him. “Your aunts and uncles, too, and your cousins. Everybody on the farm. I helped bury them, my boy. On that low hill, the one with the apple trees.”

Perrin stuck his thumb in his mouth. Fool thing to do, cutting himself on his own axe. “My mother likes apple blossoms. The Whitecloaks. Why would they-? Burn me, Paet was only nine. The girls. . . .” His voice was very flat. He thought he should have had some emotion in those words. Some emotion.

“It was Trollocs,” Mistress al’Vere said quickly. “They have come back, Perrin. Not the way they did when you went away, not attacking the village, but out in the countryside. Most farms without dose neighbors have been abandoned. No one goes outside at night, even near to the village. It is the same down to Deven Ride and up to Watch Hill, maybe to Taren Ferry. The Whitecloaks, bad as they are, are our only real protection. They’ve saved two families that I know, when Trollocs attacked their farms. “

“I wished - I hoped - ” He could not quite remember what it was he had wished. Something about Trollocs. He did not want to remember. The Whitecloaks protecting the Two Rivers? It was almost enough to make him laugh. “Rand’s father. Tam’s farm. Was that Trollocs, too?”

Mistress al’Vere opened her mouth, but Bran cut her off. “He deserves the truth, Marin. That was Whitecloaks, Perrin. That, and the Cauthon place.”

“Mat’s people too. Rand’s, and Mat’s, and mine.” Strange. He sounded as if he were talking about whether it might rain. “Are they dead, too?”

“No, my boy. No, Abell and Tam are hiding in the Westwood somewhere. And Mat’s mother and sisters They’re alive, too.”

“Hiding?”

“There is no need to go into that,” Mistress al’Vere said briskly. “Bran, bring him another cup of brandy. And you drink this one, Perrin.” Her husband sat where he was, but she only frowned at him and went on. “I would offer you a bed, but it isn’t safe. Some people are like as not to run off hunting for Lord Bornhald if they find out you are here. Eward Congar and Hari Coplin fawn after the Whitecloaks like heel-hounds, eager to please and name names, and Cenn Buie isn’t much better. And Wit Congar will carry tales, too, if Daise doesn’t stop him. She is the Wisdom, now. Perrin, it is best for to go. Believe me.”

Perrin shook his head slowly; it was too much to take in. Daise Congar the Wisdom? The woman was like a bull. Whitecloaks protecting Emond’s Field. Hari and Eward and Wit cooperating. Not much more could be expected from Congars or Coplins, but Cenn Buie was on the Village Council. Lord Bornhald. So Geofram Bornhald was there. Faile was watching him, her eyes large and moist. Why should she be on the edge of tears?

“There is more, Brandelwyn al’Vere,” Gaul said. “Your face says so.”

“There is,” Bran agreed. “No, Marin,” he added firmly when she gave a small shake of her head. “He deserves the truth. The whole truth.” She folded her hands with a sigh; Marin al’Vere very nearly always got her way - except when Bran’s face was set, as now, with his eyebrows drawn down hard as a plow.

“What truth?” Perrin asked. His mother liked apple blossoms.

“First off, Padan Fain is with the Whitecloaks,” Bran said. “He calls himself Ordeith now, and he won’t answer to his own name at all, but it’s him, stare down his nose as he will.”

“He’s a Darkfriend,” Perrin said absently. Adora and Deselle always put apple blossoms in their hair in the spring. “Admitted from his own mouth. He brought the Trollocs, on Winternight.” Paet liked to climb in the apple trees; he would throw apples at you from the branches if you did not watch him.

“Is he, now,” the Mayor said grimly. “Now, that is interesting. He has some authority with the Whitecloaks. The first we heard they were here was after they burned Tam’s farm. That was Fain’s work; he led the Whitecloaks that did it. Tam feathered four or five of them with arrows before he made it to the woods, and he reached the Cauthon farm in the nick to stop them taking Abell. But they arrested Natti and the girls. And Haral Luhhan, and Alsbet, too. I think Fain might have hung them, except Lord Bornhald wouldn’t allow it. Not that he let them go, either. They haven’t been harmed, as far as I can discover, but they’re being held in the Whitecloak camp up at Watch Hill. For some reason, Fain has a hate for you, and Rand, and Mat. He’s offered a hundred pieces of gold for anyone related to the three of you; two hundred for Tam or Abell. And Lord Bornhald seems to have some interest in you, especially. When a Whitecloak patrol comes here, he usually comes, too, and asks questions about you.”

