

PROLOGUE

What the storm means

Renald Fanwar sat on his porch, warming the sturdy blackoak chair crafted for him by his grandson two years before. He stared northward.

At the black and silver clouds.

He'd never seen their like before. They blanketed the entire horizon to the north, high in the sky. They weren't gray. They were *black* and *silver*. Dark, rumbling thunderheads, as dark as a root cellar at midnight. With striking silver light breaking between them, flashes of lightning that gave off no sound.

The air was *thick*. Thick with the scents of dust and dirt. Of dried leaves and rain that refused to fall. Spring had come. And yet his crops didn't grow. Not a sprout had dared poke through the earth.

He rose slowly from his chair, wood creaking, chair rocking softly behind him, and walked up to the edge of the porch. He chewed on his pipe, though its fire had gone out. He couldn't be bothered to relight it. Those clouds transfixed him. They were so black. Like the smoke of a brushfire, only no brushfire smoke ever rose that high up in the air. And what to make of *silver* clouds? Bulging between the black ones, like places where polished steel shone through metal crusted with soot.

He rubbed his chin, glancing down at his yard. A small, whitewashed fence contained a patch of grass and shrubs. The shrubs were dead now, every one of them. Hadn't lasted through that winter. He'd need to pull them out soon. And the grass... well, the grass was still just winter thatch. Not even any weeds sprouted.

A clap of thunder shook him. Pure, sharp, like an enormous crash of metal against metal. It rattled the windows of the house, shook the porch boards, seemed to vibrate his very bones.

He jumped back. That strike had been close—perhaps on his property. He itched to go inspect the damage. Lightning fire could destroy a man, burn him out of his land. Up here in the Borderlands, so many things were unintentional tinder—dry grass, dry shingles, dry seed.

But the clouds were still distant. That strike *couldn't* have been on his property. The silver and black thunderheads rolled and boiled, feeding and consuming themselves.

He closed his eyes, calming himself, taking a deep breath. Had he imagined the thunder? Was he going off the side, as Gaffin always joked? He opened his eyes.

And the clouds were right there, directly above his house.

It was as if they had suddenly rolled forward, intending to strike while his gaze was averted. They dominated the sky now, sweeping distantly in either direction, massive and overwhelming. He could almost feel their weight

pressing the air down around him. He drew in a breath that was heavy with sudden humidity, and his brow prickled with sweat.

Those clouds churned, dark black and silver thunderheads shaking with white blasts. They suddenly boiled downward, like the funnel cloud of a twister, coming for him. He cried out, raising a hand, as a man might before a powerfully bright light. That blackness. That endless, suffocating *blackness*. It would take him. He knew.

And then the clouds were gone.

His pipe hit the porch's floorboards, clicking softly, tossing burned tabac out in a spray across the steps. He hadn't realized he'd let it slip free. Renald hesitated, looking up at empty blue sky, realizing that he was cringing at nothing.

The clouds were off on the horizon again, some forty leagues distant. They thundered softly.

He picked up his pipe with a shaking hand, spotted from age, tanned from years spent in the sun. *Just a trick of your mind, Renald*, he told himself. *You're going off the side, sure as eggs is eggs.*

He was on edge because of the crops. That had him on edge. Though he spoke optimistic words for the lads, it just wasn't natural. Something should have sprouted by now. He'd farmed that land for forty years! Barley didn't take this long to sprout. Burn him, but it didn't. What was going on in the world these days? Plants couldn't be depended on to sprout, and clouds didn't stay where they should.

He forced himself to sit back down in his chair, legs shaking. *Getting old I am...* he thought.

He'd worked a farm all of his life. Farmsteading in the Borderlands was not easy, but if you worked hard, you could grow a successful life while you grew strong crops. „A man has as much luck as he has seeds in the field,” his father had always said.

Well, Renald was one of the most successful farmers in the area. He'd done well enough to buy out the two farms beside his, and he could run thirty wagons to market each fall. He now had six good men working for him, plowing the fields, riding the fences. Not that he didn't have to climb down in the muck every day and show them what good farming was all about. You couldn't let a little success ruin you.

Yes, he'd worked the land, lived the land, as his father always used to say. He understood the weather as well as a man could. Those clouds weren't natural. They rumbled softly, like an animal growling on a dark night. Waiting. Lurking in the nearby woods.

He jumped at another crash of thunder that seemed too close. Were those clouds forty leagues away? Is that what he'd thought? Looked more like ten leagues away, now that he studied them. „Don't get like that,” he grumbled at himself. His own voice sounded good to him. Real. It was nice to hear

something other than that rumbling and the occasional creak of shutters in the wind. Shouldn't he be able to hear Auaine inside, getting supper ready?

„You're tired. That's it. Tired.” He fished in his vest pocket and pulled out his tabac pouch.

A faint rumbling came from the right. At first, he assumed it was the thunder. However, this rumbling was too grating, too regular. That wasn't thunder. It was wheels turning.

Sure enough, a large, oxen-drawn wagon crested Mallard's Hill, just to the east. Renald had named that hill himself. Every good hill needed a name. The road was Mallard's Road. So why not name the hill that too?

He leaned forward in his chair, pointedly ignoring those clouds as he squinted toward the wagon, trying to make out the driver's face. Thulin? The smith? What was he doing, driving a wagon laden halfway to the heavens? He was supposed to be working on Renald's new plow!

Lean for one of his trade, Thulin was still twice as muscled as most farmhands. He had the dark hair and tan skin of a Shienaran, and kept his face shaved after their fashion, but he did not wear the topknot. Thulin's family might trace its roots back to Borderland warriors, but he himself was just a simple country man like the rest of them. He ran the smithy over in Oak Water, five miles to the east. Renald had enjoyed many a game of stones with the smith during winter evenings.

Thulin was getting on—he hadn't seen as many years as Renald, but the last few winters had prompted Thulin to start speaking of retirement. Smithing wasn't an old man's trade. Of course, neither was farming. Were there really any old man's trades?

Thulin's wagon approached along the packed earthen road, approaching Renald's white-fenced yard. *Now, that's odd*, Renald thought. Behind the wagon trailed a neat string of animals: five goats and two milkcows. Crates of black-feathered chickens were tied on the outside of the wagon, and the bed of the wagon itself was piled full of furniture, sacks and barrels. Thulin's youthful daughter, Mirala, sat on the seat with him, next to his wife, a golden-haired woman from the south. Twenty-five years Thulin's wife, but Renald still thought of Gallanha as "that southern girl."

The whole family was in the wagon, leading their best livestock. Obviously on the move. But where? Off to visit relatives, perhaps? He and Thulin hadn't played a round of stones in... oh, three weeks now. Not much time for visiting, what with the coming of spring and the hurried planting. Someone would need to mend the plows and sharpen the scythes. Who would do it if Thulin's smithy went cold?

Renald tucked a pinch of tabac into his pipe as Thulin pulled the wagon up beside Renald's yard. The lean, gray-haired smith handed the reins to his daughter, then climbed down from the wagon, feet throwing puffs of dust into the air when he hit the ground. Behind him the distant storm still brewed.

Thulin pushed open the fence gate, then strode up to the porch. He looked distracted. Renald opened his mouth to give greeting, but Thulin spoke first.

„I buried my best anvil in Gallanha’s old strawberry patch, Renald,” the big smith said. „You remember where that is, don’t you? I packed my best set of tools there as well. They’re well greased and inside my best chest, lined to keep it dry. That should keep the rust off of them. For a time at least.”

Renald closed his mouth, holding his pipe half-full. If Thulin was burying his anvil... well, it meant he wasn’t planning to come back for a while. „Thulin, what—”

„If I don’t return,” Thulin said, glancing northward, „would you dig my things out and see that they’re cared for? Sell them to someone who cares, Renald. I wouldn’t have just anyone beating that anvil. Took me twenty years to gather those tools, you know.”

