

# **The Eye of the World**

**Robert Jordan**

**Book One of The Wheel Of Time**

## PROLOGUE - Dragonmount

The palace still shook occasionally as the earth rumbled in memory, groaned as if it would deny what had happened. Bars of sunlight cast through rents in the walls made motes of dust glitter where they yet hung in the air. Scorch-marks marred the walls, the floors, the ceilings. Broad black smears crossed the blistered paints and gilt of once-bright murals, soot overlaying crumbling friezes of men and animals which seemed to have attempted to walk before the madness grew quiet. The dead lay everywhere, men and women and children, struck down in attempted flight by the lightnings that had flashed down every corridor, or seized by the fires that had stalked them, or sunken into stone of the palace, the stones that had flowed and sought, almost alive, before stillness came again. In odd counterpoint, colorful tapestries and paintings, masterworks all, hung undisturbed except where bulging walls had pushed them awry. Finely carved furnishings, inlaid with ivory and gold, stood untouched except where rippling floors had toppled them. The mind-twisting had struck at the core, ignoring peripheral things.

Lews Therin Telamon wandered the palace, deftly keeping his balance when the earth heaved. "Ilyena! My love, where are you?" The edge of his pale gray cloak trailed through blood as he stepped across the body of a woman, her golden-haired beauty marred by the horror of her last moments, her still-open eyes frozen in disbelief. "Where are you, my wife? Where is everyone hiding?"

His eyes caught his own reflection in a mirror hanging askew from bubbled marble. His clothes had been regal once, in gray and scarlet and gold; now the finely-woven cloth, brought by merchants from across the World Sea, was torn and dirty, thick with the same dust that covered his hair and skin. For a moment he fingered the symbol on his cloak, a circle half white and half black, the colors separated by a sinuous line. It meant something, that symbol. But the embroidered circle could not hold his attention long. He gazed at his own image with as much wonder. A tall man just into his middle years, handsome once, but now with hair already more white than brown and a face lined by strain and worry, dark eyes that had seen too much. Lews Therin began to chuckle, then threw back his head; his laughter echoed down the lifeless halls.

"Ilyena, my love! Come to me, my wife. You must see this."

Behind him the air rippled, shimmered, solidified into a man who looked around, his mouth twisting briefly with distaste. Not so tall as Lews Therin, he was clothed all in black, save for the snow-white lace at his throat and the

silverwork on the turned-down tops of his thigh-high boots. He stepped carefully, handling his cloak fastidiously to avoid brushing the dead. The floor trembled with aftershocks, but his attention was fixed on the man staring into the mirror and laughing.

"Lord of the Morning," he said, "I have come for you."

The laughter cut off as if it had never been, and Lews Therin turned, seeming unsurprised. "Ah, a guest. Have you the Voice, stranger? It will soon be time for the Singing, and here all are welcome to take part. Ilyena, my love, we have a guest. Ilyena, where are you?"

The black-clad man's eyes widened, darted to the body of the golden-haired woman, then back to Lews Therin. "Shai'tan take you, does the taint already have you so far in its grip?"

"That name. Shai—" Lews Therin shuddered and raised a hand as though to ward off something. "You mustn't say that name. It is dangerous."

"So you remember that much, at least. Dangerous for you, fool, not for me. What else do you remember? Remember, you Light-blinded idiot! I will not let it end with you swaddled in unawareness! Remember!"

For a moment Lews Therin stared at his raised hand, fascinated by the patterns of grime. Then he wiped his hand on his even dirtier coat and turned his attention back to the other man. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The black-clad man drew himself up arrogantly. "Once I was called Elan Morin Tedronai, but now—"

"Betrayed of Hope." It was a whisper from Lews Therin. Memory stirred, but he turned his head, shying away from it.

"So you do remember some things. Yes, Betrayed of Hope. So have men named me, just as they named you Dragon, but unlike you I embrace the name. They gave me the name to revile me, but I will yet make them kneel and worship it. What will you do with your name? After this day, men will call you Kinslayer. What will you do with that?"

Lews Therin frowned down the ruined hall. "Ilyena should be here to offer a guest welcome," he murmured absently, then raised his voice. "Ilyena, where

are you?" The floor shook; the golden-haired woman's body shifted as if in answer to his call. His eyes did not see her.

Elan Morin grimaced. "Look at you," he said scornfully. "Once you stood first among the Servants. Once you wore the Ring of Tamyrlin, and sat in the High Seat. Once you summoned the Nine Rods of Dominion. Now look at you! A pitiful, shattered wretch. But it is not enough. You humbled me in the Hall of Servants. You defeated me at the Gates of Paaran Disen. But I am the greater, now. I will not let you die without knowing that. When you die, your last thought will be the full knowledge of your defeat, of how complete and utter it is. If I let you die at all."

"I cannot imagine what is keeping Ilyena. She will give me the rough side of her tongue if she thinks I have been hiding a guest from her. I hope you enjoy conversation, for she surely does. Be forewarned. Ilyena will ask you so many questions you may end up telling her everything you know."

Tossing back his black cloak, Elan Morin flexed his hands. "A pity for you," he mused, "that one of your Sisters is not here. I was never very skilled at Healing, and I follow a different power now. But even one of them could only give you a few lucid minutes, if you did not destroy her first. What I can do will serve as well, for my purposes." His sudden smile was cruel. "But I fear Shai'tan's healing is different from the sort you know. Be healed, Lews Therin!" He extended his hands, and the light dimmed as if a shadow had been laid across the sun.

Pain blazed in Lews Therin, and he screamed, a scream that came from his depths, a scream he could not stop. Fire seared his marrow; acid rushed along his veins. He toppled backwards, crashing to the marble floor; his head struck the stone and rebounded. His heart pounded, trying to beat its way out of his chest, and every pulse gushed new flame through him. Helplessly he convulsed, thrashing, his skull a sphere of purest agony on the point of bursting. His hoarse screams reverberated through the palace.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the pain receded. The outflowing seemed to take a thousand years and left him twitching weakly, sucking breath through a raw throat. Another thousand years seemed to pass before he could manage to heave himself over, muscles like jellyfish, and shakily push himself up on hands and knees. His eyes fell on the golden-haired woman, and the scream that was ripped out of him dwarfed every sound he had made before. Tottering, almost falling, he scrabbled brokenly across the floor to her. It took every bit of his

strength to pull her up into his arms. His hands shook as he smoothed her hair back from her staring face.

"Ilyena! Light help me, Ilyena!" His body curved around hers protectively, his sobs the full-throated cries of a man who had nothing left to live for. "Ilyena, no! No!"

"You can have her back, Kinslayer. The Great Lord of the Dark can make her live again, if you will serve him. If you will serve me."

Lews Therin raised his head, and the black-clad man took an involuntary step back from that gaze. "Ten years, Betrayer," Lews Therin said softly, the soft sound of steel being bared. "Ten years your foul master has wracked the world. And now this. I will. . . ."

"Ten years! You pitiful fool! This war has not lasted ten years, but since the beginning of time. You and I have fought a thousand battles with the turning of the Wheel, a thousand times a thousand, and we will fight until time dies and the Shadow is triumphant!" He finished in a shout, with a raised fist, and it was Lews Therin's turn to pull back, breath catching at the glow in the Betrayer's eyes.

Carefully Lews Therin laid Ilyena down, fingers gently brushing her hair. Tears blurred his vision as he stood, but his voice was iced iron. "For what else you have done, there can be no forgiveness, Betrayer, but for Ilyena's death I will destroy you beyond anything your master can repair. Prepare to—"

"Remember, you fool! Remember your futile attack on the Great Lord of the Dark! Remember his counterstroke! Remember! Even now the Hundred Companions are tearing the world apart, and every day a hundred men more join them. What hand slew Ilyena Sunhair, Kinslayer? Not mine. Not mine. What hand struck down every life that bore a drop of your blood, everyone who loved you, everyone you loved? Not mine, Kinslayer. Not mine. Remember, and know the price of opposing Shai'tan!"

Sudden sweat made tracks down Lews Therin's face through the dust and dirt. He remembered, a cloudy memory like a dream of a dream, but he knew it true.

His howl beat at the walls, the howl of a man who had discovered his soul damned by his own hand, and he clawed at his face as if to tear away the sight of what he had done. Everywhere he looked his eyes found the dead. Torn they were, or broken or burned, or half-consumed by stone. Everywhere lay lifeless

faces he knew, faces he loved. Old servants and friends of his childhood, faithful companions through the long years of battle. And his children. His own sons and daughters, sprawled like broken dolls, play stilled forever. All slain by his hand. His children's faces accused him, blank eyes asking why, and his tears were no answer. The Betrayer's laughter flogged him, drowned out his howls. He could not bear the faces, the pain. He could not bear to remain any longer. Desperately he reached out to the True Source, to tainted saidin, and he Traveled.

The land around him was flat and empty. A river flowed nearby, straight and broad, but he could sense there were no people within a hundred leagues. He was alone, as alone as a man could be while still alive, yet he could not escape memory. The eyes pursued him through the endless caverns of his mind. He could not hide from them. His children's eyes. Ilyena's eyes. Tears glistened on his cheeks as he turned his face to the sky.

"Light, forgive me!" He did not believe it could come, forgiveness. Not for what he had done. But he shouted to the sky anyway, begged for what he could not believe he could receive. "Light, forgive me!"

He was still touching saidin, the male half of the power that drove the universe, that turned the Wheel of Time, and he could feel the oily taint fouling its surface, the taint of the Shadow's counterstroke, the taint that doomed the world. Because of him. Because in his pride he had believed that men could match the Creator, could mend what the Creator had made and they had broken. In his pride he had believed.

He drew on the True Source deeply, and still more deeply, like a man dying of thirst. Quickly he had drawn more of the One Power than he could channel unaided; his skin felt as if it were aflame. Straining, he forced himself to draw more, tried to draw it all.

"Light, forgive me! Ilyena!"

The air turned to fire, the fire to light liquefied. The bolt that struck from the heavens would have seared and blinded any eye that glimpsed it, even for an instant. From the heavens it came, blazed through Lews Therin Telamon, bored into the bowels of the earth. Stone turned to vapor at its touch. The earth thrashed and quivered like a living thing in agony. Only a heartbeat did the shining bar exist, connecting ground and sky, but even after it vanished the earth yet heaved like the sea in a storm. Molten rock fountained five hundred

feet into the air, and the groaning ground rose, thrusting the burning spray ever upward, ever higher. From north and south, from east and west, the wind howled in, snapping trees like twigs, shrieking and blowing as if to aid the growing mountain ever skyward. Ever skyward.

At last the wind died, the earth stilled to trembling mutters. Of Lewis Therin Telamon, no sign remained. Where he had stood a mountain now rose miles into the sky, molten lava still gushing from its broken peak. The broad, straight river had been pushed into a curve away from the mountain, and there it split to form a long island in its midst. The shadow of the mountain almost reached the island; it lay dark across the land like the ominous hand of prophecy. For a time the dull, protesting rumbles of the earth were the only sound.

On the island, the air shimmered and coalesced. The black-clad man stood staring at the fiery mountain rising out of the plain. His face twisted in rage and contempt. "You cannot escape so easily, Dragon. It is not done between us. It will not be done until the end of time."

Then he was gone, and the mountain and the island stood alone. Waiting.

And the Shadow fell upon the Land, and the World was riven stone from stone. The oceans fled, and the mountains were swallowed up, and the nations were scattered to the eight corners of the World. The moon was as blood, and the sun was as ashes. The seas boiled, and the living envied the dead. All was shattered, and all but memory lost, and one memory above all others, of him who brought the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. And him they named Dragon.

(From Aleth nin Taerin alta Camora, The Breaking of the World.

Author unknown, the Fourth Age)

And it came to pass in those days, as it had come before and would come again, that the Dark lay heavy on the land and weighed down the hearts of men, and the green things failed, and hope died. And men cried out to the Creator, saying, O Light of the Heavens, Light of the World, let the Promised One be

born of the mountain, according to the prophecies, as he was in ages past and will be in ages to come. Let the Prince of the Morning sing to the land that green things will grow and the valleys give forth lambs. Let the arm of the Lord of the Dawn shelter us from the Dark, and the great sword of justice defend us. Let the Dragon ride again on the winds of time.

(From Charal Drianaan te Calamon, The Cycle of the Dragon.

Author unknown, the Fourth Age)



## CHAPTER 1 - An Empty Road

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 in the Mountains of Mist. 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.

Born below the ever cloud-capped peaks that gave the mountains their name, the wind blew east, out across the Sand Hills, once the shore of a great ocean, before the Breaking of the World. Down it flailed into the Two Rivers, into the tangled forest called the Westwood, and beat at two men walking with a cart and horse down the rock-strewn track called the Quarry Road. For all that spring should have come a good month since, the wind carried an icy chill as if it would rather bear snow.

Gusts plastered Rand al'Thor's cloak to his back, whipped the earth-colored wool around his legs, then streamed it out behind him. He wished his coat were heavier, or that he had worn an extra shirt. Half the time when he tried to tug the cloak back around him it caught on the quiver swinging at his hip. Trying to hold the cloak one-handed did not do much good anyway; he had his bow in the other, an arrow nocked and ready to draw.

As a particularly strong blast tugged the cloak out of his hand, he glanced at his father over the back of the shaggy brown mare. He felt a little foolish about wanting to reassure himself that Tam was still there, but it was that kind of day. The wind howled when it rose, but aside from that, quiet lay heavy on the land. The soft creak of the axle sounded loud by comparison. No birds sang in the forest, no squirrels chattered from a branch. Not that he expected them, really; not this spring.

Only trees that kept leaf or needle through the winter had any green about them. Snarls of last year's bramble spread brown webs over stone outcrops under the trees. Nettles numbered most among the few weeds; the rest were the sorts with sharp burrs or thorns, or stinkweed, which left a rank smell on the unwary boot that crushed it. Scattered white patches of snow still dotted the ground where tight clumps of trees kept deep shade. Where sunlight did reach, it held neither strength nor warmth. The pale sun sat above the trees to the

east, but its light was crisply dark, as if mixed with shadow. It was an awkward morning, made for unpleasant thoughts.

Without thinking he touched the nock of the arrow; it was ready to draw to his cheek in one smooth movement, the way Tam had taught him. Winter had been bad enough on the farms, worse than even the oldest folk remembered, but it must have been harsher still in the mountains, if the number of wolves driven down into the Two Rivers was any guide. Wolves raided the sheep pens and chewed their way into barns to get the cattle and horses. Bears had been after the sheep, too, where a bear had not been seen in years. It was no longer safe to be out after dark. Men were the prey as often as sheep, and the sun did not always have to be down.

Tam was taking steady strides on the other side of Bela, using his spear as a walking staff, ignoring the wind that made his brown cloak flap like a banner. Now and again he touched the mare's flank lightly, to remind her to keep moving. With his thick chest and broad face, he was a pillar of reality in that morning, like a stone in the middle of a drifting dream. His sun-roughened cheeks might be lined and his hair have only a sprinkling of black among the gray, but there was a solidness to him, as though a flood could wash around him without uprooting his feet. He stumped down the road now impassively. Wolves and bears were all very well, his manner said, things that any man who kept sheep must be aware of, but they had best not try to stop Tam al'Thor getting to Emond's Field.

With a guilty start Rand returned to watching his side of the road, Tam's matter-of-factness reminding him of his task. He was a head taller than his father, taller than anyone else in the district, and had little of Tam in him physically, except perhaps for a breadth of shoulder. Gray eyes and the reddish tinge to his hair came from his mother, so Tam said. She had been an outlander, and Rand remembered little of her aside from a smiling face, though he did put flowers on her grave every year, at Bel Tine, in the spring, and at Sunday, in the summer.

Two small casks of Tam's apple brandy rested in the lurching cart, and eight larger barrels of apple cider, only slightly hard after a winter's curing. Tam delivered the same every year to the Winespring Inn for use during Bel Tine, and he had declared that it would take more than wolves or a cold wind to stop him this spring. Even so they had not been to the village for weeks. Not even Tam traveled much these days. But Tam had given his word about the brandy and cider, even if he had waited to make delivery until the day before Festival.