“Yes,” Perrin said. “Of course. He would.” Perrin of the Two Rivers, who ran with wolves. Darkfriend. Fain could have told them the rest. Fain, with the Children of the Light? It was a distant thought. Better than thinking about Trollocs, though. He grimaced at his hands, made them be still on the table. “They protect you from the Trollocs.”

Marin al’Vere leaned toward him, frowning. “Perrin, we need the Whitecloaks. Yes, they burned Tam’s farm, and Abell’s, they’ve arrested people, and they stamp around as if they own everything they see, but Alsbet and Natti and the rest are unharmed, only held, and that can be straightened out somehow. The Dragon’s Fang

has been scrawled on a few doors, but nobody except the Congars and Coplins pay any mind, and they’re likely the ones who did the scrawling. Tam and Abell can stay in hiding until the Whitecloaks go. They have to go sooner or later. But as long as there are Trollocs here, we do need them. Please understand. It isn’t that we would not rather have you than them, but we need them and we don’t want them to hang you.”

“You call this being protected, roofmistress?” Bain said. “If you ask the lion to protect you from wolves, you have only chosen to end in one belly instead of another.”

“Can you not protect yourselves?” Chiad added. “I have seen Perrin fight, and Mat Cauthon, and Rand al’Thor. They are the same blood as you.”

Bran sighed heavily. “We are farmers, simple people. Lord Luc talks of organizing men to fight the Trollocs, but that means leaving your family unprotected while you go off with him, and no one much likes that idea.”

Perrin was confused. Who was Lord Luc? He asked as much, and Mistress al’Vere answered.

“He came about the time the Whitecloaks did. He’s a Hunter of the Horn. You know the story, The Great Hunt of the Horn? Lord Luc thinks the Horn of Valere is somewhere in the Mountains of Mist above the Two Rivers. But he gave over his hunt because of our problems. Lord Luc is a great gentleman, with the finest manners.” Smoothing her hair, she gave an approving smile; Bran looked at her sideways and grunted sourly.

Hunters of the Horn. Trollocs. Whitecloaks. The Two Rivers hardly seemed the same place he had left. “Faile is a Hunter of the Horn, too. Do you know this Lord Luc, Faile?”

“I have had enough,” she announced. Perrin frowned as she stood and came around the table to him. Seizing his head, she pulled his face into her midriff. “Your mother is dead,” she said quietly. “Your father is dead. Your sisters are dead, and your brother. Your family is dead, and you cannot change it. Certainly not by dying yourself. Let yourself grieve. Don’t hold it inside where it can fester.”

He took her by the arms, meaning to move her, but for some reason his hands tightened till that grip was the only thing holding him up. It was only then that he realized he was crying, sobbing into her dress like a baby. What must she think of him? He opened his mouth to tell her he was all right, to apologize for breaking down, but what came out was, “I couldn’t get here any faster. I couldn’t - I - ” He gritted his teeth to shut himself off.

“I know,” she murmured, stroking his hair for all the world as if he were a child. “I know.”

He wanted to stop, but the more she whispered understanding, the more he wept, as though her hands soft on his head were smoothing the tears out of him.

Chapter 30 - Beyond the Oak

With Faile holding his head beneath her breasts, Perrin lost track of how long he cried. Images of his family flashed in his thoughts, his father smiling as he showed him how to hold a bow, his mother singing while she spun wool, Adora and Deselle teasing him when he shaved the first time, Paet wide-eyed at a gleeman during Sunday long ago. Pictures of graves, cold and lonely in a row. He wept until there were no more tears in him. When he finally pulled back, the two of them were alone except for Scratch, washing himself atop the ale barrel. He was glad the others had not remained to watch him. Faile was bad enough. In a way he was glad she had stayed; he only wished she had not seen or heard.

Taking his hands in hers, Faile sat in the next chair. She was so beautiful, with her slightly tilted eyes, large and dark, and her high cheekbones. He did not know how he was going to be able to make up to her for the way he had treated her these last few days. No doubt she would find a means to make him pay for it.