„But Thulin!” Renald sputtered. „Where are you going?”

Thulin turned back to him, leaning one arm on the porch railing, those brown eyes of his solemn. „There’s a storm coming,” he said. „And so I figure I’ve got to head on to the north.”

„Storm?” Renald asked. „That one on the horizon, you mean? Thulin, it looks bad—burn my bones, but it does—but there’s no use running from it. We’ve had bad storms before.”

„Not like this, old friend,” Thulin said. „This ain’t the sort of storm you ignore.”

„Thulin?” Renald asked. „What are you talking about?”

Before he could answer, Gallanha called from the wagon box. „Did you tell him about the pots?”

"Ah," Thulin said. "Gallanha polished up that set of copper-bottom pots that your wife always liked. They’re sitting on the kitchen table, waiting for Auaine, if she wants to go claim them.” With that, Thulin nodded to Renald and began to walk back toward the wagon.

Renald sat, stupefied. Thulin always *had* been a blunt one; he favored saying his mind, then moving on. That was part of what Renald liked about him. But the smith could also pass through a conversation like a boulder rolling through a flock of sheep, leaving everyone dazed.

Renald scrambled up, leaving his pipe on the chair and following Thulin down into the yard and to the wagon. *Burn it*, Renald thought, glancing to the sides, noticing the brown grass and dead shrubs again. He’d worked hard on that yard.

The smith was checking on the chicken crates tied to the sides of his vehicle. Renald caught up to him, reaching out a hand, but Gallanha distracted him.

„Here, Renald,” she said from the wagon box. „Take these.” She held out a basket of eggs, one lock of golden hair straying from her bun. Renald reached over to take the basket. "Give these to Auaine. I know you’re short on chickens on account of those foxes last fall.”

Renald took the basket of eggs. Some were white, some were brown. „Yes, but where are you *going*, Gallanha?”

„North, my friend,” Thulin said. He walked past, laying a hand on Renald’s shoulder. „There will be an army gathering, I figure. They’ll need smiths.”

„Please,” Renald said, gesturing with the basket of eggs. „At least take a few minutes. Auaine just put some bread in, one of those thick honey loaves that you like. We can discuss this over a game of stones.”

Thulin hesitated.

"We’d better be on the move," Gallanha said softly. "That storm is coming."

Thulin nodded, then climbed up into the wagon. „You might want to come north too, Renald. If you do, bring everything you can.” He paused. „You’re good enough with the tools you have here to do some small metalwork, so take your best scythes and turn them into polearms. Your two best scythes; now don’t go skimping around with anything that’s a second best or a third best. Get your best, because it’s the weapon you’re going to use.”

Renald frowned. „How do you know that there will be an army? Thulin, burn me. I’m no soldier!”

Thulin continued as if he hadn’t heard the comments. „With a polearm you can pull somebody off of a horse and stab them. And, as I think about it, maybe you can take the third best and make yourself a couple of swords.”

"What do I know about making a sword? Or about using a sword, for that matter?"

„You can learn,” Thulin said, turning north. „Everyone will be needed, Renald. Everyone. They’re coming for us.” He glanced back at Renald. "A sword really isn’t all that tough to make. You take a scythe blade and straighten it out, then you find yourself a piece of wood to act as a guard, to keep the enemy’s blade from sliding down and cutting your hand. Mostly you’ll just be using things that you’ve already got."

Renald blinked. He stopped asking questions, but he couldn’t stop thinking them. They bunched up inside his brain like cattle all trying to force their way through a single gate. „Bring all your stock, Renald,” Thulin said. „You’ll eat them—or your men will eat them—and you’ll want the milk. And if you don’t, then there’ll be men you can trade with for beef or mutton. Food will be scarce, what with everything spoiling so much and the winter stores having run low. Bring everything you’ve got. Dried beans, dried fruit, everything.”

Renald leaned back against the gate to his yard. He felt weak and limp. Finally, he forced out just one question. „Why?”

Thulin hesitated, then stepped away from the wagon, laying a hand on Renald’s shoulder again. „I’m sorry to be so abrupt. I... well, you know how I am with words, Renald. I don’t know what that storm is. But I know what it means. I’ve never held a sword, but my father fought in the Aiel War. I’m a Borderlander. And that storm means the end is coming, Renald. We need to be there when it arrives.“ He stopped, then turned and looked to the north, watching

those building clouds as a farmhand might watch a poisonous snake he found in the middle of the field. „Light preserve us, my friend. We need to be there.”

And with that, he removed his hand and climbed back into the wagon. Renald watched them ease off, nudging the oxen into motion, heading north. Renald watched for a long time, feeling numb.

The distant thunder cracked, like the sound of a whip, smacking against the hills.

The door to the farmhouse opened and shut. Auaine came out to him, gray hair in a bun. It had been that color for years now; she'd grayed early, and Renald had always been fond of the color. Silver, more than gray. Like the clouds.

„Was that Thulin?“ Auaine asked, watching the distant wagon throw up dust. A single black chicken feather blew across the roadway.

„Yes.“

„And he didn't stay, even to chat?“

Renald shook his head.

„Oh, but Gallanha sent eggs!“ She took the basket and began to transfer the eggs into her apron to carry them inside. „She's such a dear. Leave the basket there on the ground; I'm sure she'll send someone for it.“

Renald just stared northward.

„Renald?“ Auaine asked. „What's gotten into you, you old stump?“

„She polished up her pots for you,“ he said. „The ones with the copper bottoms. They're sitting on her kitchen table. They're yours if you want them.“

Auaine fell silent. Then he heard a sharp sound of cracking, and he looked over his shoulder. She had let her apron grow slack, and the eggs were slipping free, plopping to the ground and cracking.

In a very calm voice, Auaine asked, „Did she say anything else?“

He scratched his head, which hadn't much hair left to speak of. „She said the storm was coming and they had to head north. Thulin said we should go too.“

They stood for another moment. Auaine pulled up the edge of her apron, preserving the majority of the eggs. She didn't spare a glance for those that had fallen. She was just staring northward. Renald turned. The storm had jumped forward again. And it seemed to have grown *darker* somehow.

„I think we ought to listen to them, Renald,“ Auaine said. „I'll... I'll go fix up what we'll need to bring with us from the house. You can go around back and gather the men. Did they say how long we'll be gone?“

„No,“ he said. „They didn't even really say why. just that we need to go north for the storm. And... that this is the end.“

Auaine inhaled sharply. „Well, you just get the men ready. I'll take care of the house.”

She bustled inside, and Renald forced himself to turn away from the storm. He rounded the house and entered the barnyard, calling the farmhands together. They were a stout lot, good men, all of them. His own sons had sought their fortunes elsewhere, but his six workers were nearly as close to him as sons.

Merk, Favidan, Rinnin, Veshir and Adamad gathered round. Still feeling dazed, Renald sent two to gather up the animals, two more to pack what grain and provisions they had left from the winter and the final man off to fetch Geleni, who had gone into the village for some new seed, just in case the planting had gone bad on account of their stores.

The five men scattered. Renald stood in the farmyard for a moment, then went into the barn to fetch his lightweight forge and pull it out into the sunlight. It wasn't just an anvil, but a full, compact forge, made for moving. He had it on rollers; you couldn't work a forge in a barn. All that dust could take fire. He heaved the handles, wheeling it out to the alcove set off to the side of the yard, built from good bricks, where he could do minor repairs when he needed to.

An hour later, he had the fire stoked. He wasn't as skilled as Thulin, but he'd learned from his father that being able to handle a little of your own forgework made a big difference. Sometimes, you couldn't squander the hours it would take to go to town and back just to fix a broken hinge.

The clouds were still there. He tried not to look at them as he left the forge and headed into the barn. Those clouds were like eyes, peeping over his shoulder.