Keeping his word was important to Tam. Rand was just glad to get away from the farm, almost as glad as about the coming of Bel Tine.

As Rand watched his side of the road, the feeling grew in him that he was being watched. For a while he tried to shrug it off. Nothing moved or made a sound among the trees, except the wind. But the feeling not only persisted, it grew stronger. The hairs on his arms stirred; his skin prickled as if it itched on the inside.

He shifted his bow irritably to rub at his arms, and told himself to stop letting fancies take him. There was nothing in the woods on his side of the road, and Tam would have spoken if there had been anything on the other. He glanced over his shoulder . . . and blinked. Not more than twenty spans back down the road a cloaked figure on horseback followed them, horse and rider alike black, dull and ungleaming.

It was more habit than anything else that kept him walking backward alongside the cart even while he looked.

The rider's cloak covered him to his boot tops, the cowl tugged well forward so no part of him showed. Vaguely Rand thought there was something odd about the horseman, but it was the shadowed opening of the hood that fascinated him. He could see only the vaguest outlines of a face, but he had the feeling he was looking right into the rider's eyes. And he could not look away. Queasiness settled in his stomach. There was only shadow to see in the hood, but he felt hatred as sharply as if he could see a snarling face, hatred for everything that lived. Hatred for him most of all, for him above all things.

Abruptly a stone caught his heel and he stumbled, breaking his eyes away from the dark horseman. His bow dropped to the road, and only an outthrust hand grabbing Bela's harness saved him from falling flat on his back. With a startled snort the mare stopped, twisting her head to see what had caught her.

Tam frowned over Bela's back at him. "Are you all right, lad?"

"A rider," Rand said breathlessly, pulling himself upright. "A stranger, following us."

"Where?" The older man lifted his broad-bladed spear and peered back warily.

"There, down the. . . ." Rand's words trailed off as he turned to point. The road behind was empty. Disbelieving, he stared into the forest on both sides of the road. Bare-branched trees offered no hiding place, but there was not a glimmer of horse or horseman. He met his father's questioning gaze. "He was there. A man in a black cloak, on a black horse."

"I wouldn't doubt your word, lad, but where has he gone?"

"I don't know. But he was there." He snatched up the fallen bow and arrow, hastily checked the fletching before renocking, and half drew before letting the bowstring relax. There was nothing to aim at. "He was."

Tam shook his grizzled head. "If you say so, lad. Come on, then. A horse leaves hoofprints, even on this ground." He started toward the rear of the cart, his cloak whipping in the wind. "If we find them, we'll know for a fact he was there. If not . . . well, these are days to make a man think he's seeing things."

Abruptly Rand realized what had been odd about the horseman, aside from his being there at all. The wind that beat at Tam and him had not so much as shifted a fold of that black cloak. His mouth was suddenly dry. He must have imagined it. His father was right; this was a morning to prickle a man's imagination. But he did not believe it. Only, how did he tell his father that the man who had apparently vanished into air wore a cloak the wind did not touch?

With a worried frown he peered into the woods around them; it looked different than it ever had before. Almost since he was old enough to walk, he had run loose in the forest. The ponds and streams of the Waterwood, beyond the last farms east of Emond's Field, were where he had learned to swim. He had explored into the Sand Hills—which many in the Two Rivers said was bad luck—and once he had even gone to the very foot of the Mountains of Mist, him and his closest friends, Mat Cauthon and Perrin Aybara. That was a lot further afield than most people in Emond's Field ever went; to them a journey to the next village, up to Watch Hill or down to Deven Ride, was a big event. Nowhere in all of that had he found a place that made him afraid. Today, though, the Westwood was not the place he remembered. A man who could disappear so suddenly could reappear just as suddenly, maybe even right beside them.

"No, father, there's no need." When Tam stopped in surprise, Rand covered his flush by tugging at the hood of his cloak. "You're probably right. No point looking for what isn't there, not when we can use the time getting on to the village and out of this wind."

"I could do with a pipe," Tam said slowly, "and a mug of ale where it's warm." Abruptly he gave a broad grin. "And I expect you're eager to see Egwene."

Rand managed a weak smile. Of all things he might want to think about right then, the Mayor's daughter was far down the list. He did not need any more confusion. For the past year she had been making him increasingly jittery whenever they were together. Worse, she did not even seem to be aware of it. No, he certainly did not want to add Egwene to his thoughts.

He was hoping his father had not noticed he was afraid when Tam said, "Remember the flame, lad, and the void."

It was an odd thing Tam had taught him. Concentrate on a single flame and feed all your passions into it—fear, hate, anger—until your mind became empty. Become one with the void, Tam said, and you could do anything. Nobody else in Emond's Field talked that way. But Tam won the archery competition at Bel Tine every year with his flame and his void. Rand thought he might have a chance at placing this year himself, if he could manage to hold onto the void. For Tam to bring it up now meant he had noticed, but he said nothing more about it.

Tam clucked Bela into motion once more, and they resumed their journey, the older man striding along as if nothing untoward had happened and nothing untoward could. Rand wished he could imitate him. He tried forming the emptiness in his mind, but it kept slipping away into images of the black-cloaked horseman.

He wanted to believe that Tam was right, that the rider had just been his imagination, but he could remember that feeling of hatred too well. There had been someone. And that someone had meant him harm. He did not stop looking back until the high-peaked, thatched roofs of Emond's Field surrounded him.

The village lay close onto the Westwood, the forest gradually thinning until the last few trees stood actually among the stout frame houses. The land sloped gently down to the east. Though not without patches of woods, farms and hedge-bordered fields and pastures quilted the land beyond the village all the way to the Waterwood and its tangle of streams and ponds. The land to the west was just as fertile, and the pastures there lush in most years, but only a handful of farms could be found in the Westwood. Even those few dwindled to none miles short of the Sand Hills, not to mention the Mountains of Mist, which rose above the Westwood treetops, distant but in plain sight from Emond's Field.

Some said the land was too rocky, as if there were not rocks everywhere in the Two Rivers, and others said it was hard-luck land. A few muttered that there was no point getting any closer to the mountains than needs be. Whatever the reasons, only the hardest men farmed in the Westwood.

Small children and dogs dodged around the cart in whooping swarms once it passed the first row of houses. Bela plodded on patiently, ignoring the yelling youngsters who tumbled under her nose, playing tag and rolling hoops. In the last months there had been little of play or laughter from the children; even when the weather had slackened enough to let children out, fear of wolves kept them in. It seemed the approach of Bel Tine had taught them how to play again.

Festival had affected the adults as well. Broad shutters were thrown back, and in almost every house the goodwife stood in a window, apron tied about her and long-braided hair done up in a kerchief, shaking sheets or hanging mattresses over the windowsills. Whether or not leaves had appeared on the trees, no woman would let Bel Tine come before her spring cleaning was done. In every yard rugs hung from stretched lines, and children who had not been quick enough to run free in the streets instead vented their frustration on the carpets with wicker beaters. On roof after roof the goodman of the house clambered about, checking the thatch to see if the winter's damage meant calling on old Cenn Buie, the thatcher.

Several times Tam paused to engage one man or another in brief conversation. Since he and Rand had not been off the farm for weeks, everyone wanted to catch up on how things were out that way. Few Westwood men had been in. Tam spoke of damage from winter storms, each one worse than the one before, and stillborn lambs, of brown fields where crops should be sprouting and pastures greening, of ravens flocking in where songbirds had come in years before. Grim talk, with preparations for Bel Tine going on all around them, and much shaking of heads. It was the same on all sides.

Most of the men rolled their shoulders and said, "Well, we'll survive, the Light willing." Some grinned and added, "And if the Light doesn't will, we'll still survive."

That was the way of most Two Rivers people. People who had to watch the hail beat their crops or the wolves take their lambs, and start over, no matter how many years it happened, did not give up easily. Most of those who did were long since gone.

Tam would not have stopped for Wit Congar if the man had not come out into the street so they had to halt or let Bela run over him. The Congars—and the Coplins; the two families were so intermarried no one really knew where one family let off and the other began—were known from Watch Hill to Deven Ride, and maybe as far as Taren Ferry, as complainers and troublemakers.

“I have to get this to Bran al’Vere, Wit,” Tam said, nodding to the barrels in the cart, but the scrawny man held his ground with a sour expression on his face. He had been sprawled on his front steps, not up on his roof, though the thatch looked as if it badly needed Master Buie’s attention. He never seemed ready to start over, or to finish what he started the first time. Most of the Coplins and Congars were like that, those who were not worse.

“What are we going to do about Nynaeve, al’Thor?” Congar demanded. “We can’t have a Wisdom like that for Emond’s Field.”

Tam sighed heavily. “It’s not our place, Wit. The Wisdom is women’s business.”

“Well, we’d better do something, al’Thor. She said we’d have a mild winter. And a good harvest. Now you ask her what she hears on the wind, and she just scowls at you and stomps off.”

“If you asked her the way you usually do, Wit,” Tam said patiently, “you’re lucky she didn’t thump you with that stick she carries. Now if you don’t mind, this brandy—”

“Nynaeve al’Meara is just too young to be Wisdom, al’Thor. If the Women’s Circle won’t do something, then the Village Council has to.”

“What business of yours is the Wisdom, Wit Congar?” roared a woman’s voice. Wit flinched as his wife marched out of the house. Daise Congar was twice as wide as Wit, a hard-faced woman without an ounce of fat on her. She glared at him with her fists on her hips. “You try meddling in Women’s Circle business, and see how you like eating your own cooking. Which you won’t do in my kitchen. And washing your own clothes and making your own bed. Which won’t be under my roof.”

“But, Daise,” Wit whined, “I was just. . . .”

“If you’ll pardon me, Daise,” Tam said. “Wit. The Light shine on you both.” He got Bela moving again, leading her around the scrawny fellow. Daise was

concentrating on her husband now, but any minute she could realize whom it was Wit had been talking to.

That was why they had not accepted any of the invitations to stop for a bite to eat or something hot to drink. When they saw Tam, the goodwives of Emond's Field went on point like hounds spotting a rabbit. There was not a one of them who did not know just the perfect wife for a widower with a good farm, even if it was in the Westwood.

Rand stepped along just as quickly as Tam, perhaps even more so. He was sometimes cornered when Tam was not around, with no way to escape outside of rudeness. Herded onto a stool by the kitchen fire, he would be fed pastries or honeycakes or meatpies. And always the goodwife's eyes weighed and measured him as neatly as any merchant's scales and tapes while she told him that what he was eating was not nearly so good as her widowed sister's cooking, or her next-to-eldest cousin's. Tam was certainly not getting any younger, she would say. It was good that he had loved his wife so—it boded well for the next woman in his life—but he had mourned long enough. Tam needed a good woman. It was a simple fact, she would say, or something very close, that a man just could not do without a woman to take care of him and keep him out of trouble. Worst of all were those who paused thoughtfully at about that point, then asked with elaborate casualness exactly how old he was now.

Like most Two Rivers folk, Rand had a strong stubborn streak. Outsiders sometimes said it was the prime trait of people in the Two Rivers, that they could give mules lessons and teach stones. The goodwives were fine and kindly women for the most part, but he hated being pushed into anything, and they made him feel as if he were being prodded with sticks. So he walked fast, and wished Tam would hurry Bela along.

Soon the street opened onto the Green, a broad expanse in the middle of the village. Usually covered with thick grass, the Green this spring showed only a few fresh patches among the yellowish brown of dead grass and the black of bare earth. A double handful of geese waddled about, beadily eyeing the ground but not finding anything worth pecking, and someone had tethered a milkcow to crop the sparse growth.

Toward the west end of the Green, the Winespring itself gushed out of a low stone outcrop in a flow that never failed, a flow strong enough to knock a man down and sweet enough to justify its name a dozen times over. From the spring the rapidly widening Winespring Water ran swiftly off to the east, willows



dotting its banks all the way to Master Thane's mill and beyond, until it split into dozens of streams in the swampy depths of the Waterwood. Two low, railed footbridges crossed the clear stream at the Green, and one bridge wider than the others and stout enough to bear wagons. The Wagon Bridge marked where the North Road, coming down from Taren Ferry and Watch Hill, became the Old Road, leading to Deven Ride. Outsiders sometimes found it funny that the road had one name to the north and another to the south, but that was the way it had always been, as far as anyone in Emond's Field knew, and that was that. It was a good enough reason for Two Rivers people.

On the far side of the bridges, the mounds were already building for the Bel Tine fires, three careful stacks of logs almost as big as houses. They had to be on cleared dirt, of course, not on the Green, even sparse as it was. What of Festival did not take place around the fires would happen on the Green.

Near the Winespring a score of older women sang softly as they erected the Spring Pole. Shorn of its branches, the straight, slender trunk of a fir tree stood ten feet high even in the hole they had dug for it. A knot of girls too young to wear their hair braided sat cross-legged and watched enviously, occasionally singing snatches of the song the women sang.

Tam clucked at Bela as if to make her speed her pace, though she ignored it, and Rand studiously kept his eyes from what the women were doing. In the morning the men would pretend to be surprised to find the Pole, then at noon the unmarried women would dance the Pole, entwining it with long, colored ribbons while the unmarried men sang. No one knew when the custom began or why—it was another thing that was the way it had always been—but it was an excuse to sing and dance, and nobody in the Two Rivers needed much excuse for that.

The whole day of Bel Tine would be taken up with singing and dancing and feasting, with time out for footraces, and contests in almost everything. Prizes would be given not only in archery, but for the best with the sling, and the quarterstaff. There would be contests at solving riddles and puzzles, at the rope tug, and lifting and tossing weights, prizes for the best singer, the best dancer and the best fiddle player, for the quickest to shear a sheep, even the best at bowls, and at darts.

Bel Tine was supposed to come when spring had well and truly arrived, the first lambs born and the first crop up. Even with the cold hanging on, though, no one had any idea of putting it off. Everyone could use a little singing and dancing.

And to top everything, if the rumors could be believed, a grand display of fireworks was planned for the Green—if the first peddler of the year appeared in time, of course. That had been causing considerable talk; it was ten years since the last such display, and that was still talked about.

The Winespring Inn stood at the east end of the Green, hard beside the Wagon Bridge. The first floor of the inn was river rock, though the foundation was of older stone some said came from the mountains. The whitewashed second story—where Brandelwyn al’Vere, the innkeeper and Mayor of Emond’s Field for the past twenty years, lived in the back with his wife and daughters—juttied out over the lower floor all the way around. Red roof tile, the only such roof in the village, glittered in the weak sunlight, and smoke drifted from three of the inn’s dozen tall chimneys.

At the south end of the inn, away from the stream, stretched the remains of a much larger stone foundation, once part of the inn—or so it was said. A huge oak grew in the middle of it now, with a bole thirty paces around and spreading branches as thick as a man. In the summer, Bran al’Vere set tables and benches under those branches, shady with leaves then, where people could enjoy a cup and a cooling breeze while they talked or perhaps set out a board for a game of stones.

“Here we are, lad.” Tam reached for Bela’s harness, but she stopped in front of the inn before his hand touched leather. “Knows the way better than I do,” he chuckled.

As the last creak of the axle faded, Bran al’Vere appeared from the inn, seeming as always to step too lightly for a man of his girth, nearly double that of anyone else in the village. A smile split his round face, which was topped by a sparse fringe of gray hair. The innkeeper was in his shirtsleeves despite the chill, with a spotless white apron wrapped around him. A silver medallion in the form of a set of balance scales hung on his chest.

The medallion, along with the full-size set of scales used to weigh the coins of the merchants who came down from Baerlon for wool or tabac, was the symbol of the Mayor’s office. Bran only wore it for dealing with the merchants and for festival feastdays, and weddings. He had it on a day early now, but that night was Winternight, the night before Bel Tine, when every one would visit back and forth almost the whole night long exchanging small gifts, having a bite to eat and a touch to drink at every house. After the winter, Rand thought, he probably considers Winternight excuse enough not to wait until tomorrow.

"Tam," the Mayor shouted as he hurried toward them. "The Light shine on me, it's good to see you at last. And you, Rand. How are you, my boy?"