“Have you given up the notion of surrendering to the Whitecloaks?” she asked. There was no hint in her voice that she had just watched him cry like a baby.

“It seems it wouldn’t do any good. They’ll be after Rand’s father, and Mat’s, whatever I do. My family. . . .” He quickly loosened his grip on her hands, but she smiled instead of wincing. “I have to get Master Luhhan and his wife free, if I can. And Mat’s mother and sisters; I promised him I would look after them. And do what I can about the Trollocs.” Maybe this Lord Luc had some ideas. At least the Waygate was blocked; no more would come through the Ways. He especially wanted to do something about the Trollocs. “I can’t manage any of that if I let them hang me.”

“I am very glad you see that,” she told him dryly. “Any more fool notions about sending me away?”

“No.” He braced himself for the storm, but she simply nodded as if the one word were what she expected and all she wanted. A small thing, nothing worth arguing over. She was going to make him pay large.

“We are five, Perrin, six if Loial is willing. And if we can find Tam al’Thor and Abell Cauthon Are they as good with a bow as you?”

“Better,” he said truthfully. “Much better.”

She gave him a slight, disbelieving nod. “That will make eight. A beginning. Maybe others will join us. And then there’s Lord Luc. He will probably want to take charge, but if he’s not a crackbrain, it won’t matter. Not everyone who took the Hunter’s Oath is sensible, though. I’ve met some who think they know everything, and are stubborn as mules besides.”

“I know.” She looked at him sharply, and he managed to keep the smile off his face. “That you’ve met some like that, I mean. I saw a pair of them once, remem-ber.”

“Oh, them. Well, we can hope Lord Luc is not a boasting liar.” Her eyes became intent, and her grip tightened on his hands, not uncomfortably, but as though she was trying to add her strength to his. “You will want to visit your family’s farm, your home. I will come with you, if you will let me.”

“When I can, Faile.” Not now, though. Not yet. If he looked at those graves below the apple trees now It was strange. He had always taken his own strength for granted, and now it turned out that he was not strong at all. Well, he was done with weeping like a babe. It was past time to be doing something. “First things first. Finding Tam and Abell, I suppose.”

Master al’Vere put his head into the common room, and came the rest of the way when he saw them sitting apart. “There is an Ogier in the kitchen,” he told Perrin with a bemused look. “An Ogier. Drinking tea. The biggest cup looks” He held two fingers as though gripping a thimble. “Maybe Marin could pretend Aiel walk in here every day, but she nearly fainted when she saw this Loial. I gave her a double tot of brandy, and she tossed it down like water. Nearly coughed herself to death; she doesn’t take more than wine, usually. I think she’d have drunk another, if I’d given it to

her.” He pursed his lips and affected an interest in a nonexistent spot on his long white apron. “Are you all right now, my boy?”

“I’m fine, sir,” Perrin said hastily. “Master al’Vere, we cannot remain here much longer. Someone might tell the Whitecloaks you sheltered me.”

“Oh, there are not many would do that. Not all the Coplins, and not some of the Congars, even.” But he did not suggest they stay.

“Do you know where I can find Master al’Thor and Master Cauthon?”

“In the Westwood somewhere, usually,” Bran said slowly. “That’s all I know for sure. They move about.” Locking his fingers over his broad belly, he tilted his gray-fringed head to one side. “You aren’t leaving are you? Well. I told Marin you would not, but she doesn’t believe me. She thinks it best for you to go away—best for you—and like most women she’s sure you will see things her way if she talks long enough.”

“Why, Master al’Vere,” Faile said sweetly, “I for one have always found men to be sensible creatures who only need to be shown the wisest path once to choose it.”

The Mayor favored her with an amused smile. “You will be talking Perrin into going then, I take it? Matin’s right; that is wisest, if he wants to avoid a noose. The only reason to stay is that sometimes a man can’t run. No? Well, no doubt you know best.” He ignored her sour look. “Come along, my boy. Let’s tell Marin the good news. Set your teeth and hold on to your intentions, because she won’t give up trying to shift you.”

In the kitchen, Loial and the Aiel were cross-legged on the floor. There was certainly no chair in the inn big enough for the Ogier. He sat with an arm resting on the kitchen table, tall enough sitting to look Marin al’Vere in the eye. Bran had exaggerated the smallness of the cup in Loial’s hands, though on second glance Perrin saw it was a white-glazed soup bowl.