Inside the barn, light sprinkled down through cracks in the wall, falling on dust and hay. He'd built the structure himself some twenty-five years back. He kept planning to replace some of those warped roofing planks, but now there wouldn't be time.

At the tool wall, he reached for his third-best scythe, but stopped. Taking a deep breath, he took the best scythe off the wall instead. He walked back out to the forge and knocked the haft off the scythe.

As he tossed the wood aside, Veshir—eldest of his farmhands—approached, pulling a pair of goats. When Veshir saw the scythe blade on the forge, his expression grew dark. He tied the goats to a post, then trotted over to Renald, but said nothing.

How to make a polearm? Thulin had said they were good for yanking a man off his horse. Well, he would have to replace the snath with a longer straight shaft of ashwood. The flanged end of the shaft would extend beyond the heel of the blade, shaped into a crude spearpoint and clad with a piece of tin for strength. And then he would have to heat the blade and bang off the toe about halfway, making a hook that could tug a man off his horse and maybe cut him at the same time. He slid the blade into the burning coals to heat it, then began to tie on his apron.

Veshir stood there for a minute or so, watching. Finally, he stepped up, taking Renald by the arm. „Renald, what are we doing?”

Renald shook his arm free. „We're going north. The storm is coming and we're going north.”

„We're going north for just a storm? It's insanity!”

It was nearly the same thing Renald had said to Thulin. Distant thunder sounded.

Thulin was right. The crops... the skies... the food going bad without warning. Even before he'd spoken to Thulin, Renald had known. Deep within, he'd known. This storm would not pass overhead then vanish. It had to be confronted.

„Veshir,” Renald said, turning back to his work, „you've been a hand on this farm for... what, fifteen years now? You're the first man I hired. How well have I treated you and yours?”

„You've done me well,” Veshir said. „But burn me, Renald, you've never decided to *leave* the farm before! These crops, they'll wither to dust if we leave them. This ain't no southerner wetfarm. How can we just go off?”

"Because," Renald said, "if we don't leave, then it won't matter if we planted or not.“

Veshir frowned.

„Son,” Renald said, „you'll do as I say, and that's all we'll have of it. Go finish gathering the stock.”

Veshir stalked away, but he did as he was told. He was a good man, if hotheaded.

Renald pulled the blade out of the heat, the metal glowing white. He laid it against the small anvil and began to beat on the knobby section where heel met beard, flattening it. The sound of his hammer on the metal seemed louder than it should have been. It rang like the pealing thunder, and the sounds blended. As if each beat of his hammer was itself a piece of the storm.

As he worked, the peals seemed to form words. Like somebody muttering in the back of his head. The same phrase over and over.

The storm is coming. The storm is coming...

He kept on pounding, keeping the edge on the scythe, but straightening the blade and making a hook at the end. He still didn't know why. But it didn't matter. The storm was coming and he had to be ready.

Watching the bowlegged soldiers tie Tanera's blanket-wrapped body across a saddle, Falendre fought the desire to begin weeping again, the desire to vomit. She was senior, and had to maintain some composure if she expected the four other surviving *sul'dam* to do so. She tried to tell herself she had seen worse, battles where more than a single *sul'dam* had died, more than one *damane*. That brought her too near thinking of exactly how Tanera and her Miri met their deaths, though, and her mind shied from it.

Huddling by her side, Nenci whimpered as Falendre stroked the *damane*'s head and tried to send soothing feelings through the *a'dam*. That often seemed to work, but not so well today. Her own emotions were too roiled. If only she could forget that the *damane* was shielded, and by whom. By what. Nenci whimpered again.

„You will deliver the message as I directed you?“ a man said behind her.

No, not just any man. The sound of his voice stirred the pool of acid in her belly. She made herself turn to face him, made herself meet those cold, hard eyes. They changed with the angle of his head, now blue, now gray, but always like polished gemstones. She had known many hard men, but had she ever known one hard enough to lose a hand and moments later take it as if he had lost a glove? She bowed formally, twitching the *a'dam* so that Nenci did the same. So far they had been treated well for prisoners under the circumstances, even to being given washwater, and supposedly they would not remain prisoners much longer. Yet with this man, who could say what might make that change? The promise of freedom might be part of some scheme.

„I will deliver your message with the care it requires,“ she began, then stumbled over her tongue. What honorific did she use for him? „My Lord Dragon,“ she finished hurriedly. The words dried her tongue, but he nodded, so it must have sufficed.

One of the *marath'damane* appeared through that impossible hole in the air, a young woman with her hair in a long braid. She wore enough jewelry for one of the Blood, and of all things, a red dot in the middle of her forehead. „How long do you mean to stay here, Rand?“ she demanded as if the hard-eyed young man were a servant rather than who he was. „How close to Ebou Dar are we here? The place is full of Seanchan, you know, and they probably fly *raken* all around it.“

„Did Cadsuane send you to ask that?“ he said, and her cheeks colored faintly. „Not much longer, Nynaeve. A few minutes.”

The young woman shifted her gaze to the other *sul'dam* and *damame*, all taking their lead from Falendre, pretending there were no *marath'damane* watching them, and especially no men in black coats. The others had straightened themselves as best they could. Surya had washed the blood from her face, and from her Tabi's face, and Malian had tied large compresses on them that made them appear to be wearing odd hats. Ciar had managed to clean off most of the vomit she had spilled down the front of her dress.

„I still think I should Heal them,“ Nynaeve said abruptly. „Hits to the head can cause odd things that don't come on right away.“

Surya, her face hardening, moved Tabi behind her as if to protect the *damane*. As if she could. Tabi's pale eyes had widened in horror.

Falendre raised a pleading hand toward the tall young man. Toward the Dragon Reborn, it seemed. „Please. They will receive medical aid as soon as we reach Ebou Dar.”

„Give over, Nynaeve,“ the young man said. „If they don't want Healing, they don't want it.“ The *marath'damane* scowled at him, gripping her braid so hard that her knuckles turned white. He turned his own attention back to Falendre. „The road to Ebou Dar lies about an hour east of here. You can reach the city by nightfall if you press. The shields on the *damane* will evaporate in about half an hour. Is that right for the *saidar*-woven shields, Nynaeve?“ The woman scowled at him in silence. „Is that right, Nynaeve?”

„Half an hour,“ she replied finally. „But none of this is right, Rand al'Thor. Sending those *damane* back. It isn't right, and you know it.”

For a moment, his eyes were even colder. Not harder. That would have been impossible. But for that long moment, they seemed to hold caverns of ice. „Right was easy to find when all I had to care for was a few sheep,“ he said quietly. „Nowadays, sometimes it's harder to come by.” Turning away, he raised his voice. „Logain, get everyone back through the gateway. Yes, yes, Merise. I'm not trying to command you. If you'll deign to join us, though? It will be closing soon.“

Marath'damane, the ones who called themselves Aes Sedai, began filing through that mad opening in the air, as did the black-coated men, the Asha'man, all mingling with the hook-nosed soldiers. Several of those finished tying Tanera to the saddle of the horse. The beasts had been provided by the Dragon Reborn. How odd, that he should give them gifts after what had happened.

The hard-eyed young man turned back to her. „Repeat your instructions.“

„I am to return to Ebou Dar with a message for our leaders there.”

„The Daughter of the Nine Moons,“ the Dragon Reborn said sternly. „You will deliver my message to her.“

Falendre stumbled. She was not in any way worthy to speak to one of the Blood, let alone the High Lady, daughter of the Empress, may she live forever! But this man's expression allowed no argument. Falendre would find a way. „I will deliver your message to her,“ Falendre continued. „I will tell her that... that you bear her no malice for this attack, and that you desire a meeting.“

„I still desire one,“ the Dragon Reborn said sternly.

As far as Falendre knew, the Daughter of the Nine Moons had never known about the original meeting. It had been arranged in secret by Anath. And that was why Falendre knew for certain that this man must be the Dragon Reborn. For only the Dragon Reborn himself could face one of the Forsaken and not only survive, but come out the victor.