"Fine, Master al'Vere," Rand said. "And you, sir?" But Bran's attention was already back on Tam.

"I was almost beginning to think you wouldn't be bringing your brandy this year. You've never waited so late before."

"I've no liking for leaving the farm these days, Bran," Tam replied. "Not with the wolves the way they are. And the weather."

Bran harrumphed. "I could wish somebody wanted to talk about something besides the weather. Everyone complains about it, and folk who should know better expect me to set it right. I've just spent twenty minutes explaining to Mistress al'Donel that I can do nothing about the storks. Though what she expected me to do. . . ." He shook his head.

"An ill omen," a scratchy voice announced, "no storks nesting on the rooftops at Bel Tine." Cenn Buie, as gnarled and dark as an old root, marched up to Tam and Bran and leaned on his walking staff, near as tall as he was and just as gnarled. He tried to fix both men at once with a beady eye. "There's worse to come, you mark my words."

"Have you become a soothsayer, then, interpreting omens?" Tam asked dryly. "Or do you listen to the wind, like a Wisdom? There's certainly enough of it. Some originating not far from here."

"Mock if you will," Cenn muttered, "but if it doesn't warm enough for crops to sprout soon, more than one root cellar will come up empty before there's a harvest. By next winter there may be nothing left alive in the Two Rivers but wolves and ravens. If it is next winter at all. Maybe it will still be this winter."

"Now what is that supposed to mean?" Bran said sharply.

Cenn gave them a sour look. "I've not much good to say about Nynaeve al'Meara. You know that. For one thing, she's too young to—No matter. The Women's Circle seems to object to the Village Council even talking about their business, though they interfere in ours whenever they want to, which is most of the time, or so it seems to—"

"Cenn," Tam broke in, "is there a point to this?"

"This is the point, al'Thor. Ask the Wisdom when the winter will end, and she walks away. Maybe she doesn't want to tell us what she hears on the wind. Maybe what she hears is that the winter won't end. Maybe it's just going to go on being winter until the Wheel turns and the Age ends. There's your point."

"Maybe sheep will fly," Tam retorted, and Bran threw up his hands.

"The Light protect me from fools. You sitting on the Village Council, Cenn, and now you're spreading that Coplin talk. Well, you listen to me. We have enough problems without. . . ."

A quick tug at Rand's sleeve and a voice pitched low, for his ear alone, distracted him from the older men's talk. "Come on, Rand, while they're arguing. Before they put you to work."

Rand glanced down, and had to grin. Mat Cauthon crouched beside the cart so Tam and Bran and Cenn could not see him, his wiry body contorted like a stork trying to bend itself double.

Mat's brown eyes twinkled with mischief, as usual. "Dav and I caught a big old badger, all grouchy at being pulled out of his den. We're going to let it loose on the Green and watch the girls run."

Rand's smile broadened; it did not sound as much like fun to him as it would have a year or two back, but Mat never seemed to grow up. He took a quick look at his father—the men had their heads together still, all three talking at once—then lowered his own voice. "I promised to unload the cider. I can meet you later, though."

Mat rolled his eyes skyward. "Toting barrels! Burn me, I'd rather play stones with my baby sister. Well, I know of better things than a badger. We have strangers in the Two Rivers. Last evening—"

For an instant Rand stopped breathing. "A man on horseback?" he asked intently. "A man in a black cloak, on a black horse? And his cloak doesn't move in the wind?"

Mat swallowed his grin, and his voice dropped to an even hoarser whisper. "You saw him, too? I thought I was the only one. Don't laugh, Rand, but he scared me."

"I'm not laughing. He scared me, too. I could swear he hated me, that he wanted to kill me." Rand shivered. Until that day he had never thought of anyone wanting to kill him, really wanting to kill him. That sort of thing just did not happen in the Two Rivers. A fistfight, maybe, or a wrestling match, but not killing.

"I don't know about hating, Rand, but he was scary enough anyway. All he did was sit on his horse looking at me, just outside the village, but I've never been so frightened in my life. Well, I looked away, just for a moment—it wasn't easy, mind you—then when I looked back he'd vanished. Blood and ashes! Three days, it's been, and I can hardly stop thinking about him. I keep looking over my shoulder." Mat attempted a laugh that came out as a croak. "Funny how being scared takes you. You think strange things. I actually thought—just for a minute, mind—it might be the Dark One." He tried another laugh, but no sound at all came out this time.

Rand took a deep breath. As much to remind himself as for any other reason, he said by rote, "The Dark One and all of the Forsaken are bound in Shayol Ghul, beyond the Great Blight, bound by the Creator at the moment of Creation, bound until the end of time. The hand of the Creator shelters the world, and the Light shines on us all." He drew another breath and went on. "Besides, if he was free, what would the Shepherd of the Night be doing in the Two Rivers watching farmboys?"

"I don't know. But I do know that rider was . . . evil. Don't laugh. I'll take oath on it. Maybe it was the Dragon."

"You're just full of cheerful thoughts, aren't you?" Rand muttered. "You sound worse than Cenn."

"My mother always said the Forsaken would come for me if I didn't mend my ways. If I ever saw anybody who looked like Ishamael, or Aginor, it was him."

"Everybody's mother scared them with the Forsaken," Rand said dryly, "but most grow out of it. Why not the Shadowman, while you're about it?"

Mat glared at him. "I haven't been so scared since. . . . No, I've never been that scared, and I don't mind admitting it."

"Me, either. My father thinks I was jumping at shadows under the trees."

Mat nodded glumly and leaned back against the cart wheel. "So does my da. I told Dav, and Elam Dowtry. They've been watching like hawks ever since, but they haven't seen anything. Now Elam thinks I was trying to trick him. Dav thinks he's down from Taren Ferry—a sheepstealer, or a chickenthief. A chickenthief!" He lapsed into affronted silence.

"It's probably all foolishness anyway," Rand said finally. "Maybe he is just a sheepstealer." He tried to picture it, but it was like picturing a wolf taking the cat's place in front of a mouse hole.

"Well, I didn't like the way he looked at me. And neither did you, not if how you jumped at me is any guide. We ought to tell someone."

"We already have, Mat, both of us, and we weren't believed. Can you imagine trying to convince Master al'Vere about this fellow, without him seeing him? He'd send us off to Nynaeve to see if we were sick."

"There are two of us, now. Nobody could believe we both imagined it."

Rand rubbed the top of his head briskly, wondering what to say. Mat was something of a byword around the village. Few people had escaped his pranks. Now his name came up whenever a washline dropped the laundry in the dirt or a loose saddle girth deposited a farmer in the road. Mat did not even have to be anywhere around. His support might be worse than none.

After a moment Rand said, "Your father would believe you put me up to it, and mine. . . ." He looked over the cart to where Tam and Bran and Cenn had been talking, and found himself staring his father in the eyes. The Mayor was still lecturing Cenn, who took it now in sullen silence.

"Good morning, Matrim," Tam said brightly, hefting one of the brandy casks up onto the side of the cart. "I see you've come to help Rand unload the cider. Good lad."

Mat leaped to his feet at the first word and began backing away. "Good morning to you, Master al'Thor. And to you, Master al'Vere. Master Buie. May the Light shine on you. My da sent me to—"

"No doubt he did," Tam said. "And no doubt, since you are a lad who does his chores right off, you've finished the task already. Well, the quicker you lads get the cider into Master al'Vere's cellar, the quicker you can see the gleeman."

"Gleeman!" Mat exclaimed, stopping dead in his footsteps, at the same instant that Rand asked, "When will he get here?"

Rand could remember only two gleemen coming into the Two Rivers in his whole life, and for one of those he had been young enough to sit on Tam's shoulders to watch. To have one there actually during Bel Tine, with his harp and his flute and his stories and all. . . . Emond's Field would still be talking about this Festival ten years off, even if there were not any fireworks.

"Foolishness," Cenn grumbled, but fell silent at a look from Bran that had all the weight of the Mayor's office in it.

Tam leaned against the side of the cart, using the brandy cask as a prop for his arm. "Yes, a gleeman, and already here. According to Master al'Vere, he's in a room in the inn right now."

"Arrived in the dead of night, he did." The innkeeper shook his head in disapproval. "Pounded on the front door till he woke the whole family. If not for Festival, I'd have told him to stable his own horse and sleep in the stall with it, gleeman or not. Imagine coming in the dark like that."

Rand stared wonderingly. No one traveled beyond the village by night, not these days, certainly not alone. The thatcher grumbled under his breath again, too low this time for Rand to understand more than a word or two. "Madman" and "unnatural."

"He doesn't wear a black cloak, does he?" Mat asked suddenly.

Bran's belly shook with his chuckle. "Black! His cloak is like every gleeman's cloak I've ever seen. More patches than cloak, and more colors than you can think of."

Rand startled himself by laughing out loud, a laugh of pure relief. The menacing black-clad rider as a gleeman was a ridiculous notion, but. . . . He clapped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment.

"You see, Tam," Bran said. "There's been little enough laughter in this village since winter came. Now even the gleeman's cloak brings a laugh. That alone is worth the expense of bringing him down from Baerlon."

"Say what you will," Cenn spoke up suddenly. "I still say it's a foolish waste of money. And those fireworks you all insisted on sending off for."

"So there are fireworks," Mat said, but Cenn went right on.

"They should have been here a month ago with the first peddler of the year, but there hasn't been a peddler, has there? If he doesn't come by tomorrow, what are we going to do with them? Hold another Festival just to set them off? That's if he even brings them, of course."

"Cenn"—Tam sighed—"you've as much trust as a Taren Ferry man."

"Where is he, then? Tell me that, al'Thor."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Mat demanded in an aggrieved voice. "The whole village would have had as much fun with the waiting as with the gleeman. Or almost, anyway. You can see how everybody's been over just a rumor of fireworks."

"I can see," Bran replied with a sidelong look at the thatcher. "And if I knew for sure how that rumor started . . . if I thought, for instance, that somebody had been complaining about how much things cost where people could hear him when the things are supposed to be secret. . . ."

Cenn cleared his throat. "My bones are too old for this wind. If you don't mind, I'll just see if Mistress al'Vere won't fix me some mulled wine to take the chill off. Mayor. Al'Thor." He was headed for the inn before he finished, and as the door swung shut behind him, Bran sighed.

"Sometimes I think Nynaeve is right about. . . . Well, that's not important now. You young fellows think for a minute. Everyone's excited about the fireworks, true, and that's only at a rumor. Think how they'll be if the peddler doesn't get



here in time, after all their anticipating. And with the weather the way it is, who knows when he will come. They'd be fifty times as excited about a gleeman."

"And feel fifty times as bad if he hadn't come," Rand said slowly. "Even Bel Tine might not do much for people's spirits after that."

"You have a head on your shoulders when you choose to use it," Bran said. "He'll follow you on the Village Council one day, Tam. Mark my words. He couldn't do much worse right now than someone I could name."

"None of this is unloading the cart," Tam said briskly, handing the first cask of brandy to the Mayor. "I want a warm fire, my pipe, and a mug of your good ale." He hoisted the second brandy cask onto his shoulder. "I'm sure Rand will thank you for your help, Matrim. Remember, the sooner the cider is in the cellar. . . ."

As Tam and Bran disappeared into the inn, Rand looked at his friend. "You don't have to help. Dav won't keep that badger long."

"Oh, why not?" Mat said resignedly. "Like your da said, the quicker it's in the cellar. . . ." Picking up one of the casks of cider in both arms, he hurried toward the inn in a half trot. "Maybe Egwene is around. Watching you stare at her like a poleaxed ox will be as good as a badger any day."

Rand paused in the act of putting his bow and quiver in the back of the cart. He really had managed to put Egwene out of his mind. That was unusual in itself. But she would likely be around the inn somewhere. There was not much chance he could avoid her. Of course, it had been weeks since he saw her last.

"Well?" Mat called from the front of the inn. "I didn't say I would do it by myself. You aren't on the Village Council yet."

With a start, Rand took up a cask and followed. Perhaps she would not be there after all. Oddly, that possibility did not make him feel any better.

## CHAPTER 2 - Strangers

When Rand and Mat carried the first barrels through the common room, Master al’Vere was already filling a pair of mugs with his best brown ale, his own make, from one of the casks racked against one wall. Scratch, the inn’s yellow cat, crouched atop it with his eyes closed and his tail wrapped around his feet. Tam stood in front of the big fireplace of river rock, thumbing a long-stemmed pipe full of tabac from a polished canister the innkeeper always kept on the plain stone mantel. The fireplace stretched half the length of the big, square room, with a lintel as high as a man’s shoulder, and the crackling blaze on the hearth vanquished the chill outside.

At that time of the busy day before Festival, Rand expected to find the common room empty except for Bran and his father and the cat, but four more members of the Village Council, including Cenn, sat in high-backed chairs in front of the fire, mugs in hand and blue-gray pipesmoke wreathing their heads. For once none of the stones boards were in use, and all of Bran’s books stood idle on the shelf opposite the fireplace. The men did not even talk, peering silently into their ale or tapping pipestems against their teeth in impatience, as they waited for Tam and Bran to join them.

Worry was not uncommon for the Village Council these days, not in Emond’s Field, and likely not in Watch Hill, or Deven Ride. Or even Taren Ferry, though who knew what Taren Ferry folk really thought about anything?

Only two of the men before the fire, Haral Luhhan, the blacksmith, and Jon Thane, the miller, so much as glanced at the boys as they entered. Master Luhhan, though, made it more than a glance. The blacksmith’s arms were as big as most men’s legs, roped with heavy muscle, and he still wore his long leather apron as if he had hurried to the meeting straight from the forge. His frown took them both in, then he straightened around in his chair deliberately, turning his attention back to an over-studious tamping of his pipe with a thick thumb.

Curious, Rand slowed, then barely bit back a yelp as Mat kicked his ankle. His friend nodded insistently toward the doorway at the back of the common room and hurried on without waiting. Limping slightly, Rand followed less quickly.

“What was that about?” he demanded as soon as he was in the hall that led to the kitchen. “You almost broke my—”

"It's old Luhhan," Mat said, peering past Rand's shoulder into the common room. "I think he suspects I was the one who—" He cut off abruptly as Mistress al'Vere bustled out of the kitchen, the aroma of fresh-baked bread wafting ahead of her.

The tray in her hands carried some of the crusty loaves for which she was famous around Emond's Field, as well as plates of pickles and cheese. The food reminded Rand abruptly that he had eaten only an end of bread before leaving the farm that morning. His stomach gave an embarrassing rumble.

A slender woman, with her thick braid of graying hair pulled over one shoulder, Mistress al'Vere smiled in a motherly fashion that took in both of them. "There is more of this in the kitchen, if you two are hungry, and I never knew boys your age who weren't. Or any other age, for that matter. If you prefer, I'm baking honeycakes this morning."

She was one of the few married women in the area who never tried to play matchmaker with Tam. Toward Rand her motherliness extended to warm smiles and a quick snack whenever he came by the inn, but she did as much for every young man in the area. If she occasionally looked at him as if she wanted to do more, at least she took it no further than looks, for which he was deeply grateful.

Without waiting for a reply she swept on into the common room. Immediately there was the sound of chairs scraping on the floor as the men got to their feet, and exclamings over the smell of the bread. She was easily the best cook in Emond's Field, and not a man for miles around but eagerly leaped at a chance to put his feet under her table.

"Honeycakes," Mat said, smacking his lips.

"After," Rand told him firmly, "or we'll never get done."

A lamp hung over the cellar stairs, just beside the kitchen door, and another made a bright pool in the stone-walled room beneath the inn, banishing all but a little dimness in the furthest corners. Wooden racks along the walls and across the floor held casks of brandy and cider, and larger barrels of ale and wine, some with taps driven in. Many of the wine barrels were marked with chalk in Bran al'Vere's hand, giving the year they had been bought, what peddler had brought them, and in which city they had been made, but all of the ale and

brandy was the make of Two Rivers farmers or of Bran himself. Peddlers, and even merchants, sometimes brought brandy or ale from outside, but it was never as good and cost the earth, besides, and nobody ever drank it more than once.

"Now," Rand said, as they set their casks in the racks, "what did you do that you have to avoid Master Luhhan?"