Mistress al’Vere was still doing her best to pretend Aiel and Ogier were normal, bustling about with a tray of bread and cheese and pickles, making sure everyone ate, but her eyes did widen each time they landed on Loial, though he tried to put her at ease with compliments for her baking. His tufted ears twitched nervously whenever she looked at him, and she gave a little jump every time they did, then shook her head, the thick graying braid swaying vigorously. Given a few hours, they might send each other to bed with the shakes.

Loial heaved a deep bass sigh of relief at the sight of Perrin and set his cup-bowl-of tea on the table, but the next instant his broad face sagged sadly. “I am sorry to hear your loss, Perrin. I share your grief. Mistress al’Vere . . .” His ears twitched wildly even without looking at her, and she gave another start. “. . . has been telling me you will go, now there’s nothing to keep you here. If you wish it, I will sing to the apple trees before we leave.”

Bran and Marin exchanged startled looks, and the Mayor actually reamed at his ear with a finger.

“Thank you, Loial. I will appreciate that, when there’s time. But I have work to do before I can go.” Mistress al’Vere set the tray on the table with a sharp click and stared at him, but he kept on, laying out his plans, such as they were: Find Tam and Abell, and rescue the people the Whitecloaks held. He did not mention Trollocs, though he had vague plans there, too. Perhaps not so vague. He did not mean to leave while there was a Trolloc or Myrddraal alive in the Two Rivers. He fastened his thumbs behind his belt to keep from caressing his axe. “It won’t be easy,” he finished. “I will appreciate your company, but I will understand if you want to go. This isn’t your fight, and you have seen enough trouble through staying close to Emond’s Field folk. And you won’t write much of your book here.”

“Here or there, it is the same fight, I think,” Loial replied. “The book can wait. Perhaps I will have a chapter about you.”

“I said I would come with you,” Gaul put in without being asked. “I did not mean until the journey grew hard. I owe you blood debt.”

Bain and Chiad looked questioningly at Faile, and when she nodded, added their decisions to remain, too.

“Stubborn foolish,” Mistress al’Vere said, “the lot of you. Very likely you will all end up on gallows, if you live that long. You know that, don’t you?” When they only looked at her, she untied her apron and lifted it over her head. “Well, if you are foolish enough to stay, I suppose I had better show you where to hide.”

Her husband looked surprised at her sudden surrender, but he recovered quickly. “I thought perhaps the old sickhouse, Marin. No one ever goes there now, and I think it still has most of its roof.”

What was still called the new sickhouse, where people were taken to be tended if their illness was contagious, had stood east of the village, beyond Master Thane’s mill, since Perrin was a small boy. The old one, in the Westwood, had been all but destroyed in a fierce windstorm back then. Perrin remembered it as half-covered by vines and briars, with birds roosting in what was left of the thatch and a badger’s den under the back steps. It would be a good place to hide.

Mistress al’Vere gave Bran a sharp look, as though startled he had thought of it. “That will do, I suppose. For tonight, at least. That is where I will take them.”

“No need for you to do it, Marin. I can lead them easy enough, if Perrin doesn’t remember the way.”

“Sometimes you forget you’re the Mayor, Bran. You attract eyes; people wonder where you’re going and what you are up to. Why don’t you stay here, and if anyone drops by, see they go away thinking everything is just as it should be. There’s mutton stew in the kettle, and lentil soup that just needs heating. Now don’t mention the sickhouse to anyone, Bran. Best if no one even remembers it exists.”

“I am not a fool, Marin,” he said stiffly.

“I know you aren’t, dear.” She patted her husband’s cheek, but her fond look tightened as it shifted from Bran to the rest of them. “You do cause trouble,” she muttered before handing out instructions.

They were to travel in smaller parties so as not to attract attention. She would cross the village by herself and meet them in the woods on the other side. The Aiel assured her they could find the lightning-split oak she described, and slipped out by the back door. Perrin knew it, a huge tree, a mile beyond the edge of the village, that looked as if it had been deft down the middle by an axe yet somehow continued to live and even flourish. He was sure he could go straight to the sickhouse itself with no trouble, but Mistress al’Vere insisted everyone meet at the oak.