Was that really what she had been? One of the Forsaken? Falendre's mind reeled at the concept. Impossible. And yet, here was the Dragon Reborn. If he lived, if he walked the land, then the Forsaken would, too. She was muddled, her thoughts going in circles, she knew. She bottled up her terror—she would deal with that later. She needed to be in control.

She forced herself to meet those frozen gemstones this man had for eyes. She had to preserve some dignity if only to reassure the four other surviving *sul'dam*. And the *damane*, of course. If the *sul'dam* lost composure again, there would be no hope for the *damane*.

„I will tell her,“ Falendre said, managing to keep her voice even, „that you still desire a meeting with her. That you believe there must be peace between our peoples. And I am to tell her that Lady Anath was... was one of the Forsaken.

„To the side, she saw some of the *marath'damane* push Anath through the hole in the air, maintaining a stately bearing despite her captivity. She always

had tried to dominate above her station. Could she really be what this man said she was?

How was Falendre to face the *der'sul'dam* and explain this tragedy, this terrible mess? She itched to be away from it, to find someplace to hide.

„We *must* have peace,“ the Dragon Reborn said. „I will see it happen. Tell your mistress that she can find me in Arad Doman; I will quell the battle against your forces there. Let her know that I give this as a sign of good faith, just as I release you out of good faith. It is no shame to be manipulated by one of the Forsaken, particularly not... that creature. In a way, I rest more easily, now. I worried that one of them would have infiltrated the Seanchan nobility. I should have guessed that it would be Semirhage. She always preferred a challenge.“

He spoke of the Forsaken with an incredible sense of familiarity, and it gave Falendre chills.

He glanced at her. „You may go,“ he said, then walked over and passed through the rip in the air. What she would give to have that traveling trick for Nenci. The last of the *marath'damane* passed through the hole, and it closed, leaving Falendre and the others alone. They were a sorry group. Talha was still crying, and Malian looked ready to sick up. Several of the others had had bloodied faces before they washed, and faint red smears and flakes of crusted blood still marred their skin. Falendre was glad she had been able to avoid accepting Healing for them. She had seen one of those men Healing members of the Dragon's party. Who knew what taint it would leave on a person to be beneath those corrupt hands?

„Be strong,“ she commanded the others, feeling far more uncertain than she sounded. He had actually let her free! She'd barely dared hope for that. Best to be away soon. Very soon. She chivvied the others onto the horses he had given, and within minutes they were riding south, toward Ebou Dar, each *sul'dam* riding with her companion *damane* at her side.

The events of this day could mean having her *damane* stripped from her, being forbidden to hold the *a'dam* ever again. With Anath gone, punishment would be demanded of someone. What would High Lady Suroth say? *Damane* dead, the Dragon Reborn insulted.

Surely losing access to the *a'dam* was the worst that could happen to her. They wouldn't make one such as Falendre *da'covale*, would they? The thought made the bile twist inside of her again.

She would have to explain the events of this day very carefully. There *had* to be a way she could present these matters in a way that would save her life.

She had given her word to the Dragon to speak directly to the Daughter of the Nine Moons. And she would. But she might not do so immediately. Careful consideration would have to be given. Very careful consideration.

She leaned in close to her horse's neck, nudging her mount forward, ahead of the others. That way, they wouldn't see the tears of frustration, pain and terror in her eyes.

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Tylee Khirgan, Lieutenant-General of the Ever Victorious Army, sat atop a forested hilltop, looking northward. Such a different place this land was. Her homeland, Maram Kashor, was a dry island on the very southeastern tip of Seanchan. The lumma trees there were straight, towering monsters, with fronds sprouting from the top like the hair crest of a member of the High Blood.

The things that passed for trees in this land were gnarled, twisting, branching shrubs by comparison. Their limbs were like the fingers of old soldiers, gone arthritic from years holding the sword. What had the locals called these plants? Brushwood trees? So odd. To think that some of her ancestors might have come from this place, traveling with Luthair Paendrag to Seanchan.

Her army marched down the road below, throwing dust into the air. Thousands upon thousands of men. Fewer than she'd had before, but not by many. It had been two weeks since her fight with the Aiel, where Perrin Aybara's plan had worked impressively. Fighting alongside a man like him was always a bittersweet experience. Sweet for the sheer genius of it. Bitter for the worry that one day, they would face each other on the battlefield. Tylee was not one who enjoyed a challenge in a fight. She'd always preferred to win straight out.

Some generals said that never struggling meant never being forced to improve. Tylee figured that she and her men would do their improving on the practice field, and leave the struggling to her enemies.

She would not like to face Perrin. No, she would not. And not just because she was fond of him.

Slow hoofbeats sounded on the earth. She glanced to the side as Mishima rode his horse, a pale gelding, up next to hers. He had his helm tied to his saddle, and his scarred face was thoughtful. They were a pair, the two of them. Tylee's own face bore its share of old scars.

Mishima saluted her, more respectful now that Tylee had been raised to the Blood. That particular message, delivered by *raken*, had been an unexpected one. It was an honor, and one she still wasn't accustomed to.

„Still mulling over of the battle?“ Mishima asked.

„I am,“ Tylee said. Two weeks, and still it dominated her mind. „What do you think?“

„Of Aybara, you mean?“ Mishima asked. He still spoke to her like a friend, even if he kept himself from meeting her eyes. „He is a good soldier. Perhaps too focused, too driven. But solid.“

„Yes,“ Tylee said, then shook her head. „The world is changing, Mishima. In ways we cannot anticipate. First Aybara, and then the oddities.“

Mishima nodded thoughtfully. „The men don't want to speak of them.“

„The events have happened too often to be the work of delusion,“ Tylee said. „The scouts are seeing *something*.“

„Men don't just vanish,“ Mishima said. „You think it's the One Power?“

„I do not know what it is,” she said. She glanced over the trees around her. Though some trees she’d passed earlier had begun to send out spring growth, not a one of these had done so. They looked skeletal, though the air was warm enough for it to be planting season already. „Do they have trees like this in Halamak?”

„Not exactly like them,” Mishima said. „But I’ve seen their like before.”

„Should they have budded by now?”

He shrugged. „I’m a soldier, Lady Tylee.”

„I hadn’t noticed,” she said dryly.

He grunted. "I mean that I don’t pay attention to trees. Trees don’t bleed. Perhaps they should have budded, but perhaps not. Few things make sense on this side of the ocean. Trees that don’t bud in spring, that’s just another oddity. Better that than more *marath’damane* acting like they were of the Blood, everyone bowing and scraping to them.” He shuddered visibly.

Tylee nodded, though she didn’t share his revulsion. Not completely. She wasn’t certain what to think of Perrin Aybara and his Aes Sedai, let alone his Asha’man. And she didn’t know much more about trees than Mishima. But it felt to her that they should have started to bud. And those men the scouts kept seeing in the fields, how could they vanish so quickly, even with the One Power?

The quartermaster had opened up one of their packs of travel rations today and found only dust. Tylee would have started a search for a thief or a prankster if the quartermaster hadn’t insisted that he’d checked that pack just moments before. Karm was a solid man; he’d been her quartermaster for years. He did not make mistakes.

Rotting food was so common here. Karm blamed the heat of this strange land. But travel rations couldn’t rot or spoil, at least not this unpredictably. The omens were all bad, these days. Earlier today, she’d seen two dead rats lying on their backs, one with a tail in the mouth of the other. It was the worst omen she’d ever seen in her life, and it still chilled her to think of it.

Something was happening. Perrin hadn’t been willing to speak of it much, but she saw a weight upon him. He knew much more than he had spoken.