Mat shrugged. "Nothing, really. I told Adan al'Caar and some of his snot-nosed friends—Ewin Finngar and Dag Coplin—that some farmers had seen ghost hounds, breathing fire and running through the woods. They ate it up like clotted cream."

"And Master Luhhan is mad at you for that?" Rand said doubtfully.

"Not exactly." Mat paused, then shook his head. "You see, I covered two of his dogs with flour, so they were all white. Then I let them loose near Dag's house. How was I to know they'd run straight home? It really isn't my fault. If Mistress Luhhan hadn't left the door open they couldn't have gotten inside. It isn't like I intended to get flour all over her house." He gave a bark of laughter. "I hear she chased old Luhhan and the dogs, all three, out of the house with a broom."

Rand winced and laughed at the same time. "If I were you, I'd worry more about Alsbet Luhhan than about the blacksmith. She's almost as strong, and her temper is a lot worse. No matter, though. If you walk fast, maybe he won't notice you." Mat's expression said he did not think Rand was funny.

When they went back through the common room, though, there was no need for Mat to hurry. The six men had their chairs in a tight knot before the fireplace. With his back to the fire, Tam was speaking in a low voice, and the others were leaning forward to listen, so intent on his words they would likely not have noticed if a flock of sheep had been driven through. Rand wanted to move closer, to hear what they were talking about, but Mat plucked at his sleeve and gave him an agonized look. With a sigh he followed Mat out to the cart.

On their return to the hallway they found a tray by the top of the steps, and hot honeycakes filling the hall with their sweet aroma. There were two mugs, as well, and a pitcher of steaming mulled cider. Despite his own admonition about waiting until later Rand found himself making the last two trips between cart and cellar while trying to juggle a cask and a piping honeycake.

Setting his final cask in the racks, he wiped crumbs from his mouth while Mat was unburdening himself, then said, "Now for the glee—"

Feet clattered on the stairs, and Ewin Finngar half fell into the cellar in his haste, his pudgy face shining with eagerness to impart his news. "There are strangers in the village." He caught his breath and gave Mat a wry look. "I haven't seen any ghost hounds, but I hear somebody floured Master Luhhan's dogs. I hear Mistress Luhhan has ideas who to look for, too."

The years separating Rand and Mat from Ewin, only fourteen, were usually more than enough for them to give short shrift to anything he had to say. This time they exchanged one startled glance, then both were talking at once.

"In the village?" Rand asked. "Not in the woods?"

Right on top of him Mat added, "Was his cloak black? Could you see his face?"

Ewin looked uncertainly from one of them to the other, then spoke quickly when Mat took a threatening step. "Of course I could see his face. And his cloak is green. Or maybe gray. It changes. It seems to fade into wherever he's standing. Sometimes you don't see him even when you look right at him, not unless he moves. And hers is blue, like the sky, and ten times fancier than any feastday clothes I ever saw. She's ten times prettier than anybody I ever saw, too. She's a high-born lady, like in the stories. She must be."

"Her?" Rand said. "Who are you talking about?" He stared at Mat, who had put both hands on top of his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

"They're the ones I meant to tell you about," Mat muttered, "before you got me off onto—" He cut off, opening his eyes for a sharp glance at Ewin. "They arrived last evening," Mat went on after a moment, "and took rooms here at the inn. I saw them ride in. Their horses, Rand. I never saw horses so tall, or so sleek. They look like they could run forever. I think he works for her."

"In service," Ewin broke in. "They call it being in service, in the stories."

Mat continued as if Ewin had not spoken. "Anyway, he defers to her, does what she says. Only he isn't like a hired man. A soldier, maybe. The way he wears his sword, it's part of him, like his hand or his foot. He makes the merchants' guards look like cur dogs. And her, Rand. I never even imagined anyone like her.

She's out of a gleeman's story. She's like . . . like. . . ." He paused to give Ewin a sour look. ". . . Like a high-born lady," he finished with a sigh.

"But who are they?" Rand asked. Except for merchants, once a year to buy tabac and wool, and the peddlers, outsiders never came into the Two Rivers, or as good as never. Maybe at Taren Ferry, but not this far south. Most of the merchants and peddlers had been coming for years, too, so they did not really count as strangers. Just outsiders. It was a good five years since the last time a real stranger appeared in Emond's Field, and he had been trying to hide from some sort of trouble up in Baerlon that nobody in the village understood. He had not stayed long. "What do they want?"

"What do they want?" Mat exclaimed. "I don't care what they want. Strangers, Rand, and strangers like you never even dreamed of. Think of it!"

Rand opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking. The black-cloaked rider had him as nervous as a cat in a dog run. It just seemed like an awful coincidence, three strangers around the village at the same time. Three if this fellow's cloak that changed colors never changed to black.

"Her name is Moiraine," Ewin said into the momentary silence. "I heard him say it. Moiraine, he called her. The Lady Moiraine. His name is Lan. The Wisdom may not like her, but I do."

"What makes you think Nynaeve dislikes her?" Rand said.

"She asked the Wisdom for directions this morning," Ewin said, "and called her 'child.' " Rand and Mat both whistled softly through their teeth, and Ewin tripped over his tongue in his haste to explain. "The Lady Moiraine didn't know she was the Wisdom. She apologized when she found out. She did. And asked some questions about herbs, and about who is who around Emond's Field, just as respectfully as any woman in the village—more so than some. She's always asking questions, about how old people are, and how long they've lived where they live, and . . . oh, I don't know what all. Anyway, Nynaeve answered like she'd bitten a green sweetberry. Then, when the Lady Moiraine walked away, Nynaeve stared after her like, like . . . well, it wasn't friendly, I can tell you that."

"Is that all?" Rand said. "You know Nynaeve's temper. When Cenn Buie called her a child last year, she thumped him on the head with her stick, and he's on the Village Council, and old enough to be her grandfather, besides. She flares up at anything, and never stays angry past turning around."

"That's too long for me," Ewin muttered.

"I don't care who Nynaeve thumps"—Mat chortled—"so long as it isn't me. This is going to be the best Bel Tine ever. A gleeman, a lady—who could ask for more? Who needs fireworks?"

"A gleeman?" Ewin said, his voice rising sharply.

"Come on, Rand," Mat went on, ignoring the younger boy. "We're done here. You have to see this fellow."

He bounded up the stairs, with Ewin scrambling behind him calling, "Is there really a gleeman, Mat? This isn't like the ghost hounds, is it? Or the frogs?"

Rand paused long enough to turn down the lamp, then hurried after them.

In the common room Rowan Hum and Samel Crape had joined the others in front of the fire, so that the entire Village Council was there. Bran al'Vere spoke now, his normally bluff voice pitched so low that only a rumbling murmur traveled beyond the close-gathered chairs. The Mayor emphasized his words by tapping a thick forefinger into the palm of his other hand, and eyed each man in turn. They all nodded in agreement with whatever he was saying, though Cenn more reluctantly than the rest.

The way the men all but huddled together spoke more plainly than a painted sign. Whatever they were talking about, it was for the Village Council alone, at least for now. They would not appreciate Rand trying to listen in. Reluctantly he pulled himself away. There was still the gleeman. And these strangers.

Outside, Bela and the cart were gone, taken away by Hu or Tad, the inn's stablemen. Mat and Ewin stood glaring at one another a few paces from the front door of the inn, their cloaks whipping in the wind.

"For the last time," Mat barked, "I am not playing a trick on you. There is a gleeman. Now go away. Rand, will you tell this woolhead I am telling the truth so he'll leave me alone?"

Pulling his cloak together, Rand stepped forward to support Mat, but words died as the hairs stirred on the back of his neck. He was being watched again. It

was far from the feeling the hooded rider had given him, but neither was it pleasant, especially so soon after that encounter.

A quick look about the Green showed him only what he had seen before—children playing, people preparing for Festival, and no one more than glancing in his direction. The Spring Pole stood alone, now, waiting. Bustle and childish shouts filled the side streets. All was as it should be. Except that he was being watched.

Then something led him to turn around, to raise his eyes. On the edge of the inn's tile roof perched a large raven, swaying a little in the gusting wind from the mountains. Its head was cocked to one side, and one beady, black eye was focused . . . on him, he thought. He swallowed, and suddenly anger flickered in him, hot and sharp.

"Filthy carrion eater," he muttered.

"I am tired of being stared at," Mat growled, and Rand realized his friend had stepped up beside him and was frowning at the raven, too.

They exchanged a glance, then as one their hands darted for rocks.

The two stones flew true . . . and the raven stepped aside; the stones whistled through the space where it had been. Fluffing its wings once, it cocked its head again, fixing them with a dead black eye, unafraid, giving no sign that anything had happened.

Rand stared at the bird in consternation. "Did you ever see a raven do that?" he asked quietly.

Mat shook his head without looking away from the raven. "Never. Nor any other bird, either."

"A vile bird," came a woman's voice from behind them, melodious despite echoes of distaste, "to be mistrusted in the best of times."

With a shrill cry the raven launched itself into the air so violently that two black feathers drifted down from the roof's edge.



Startled, Rand and Mat twisted to follow the bird's swift flight, over the Green and toward the cloud-tipped Mountains of Mist, tall beyond the Westwood, until it dwindled to a speck in the west, then vanished from view.

Rand's gaze fell to the woman who had spoken. She, too, had been watching the flight of the raven, but now she turned back, and her eyes met his. He could only stare. This had to be the Lady Moiraine, and she was everything that Mat and Ewin had said, everything and more.

When he had heard she called Nynaeve child, he had pictured her as old, but she was not. At least, he could not put any age to her at all. At first he thought she was as young as Nynaeve, but the longer he looked the more he thought she was older than that. There was a maturity about her large, dark eyes, a hint of knowing that no one could have gotten young. For an instant he thought those eyes were deep pools about to swallow him up. It was plain why Mat and Ewin named her a lady from a gleeman's tale, too. She held herself with a grace and air of command that made him feel awkward and stumble-footed. She was barely tall enough to come up to his chest, but her presence was such that her height seemed the proper one, and he felt ungainly in his tallness.

Altogether she was like no one he had ever seen before. The wide hood of her cloak framed her face and dark hair, hanging in soft ringlets. He had never seen a grown woman with her hair unbraided; every girl in the Two Rivers waited eagerly for the Women's Circle of her village to say she was old enough to wear a braid. Her clothes were just as strange. Her cloak was sky-blue velvet, with thick silver embroidery, leaves and vines and flowers, all along the edges. Her dress gleamed faintly as she moved, a darker blue than the cloak, and slashed with cream. A necklace of heavy gold links hung around her neck, while another gold chain, delicate and fastened in her hair, supported a small, sparkling blue stone in the middle of her forehead. A wide belt of woven gold encircled her waist, and on the second finger of her left hand was a gold ring in the shape of a serpent biting its own tail. He had certainly never seen a ring like that, though he recognized the Great Serpent, an even older symbol for eternity than the Wheel of Time.

Fancier than any feastday clothes, Ewin had said, and he was right. No one ever dressed like that in the Two Rivers. Not ever.

"Good morning, Mistress . . . ah . . . Lady Moiraine," Rand said. His face grew hot at his tongue's fumbling.

"Good morning, Lady Moiraine," Mat echoed somewhat more smoothly, but only a little.

She smiled, and Rand found himself wondering if there was anything he might do for her, something that would give him an excuse to stay near her. He knew she was smiling at all of them, but it seemed meant for him alone. It really was just like seeing a gleeman's tale come to life. Mat had a foolish grin on his face.

"You know my name," she said, sounding delighted. As if her presence, however brief, would not be the talk of the village for a year! "But you must call me Moiraine, not lady. And what are your names?"

Ewin leaped forward before either of the others could speak. "My name is Ewin Finngar, my lady. I told them your name; that's how they know. I heard Lan say it, but I wasn't eavesdropping. No one like you has ever come to Emond's Field, before. There's a gleeman in the village for Bel Tine, too. And tonight is Winternight. Will you come to my house? My mother has apple cakes."

"I shall have to see," she replied, putting a hand on Ewin's shoulder. Her eyes twinkled with amusement, though she gave no other sign of it. "I do not know how well I could compete against a gleeman, Ewin. But you must all call me Moiraine." She looked expectantly at Rand and Mat.

"I'm Matrim Cauthon, La . . . ah . . . Moiraine," Mat said. He made a stiff, jerking bow, then went red in the face as he straightened.

Rand had been wondering if he should do something of the sort, the way men did in stories, but with Mat's example, he merely spoke his name. At least he did not stumble over his own tongue this time.

Moiraine looked from him to Mat and back again. Rand thought her smile, a bare curve of the corners of her mouth, was now the sort Egwene wore when she had a secret. "I may have some small tasks to be done from time to time while I am in Emond's Field," she said. "Perhaps you would be willing to assist me?" She laughed as their assents tumbled over one another. "Here," she said, and Rand was surprised when she pressed a coin into his palm, closing his hand tightly around it with both of hers.

"There's no need," he began, but she waved aside his protest as she gave Ewin a coin as well, then pressed Mat's hand around one the same way she had Rand's.

"Of course, there is," she said. "You cannot be expected to work for nothing. Consider this a token, and keep it with you, so you will remember that you have agreed to come to me when I ask it. There is a bond between us now."

"I'll never forget," Ewin piped up.

"Later we must talk," she said, "and you must tell me all about yourselves."

"Lady . . . I mean, Moiraine?" Rand asked hesitantly as she turned away. She stopped and looked back over her shoulder, and he had to swallow before going on. "Why have you come to Emond's Field?" Her expression was unchanged, but suddenly he wished he had not asked, though he could not have said why. He rushed to explain himself, anyway. "I don't mean to be rude. I'm sorry. It's just that no one comes into the Two Rivers except the merchants, and peddlers when the snow isn't too deep to get down from Baerlon. Almost no one. Certainly no one like you. The merchants' guards sometimes say this is the back end of forever, and I suppose it must seem that way to anyone from outside. I just wondered."

Her smile did fade then, slowly, as if something had been recalled to her. For a moment she merely looked at him. "I am a student of history," she said at last, "a collector of old stories. This place you call the Two Rivers has always interested me. Sometimes I study the stories of what happened here long ago, here and at other places."

"Stories?" Rand said. "What ever happened in the Two Rivers to interest someone like—I mean, what could have happened here?"

"And what else would you call it beside the Two Rivers?" Mat added. "That's what it has always been called."

"As the Wheel of Time turns," Moiraine said, half to herself and with a distant look in her eyes, "places wear many names. Men wear many names, many faces. Different faces, but always the same man. Yet no one knows the Great Pattern the Wheel weaves, or even the Pattern of an Age. We can only watch, and study, and hope."

Rand stared at her, unable to say a word, even to ask what she meant. He was not sure she had meant for them to hear. The other two were just as tongue-tied, he noticed. Ewin's mouth hung open.

Moiraine focused on them again, and all three gave a little shake as if waking up. "Later we will talk," she said. None of them said a word. "Later." She moved on toward the Wagon Bridge, appearing to glide over the ground rather than walk, her cloak spreading on either side of her like wings.

As she left, a tall man Rand had not noticed before moved away from the front of the inn and followed her, one hand resting on the long hilt of a sword. His clothes were a dark grayish green that would have faded into leaf or shadow, and his cloak swirled through shades of gray and green and brown as it shifted in the wind. It almost seemed to disappear at times, that cloak, fading into whatever lay beyond it. His hair was long, and gray at the temples, held back from his face by a narrow leather headband. That face was made from stony planes and angles, weathered but unlined despite the gray in his hair. When he moved, Rand could think of nothing but a wolf.

In passing the three youths his gaze ran over them, eyes as cold and blue as a midwinter dawn. It was as if he were weighing them in his mind, and there was no sign on his face of what the scales told him. He quickened his pace until he caught up to Moiraine, then slowed to walk by her shoulder, bending to speak to her. Rand let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding.

"That was Lan," Ewin said throatily, as if he, too, had been holding his breath. It had been that kind of look. "I'll bet he's a Warder."