“You go wandering about by yourself, Perrin, and the Light knows what you might stumble into.” She looked up at Loial-standing now, his shaggy hair brushing the ceiling beams - and sighed. “I do wish there was something we could do about your height, Master Loial. I know it is hot, but would you mind wearing your cloak, with the hood up? Even these days most people will soon convince themselves they didn’t see what they saw if it isn’t what they expect, but if they catch a glimpse of your face Not that you aren’t quite handsome, I’m sure, but you’ll never pass for Two Rivers folk.”

Loial’s smile split his face in two beneath his wide snout of a nose. “The day doesn’t seem too warm for a cloak at all, Mistress al’Vere.”

Fetching a light, knit shawl with blue fringe, she accompanied Perrin, Faile and Loial out to the stableyard to see them off, and for a moment it appeared all their efforts at secrecy were doomed. Cenn Buie, looking made from gnarled old roots, was examining the horses with beady eyes. Especially Loial’s tall horse, as big as one of Bran’s Dhurrans. Cenn scratched his head, staring at the great saddle on the big horse.

Those eyes widened when they caught sight of Loial, and Cenn’s jaw flapped. “Tr-Tr-Trolloc!” he managed to get out at last.

“Don’t be an old fool, Cenn Buie,” Marin said firmly, stepping off to one side to pull the thatcher’s attention with her. Perrin kept his head down, studying his bow, and did not move. “Would I be standing on my own back doorstep with a Trolloc?” She gave a contemptuous sniff. “Master Loial is an Ogier, as you would know if you weren’t a cantankerous

goose who would rather complain than look at what's under his nose. Passing through, and with no time to be bothered by the likes of you. You be on about your business and leave our guests some peace. You know very well that Corin Ayellin has been after you for months about the poor work you did on her roof."

Cenn mouthed the word "Ogier," silent and blinking. For a moment it seemed he might rouse himself in defense of his handiwork, but then his gaze shifted to Perrin and narrowed. "Him! It's him! They're after you, you young whelp, rapsallion, running off with Aes Sedai and becoming a Darkfriend. That was when we had Trollocs before. Now you're back, and so are they. You going to tell me that's coincidence? What's wrong with your eyes? You sick? You have some kind of sickness from off you've brought back to kill us all, as if Trollocs are not enough? The Children of the Light will settle you. See if they don't."

Perrin sensed Faile tensing, and hastily put a hand on her arm when he realized she was drawing a knife. What did she think she was doing? Cenn was an irascible old fool, but that was no reason for knives. She gave an exasperated toss of her head, but at least she left it at that.

"That is enough, Cenn," Marin said sharply. "You keep this to yourself. Or have you started running to the Whitecloaks with tales, like Hari and his brother Darl? I've my suspicions why the Whitecloaks came rummaging through Bran's books. They took six off with them, and lectured Bran under his own roof about blasphemy. Blasphemy, of all things! Because they didn't agree with what was in a book. You're lucky I don't make you replace those books for him. They burrowed through the whole inn like weasels. Hunting for more blasphemous writings, they said, as if anyone would hide a book. Tumbled all the mattresses from the beds, upset my linen closets. You are lucky I didn't come haul you back here to put it all to rights again."

Cenn drew in on himself a little more with each sentence, until he looked to be trying to pull his bony shoulders over his head. "I didn't tell them anything, Marin," he protested. "Just because a man mentions - That is, I just happened to say, just in passing - " He shook himself, still avoiding her eye but regaining some of his old manner. "I mean to take this up with the Council, Marin. Him, I mean." He pointed a gnarled finger at Perrin. "We're all in danger as long as he's here. If the Children find out you're sheltering him, they might blame the rest of us. Upset closets won't be in it, then."

"This is Women's Circle business." Marin rewrapped her shawl about her shoulders and moved to stand eye to eye with the thatcher. He was a little taller than she, but her sudden air of grave formality gave her the edge. He spluttered, but she rode right over his attempts to slide a word in. "Circle business, Cenn Buie. If you think it isn't-if you even dare think of calling me a liar-you go flapping your tongue. You breathe a word of Women's Circle business to anyone, including the Village Council . . ."