We can’t afford to be fighting these people, she thought. It was a rebellious thought, one she wouldn’t speak to Mishima. She didn’t even dare ponder it. The Empress, may she live forever, had declared that this land be reclaimed. Suroth and Galgan were the Empire’s chosen leaders in the venture, until the Daughter of the Nine Moons revealed herself. While Tylee couldn’t know the High Lady Tuon’s thoughts, Suroth and Galgan were united in their desire to see this land subdued. It was practically the only thing they did agree upon.

None of them would listen to suggestions that they should be looking for allies among the people of this land, rather than enemies. Thinking about it was close to treason. Insubordination, at least. She sighed and turned to Mishima, prepared to give the order to begin scouting for a place to camp for the night.

She froze. Mishima had an arrow through his neck, a wicked, barbed thing. She hadn't heard it strike. He met her eyes, stunned, trying to speak and only letting out blood. He slid from the saddle and collapsed in a heap as something enormous charged through the underbrush beside Tylee, cracking gnarled branches, throwing itself at her. She barely had time to pull free her sword and shout before Duster—a good, solid warhorse that had never failed her in battle—reared in panic, tossing her to the ground.

That probably saved her life, as her attacker swung a thick—bladed sword, cutting into the saddle where Tylee had been. She scrambled to her feet, armor clanking, and screamed the alert. „To arms! Attack!“

Her voice joined hundreds who made the same call at virtually the same time. Men screamed. Horses whinnied.

An ambush, she thought, raising her blade. And we walked right into it! Where are the scouts? What happened? She launched herself at the man who had tried to kill her. He spun, snorting.

And for the first time, she saw just what he was. Not quite a man—instead, some creature with twisted features, the head covered in coarse brown hair, the too-wide forehead wrinkled with thick skin. Those eyes were disturbingly human-like, but the nose below was flattened like that of a boar and the mouth jutted with two prominent tusks. The creature roared at her, spittle spraying from its nearly human lips.

Blood of my Fathers Forgotten, she thought. What have we stumbled into? The monster was a nightmare, given a body and let loose to kill. It was a thing she had always dismissed as superstition.

She charged the creature, knocking aside its thick sword as it tried to attack. She spun, falling into Beat the Brushes, and separated the beast's arm from its shoulder. She struck again, and its head followed the arm to the ground, severed free. It stumbled, somehow still walking three steps, before collapsing.

The trees rustled, more branches snapping. Just down from her hillside, Tylee saw that hundreds of the creatures had broken out of the underbrush, attacking the line of her men near the middle, causing chaos. More and more of the monsters poured between the trees.

How had this happened? How had these things gotten so close to Ebou Dar! They were well inside the Seanchan defensive perimeter, only a day's march from the capital.

Tylee charged down the hillside, bellowing for her honor guard as more of the beasts roared out of the trees behind her.

Graendal lounged in a stonework room lined with adoring men and women, each one a perfect specimen, each one wearing little more than a robe of diaphanous white cloth. A warm fire played in the hearth, illuminating a fine rug of blood red. That rug was woven in the design of young women and men entangled in ways that would have made even an experienced courtesan blush.

The open windows let in afternoon light, the lofty position of her palace giving a view of pines and a shimmering lake below.

She sipped sweetbristle juice, wearing a pale blue dress after the Domani cut—she was growing fond of their fashions, though her dress was far more filmy than the ones they wore. These Domani were too fond of whispering when Graendal preferred a nice sharp scream. She took another sip of juice. What an interestingly sour flavor it had. It was exotic during this Age, since the trees now grew only on distant islands.

Without warning, a gateway spun open in the center of the room. She cursed under her breath as one of her finest prizes—a succulent young woman named Thurasa, a member of the Domani merchant council—nearly lost an arm to the thing. The gateway let in a sweltering heat that marred the perfect mix of chill mountain air and fireplace warmth she had cultivated.

Graendal kept her composure, forcing herself to lounge back in her overstuffed velvet chair. A messenger in black strode through the portal, and she knew what he wanted before he even spoke. Only Moridin knew where to find her, now that Sammael was dead.

„My Lady, your presence is required by—„

„Yes, yes,“ she said. „Stand straight and let me see you.“

The youth stood still, just two steps into the room. And my, he was attractive! Pale golden hair as was so rare in many parts of the world, green eyes that shimmered like moss-grown pools, a lithe figure taut with just enough muscle. Graendal clicked her tongue. Was Moridin trying to tempt her by sending his very most pretty, or was the choice coincidental?

No. Among the Chosen, there were no coincidences. Graendal nearly reached out with a weave of Compulsion to seize the boy for herself. However, she restrained herself: Once a man had known that level of Compulsion, there was no way to recover him, and Moridin might be angered. She did need to worry about his whims. The man never had been stable, even during the early years. If she intended to see herself as Nae’blis someday, it was important not to rile him until it was time to strike.

She turned her attention away from the messenger—if she couldn’t have him, then she wasn’t interested in him—and looked through the open gateway. She hated being forced to meet with one of the other Chosen on their terms. She hated leaving her stronghold and her pets. Most of all, she hated being forced to grovel before one who should have been her subordinate.

There was nothing to be done about it. Moridin was Nae’blis. For now. And that meant, hate it or not, Graendal had no choice but to answer his summons. So she set aside her drink, then stood and walked through the gateway, her diaphanous pale blue gown shimmering with golden embroidery.

It was distractingly hot on the other side of the gateway. She immediately wove Air and Water, cooling the air around her. She was in a black-stone building, with ruddy light coming in the windows. They had no glass in them.

That reddish tint implied a sunset, but it was barely midafternoon back in Arad Doman. Surely she hadn't traveled *that* far, had she?

The room was furnished only with hard chairs of the deepest black wood. Moridin certainly was lacking in imagination lately. Everything of black and red, and all focused on killing those fool boys from the village of Rand al'Thor. Was she the only one who saw that al'Thor himself was the real threat? Why not just kill him and be done with it?

The most obvious answer to that question—that none of them so far had proven strong enough to defeat him—was one she did not enjoy contemplating.

She walked to the window and found the reason for the rust-colored light. Outside, the claylike ground was stained red from the iron in the soil. She was on the second level of a deep black tower, the stones drawing in the burning heat of the sky. Very little vegetation sprouted outside, and that which did was spotted with black. So, it was the deep northeastern Blight. It had been some time since she'd been here. Moridin seemed to have located a fortress, of all things.

A collection of shoddy huts stood in the shadow of the fortress, and a few patches of blightstrain crops marked fields in the distance. They were probably trying a new strain, coaxing it to grow in the area. Perhaps several different crops; that would explain the patches. Guards prowled the area, wearing black uniforms despite the heat. Soldiers were necessary to fight off attacks from the various Shadowspawn that inhabited the lands this deep within the blight. Those creatures obeyed no master save for the Great Lord himself. What was Moridin doing all the way out here?

Her speculation was cut short as footsteps announced other arrivals. Demandred entered though the doorway to the south, and he was accompanied by Mesaana. Had they arrived together, then? They assumed that Graendal did not know of their little alliance, a pact that included Semirhage. But honestly, if they wanted to keep that a secret, couldn't they see that they shouldn't answer a summons together?

Graendal hid a smile as she nodded to the two of them, then selected the largest and most comfortable-looking of the room's chairs to sit in. She ran a finger along the smooth, dark wood, feeling the grain beneath the lacquer. Demandred and Mesaana regarded her coldly, and she knew them well enough to pick out hints of their surprise at seeing her. So. They had anticipated this meeting, had they? But not Graendal's presence at it? Best to pretend that she herself was not confused. She smiled knowingly at the two of them and caught a flash of anger in Demandred's eyes.

That man frustrated her, though she would never admit it out loud. Mesaana was in the White Tower, pretending to be one of what passed for an Aes Sedai in this Age. She was obvious and easy to read; Graendal's agents in the White Tower kept her well apprised of Mesaana's activities. And, of course, Graendal's own newly minted association with Aran'gar was helpful as well.