"Don't be a fool." Mat laughed, but it was a shaky laugh. "Warders are just in stories. Anyway, Warders have swords and armor covered in gold and jewels, and spend all their time up north, in the Great Blight, fighting evil and Trollocs and such."

"He could be a Warder," Ewin insisted.

"Did you see any gold or jewels on him?" Mat scoffed. "Do we have Trollocs in the Two Rivers? We have sheep. I wonder what could ever have happened here to interest someone like her."

"Something could have," Rand answered slowly. "They say the inn's been here for a thousand years, maybe more."

"A thousand years of sheep," Mat said.

"A silver penny!" Ewin burst out. "She gave me a whole silver penny! Think what I can buy when the peddler comes."

Rand opened his hand to look at the coin she had given him, and almost dropped it in surprise. He did not recognize the fat silver coin with the raised image of a woman balancing a single flame on her upturned hand, but he had watched while Bran al'Vere weighed out the coins merchants brought from a dozen lands, and he had an idea of its value. That much silver would buy a good horse anywhere in the Two Rivers, with some left over.

He looked at Mat and saw the same stunned expression he knew must be on his own face. Tilting his hand so Mat could see the coin but not Ewin, he raised a questioning eyebrow. Mat nodded, and for a minute they stared at one another in perplexed wonder.

"What kind of chores does she have?" Rand asked finally.

"I don't know," Mat said firmly, "and I don't care. I won't spend it, either. Even when the peddler comes." With that he thrust his coin into his coat pocket.

Nodding, Rand slowly did the same with his. He was not sure why, but somehow what Mat said seemed right. The coin should not be spent. Not when it came from her. He could not think of anything else silver was good for, but. . . .

"Do you think I should keep mine, too?" Anguished indecision painted Ewin's face.

"Not unless you want to," Mat said.

"I think she gave it to you to spend," Rand said.

Ewin looked at his coin, then shook his head and stuffed the silver penny into his pocket. "I'll keep it," he said mournfully.

"There's still the gleeman," Rand said, and the younger boy brightened.

"If he ever wakes up," Mat added.

"Rand," Ewin asked, "is there a gleeman?"

“You’ll see,” Rand answered with a laugh. It was clear Ewin would not believe until he set eyes on the gleeman. “He has to come down sooner or later.”

Shouting drifted across the Wagon Bridge, and when Rand looked to see what was causing it, his laughter became wholehearted. A milling crowd of villagers, from gray-haired oldsters to toddlers barely able to walk, escorted a tall wagon toward the bridge, a huge wagon drawn by eight horses, the outside of its rounded canvas cover hung about with bundles like bunches of grapes. The peddler had come at last. Strangers and a gleeman, fireworks and a peddler. It was going to be the best Bel Tine ever.

## CHAPTER 3 - The Peddler

Clusters of pots clattered and banged as the peddler's wagon rumbled over the heavy timbers of the Wagon Bridge. Still surrounded by a cloud of villagers and farmers come for Festival, the peddler reined his horses to a stop in front of the inn. From every direction people streamed to swell the numbers around the great wagon, its wheels taller than any of the people with their eyes fastened to the peddler above them on the wagon seat.

The man on the wagon was Padan Fain, a pale, skinny fellow with gangly arms and a massive beak of a nose. Fain, always smiling and laughing as if he knew a joke that no one else knew, had driven his wagon and team into Emond's Field every spring for as long as Rand could remember.

The door of the inn flew open even as the team halted in a jangle of harness, and the Village Council appeared, led by Master al'Vere and Tam. They marched out deliberately, even Cenn Buie, amid all the excited shouting of the others for pins or lace or books or a dozen other things. Reluctantly the crowd parted to let them to the fore, everyone closing in quickly behind and never stopping their calling to the peddler. Most of all, the villagers called for news.

In the eyes of the villagers, needles and tea and the like were no more than half the freight in a peddler's wagon. Every bit as important was word of outside, news of the world beyond the Two Rivers. Some peddlers simply told what they knew, throwing it out in a heap, a pile of rubbish with which they could not be bothered. Others had to have every word dragged out of them, speaking grudgingly, with a bad grace. Fain, however, spoke freely if often teasingly, and spun out the telling, making a show to rival a gleeman. He enjoyed being the center of attention, strutting around like an under-sized rooster, with every eye on him. It occurred to Rand that Fain might not be best pleased to find a real gleeman in Emond's Field.

The peddler gave the Council and villagers alike exactly the same attention as he fussed with tying his reins off just so, which was to say hardly any attention at all. He nodded casually at no one in particular. He smiled without speaking, and waved absently to people with whom he was particularly friendly, though his friendliness had always been of a peculiarly distant kind, backslapping without ever getting close.

The demands for him to speak grew louder, but Fain waited, fiddling with small tasks about the driver's seat, for the crowd and the anticipation to reach the size he wanted. The Council alone kept silent. They maintained the dignity befitting their position, but increasing clouds of pipesmoke rising above their heads showed the effort of it.

Rand and Mat edged into the crowd, getting as close to the wagon as they could. Rand would have stopped halfway, but Mat wriggled through the press, pulling Rand behind him, until they were right behind the Council.

"I had been thinking you were going to stay out on the farm through the whole Festival," Perrin Aybara shouted at Rand over the clamor. Half a head shorter than Rand, the curly-haired blacksmith's apprentice was so stocky as to seem a man and a half wide, with arms and shoulders thick enough to rival those of Master Luhhan himself. He could easily have pushed through the throng, but that was not his way. He picked his path carefully, offering apologies to people who had only half a mind to notice anything but the peddler. He made the apologies anyway, and tried not to jostle anyone as he worked through the crowd to Rand and Mat. "Imagine it," he said when he finally reached them. "Bel Tine and a peddler, both together. I'll bet there really are fireworks."

"You don't know a quarter of it." Mat laughed.

Perrin eyed him suspiciously, then looked a question at Rand.

"It's true," Rand shouted, then gestured at the growing mass of people, all giving voice. "Later. I'll explain later. Later, I said!"

At that moment Padan Fain stood up on the wagon seat, and the crowd quieted in an instant. Rand's last words exploded into utter silence, catching the peddler with an arm raised dramatically and his mouth open. Everybody turned to stare at Rand. The bony little man on the wagon, prepared to have everyone hanging on his first words, gave Rand a sharp, searching look.

Rand's face reddened, and he wished he were Ewin's size so he did not stand out so clearly. His friends shifted uncomfortably, too. It had only been the year before that Fain had taken notice of them for the first time, acknowledging them as men. Fain did not usually have time for anyone too young to buy a good deal of things off his wagon. Rand hoped he had not been relegated to a child again in the peddler's eyes.



With a loud harrumph, Fain tugged at his heavy cloak. "No, not later," the peddler declaimed, once more throwing up a hand grandly. "I will be telling you now." As he spoke he made broad gestures, casting his words over the crowd. "You are thinking you have had troubles in the Two Rivers, are you? Well, all the world has troubles, from the Great Blight south to the Sea of Storms, from the Aryth Ocean in the west to the Aiel Waste in the east. And even beyond. The winter was harsher than you've ever seen before, cold enough to jell your blood and crack your bones? Ahhh! Winter was cold and harsh everywhere. In the Borderlands they'd be calling your winter spring. But spring does not come, you say? Wolves have killed your sheep? Perhaps wolves have attacked men? Is that the way of it? Well, now. Spring is late everywhere. There are wolves everywhere, all hungry for any flesh they can sink a tooth into, be it sheep or cow or man. But there are things worse than wolves or winter. There are those who would be glad to have only your little troubles." He paused expectantly.

"What could be worse than wolves killing sheep, and men?" Cenn Buie demanded. Others muttered in support.

"Men killing men." The peddler's reply, in portentous tones, brought shocked murmurs that increased as he went on. "It is war I mean. There is war in Ghealdan, war and madness. The snows of the Dhallin Forest are red with the blood of men. Ravens and the cries of ravens fill the air. Armies march to Ghealdan. Nations, great houses and great men, send their soldiers to fight."

"War?" Master al'Vere's mouth fit awkwardly around the unfamiliar word. No one in the Two Rivers had ever had anything to do with a war. "Why are they having a war?"

Fain grinned, and Rand had the feeling he was mocking the villagers' isolation from the world, and their ignorance. The peddler leaned forward as if he were about to impart a secret to the Mayor, but his whisper was meant to carry and did. "The standard of the Dragon has been raised, and men flock to oppose. And to support."

One long gasp left every throat together, and Rand shivered in spite of himself.

"The Dragon!" someone moaned. "The Dark One's loose in Ghealdan!"

"Not the Dark One," Haral Luhhan growled. "The Dragon's not the Dark One. And this is a false Dragon, anyway."

"Let's hear what Master Fain has to say," the Mayor said, but no one would be quieted that easily. People cried out from every side, men and women shouting over one another.

"Just as bad as the Dark One!"

"The Dragon broke the world, didn't he?"

"He started it! He caused the Time of Madness!"

"You know the prophecies! When the Dragon is reborn, your worst nightmares will seem like your fondest dreams!"

"He's just another false Dragon. He must be!"

"What difference does that make? You remember the last false Dragon. He started a war, too. Thousands died, isn't that right, Fain? He laid siege to Illian."

"It's evil times! No one claiming to be the Dragon Reborn for twenty years, and now three in the last five years. Evil times! Look at the weather!"

Rand exchanged looks with Mat and Perrin. Mat's eyes shone with excitement, but Perrin wore a worried frown. Rand could remember every tale he had heard about the men who named themselves the Dragon Reborn, and if they had all proven themselves false Dragons by dying or disappearing without fulfilling any of the prophecies, what they had done was bad enough. Whole nations torn by battle, and cities and towns put to the torch. The dead fell like autumn leaves, and refugees clogged the roads like sheep in a pen. So the peddlers said, and the merchants, and no one in the Two Rivers with any sense doubted it. The world would end, so some said, when the real Dragon was born again.

"Stop this!" the Mayor shouted. "Be quiet! Stop working yourselves to a lather out of your own imaginations. Let Master Fain tell us about this false Dragon." The people began to quieten, but Cenn Buie refused to be silent.

"Is this a false Dragon?" the thatcher asked sourly.

Master al'Vere blinked as if taken by surprise, then snapped, "Don't be an old fool, Cenn!" But Cenn had kindled the crowd again.

"He can't be the Dragon Reborn! Light help us, he can't be!"

"You old fool, Buie! You want bad luck, don't you?"

"Be naming the Dark One, next! You're taken by the Dragon, Cenn Buie! Trying to bring us all harm!"

Cenn looked around defiantly, trying to stare down the glowers, and raised his voice. "I didn't hear Fain say this was a false Dragon. Did you? Use your eyes! Where are the crops that should be knee high or better? Why is it still winter when spring should be here a month?" There were angry shouts for Cenn to hold his tongue. "I will not be silent! I've no liking for this talk, either, but I won't hide my head under a basket till a Taren Ferry man comes to cut my throat. And I won't dangle on Fain's pleasure, not this time. Speak it out plain, peddler. What have you heard? Eh? Is this man a false Dragon?"

If Fain was perturbed by the news he brought or the upset he had caused, he gave no sign of it. He merely shrugged and laid a skinny finger alongside his nose. "As to that, now, who can say until it is over and done?" He paused with one of his secretive grins, running his eyes over the crowd as if imagining how they would react and finding it funny. "I do know," he said, too casually, "that he can wield the One Power. The others couldn't. But he can channel. The ground opens beneath his enemies' feet, and strong walls crumble at his shout. Lightning comes when he calls and strikes where he points. That I've heard, and from men I believe."

A stunned silence fell. Rand looked at his friends. Perrin seemed to be seeing things he did not like, but Mat still looked excited.

Tam, his face only a little less composed than usual, drew the Mayor close, but before he could speak Ewin Finngar burst out.

"He'll go mad and die! In the stories, men who channel the Power always go mad, and then waste away and die. Only women can touch it. Doesn't he know that?" He ducked under a cuff from Master Buie.

"Enough of that from you, boy." Cenn shook a gnarled fist in Ewin's face. "Show a proper respect and leave this to your elders. Get away with you!"

"Hold steady, Cenn," Tam growled. "The boy is just curious. There's no need of this foolishness from you."

"Act your age," Bran added. "And for once remember you're a member of the Council."

Cenn's wrinkled face grew darker with every word from Tam and the Mayor, until it was almost purple. "You know what kind of women he's talking about. Stop frowning at me, Luhhan, and you, too, Crowe. This is a decent village of decent folk, and it's bad enough to have Fain here talking about false Dragons using the Power without this Dragon-possessed fool of a boy bringing Aes Sedai into it. Some things just shouldn't be talked about, and I don't care if you will be letting that fool gleeman tell any kind of tale he wants. It isn't right or decent."

"I never saw or heard or smelled anything that couldn't be talked about," Tam said, but Fain was not finished.

"The Aes Sedai are already into it," the peddler spoke up. "A party of them has ridden south from Tar Valon. Since he can wield the Power, none but Aes Sedai can defeat him, for all the battles they fight, or deal with him once he's defeated. If he is defeated."

Someone in the crowd moaned aloud, and even Tam and Bran exchanged uneasy frowns. Huddles of villagers clumped together, and some pulled their cloaks tighter around themselves, though the wind had actually lessened.

"Of course, he'll be defeated," someone shouted.

"They're always beaten in the end, false Dragons."

"He has to be defeated, doesn't he?"

"What if he isn't?"

Tam had finally managed to speak quietly into the Mayor's ear, and Bran, nodding from time to time and ignoring the hubbub around them, waited until he was finished before raising his own voice.

"All of you listen. Be quiet and listen!" The shouting died to a murmur again. "This goes beyond mere news from outside. It must be discussed by the Village Council. Master Fain, if you will join us inside the inn, we have questions to ask."

"A good mug of hot mulled wine would not go far amiss with me just now," the peddler replied with a chuckle. He jumped down from the wagon, dusted his hands on his coat, and cheerfully righted his cloak. "Will you be looking after my horses, if you please?"

"I want to hear what he has to say!" More than one voice was raised in protest.

"You can't take him off! My wife sent me to buy pins!" That was Wit Congar; he hunched his shoulders at the stares some of the others gave him, but he held his ground.

"We've a right to ask questions, too," somebody back in the crowd shouted. "I —"

"Be silent!" the Mayor roared, producing a startled hush. "When the Council has asked its questions, Master Fain will be back to tell you all his news. And to sell you his pots and pins. Hu! Tad! Stable Master Fain's horses."

Tam and Bran moved in on either side of the peddler, the rest of the Council gathered behind them, and the whole cluster swept into the Winespring Inn, firmly shutting the door in the faces of those who tried to crowd inside after them. Pounding on the door brought only a single shout from the Mayor.

"Go home!"

People milled around in front of the inn muttering about what the peddler had said, and what it meant, and what questions the Council was asking, and why they should be allowed to listen and ask questions of their own. Some peered in through the front windows of the inn, and a few even questioned Hu and Tad, though it was far from clear what they were supposed to know. The two stolid stablemen just grunted in reply and went on methodically removing the team's harness. One by one they led Fain's horses away and, when the last was gone, did not return.

Rand ignored the crowd. He took a seat on the edge of the old stone foundation, gathered his cloak around him, and stared at the inn door. Ghealdan. Tar Valon. The very names were strange and exciting. They were places he knew only from peddlers' news, and tales told by merchants' guards. Aes Sedai and wars and false Dragons: those were the stuff of stories told late at night in front of the fireplace, with one candle making strange shapes on the wall and the wind howling against the shutters. On the whole, he believed he

would rather have blizzards and wolves. Still, it must be different out there, beyond the Two Rivers, like living in the middle of a gleeman's tale. An adventure. One long adventure. A whole lifetime of it.

Slowly the villagers dispersed, still muttering and shaking their heads. Wit Congar paused to stare into the now-abandoned wagon as though he might find another peddler hidden inside. Finally only a few of the younger folk were left. Mat and Perrin drifted over to where Rand sat.

"I don't see how the gleeman could beat this," Mat said excitedly. "I wonder if we might get to see this false Dragon?"

Perrin shook his shaggy head. "I don't want to see him. Somewhere else, maybe, but not in the Two Rivers. Not if it means war."