"The Circle has no right interfering in Council affairs," he shouted.

". . . and see if your wife doesn't have you sleeping in the barn. And eating what your milk cows leave. You think Council takes precedence over Circle? I'll send Daise Congar over to convince you different, if you need convincing."

Cenn flinched, as well he might. If Daise Congar was the Wisdom, she would probably force foul-tasting concoctions down his throat every day for the next year, and Cenn was too scrawny to stop her. Alsbet Luhhan was the only woman in Emond's Field larger than Daise, and Daise had a mean streak and a temper to go with it. Perrin could not imagine her as Wisdom; Nynaeve would probably have a fit when she found out who had replaced her. Nynaeve had always believed she used sweet reason, herself.

"No need to get nasty, Marin," Cenn muttered placatingly. "You want me to keep quiet, I'll keep quiet. But Women's Circle or no, you're risking bringing the Children down on all of us." Marin merely raised her eyebrows, and after a moment he slunk away, grumbling under his breath.

"Well done," Faile said when Cenn disappeared around the corner of the inn. "I think I need to take lessons from you. I am not half so good at handling Perrin as you are with Master al'Vere and that fellow." She smiled at Perrin to show she was joking. At least, he hoped that was what it meant.

“You have to know when to rein them short,” the older woman replied absently, “and when there’s nothing to do but give them their head. Letting them have their way when it isn’t important makes it easier to check them when it is.” She was frowning after Cenn, not really paying attention to what she was saying, except maybe when she added, “And some should be tied in the stall and left there.”

Perrin leaped in hastily. Faile certainly did not need any advice of this sort. “Will he hold his tongue do you think, Mistress al’Vere?”

Hesitating, she said, “I believe he will. Cenn was born with a sore tooth that’s only gotten worse as he ages, but he isn’t like Hari Coplin or that lot.” Still, she had hesitated.

“We had best be moving,” he said. No one argued.

The sun was higher than he had expected, past its midday height already, which meant most people were indoors for their dinner. The few still out, mainly boys minding sheep or cows, were busy eating what they had brought with them wrapped up in a cloth, too absorbed in their food and too far from the cart paths to pay much mind to anyone passing. Still, Loial earned some stares despite the deep hood hiding his face. Even on Stepper Perrin came short of the Ogier’s chest on his tall mount. To the people who saw them from a distance they must have looked like an adult with two children, all on ponies, leading packponies. Certainly not a usual sight, but Perrin hoped that was what they thought they saw. Talk would draw notice. He had to avoid that until he got Mistress Luhhan and the others free. If only Cenn kept his peace. He kept the hood of his own cloak up, too. That might also cause talk, but not as much as if anyone saw his beard and realized he was definitely not a child. At least the day was not particularly warm. It almost felt like spring, not summer, after Tear.

He had no trouble finding the split oak, the two halves leaning apart in a wide fork with the inner surface black and hardened like iron, the ground beneath the thick spreading branches clear. Merely crossing the village was much shorter than going around, so Mistress al’Vere was already waiting, shifting her shawl a trifle impatiently. The Aiel were there, too, squatting on the mulch of old oak leaves and squirrel-chewed acorn hulls, Gaul apart from the two women. The Maidens and Gaul watched each other almost as closely as the surrounding woods. Perrin had no doubt they had managed to reach this spot unobserved. He wished he had that ability; he could stalk fairly well in the woods, but the Aiel did not seem to care if it was forest or farmland or city. When they did not want to be seen, they found a way not to be seen.

Mistress al’Vere insisted they go the rest of the way afoot, claiming the way was too overgrown for riding. Perrin did not agree, but he dismounted anyway. No doubt it would not be comfortable leading folk on horseback while on foot. In any case, his head was full of plans. He needed a look at the Whitecloak camp up at Watch Hill before deciding how to rescue Mistress Luhhan and the others. And where were Tam and Abell hiding? Neither Bran nor Mistress al’Vere had said; perhaps they did not know. If Tam and Abell had not brought the prisoners out already, it was not an easy task. He had to do it somehow, though. Then he could turn his attention to Trollocs.