Aran'gar was playing with the rebel Aes Sedai, the ones who were besieging the White Tower.

Yes, Mesaana did not confuse her, and the others were equally easy to track. Moridin was gathering the Great Lord's forces for the Last Battle, and his war preparations left him very little time for the south—though his two minions, Cyndane and Moghedien, occasionally showed their faces there. They spent their time rallying the Darkfriends and occasionally trying follow Moridin's orders that the two *ta'veren*—Perrin Aybara and Matrim Cauthon be killed.

She was certain Sammael had fallen to Rand al'Thor during the struggle for Illian. In fact—now that Graendal had a clue that Semirhage had been pulling strings with the Seanchan—she was confident she knew the plans of every one of the other seven remaining Chosen.

Except Demandred.

What was that blasted man up to? She'd have traded all of her knowledge of Mesaana's and Aran'gar's doings for even a hint of Demandred's plans. He stood there, handsome and hawk-nosed, his lips drawn in perpetual anger. Demandred never smiled, never seemed to enjoy anything. Though he was one of the foremost generals among the Chosen, warfare had never seemed to bring him joy. Once she had heard him say that he would laugh the day he could snap the neck of Lews Therin. And only then.

He was a fool to bear that grudge. To think he might have been on the other side—might have become the Dragon himself, had things turned out differently. Still, fool or not, he was extremely dangerous, and Graendal did *not* like being ignorant of his plans. Where had he set up? Demandred liked having armies to command, but there were none left moving in the world.

Save perhaps for those Borderlanders. Could he have managed to infiltrate *them*? That certainly would have been a coup. But surely she'd have heard something; she had spies in that camp.

She shook her head, wishing for a drink to wet her lips. This northern air was too dry; she much preferred the Domani humidity. Demandred folded his arms, remaining standing as Mesaana seated herself. She had chin-length dark hair and watery blue eyes. Her floor-length white dress bore no embroidery, and she wore no jewelry. A scholar to the core. Sometimes Graendal thought Mesaana had gone over to the Shadow because it offered a more interesting opportunity for research.

Mesaana was fully dedicated to the Great Lord now, just like the rest of them, but she seemed a second-rate member of the Chosen. Making boasts she couldn't fulfill, allying herself to stronger parties but lacking the skill to manipulate them. She'd done evil works in the Great Lord's name, but had never managed the grand achievements of Chosen like Semirhage and Demandred. Let alone Moridin.

And, as Graendal began to think on Moridin, the man entered. Now, *there* was a handsome creature. Demandred looked like a knob-faced peasant compared with him. Yes, this body was much better than his previous one. He

was almost pretty enough to be one of her pets, though that chin spoiled the face. Too prominent, too strong. Still, that stark black hair atop a tall, broad-shouldered body.... She smiled, thinking of him kneeling in a filmy outfit of white, looking at her adoringly, his mind wrapped in Compulsion to the point that he saw nobody—nothing—other than Graendal.

Mesaana rose as soon as Moridin entered, and Graendal reluctantly did likewise. He wasn't her pet, not yet. He was Nae'blis, and he had begun to demand more and more shows of obedience from them in recent days. The Great Lord gave him the authority. All three of the other Chosen reluctantly bowed their heads to him; only to him among all men would they show deference. He noted their obedience with stern eyes as he stalked to the front of the room, where the wall of charcoal black stones was set with a mantel. What had possessed someone to build a fortress out of *black* rock in the Blight's heat?

Graendal sat back down. Were the other Chosen coming? If not, what did it mean?

Mesaana spoke before Moridin could say anything. „Moridin,” she said, stepping forward, „we need to rescue her.”

„You will speak when I give you leave, Mesaana,” he replied coldly. „You are not yet forgiven.”

She cringed, then obviously grew angry at herself for it. Moridin ignored her, glancing over at Graendal, eyes narrow. What was that look for?

„You may continue,” he finally said to Mesaana, „but remember your place.”

Mesaana's lips formed a line, but she did not argue. „Moridin,” she said, tone less demanding. „You saw the wisdom in agreeing to meet with us. Surely that was because you are as shocked as we are. We do not have the resources to help her ourselves; she is bound to be well guarded by Aes Sedai and those Asha'man. You need to help us free her.”

„Semirhage deserves her imprisonment,” Moridin said, resting his arm on the mantel, still turned away from Mesaana.

Semirhage, captured? Graendal had just barely learned that the woman was impersonating an important Seanchan! What had she done to get herself captured? If there were Asha'man, then it seemed she'd managed to be taken by al'Thor himself!

Despite her startlement, Graendal maintained her knowing smile. Demandred glanced at her. If he and Mesaana had asked for this meeting, then why had Moridin sent for Graendal?

„But think of what Semirhage might reveal!” Mesaana said, ignoring Graendal. „Beyond that, she is one of the Chosen. It is our duty to aid her.”

And beyond that, Graendal thought, she is a member of the little alliance you two made. Perhaps the strongest member. Losing her will be a blow to your bid for control of the Chosen.

„She disobeyed,” Moridin said. „She was not to try to kill al'Thor.”

„She didn't intend to," Mesaana said hastily. „Our woman there thinks that the bolt of Fire was a reaction of surprise, not an intention to kill."

„And what say you of this, Demandred?" Moridin said, glancing at the shorter man.

„I want Lews Therin," Demandred said, his voice deep, his expression dark, as always. „Semirhage knows that. She also knows that if she'd killed him, I would have found her and claimed her life in retribution. Nobody kills al'Thor. Nobody but me."

„You or the Great Lord, Demandred," Moridin said, voice dangerous. „His will dominates us all."

„Yes, yes, of course it does," Mesaana cut in, stepping forward, plain dress brushing the mirror-bright black marble floor. „Moridin, the fact remains that she didn't intend to kill him, just to capture him. I—"

„Of course she intended to capture him!" Moridin roared, causing Mesaana to flinch. „That was what she was *ordered* to do. And she failed at it, Mesaana. Failed spectacularly, leaving him wounded despite my express command that he wasn't to be harmed! And for that incompetence, she will suffer. I will give you no aid in rescuing her. In fact, I *forbid* you to send her aid. Do you understand?"

Mesaana flinched again. Demandred did not; he met Moridin's eyes, then nodded. Yes, he was a cold one. Perhaps Graendal underestimated him. He very well might be the most powerful of the three, more dangerous than Semirhage. She was emotionless and controlled, true, but sometimes emotion was appropriate. It could drive a man like Demandred to actions that a more coolheaded person couldn't even contemplate.

Moridin looked down, flexing his left hand, as if it were stiff. Graendal caught a hint of pain in his expression.

„Let Semirhage rot," Moridin growled. „Let her see what it is to be the one questioned. Perhaps the Great Lord will find some use for her in the coming weeks, but that is his to determine. Now. Tell me of your preparations."

Mesaana paled just slightly, glancing at Graendal. Demandred's face grew red, as if he was incredulous that they would be interrogated in front of another Chosen. Graendal smiled at them.

„I am perfectly poised," Mesaana said, turning back to Moridin with a sweep of her head. „The White Tower and those fools who rule it will shortly be mine. I will deliver not just a broken White Tower to our Great Lord, but an entire broad of channelers who—one way or another—will serve our cause in the Last Battle. This time, the Aes Sedai will fight for us!"

„A bold claim," Moridin said.

„I will make it happen," Mesaana said evenly. „My followers infest the Tower like an unseen plague, festering inside of a healthy-looking man at market. More and more join our cause. Some intentionally, others unwittingly. It is the same either way."

Graendal listened thoughtfully. Aran'gar claimed that the rebel Aes Sedai would eventually secure the Tower, though Graendal herself wasn't certain. Who would be victorious, the child or the fool? Did it matter?

„And you?” Moridin asked Demandred.

„My rule is secure,” Demandred said simply. „I gather for war. We will be ready.”