"Not if it means Aes Sedai here, either," Rand added. "Or have you forgotten who caused the Breaking? The Dragon may have started it, but it was Aes Sedai who actually broke the world."

"I heard a story once," Mat said slowly, "from a wool-buyer's guard. He said the Dragon would be reborn in mankind's greatest hour of need, and save us all."

"Well, he was a fool if he believed that," Perrin said firmly. "And you were a fool to listen." He did not sound angry; he was slow to anger. But he sometimes got exasperated with Mat's quicksilver fancies, and there was a touch of that in his voice. "I suppose he claimed we'd all live in a new Age of Legends afterwards, too."

"I didn't say I believed it," Mat protested. "I just heard it. Nynaeve did, too, and I thought she was going to skin me and the guard both. He said—the guard did—that a lot of people do believe, only they're afraid to say so, afraid of the Aes Sedai or the Children of the Light. He wouldn't say any more after Nynaeve lit into us. She told the merchant, and he said it was the guard's last trip with him."

"A good thing, too," Perrin said. "The Dragon going to save us? Sounds like Coplin talk to me."

"What kind of need would be great enough that we'd want the Dragon to save us from it?" Rand mused. "As well ask for help from the Dark One."

"He didn't say," Mat replied uncomfortably. "And he didn't mention any new Age of Legends. He said the world would be torn apart by the Dragon's coming."

"That would surely save us," Perrin said dryly. "Another Breaking."

"Burn me!" Mat growled. "I'm only telling you what the guard said."

Perrin shook his head. "I just hope the Aes Sedai and this Dragon, false or not, stay where they are. Maybe that way the Two Rivers will be spared."

"You think they're really Darkfriends?" Mat was frowning thoughtfully.

"Who?" Rand asked.

"Aes Sedai."

Rand glanced at Perrin, who shrugged. "The stories," he began slowly, but Mat cut him off.

"Not all the stories say they serve the Dark One, Rand."

"Light, Mat," Rand said, "they caused the Breaking. What more do you want?"

"I suppose." Mat sighed, but the next moment he was grinning again. "Old Bili Congar says they don't exist. Aes Sedai. Darkfriends. Says they're just stories. He says he doesn't believe in the Dark One, either."

Perrin snorted. "Coplin talk from a Congar. What else can you expect?"

"Old Bili named the Dark One. I'll bet you didn't know that."

"Light!" Rand breathed.

Mat's grin broadened. "It was last spring, just before the cutworm got into his fields and nobody else's. Right before everybody in his house came down with yelloweye fever. I heard him do it. He still says he doesn't believe, but whenever I ask him to name the Dark One now, he throws something at me."

"You are just stupid enough to do that, aren't you, Matrim Cauthon?" Nynaeve al'Meara stepped into their huddle, the dark braid pulled over her shoulder almost bristling with anger. Rand scrambled to his feet. Slender and barely

taller than Mat's shoulder, at the moment the Wisdom seemed taller than any of them, and it did not matter that she was young and pretty. "I suspected something of the sort about Bili Congar at the time, but I thought you at least had more sense than to try taunting him into such a thing. You may be old enough to be married, Matrim Cauthon, but in truth you shouldn't be off your mother's apron strings. The next thing, you'll be naming the Dark One yourself."

"No, Wisdom," Mat protested, looking as if he would rather be anywhere else than there. "It was old Bil—I mean, Master Congar, not me! Blood and ashes, I —"

"Watch your tongue, Matrim!"

Rand stood up straighter, though her glare was not directed at him. Perrin looked equally abashed. Later one or another of them would almost certainly complain about being scolded by a woman not all that much older than themselves—someone always did after one of Nynaeve's scoldings, if never in her hearing—but the gap in ages always seemed more than wide enough when face-to-face with her. Especially if she was angry. The stick in her hand was thick at one end and a slender switch at the other, and she was liable to give a flail to anybody she thought was acting the fool—head or hands or legs—no matter their age or position.

The Wisdom so held his attention that at first Rand failed to see she was not alone. When he realized his mistake, he began to think about leaving no matter what Nynaeve would say or do later.

Egwene stood a few paces behind the Wisdom, watching intently. Of a height with Nynaeve, and with the same dark coloring, she could at that moment have been a reflection of Nynaeve's mood, arms crossed beneath her breasts, mouth tight with disapproval. The hood of her soft gray cloak shaded her face, and her big brown eyes held no laughter now.

If there was any fairness, he thought that being two years older than her should give him some advantage, but that was not the way of it. At the best of times he was never very nimble with his tongue when talking to any of the village girls, not like Perrin, but whenever Egwene gave him that intent look, with her eyes as wide as they would go, as if every last ounce of her attention was on him, he just could not seem to make the words go where he wanted. Perhaps he could



get away as soon as Nynaeve finished. But he knew he would not, even if he did not understand why.

"If you are done staring like a moonstruck lamb, Rand al'Thor," Nynaeve said, "perhaps you can tell me why you were talking about something even you three great bullcalves ought to have sense enough to keep out of your mouths."

Rand gave a start and pulled his eyes away from Egwene; she had grown a disconcerting smile when the Wisdom began speaking. Nynaeve's voice was tart, but she had the beginnings of a knowing smile on her face, too—until Mat laughed aloud. The Wisdom's smile vanished, and the look she gave Mat cut his laughter off in a strangled croak.

"Well, Rand?" Nynaeve said.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Egwene still smiling. What does she think is so funny? "It was natural enough to talk of it, Wisdom," he said hurriedly. "The peddler—Padan Fain . . . ah . . . Master Fain—brought news of a false Dragon in Ghealdan, and a war, and Aes Sedai. The Council thought it was important enough to talk to him. What else would we be talking about?"

Nynaeve shook her head. "So that's why the peddler's wagon stands abandoned. I heard people rushing to meet it, but I couldn't leave Mistress Ayellin till her fever broke. The Council is questioning the peddler about what's happening in Ghealdan, are they? If I know them, they're asking all the wrong questions and none of the right ones. It will take the Women's Circle to find out anything useful." Settling her cloak firmly on her shoulders she disappeared into the inn.

Egwene did not follow the Wisdom. As the inn door closed behind Nynaeve, the younger woman came to stand in front of Rand. The frowns were gone from her face, but her unblinking stare made him uneasy. He looked to his friends, but they moved away, grinning broadly as they abandoned him.

"You shouldn't let Mat get you mixed up in his foolishness, Rand," Egwene said, as solemn as a Wisdom herself, then abruptly she giggled. "I haven't seen you look like that since Cenn Buie caught you and Mat up in his apple trees when you were ten."

He shifted his feet and glanced at his friends. They stood not far away, Mat gesturing excitedly as he talked.

"Will you dance with me tomorrow?" That was not what he had meant to say. He did want to dance with her, but at the same time he wanted nothing so little as the uncomfortable way he was sure to feel while he was with her. The way he felt right then.

The corners of her mouth quirked up in a small smile. "In the afternoon," she said. "I will be busy in the morning."

From the others came Perrin's exclamation. "A gleeman!"

Egwene turned toward them, but Rand put a hand on her arm. "Busy? How?"

Despite the chill she pushed back the hood of her cloak and with apparent casualness pulled her hair forward over her shoulder. The last time he had seen her, her hair had hung in dark waves below her shoulders, with only a red ribbon keeping it back from her face; now it was worked into a long braid.

He stared at that braid as if it were a viper, then stole a glance at the Spring Pole, standing alone on the Green now, ready for tomorrow. In the morning unmarried women of marriageable age would dance the Pole. He swallowed hard. Somehow, it had never occurred to him that she would reach marriageable age at the same time that he did.

"Just because someone is old enough to marry," he muttered, "doesn't mean they should. Not right away."

"Of course not. Or ever, for that matter."

Rand blinked. "Ever?"

"A Wisdom almost never marries. Nynaeve has been teaching me, you know. She says I have a talent, that I can learn to listen to the wind. Nynaeve says not all Wisdoms can, even if they say they do."

"Wisdom!" he hooted. He failed to notice the dangerous glint in her eye. "Nynaeve will be Wisdom here for another fifty years at least. Probably more. Are you going to spend the rest of your life as her apprentice?"

"There are other villages," she replied heatedly. "Nynaeve says the villages north of the Taren always choose a Wisdom from away. They think it stops her from having favorites among the village folk."

His amusement melted as fast as it had come. "Outside the Two Rivers? I'd never see you again."

"And you wouldn't like that? You have not given any sign lately that you'd care one way or another."

"No one ever leaves the Two Rivers," he went on. "Maybe somebody from Taren Ferry, but they're all strange anyway. Hardly like Two Rivers folk at all."

Egwene gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, maybe I'm strange, too. Maybe I want to see some of the places I hear about in the stories. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Of course I have. I daydream sometimes, but I know the difference between daydreams and what's real."

"And I do not?" she said furiously, and promptly turned her back on him.

"That wasn't what I meant. I was talking about me. Egwene?"

She jerked her cloak around her, a wall to shut him off, and stiffly walked a few paces away. He rubbed his head in frustration. How to explain? This was not the first time she had squeezed meanings from his words that he never knew were in them. In her present mood, a misstep would only make matters worse, and he was fairly sure that nearly anything he said would be a misstep.

Mat and Perrin came back then. Egwene ignored their coming. They looked at her hesitantly, then crowded close to Rand.

"Moiraine gave Perrin a coin, too," Mat said. "Just like ours." He paused before adding, "And he saw the rider."

"Where?" Rand demanded. "When? Did anybody else see him? Did you tell anyone?"

Perrin raised broad hands in a slowing gesture. "One question at a time. I saw him on the edge of the village, watching the smithy, just at twilight yesterday. Gave me the shivers, he did. I told Master Luhhan, only nobody was there when he looked. He said I was seeing shadows. But he carried his biggest hammer

around with him while we were banking the forge-fire and putting the tools up. He's never done that before."

"So he believed you," Rand said, but Perrin shrugged.

"I don't know. I asked him why he was carrying the hammer if all I saw was shadows, and he said something about wolves getting bold enough to come into the village. Maybe he thought that's what I saw, but he ought to know I can tell the difference between a wolf and a man on horseback, even at dusk. I know what I saw, and nobody is going to make me believe different."

"I believe you," Rand said. "Remember, I saw him, too." Perrin gave a satisfied grunt, as if he had not been sure of that.

"What are you talking about?" Egwene demanded suddenly.

Rand suddenly wished he had spoken more quietly. He would have if he had realized she was listening. Mat and Perrin, grinning like fools, fell all over themselves telling her of their encounters with the black-cloaked rider, but Rand kept silent. He was sure he knew what she would say when they were done.

"Nynaeve was right," Egwene announced to the sky when the two youths fell silent. "None of you is ready to be off leading strings. People do ride horses, you know. That doesn't make them monsters out of a gleeman's tale." Rand nodded to himself; it was just as he had thought. She rounded on him. "And you've been spreading these tales. Sometimes you have no sense, Rand al'Thor. The winter has been frightening enough without you going about scaring the children."

Rand gave a sour grimace. "I haven't spread anything, Egwene. But I saw what I saw, and it was no farmer out looking for a strayed cow."

Egwene drew a deep breath and opened her mouth, but whatever she had been going to say vanished as the door of the inn opened and a man with shaggy white hair came hurrying out as if pursued.

## CHAPTER 4 - The Gleeman

The door of the inn banged shut behind the white-haired man, and he spun around to glare at it. Lean, he would have been tall if not for a stoop to his shoulders, but he moved in a spry fashion that belied his apparent age. His cloak seemed a mass of patches, in odd shapes and sizes, fluttering with every breath of air, patches in a hundred colors. It was really quite thick, Rand saw, despite what Master al'Vere had said, with the patches merely sewn on like decorations.

"The gleeman!" Egwene whispered excitedly.

The white-haired man whirled, cloak flaring. His long coat had odd, baggy sleeves and big pockets. Thick mustaches, as snowy as the hair on his head, quivered around his mouth, and his face was gnarled like a tree that had seen hard times. He gestured imperiously at Rand and the others with a long-stemmed pipe, ornately carved, that trailed a wisp of smoke. Blue eyes peered out from under bushy white brows, drilling into whatever he looked at.

Rand stared at the man's eyes almost as much as at the rest of him. Everybody in the Two Rivers had dark eyes, and so did most of the merchants, and their guards, and everyone else he had ever seen. The Congars and the Coplins had made fun of him for his gray eyes, until the day he finally punched Ewal Coplin in the nose; the Wisdom had surely gotten onto him for that. He wondered if there was a place where nobody had dark eyes. Maybe Lan comes from there, too.

"What sort of place is this?" the gleeman demanded in a deep voice that sounded in some way larger than that of an ordinary man. Even in the open air it seemed to fill a great room and resonate from the walls. "The yokels in that village on the hill tell me I can get here before dark, neglecting to say that that was only if I left well before noon. When I finally do arrive, chilled to the bone and ready for a warm bed, your innkeeper grumbles about the hour as if I were a wandering swineherd and your Village Council hadn't begged me to display my art at this festival of yours. And he never even told me he was the Mayor." He slowed for a breath, taking them all in with a glare, but he was off again on the instant. "When I came downstairs to smoke my pipe before the fire and have a mug of ale, every man in the common room stares at me as if I were his least favorite brother-in-law seeking to borrow money. One old grandfather starts ranting at me about the kind of stories I should or should not tell, then a girl-

child shouts at me to get out, and threatens me with a great club when I don't move quickly enough for her. Who ever heard of treating a gleeman so?"

Egwene's face was a study, her goggle-eyed amaze at a gleeman in the flesh marred by a desire to defend Nynaeve.

"Your pardon, Master Gleeman," Rand said. He knew he was grinning foolishly, himself. "That was our Wisdom, and—"

"That pretty little slip of a girl?" the gleeman exclaimed. "A village Wisdom? Why, at her age she should better be flirting with the young men than foretelling the weather and curing the sick."

Rand shifted uncomfortably. He hoped Nynaeve never overheard the man's opinion. At least, not until he had done with his performing. Perrin winced at the gleeman's words, and Mat whistled soundlessly, as if both had had the same thought as he had.

"The men were the Village Council," Rand went on. "I'm sure they intended no discourtesy. You see, we just learned there's a war in Ghealdan, and a man claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. A false Dragon. Aes Sedai are riding there from Tar Valon. The Council is trying to decide if we might be in danger here."

"Old news, even in Baerlon," the gleeman said dismissively, "and that is the last place in the world to hear anything." He paused, looking around the village, and dryly added, "Almost the last place." Then his eyes fell on the wagon in front of the inn, standing alone now, with its shafts on the ground. "So. I thought I recognized Padan Fain in there." His voice was still deep, but the resonance had gone, replaced by scorn. "Fain was always one to carry bad news quickly, and the worse, the faster. There's more raven in him than man."

"Master Fain has come often to Emond's Field, Master Gleeman," Egwene said, a hint of disapproval finally breaking through her delight. "He is always full of laughter, and he brings much more good news than bad."

The gleeman eyed her for a moment, then smiled broadly. "Now you're a lovely lass. You should have rose buds in your hair. Unfortunately, I cannot pull roses from the air, not this year, but how would you like to stand beside me tomorrow for a part of my performance? Hand me my flute when I want it, and certain other apparatus. I always choose the prettiest girl I can find as my assistant."

Perrin snickered, and Mat, who had been snickering, laughed out loud. Rand blinked in surprise; Egwene was glaring at him, and he had not even smiled. She straightened around and spoke in a too-calm voice.

"Thank you, Master Gleeman. I would be happy to assist you."

"Thom Merrilin," the gleeman said. They stared. "My name is Thom Merrilin, not Master Gleeman." He hitched the multihued cloak up on his shoulders, and abruptly his voice once more seemed to reverberate in a great hall. "Once a Courtbard, I am now indeed risen to the exalted rank of Master Gleeman, yet my name is plain Thom Merrilin, and gleeman is the simple title in which I glory." And he swept a bow so elaborate with flourishes of his cloak that Mat clapped and Egwene murmured appreciatively.