No one from the village had come this way in years, and the path had vanished, yet tall trees kept the undergrowth down to a large extent. The Aiel slipped along silently with everyone else, acceding to Mistress al’Vere’s insistence that they all stay together. Loial murmured approvingly at great oaks or particularly tall fir trees and leatherleaf. Occasionally a mocker or redbreast sang in the trees, and once Perrin smelled a fox watching them pass.

Suddenly he caught man scent that had not been there a moment before, heard a faint rustle. The Aiel tensed, crouching with spears ready. Perrin reached to his quiver.

“Be at ease,” Mistress al’Vere said urgently, motioning for weapons to be lowered. “Please, be at ease.”

Abruptly there were two men standing ahead, one tall and dark and slender to the left, the other short, stocky and graying to the right. Both held bows with arrows nocked, ready to raise and draw, with quivers balancing the swords on their hips. Both wore cloaks that seemed to fade into the surrounding foliage.

“Warders!” Perrin exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell us there are Aes Sedai here, Mistress al’Vere? Master al’Vere never mentioned it either. Why?”

“Because he doesn’t know,” she said hurriedly. “I did not lie when I said this is Women’s Circle business.” She turned her attention to the two Warders, neither of whom had relaxed an inch. “Tomas, Ihvon, you know me. Put those bows down. You know I’d not bring anyone here if they meant harm.”

“An Ogier,” the gray-haired man said, “Aiel, a yellow-eyed man - the one the Whitecloaks seek, of course - and a fierce young woman with a knife.” Perrin glanced at Faile; she held a blade ready to throw. He agreed with her this time. These might be Warders, but they showed no sign of lowering their bows yet; their faces might as well have been carved from anvils. The Aiel looked ready to begin dancing the spears without waiting to veil themselves. “A strange group, Mistress al’Vere,” the older Warder went on. “We shall see. Ihvon?” The slender man nodded and melted into the undergrowth; Perrin could barely hear the fellow’s going. Warders moved like death itself when they wanted to.

“What do you mean, Women’s Circle business?” he demanded. “I know Whitecloaks would cause trouble if they knew about Aes Sedai, so you wouldn’t want to tell Hari Coplin, but why keep it secret from the Mayor? And us?”

“Because we agreed to,” Mistress al’Vere said irritably. The irritation seemed meant in equal parts for Perrin and the Warder still guarding them - there was no other word for it - with maybe a bit left over for the Aes Sedai. “They were at Watch Hill when the Whitecloaks came. No one there knew who they were except the Circle there, who passed them on to us to hide. From everyone, Perrin. It’s the best way to keep a secret, if only a few know. Light preserve me, I know two women who have stopped sharing their husbands’ beds for fear they might talk in their sleep. We agreed to keep it secret.”

“Why did you decide to change that?” the gray-haired Warder asked in a hard voice.

“For what I consider good and sufficient reasons, Tomas.” From the way she shifted her shawl, Perrin suspected she was hoping the Circle - and the Aes Sedai - thought so, too. Rumor had it the Circle could be even harder on each other than they were on the rest of the village. “Where better to hide you, Perrin, than with Aes Sedai? Surely you aren’t afraid of them, not after leaving here with one. And . . . You will find out soon enough. You just have to trust me.”

“There are Aes Sedai and Aes Sedai,” Perrin told her. But those he considered the worst, the Red Ajah, did not bond Warders; the Red Ajah did not like men very much at all. This Tomas had dark unwavering eyes. They might rush him, or better simply leave, but the Warder would surely put an arrow through the first one to do something he did not like, and Perrin was ready to bet the man had more shafts handy for easy nocking. The Aiel seemed to agree; they still looked ready to spring in any direction at any moment, but they looked as if they could stand where they were until the sun froze, too. Perrin patted Faile on the shoulder. “It will be all right,” he said.

“Of course it will,” she replied, smiling. She had put the knife away. “If Mistress al’Vere says it, I trust her.”

Perrin hoped she was right. He did not trust as many people as he once had. Not Aes Sedai. And maybe not even Marin al’Vere. But maybe these Aes Sedai would help him fight Trollocs. He would trust anyone who did that. But how far could he rely on Aes Sedai? They did what they did for their own reasons; the Two Rivers was home, to him, but to them it might be a stone on a stone’s board. Faile and Marin al’Vere appeared to be trusting, though, and the Aiel waited. For the moment, it seemed he had little choice.