Graendal itched for him to say more than that, but Moridin did not push. Still, it was much more than she'd been able to glean on her own. Demandred apparently held a throne and had armies. Which were gathered. The Borderlanders marching through the east seemed more and more likely.

„You two may withdraw,” Moridin said.

Mesaana sputtered at the dismissal, but Demandred simply turned and stalked away. Graendal nodded to herself; she'd have to watch him. The Great Lord favored action, and often those who could bring armies to his name were best rewarded. Demandred could very well be her most important rival—following Moridin himself, of course.

He had not dismissed her, and so she remained seated as the other two withdrew. Moridin stayed where he was, one arm leaning against the mantel. There was silence in the too-black room for a time, and then a servant in a crisp red uniform entered, bearing two cups. He was an ugly thing, with a flat face and bushy eyebrows, worth no more than a passing glance.

She took a sip of her drink and tasted new wine, just slightly tart, but quite good. It was growing hard to find good wine; the Great Lord's touch on the world tainted everything, spoiling food, ruining even that which never should have been able to spoil.

Moridin waved the servant away, not taking his own cup. Graendal feared poison, of course. She always did when drinking from another's cup. However, there would be no reason for Moridin to poison her; he was Naelblis. While most of them resisted showing subservience to him, more and more he was exerting his will on them, pushing them into positions as his lessers. She suspected that, if he wished, he could have her executed in any manner of ways and the Great Lord would grant it to him. So she drank and waited.

„Did you glean much from what you heard, Graendal?” Moridin asked.

„As much as could be gleaned,” she answered carefully.

„I know how you crave information. Moghedien has always been known as the spider, pulling strings from afar, but you are in many ways better at it than she. She winds so many webs that she gets caught in them. You are more careful. You strike only when wise, but are not afraid of conflict. The Great Lord approves of your initiative.”

„My dear Moridin,” she said, smiling to herself, „you flatter me.”

„Do not toy with me, Graendal,” he said, voice hard. „Take your compliments and be silent.”

She recoiled as if slapped, but said no more.

„I gave you leave to listen to the other two as a reward,“ Moridin said. „Nae’blis has been chosen, but there will be other positions of high glory in the Great Lord’s reign. Some much higher than others. Today was a taste of the privileges you might enjoy.“

„I live only to serve the Great Lord.“

„Then serve him in this,“ Moridin said, looking directly at her. „Al’Thor moves for Arad Doman. He is to live unharmed until he can face me at that last day. But he *must not* be allowed to make peace in your lands. He will attempt to restore order. You must find ways to prevent that from happening.“

„It will be done.“

„Go, then,“ Moridin said, waving a hand sharply.

She rose, thoughtful, and started toward the door.

„And Graendal,“ he said.

She hesitated, glancing at him. He stood against the mantel, back mostly to her. He seemed to be staring at nothing, just looking at the black stones of the far wall. Strangely, he looked a great deal like al’Thor—of whom she had numerous sketches via her spies—when he stood like that.

„The end is near,“ Moridin said. „The Wheel has groaned its final rotation, the clock has lost its spring, the serpent heaves its final gasps. He must know pain of heart. He must know frustration, and he must know anguish. Bring these to him. And you will be rewarded.“

She nodded, then made her way through the provided gateway, back to her stronghold in the hills of Arad Doman.

To plot.

Rodel Ituralde’s mother, now thirty years buried in the clay hills of his Domani homeland, had been fond of a particular saying: „Things always have to get worse before they can get better.“ She’d said it when she’d yanked free his festering tooth as a boy, an ailment he’d earned while playing at swords with the village boys. She’d said it when he’d lost his first love to a lordling who wore a hat with feathers and whose soft hands and jeweled sword had proven he’d never known a real battle. And she’d say it now, if she were standing with him on the ridge, watching the Seanchan march upon the city nestled in the shallow valley below.

He studied the city, Darluna, through his looking glass, shading the end with his left hand, his gelding quiet beneath him in the evening light. He and several of his Domani kept to this small stand of trees; it would take the Dark One’s own luck for the Seanchan to spot him, even with looking glasses of their own.

Things always had to get worse before they could get better. He’d lit a fire under the Seanchan by destroying their supply depots all across Almoth Plain and even into Tarabon. He shouldn’t be surprised, then, to see a grand army like this one—a hundred and fifty thousand strong at least—come to quench that

fire. It showed a measure of respect. They did not underestimate him, these Seanchan invaders. He wished that they did.

Ituralde moved his looking glass, studying a group of riders among the Seanchan force. They rode in pairs, one woman of each pair wearing gray, the other red and blue. They were far too distant, even with the glass, for him to make out the embroidered lightning bolts on the dresses of those in red and blue, nor could he see the chains that linked each pair together. *Damane* and *sul'dam*.

This army had at least a hundred pairs, probably more. If that weren't enough, he could see one of the flying beasts above, drawing close for its rider to drop a message to the general. With those creatures to carry their scouts, the Seanchan army had an unprecedented edge. Ituralde would have traded ten thousand soldiers for one of those flying beasts. Other commanders might have wanted the *damane*, with their ability to throw lightnings and cause the earth to heave, but battles—even wars—were won by information as often as they were by weapons.

Of course, the Seanchan had superior weapons as well as superior scouts. They also had superior troops. Though Ituralde was proud of his Domani, many of his men were ill trained or too old for fighting. He almost lumped himself in that latter group, as the years were beginning to pile on him like bricks on a pallet. But he gave no thought to retiring. When he'd been a boy, he'd often felt a sense of urgency—a worry that by the time he came of age, the great battles would all be done, all the glory won.

Sometimes, he envied boys their foolishness.

„They march hard, Rodel,” Lidrin said. He was a youth with a scar across the left side of his face, and he wore a fashionable thin black mustache. "They badly want to capture that city." Lidrin had been untested as an officer before this campaign began. He was a veteran now. Even though Ituralde and his forces had won nearly every engagement they'd had with the Seanchan, Lidrin had seen three of his companion officers fall, poor Jaalam Nishur among them. From their deaths, Lidrin had learned one of the bitter lessons of warfare: winning didn't necessarily mean living. And following orders often didn't mean either winning or living.

Lidrin didn't wear his customary uniform. Neither did Ituralde or any of the men with him. Their uniforms had been needed elsewhere, and that left them with simple worn coats and tan trousers, many borrowed or bought from locals.

Ituralde raised his looking glass again, thinking on Lidrin's comment. The Seanchan did indeed march with speed; they were planning to take Darluna quickly. They saw the advantage it would offer, for they were a clever foe, and they had returned to Ituralde an excitement he had assumed that he'd left behind years ago.

„Yes, they push hard,” he said. „But what would you do, Lidrin? An enemy force of two hundred thousand behind you, another of a hundred and fifty thousand ahead of you. With enemies on all sides, would you march your men maybe just a little too hard if you knew that you'd find refuge at the end?”

Lidrin did not respond. Ituralde turned his looking glass, examining spring fields clustered with workers going about their planting. Darluna was a large city for these parts. Nothing here in the west could match the grand cities of the east and south, of course, regardless of what people from Tanchico or Falme would like to claim. Still, Darluna had a sturdy granite wall a good twenty feet tall. There was no beauty to the fortification, but the wall was solid, and it wrapped a city big enough to make any country boy gawk. In his youth, Ituralde would have called it grand. That was before he'd gone to fight the Aiel at Tar Valon.

Either way, it was the best fortification to be found in the area, and the Seanchan commanders no doubt knew it. They could have chosen to bunker down on a hilltop; fighting surrounded would make full use of those *damane*. However, that would not only leave no retreat, but would leave them minimal opportunities for supply. A city would have wells and perhaps leftover winter stores inside the wall. And Darluna, which had had its garrisons pressed into service elsewhere, was far too small to offer serious resistance...