"Master . . . ah . . . Master Merrilin," Mat said, unsure exactly what form of address to take out of what Thom Merrilin had said, "what is happening in Ghealdan? Do you know anything about this false Dragon? Or the Aes Sedai?"

"Do I look like a peddler, boy?" the gleeman grumbled, tapping out his pipe on the heel of his palm. He made the pipe disappear somewhere inside his cloak, or his coat; Rand was not sure where it had gone or how. "I am a gleeman, not a newsmonger. And I make a point of never knowing anything about Aes Sedai. Much safer that way."

"But the war," Mat began eagerly, only to be cut off by Master Merrilin.

"In wars, boy, fools kill other fools for foolish causes. That's enough for anyone to know. I am here for my art." Suddenly he thrust a finger at Rand. "You, lad. You're a tall one. Not with your full growth on you yet, but I doubt there's another man in the district with your height. Not many in the village with eyes that color, either, I'll wager. The point is, you're an axe handle across the shoulders and as tall as an Aielman. What's your name, lad?"

Rand gave it hesitantly, not sure whether or not the man was making fun of him, but the gleeman had already turned his attention to Perrin. "And you have almost the size of an Ogier. Close enough. How are you called?"

"Not unless I stand on my own shoulders." Perrin laughed. "I'm afraid Rand and I are just ordinary folk, Master Merrilin, not made-up creatures from your stories. I'm Perrin Aybara."

Thom Merrillin tugged at one of his mustaches. "Well, now. Made-up creatures from my stories. Is that what they are? You lads are widely traveled, then, it seems."

Rand kept his mouth shut, certain they were the butt of a joke, now, but Perrin spoke up.

"We've all of us been as far as Watch Hill, and Deven Ride. Not many around here have gone as far." He was not boasting; Perrin seldom did. He was just telling the truth.

"We've all seen the Mire, too," Mat added, and he did sound boastful. "That's the swamp at the far end of the Waterwood. Nobody at all goes there—it's full of quicksands and bogs—except us. And nobody goes to the Mountains of Mist, either, but we did, once. To the foot of them, anyway."

"As far as that?" the gleeman murmured, brushing at his mustaches now continually. Rand thought he was hiding a smile, and he saw that Perrin was frowning.

"It's bad luck to enter the mountains," Mat said, as if he had to defend himself for not going further. "Everybody knows that."

"That's just foolishness, Matrim Cauthon," Egwene cut in angrily. "Nynaeve says. . . ." She broke off, her cheeks turning pink, and the look she gave Thom Merrillin was not as friendly as it had been. "It is not right to make. . . . It isn't. . . ." Her face went redder, and she fell silent. Mat blinked, as if he was just getting a suspicion of what had been going on.

"You're right, child," the gleeman said contritely. "I apologize humbly. I am here to entertain. Aah, my tongue has always gotten me into trouble."

"Maybe we haven't traveled as far as you," Perrin said flatly, "but what does how tall Rand is have to do with anything?"

"Just this, lad. A little later I will let you try to pick me up, but you won't be able to lift my feet from the ground. Not you, nor your tall friend there—Rand, is it?—nor any other man. Now what do you think of that?"

Perrin snorted a laugh. "I think I can lift you right now." But when he stepped forward Thom Merrillin motioned him back.



"Later, lad, later. When there are more folk to watch. An artist needs an audience."

A score of folk had gathered on the Green since the gleeman appeared from the inn, young men and women down to children who peeked, wide-eyed and silent, from behind the older onlookers. All looked as if they were waiting for miraculous things from the gleeman. The white-haired man looked them over—he appeared to be counting them—then gave a slight shake of his head and sighed.

"I suppose I had better give you a small sample. So you can run tell the others. Eh? Just a taste of what you'll see tomorrow at your festival."

He took a step back, and suddenly leaped into the air, twisting and somersaulting to land facing them atop the old stone foundation. More than that, three balls—red, white, and black—began dancing between his hands even as he landed.

A soft sound came from the watchers, half astonishment, half satisfaction. Even Rand forgot his irritation. He flashed Egwene a grin and got a delighted one in return, then both turned to stare unabashedly at the gleeman.

"You want stories?" Thom Merrill declaimed. "I have stories, and I will give them to you. I will make them come alive before your eyes." A blue ball joined the others from somewhere, then a green one, and a yellow. "Tales of great wars and great heroes, for the men and boys. For the women and girls, the entire Aptarigine Cycle. Tales of Artur Paendrag Tanreall, Artur Hawkwing, Artur the High King, who once ruled all the lands from the Aiel Waste to the Aryth Ocean, and even beyond. Wondrous stories of strange people and strange lands, of the Green Man, of Warders and Trollocs, of Ogier and Aiel. The Thousand Tales of Anla, the Wise Counselor. 'Jaem the Giant-Slayer.' How Susa Tamed Jain Farstrider. 'Mara and the Three Foolish Kings.' "

"Tell us about Lenn," Egwene called. "How he flew to the moon in the belly of an eagle made of fire. Tell about his daughter Salya walking among the stars."

Rand looked at her out of the corner of his eye, but she seemed intent on the gleeman. She had never liked stories about adventures and long journeys. Her favorites were always the funny ones, or stories about women outwitting people who were supposed to be smarter than everyone else. He was sure she had

asked for tales about Lenn and Salya to put a burr under his shirt. Surely she could see the world outside was no place for Two Rivers folk. Listening to tales of adventures, even dreaming about them, was one thing; having them take place around you would be something else again.

"Old stories, those," Thom Merrilin said, and abruptly he was juggling three colored balls with each hand. "Stories from the Age before the Age of Legends, some say. Perhaps even older. But I have all stories, mind you now, of Ages that were and will be. Ages when men ruled the heavens and the stars, and Ages when man roamed as brother to the animals. Ages of wonder, and Ages of horror. Ages ended by fire raining from the skies, and Ages doomed by snow and ice covering land and sea. I have all stories, and I will tell all stories. Tales of Mosk the Giant, with his Lance of fire that could reach around the world, and his wars with Elsbet, the Queen of All. Tales of Materese the Healer, Mother of the Wondrous Ind."

The balls now danced between Thom's hands in two intertwining circles. His voice was almost a chant, and he turned slowly as he spoke, as if surveying the onlookers to gauge his effect. "I will tell you of the end of the Age of Legends, of the Dragon, and his attempt to free the Dark One into the world of men. I will tell of the Time of Madness, when Aes Sedai shattered the world; of the Trolloc Wars, when men battled Trollocs for rule of the earth; of the War of the Hundred Years, when men battled men and the nations of our day were wrought. I will tell the adventures of men and women, rich and poor, great and small, proud and humble. The Siege of the Pillars of the Sky. 'How Goodwife Karil Cured Her Husband of Snoring.' King Darith and the Fall of the House of —"

Abruptly the flow of words and the juggling alike stopped. Thom simply snatched the balls from the air and stopped talking. Unnoticed by Rand, Moiraine had joined the listeners. Lan was at her shoulder, though he had to look twice to see the man. For a moment Thom looked at Moiraine sideways, his face and body still except for making the balls disappear into his capacious coat sleeves. Then he bowed to her, holding his cloak wide. "Your pardon, but you are surely not from this district?"

"Lady!" Ewin hissed fiercely. "The Lady Moiraine."

Thom blinked, then bowed again, more deeply. "Your pardon again . . . ah, Lady. I meant no disrespect."

Moiraine made a small waving-away gesture. "None was perceived, Master Bard. And my name is simply Moiraine. I am indeed a stranger here, a traveler like yourself, far from home and alone. The world can be a dangerous place when one is a stranger."

"The Lady Moiraine collects stories," Ewin put in. "Stories about things that happened in the Two Rivers. Though I don't know what ever happened here to make a story of."

"I trust you will like my stories, as well . . . Moiraine." Thom watched her with obvious wariness. He looked not best pleased to find her there. Suddenly Rand wondered what sort of entertainment a lady like her might be offered in a city like Baerlon, or Caemlyn. Surely it could not be anything better than a gleeman.

"That is a matter of taste, Master Bard," Moiraine replied. "Some stories I like, and some I do not."

Thom's bow was his deepest yet, bending his long body parallel to the ground. "I assure you, none of my stories will displease. All will please and entertain. And you do me too much honor. I am a simple gleeman; that and nothing more."

Moiraine answered his bow with a gracious nod. For an instant she seemed even more the lady Ewin had named her, accepting an offering from one of her subjects. Then she turned away, and Lan followed, a wolf heeling a gliding swan. Thom stared after them, bushy brows drawn down, stroking his long mustaches with a knuckle, until they were halfway up the Green. He's not pleased at all, Rand thought.

"Are you going to juggle some more, now?" Ewin demanded.

"Eat fire," Mat shouted. "I want to see you eat fire."

"The harp!" a voice cried from the crowd. "Play the harp!" Someone else called for the flute.

At that moment the door of the inn opened and the Village Council trundled out, Nynaeve in their midst. Padan Fain was not with them, Rand saw; apparently the peddler had decided to remain in the warm common room with his mulled wine.

Muttering about “a strong brandy,” Thom Merrilin abruptly jumped down from the old foundation. He ignored the cries of those who had been watching him, pressing inside past the Councilors before they were well out of the doorway.

“Is he supposed to be a gleeman or a king?” Cenn Buie asked in annoyed tones. “A waste of good money, if you ask me.”

Bran al’Vere half turned after the gleeman, then shook his head. “That man may be more trouble than he’s worth.”

Nynaeve, busy gathering her cloak around her, sniffed loudly. “Worry about the gleeman if you want, Brandelwyn al’Vere. At least he is in Emond’s Field, which is more than you can say for this false Dragon. But as long as you are worrying, there are others here who should excite your worry.”

“If you please, Wisdom,” Bran said stiffly, “kindly leave who should worry me to my deciding. Mistress Moiraine and Master Lan are guests in my inn, and decent, respectable folk, so I say. Neither of them has called me a fool in front of the whole Council. Neither of them has told the Council it hasn’t a full set of wits among them.”

“It seems my estimate was too high by half,” Nynaeve retorted. She strode away without a backward glance, leaving Bran’s jaw working as he searched for a reply.

Egwene looked at Rand as if she were going to speak, then darted after the Wisdom instead. Rand knew there must be some way to stop her from leaving the Two Rivers, but the only way he could think of was not one he was prepared to take, even if she was willing. And she had as much as said she was not willing at all, which made him feel even worse.

“That young woman wants a husband,” Cenn Buie growled, bouncing on his toes. His face was purple, and getting darker. “She lacks proper respect. We’re the Village Council, not boys raking her yard, and—”

The Mayor breathed heavily through his nose, and suddenly rounded on the old thatcher. “Be quiet, Cenn! Stop acting like a black-veiled Aiel!” The skinny man froze on his toes in astonishment. The Mayor never let his temper get the best of him. Bran glared. “Burn me, but we have better things to be about than this foolishness. Or do you intend to prove Nynaeve right?” With that he stumped back into the inn and slammed the door behind him.

The Council members glanced at Cenn, then moved off in their separate directions. All but Haral Luhhan, who accompanied the stony-visaged thatcher, talking quietly. The blacksmith was the only one who could ever get Cenn to see reason.

Rand went to meet his father, and his friends trailed after him.

"I've never seen Master al'Vere so mad," was the first thing Rand said, getting him a disgusted look from Mat.

"The Mayor and the Wisdom seldom agree," Tam said, "and they agreed less than usual today. That's all. It's the same in every village."

"What about the false Dragon?" Mat asked, and Perrin added eager murmurs. "What about the Aes Sedai?"

Tam shook his head slowly. "Master Fain knew little more than he had already told. At least, little of interest to us. Battles won or lost. Cities taken and retaken. All in Ghealdan, thank the Light. It hasn't spread, or had not the last Master Fain knew."

"Battles interest me," Mat said, and Perrin added, "What did he say about them?"

"Battles don't interest me, Matrim," Tam said. "But I'm sure he will be glad to tell you all about them later. What does interest me is that we shouldn't have to worry about them here, as far as the Council can tell. We can see no reason for Aes Sedai to come here on their way south. And as for the return journey, they aren't likely to want to cross the Forest of Shadows and swim the White River."

Rand and the others chuckled at the idea. There were three reasons why no one came into the Two Rivers except from the north, by way of Taren Ferry. The Mountains of Mist, in the west, were the first, of course, and the Mire blocked the east just as effectively. To the south was the White River, which got its name from the way rocks and boulders churned its swift waters to froth. And beyond the White lay the Forest of Shadows. Few Two Rivers folk had ever crossed the White, and fewer still returned if they did. It was generally agreed, though, that the Forest of Shadows stretched south for a hundred miles or more without a road or a village, but with plenty of wolves and bears.

"So that's an end to it for us," Mat said. He sounded at least a little disappointed.

"Not quite," Tam said. "Day after tomorrow we will send men to Deven Ride and Watch Hill, and Taren Ferry, too, to arrange for a watch to be kept. Riders along the White and the Taren, both, and patrols between. It should be done today, but only the Mayor agrees with me. The rest can't see asking anyone to spend Bel Tine off riding across the Two Rivers."

"But I thought you said we didn't have to worry," Perrin said, and Tam shook his head.

"I said should not, boy, not did not. I've seen men die because they were sure that what should not happen, would not. Besides, the fighting will stir up all sorts of people. Most will just be trying to find safety, but others will be looking for a way to profit from the confusion. We'll offer any of the first a helping hand, but we must be ready to send the second type on their way."

Abruptly Mat spoke up. "Can we be part of it? I want to, anyway. You know I can ride as well as anyone in the village."

"You want a few weeks of cold, boredom, and sleeping rough?" Tam chuckled. "Likely that's all there will be to it. I hope that's all. We're well out of the way even for refugees. But you can speak to Master al'Vere if your mind is made up. Rand, it's time for us to be getting back to the farm."

Rand blinked in surprise. "I thought we were staying for Winternight."

"Things need seeing to at the farm, and I need you with me."

"Even so, we don't have to leave for hours yet. And I want to volunteer for the patrols, too."

"We are going now," his father replied in a tone that brooked no argument. In a softer voice he added, "We'll be back tomorrow in plenty of time for you to speak to the Mayor. And plenty of time for Festival, too. Five minutes, now, then meet me in the stable."

"Are you going to join Rand and me on the watch?" Mat asked Perrin as Tam left. "I'll bet there's nothing like this ever happened in the Two Rivers before."

Why, if we get up to the Taren, we might even see soldiers, or who knows what. Even Tinkers."

"I expect I will," Perrin said slowly, "if Master Luhhan doesn't need me, that is."

"The war is in Ghealdan," Rand snapped. With an effort he lowered his voice. "The war is in Ghealdan, and the Aes Sedai are the Light knows where, but none of it is here. The man in the black cloak is, or have you forgotten him already?" The others exchanged embarrassed looks.

"Sorry, Rand," Mat muttered. "But a chance to do something besides milk my da's cows doesn't come along very often." He straightened under their startled stares. "Well, I do milk them, and every day, too."

"The black rider," Rand reminded them. "What if he hurts somebody?"

"Maybe he's a refugee from the war," Perrin said doubtfully.

"Whatever he is," Mat said, "the watch will find him."

"Maybe," Rand said, "but he seems to disappear when he wants to. It might be better if they knew to look for him."

"We'll tell Master al'Vere when we volunteer for the patrols," Mat said, "he'll tell the Council, and they'll tell the watch."

"The Council!" Perrin said incredulously. "We'd be lucky if the Mayor didn't laugh out loud. Master Luhhan and Rand's father already think the two of us are jumping at shadows."

Rand sighed. "If we're going to do it, we might as well do it now. He won't laugh any louder today than he will tomorrow."

"Maybe," Perrin said with a sidelong glance at Mat, "we should try finding some others who've seen him. We'll see just about everybody in the village tonight." Mat's scowl deepened, but he still did not say anything. All of them understood that Perrin meant they should find witnesses who were more reliable than Mat. "He won't laugh any louder tomorrow," Perrin added when Rand hesitated. "And I'd just as soon have somebody else with us when we go to him. Half the village would suit me fine."