Ituralde lowered his looking glass. He didn't need it to know what was happening as the Seanchan scouts reached the city, demanding that the gates be opened to the invading force. He closed his eyes, waiting.

Lidrin exhaled softly beside him. „They didn't notice,” he whispered. „They're moving the bulk of their forces up to the walls, waiting to be let in!”

„Give the order,” Ituralde said, opening his eyes. There was one problem with superior scouts like the *raken*. When you had access to a tool so useful, you tended to rely upon it. And reliance like that could be exploited.

In the distance, the „farmers“ on the fields tossed aside their tools and pulled bows from hidden clefts in the ground. The gates to the city opened, revealing the soldiers hiding inside—soldiers that the Seanchan *raken* scouts had claimed were a four-day ride away.

Ituralde raised his looking glass. The battle began.

The Prophet's fingers bit dirt, tearing trenches in the soil as he scrambled up to the top of the forested hillside. His followers straggled behind. So few. So few! But he would rebuild. The glory of the Dragon Reborn followed him, and no matter where he went, he found willing souls. Those with hearts that were pure, those who had hands that burned to destroy the Shadow.

Yes! Think not of the past, think of the future, when the Lord Dragon would rule all of the land! When men would be subject only to him, and to his Prophet beneath him. Those days would be glorious indeed, days when none would dare scorn the Prophet or deny his will. Days when the Prophet wouldn't have to suffer the indignity of living near the very camp—the *very* one—as Shadowspawn like that creature Aybara. Glorious days. Glorious days were coming.

It was difficult to keep his thoughts on those future glories. The world around him was filthy. Men denied the Dragon and sought the Shadow. Even his own followers. Yes! That must have been why they had fallen. That must have been why so many died when assaulting the city of Malden and its Darkfriend Aiel.

The Prophet had been so certain. He had assumed that the Dragon would protect his people, lead them to a powerful victory. Then the Prophet would finally have gotten his wish. He could have killed Perrin Aybara with his own hands! Twist that too-thick bull's neck in his fingers, twist it around, squeezing, feeling the bones crack, the flesh wring, the breath stop.

The Prophet reached the top of the ridge and brushed the dirt from his fingers. He breathed in and out, scanning around him, underbrush rustling as his few remaining followers climbed up toward him. The canopy was dense overhead, and very little sunlight peeked through. Light. Radiant light.

The Dragon had appeared to him the night before the attack. Appeared in glory! A figure of light, glowing in the air in shimmering robes. Kill Perrin Aybara! the Dragon had commanded. Kill him! And so the Prophet had sent his very best tool, Aybara's own dear friend.

That boy, that tool, had failed. Aram was dead. The Prophet's men had confirmed it. Tragedy! Was that why they had not prospered? Was that why, out of his thousands of followers, he now only had a bare handful? No. No! They must have turned against him, secretly worshipping the Shadow. Even Aram! Darkfriend! That was why he had failed.

The first of his followers—battered, dirtied, bloodied, exhausted—reached the top of the ridge. They wore threadbare clothing. Clothing that did not set them above others. The clothing of simplicity and goodness.

The Prophet counted them off. Fewer than a hundred. So few. This cursed forest was so dark, even during daylight. Thick trunks stood shoulder-to-shoulder, and the sky overhead had grown dim with cloud cover. The underbrush of thin-branched boneweed shrubs matted together, forming an almost unnatural barrier, and those shrubs scratched like claws on his skin.

With that underbrush and the sharp earthen bank, the army could not follow this way. Though the Prophet had escaped from Aybara's camp barely an hour before, he already felt safe. They would go north, where Aybara and his Darkfriends would not find them. There, the Prophet could rebuild. He had stayed with Aybara only because his followers had been strong enough to keep Aybara's Darkfriends away.

His dear followers. Brave men, and true, every one. Killed by Darkfriends. He mourned them, bowing his head and muttering a prayer. His followers joined him. They were weary, but the light of zeal shone in their eyes. Any who were weak, or who lacked dedication, had fled or been killed long ago. These were the best, the mightiest, the most faithful. Each one had killed many Darkfriends in the name of the Dragon Reborn.

With them, he could rebuild. But first he had to escape Aybara. The Prophet was too weak, now, to face him. But later he would kill him. Yes... Fingers on that neck... Yes...

The Prophet could remember a time when he'd been called something else. Masema. Those days were growing very blurry to him, like memories from a former life. Indeed, just as all men were reborn into the Pattern, so had Masema been reborn—he had cast off his old, profane life and had become the Prophet.

The last of his followers joined him atop the cliff face. He spat at their feet. They had failed him. Cowards. They should have fought better! He should have been able to win that city.

He turned north and pushed his way forward. This landscape was growing familiar to him, though they had nothing like it up in the Borderlands. They would climb to the highlands, then cross over and enter Almoth Plain. There were Dragonsworn there, followers of the Prophet, even if many didn't know of him. There he could rebuild quickly.

He pushed through a patch of the dark brush and entered a small clearing. His men followed quickly. They would need food, soon, and he would have to send them hunting. No fires. They couldn't afford to alert—

„Hello, Masema,” a quiet voice said.

He hissed, spinning, his followers bunching around him and pulling out weapons. Swords for some, knives, quarterstaves, and the occasional polearm. The Prophet scanned the dim afternoon clearing, searching for the one who had spoken. He found her standing on a little outcrop of rock a short distance away, a woman with a prominent Saldaean nose, slightly tilted eyes, and shoulder-length black hair. She wore green, with skirts divided for riding, her arms folded in front of her.

Faile Aybara, wife of the Shadowspawn, Perrin Aybara. „Take her!” the Prophet screamed, pointing. Several of his followers scrambled forward, but most hesitated. They had seen what he had not. Shadows in the forest behind Aybara's wife, a half-circle of them. They were the shapes of men, with bows pointed into the clearing.

Faile waved with a sharp motion, and the arrows flew. Those of his followers who had run at his bidding fell first, crying out in the silent forest before falling to the loamy earth. The Prophet bellowed, each arrow seeming to pierce his own heart. His beloved followers! His friends! His dear brothers!

An arrow slammed into him, throwing him backward to the ground. Around him, men died, just as they had earlier. Why, why hadn't the Dragon protected them? Why? Suddenly, the horror of it all returned to him, the sinking terror of watching his men fall in waves, at watching them die at the hands of those Darkfriend Aiel.

It was Perrin Aybara's fault. If only the Prophet had seen earlier, back in the early days, before he'd even recognized the Lord Dragon for who he was!

„It's my fault,” the Prophet whispered as the last of his followers died. It had taken several arrows to stop some of them. That made him proud.

Slowly, he forced himself back to his feet, hand to his shoulder, where the shaft sprouted. He'd lost too much blood. Dizzy, he fell to his knees.

Faile stepped down off her stone and entered the clearing. Two women wearing trousers followed. They looked concerned, but Faile ignored their protests that she stay back. She walked right up to the Prophet, then slid her knife from her belt. It was a fine blade, with a cast hilt that showed a wolf's head. That was well. Looking at it, the Prophet remembered the day when he'd earned his own blade. The day his father had given it to him.

„Thank you for helping to assault Malden, Masema,” Faile said, stopping right in front of him. Then she reached up and rammed that knife into his heart. He fell backward, his own blood hot on his chest.

„Sometimes, a wife must do what her husband cannot,” he heard Faile tell her women as his eyes fluttered, trying to close. "It is a dark thing we did this day, but necessary. Let no one speak of it to my husband. He must never know.”

Her voice grew distant. The Prophet fell.

Masema. That had been his name. He'd earned his sword on his fifteenth birthday. His father had been so proud.

It's over, then, he thought, unable to keep his eyes open. He closed them, falling as if through an endless void. *Did I do well, Father, or did I fail?*

There was no answer. And he joined with the void, tumbling into an endless sea of blackness.