Rand nodded slowly. He could already hear Master al'Vere laughing. More witnesses certainly could not hurt. And if three of them had seen the fellow, others had to have, too. They must have. "Tomorrow, then. You two find whoever you can tonight, and tomorrow we go to the Mayor. After that. . . ." They looked at him silently, no one raising the question of what happened if they could not find anyone else who had seen the black-cloaked man. The question was clear in their eyes, though, and he had no answer. He sighed heavily. "I'd better go, now. My father will be wondering if I fell into a hole."

Followed by their goodbyes, he trotted around to the stableyard where the high-wheeled cart stood propped on its shafts.

The stable was a long, narrow building, topped by a high-peaked, thatched roof. Stalls, their floors covered with straw, filled both sides of the dim interior, lit only by the open double doors at either end. The peddler's team munched their oats in eight stalls, and Master al'Vere's massive Dhurrans, the team he hired out when farmers had hauling beyond the abilities of their own horses, filled six more, but only three others were occupied. Rand thought he could match up horse and rider with no trouble. The tall, deep-chested black stallion that swung up his head fiercely had to be Lan's. The sleek white mare with an arched neck, her quick steps as graceful as a girl dancing, even in the stall, could only belong to Moiraine. And the third unfamiliar horse, a rangy, slab-sided gelding of a dusty brown, fit Thom Merrilin perfectly.

Tam stood in the rear of the stable, holding Bela by a lead rope and speaking quietly to Hu and Tad. Before Rand had taken two steps into the stable his father nodded to the stablemen and brought Bela out, wordlessly gathering up Rand as he went.

They harnessed the shaggy mare in silence. Tam appeared so deep in thought that Rand held his tongue. He did not really look forward to trying to convince his father about the black-cloaked rider, much less the Mayor. Tomorrow would have to be time enough, when Mat and the rest had found others who had seen the man. If they found others.

As the cart lurched into motion, Rand took his bow and quiver from the back, awkwardly belting the quiver at his waist as he half trotted alongside. When they reached the last row of houses in the village, he nocked an arrow, carrying it half raised and partly drawn. There was nothing to see except mostly leafless trees, but his shoulders tightened. The black rider could be on them before



either of them knew it. There might not be time to draw the bow if he was not already halfway to it.

He knew he could not keep up the tension on the bowstring for long. He had made the bow himself, and Tam was one of the few others in the district who could even draw it all the way to the cheek. He cast around for something to take his mind off thinking about the dark rider. Surrounded by the forest, their cloaks flapping in the wind, it was not easy.

"Father," he said finally, "I don't understand why the Council had to question Padan Fain." With an effort he took his eyes off the woods and looked across Bela at Tam. "It seems to me, the decision you reached could have been made right on the spot. The Mayor frightened everybody half out of their wits, talking about Aes Sedai and the false Dragon here in the Two Rivers."

"People are funny, Rand. The best of them are. Take Haral Luhhan. Master Luhhan is a strong man, and a brave one, but he can't bear to see butchering done. Turns pale as a sheet."

"What does that have to do with anything? Everybody knows Master Luhhan can't stand the sight of blood, and nobody but the Coplins and the Congars thinks anything of it."

"Just this, lad. People don't always think or behave the way you might believe they would. Those folk back there . . . let the hail beat their crops into the mud, and the wind take off every roof in the district, and the wolves kill half their livestock, and they'll roll up their sleeves and start from scratch. They'll grumble, but they won't waste any time with it. But you give them just the thought of Aes Sedai and a false Dragon in Ghealdan, and soon enough they'll start thinking that Ghealdan is not that far the other side of the Forest of Shadows, and a straight line from Tar Valon to Ghealdan wouldn't pass that much to the east of us. As if the Aes Sedai wouldn't take the road through Caemlyn and Lugard instead of traveling cross-country! By tomorrow morning half the village would have been sure the entire war was about to descend on us. It would take weeks to undo. A fine Bel Tine that would make. So Bran gave them the idea before they could get it for themselves.

"They've seen the Council take the problem under consideration, and by now they'll be hearing what we decided. They chose us for the Village Council because they trust we can reason things out in the best way for everybody. They trust our opinions. Even Cenn's, which doesn't say much for the rest of us, I

suppose. At any rate, they will hear there isn't anything to worry about, and they'll believe it. It is not that they couldn't reach the same conclusion, or would not, eventually, but this way we won't have Festival ruined, and nobody has to spend weeks worrying about something that isn't likely to happen. If it does, against all odds . . . well, the patrols will give us enough warning to do what we can. I truly don't think it will come to that, though."

Rand puffed out his cheeks. Apparently, being on the Council was more complicated than he had believed. The cart rumbled on along the Quarry Road.

"Did anyone besides Perrin see this strange rider?" Tam asked.

"Mat did, but—" Rand blinked, then stared across Bela's back at his father. "You believe me? I have to go back. I have to tell them." Tam's shout halted him as he turned to run back to the village.

"Hold, lad, hold! Do you think I waited this long to speak for no reason?"

Reluctantly Rand kept on beside the cart, still creaking along behind patient Bela. "What made you change your mind? Why can't I tell the others?"

"They'll know soon enough. At least, Perrin will. Mat, I'm not sure of. Word must be gotten to the farms as best it can, but in another hour there won't be anyone in Emond's Field above sixteen, those who can be responsible about it, at least, who doesn't know a stranger is skulking around and likely not the sort you would invite to Festival. The winter has been bad enough without this to scare the young ones."

"Festival?" Rand said. "If you had seen him you wouldn't want him closer than ten miles. A hundred, maybe."

"Perhaps so," Tam said placidly. "He could be just a refugee from the troubles in Ghealdan, or more likely a thief who thinks the pickings will be easier here than in Baerlon or Taren Ferry. Even so, no one around here has so much they can afford to have it stolen. If the man is trying to escape the war . . . well, that's still no excuse for scaring people. Once the watch is mounted, it should either find him or frighten him off."

"I hope it frightens him off. But why do you believe me now, when you didn't this morning?"

"I had to believe my own eyes then, lad, and I saw nothing." Tam shook his grizzled head. "Only young men see this fellow, it seems. When Haral Luhhan mentioned Perrin jumping shadows, though, it all came out. Jon Thane's oldest son saw him, too, and so did Samel Crowe's boy, Bandry. Well, when four of you say you've seen a thing—and solid lads, all—we start thinking maybe it's there whether we can see it or not. All except Cenn, of course. Anyway, that's why we're going home. With both of us away, this stranger could be up to any kind of mischief there. If not for Festival, I wouldn't come back tomorrow, either. But we can't make ourselves prisoners in our own homes just because this fellow is lurking about."

"I didn't know about Ban or Lem," Rand said. "The rest of us were going to the Mayor tomorrow, but we were worried he wouldn't believe us, either."

"Gray hairs don't mean our brains have curdled," Tam said dryly. "So you keep a sharp eye. Maybe I'll catch sight of him, too, if he shows up again."

Rand settled down to do just that. He was surprised to realize that his step felt lighter. The knots were gone from his shoulders. He was still scared, but it was not so bad as it had been. Tam and he were just as alone on the Quarry Road as they had been that morning, but in some way he felt as if the entire village were with them. That others knew and believed made all the difference. There was nothing the black-cloaked horseman could do that the people of Emond's Field could not handle together.

## CHAPTER 5 - Winternight

The sun stood halfway down from its noonday high by the time the cart reached the farmhouse. It was not a big house, not nearly so large as some of the sprawling farmhouses to the east, dwellings that had grown over the years to hold entire families. In the Two Rivers that often included three or four generations under one roof, including aunts, uncles, cousins, and nephews. Tam and Rand were considered out of the ordinary as much for being two men living alone as for farming in the Westwood.

Here most of the rooms were on one floor, a neat rectangle with no wings or additions. Two bedrooms and an attic storeroom fitted up under the steeply sloped thatch. If the whitewash was all but gone from the stout wooden walls after the winter storms, the house was still in a tidy state of repair, the thatch tightly mended and the doors and shutters well-hung and snug-fitting.

House, barn, and stone sheep pen formed the points of a triangle around the farmyard, where a few chickens had ventured out to scratch at the cold ground. An open shearing shed and a stone dipping trough stood next to the sheep pen. Hard by the fields between the farmyard and the trees loomed the tall cone of a tight-walled curing shed. Few farmers in the Two Rivers could make do without both wool and tabac to sell when the merchants came.

When Rand took a look in the stone pen, the heavy-horned herd ram looked back at him, but most of the black-faced flock remained placidly where they lay, or stood with their heads in the feed trough. Their coats were thick and curly, but it was still too cold for shearing.

"I don't think the black-cloaked man came here," Rand called to his father, who was walking slowly around the farmhouse, spear held at the ready, examining the ground intently. "The sheep wouldn't be so settled if that one had been around."

Tam nodded but did not stop. When he had made a complete circuit of the house, he did the same around the barn and the sheep pen, still studying the ground. He even checked the smokehouse and the curing shed. Drawing a bucket of water from the well, he filled a cupped hand, sniffed the water, and gingerly touched it with the tip of his tongue. Abruptly he barked a laugh, then drank it down in a quick gulp.

"I suppose he didn't," he told Rand, wiping his hand on his coat front. "All this about men and horses I can't see or hear just makes me look crossways at everything." He emptied the well water into another bucket and started for the house, the bucket in one hand and his spear in the other. "I'll start some stew for supper. And as long as we're here, we might as well get caught up on a few chores."

Rand grimaced, regretting Winternight in Emond's Field. But Tam was right. Around a farm the work never really got done; as soon as one thing was finished two more always needed doing. He hesitated about it, but kept his bow and quiver close at hand. If the dark rider did appear, he had no intention of facing him with nothing but a hoe.

First was stabling Bela. Once he had unharnessed her and put her into a stall in the barn next to their cow, he set his cloak aside and rubbed the mare down with handfuls of dry straw, then curried her with a pair of brushes. Climbing the narrow ladder to the loft, he pitched down hay for her feed. He fetched a scoopful of oats for her as well, though there was little enough left and might be no more for a long while unless the weather warmed soon. The cow had been milked that morning before first light, giving a quarter of her usual yield; she seemed to be drying up as the winter hung on.

Enough feed had been left to see the sheep for two days—they should have been in the pasture by now, but there was none worth calling it so—but he topped off their water. Whatever eggs had been laid needed to be gathered, too. There were only three. The hens seemed to be getting cleverer at hiding them.

He was taking a hoe to the vegetable garden behind the house when Tam came out and settled on a bench in front of the barn to mend harness, propping his spear beside him. It made Rand feel better about the bow lying on his cloak a pace from where he stood.

Few weeds had pushed above ground, but more weeds than anything else. The cabbages were stunted, barely a sprout of the beans or peas showed, and there was not a sign of a beet. Not everything had been planted, of course; only part, in hopes the cold might break in time to make a crop of some kind before the cellar was empty. It did not take long to finish hoeing, which would have suited him just fine in years past, but now he wondered what they would do if nothing came up this year. Not a pleasant thought. And there was still firewood to split.

It seemed to Rand like years since there had not been firewood to split. But complaining would not keep the house warm, so he fetched the axe, propped up bow and quiver beside the chopping block, and got to work. Pine for a quick, hot flame, and oak for long burning. Before long he was warm enough to put his coat aside. When the pile of split wood grew big enough, he stacked it against the side of the house, beside other stacks already there. Most reached all the way to the eaves. Usually by this time of year the woodpiles were small and few, but not this year. Chop and stack, chop and stack, he lost himself in the rhythm of the axe and the motions of stacking wood. Tam's hand on his shoulder brought him back to where he was, and for a moment he blinked in surprise.

Gray twilight had come on while he worked, and already it was fading quickly toward night. The full moon stood well above the treetops, shimmering pale and bulging as if about to fall on their heads. The wind had grown colder without his noticing, too, and tattered clouds scudded across the darkling sky.

"Let's wash up, lad, and see about some supper. I've already carried in water for hot baths before sleep."

"Anything hot sounds good to me," Rand said, snatching up his cloak and tossing it round his shoulders. Sweat soaked his shirt, and the wind, forgotten in the heat of swinging the axe, seemed to be trying to freeze it now that he had stopped work. He stifled a yawn, shivering as he gathered the rest of his things. "And sleep, too, for that. I might just sleep right through Festival."

"Would you care to make a small wager about that?" Tam smiled, and Rand had to grin back. He would not miss Bel Tine if he had had no sleep in a week. No one would.

Tam had been extravagant with the candles, and a fire crackled in the big stone fireplace, so that the main room had a warm, cheerful feel to it. A broad oaken table was the main feature of the room other than the fireplace, a table long enough to seat a dozen or more, though there had seldom been so many around it since Rand's mother died. A few cabinets and chests, most of them skillfully made by Tam himself, lined the walls, and high-backed chairs stood around the table. The cushioned chair that Tam called his reading chair sat angled before the flames. Rand preferred to do his reading stretched out on the rug in front of the fire. The shelf of books by the door was not nearly as long as the one at the Winespring Inn, but books were hard to come by. Few peddlers carried more than a handful, and those had to be stretched out among everyone who wanted them.

If the room did not look quite so freshly scrubbed as most farm wives kept their homes—Tam’s piperack and *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* sat on the table, while another wood-bound book rested on the cushion of his reading chair; a bit of harness to be mended lay on the bench by the fireplace, and some shirts to be darned made a heap on a chair—if not quite so spotless, it was still clean and neat enough, with a lived-in look that was almost as warming and comforting as the fire. Here, it was possible to forget the chill beyond the walls. There was no false Dragon here. No wars or Aes Sedai. No men in black cloaks. The aroma from the stewpot hanging over the fire permeated the room, and filled Rand with ravenous hunger.

His father stirred the stewpot with a long-handled wooden spoon, then took a taste. “A little while longer.”

Rand hurried to wash his face and hands; there was a pitcher and basin on the washstand by the door. A hot bath was what he wanted, to take away the sweat and soak the chill out, but that would come when there had been time to heat the big kettle in the back room.

Tam rooted around in a cabinet and came up with a key as long as his hand. He twisted it in the big iron lock on the door. At Rand’s questioning look he said, “Best to be safe. Maybe I’m taking a fancy, or maybe the weather is blacking my mood, but. . . .” He sighed and bounced the key on his palm. “I’ll see to the back door,” he said, and disappeared toward the back of the house.

Rand could not remember either door ever being locked. No one in the Two Rivers locked doors. There was no need. Until now, at least.

From overhead, from Tam’s bedroom, came a scraping, as of something being dragged across the floor. Rand frowned. Unless Tam had suddenly decided to move the furniture around, he could only be pulling out the old chest he kept under his bed. Another thing that had never been done in Rand’s memory.

He filled a small kettle with water for tea and hung it from a hook over the fire, then set the table. He had carved the bowls and spoons himself. The front shutters had not yet been closed, and from time to time he peered out, but full night had come and all he could see were moon shadows. The dark rider could be out there easily enough, but he tried not to think about that.

When Tam came back, Rand stared in surprise. A thick belt slanted around Tam's waist, and from the belt hung a sword, with a bronze heron on the black scabbard and another on the long hilt. The only men Rand had ever seen wearing swords were the merchants' guards. And Lan, of course. That his father might own one had never even occurred to him. Except for the herons, the sword looked a good deal like Lan's sword.

"Where did that come from?" he asked. "Did you get it from a peddler? How much did it cost?"

Slowly Tam drew the weapon; firelight played along the gleaming length. It was nothing at all like the plain, rough blades Rand had seen in the hands of merchants' guards. No gems or gold adorned it, but it seemed grand to him, nonetheless. The blade, very slightly curved and sharp on only one edge, bore another heron etched into the steel. Short quillons, worked to look like braid, flanked the hilt. It seemed almost fragile compared with the swords of the merchants' guards; most of those were double-edged, and thick enough to chop down a tree.

"I got it a long time ago," Tam said, "a long way from here. And I paid entirely too much; two coppers is too much for one of these. Your mother didn't approve, but she was always wiser than I. I was young then, and it seemed worth the price at the time. She always wanted me to get rid of it, and more than once I've thought she was right, that I should just give it away."

Reflected fire made the blade seem aflame. Rand started. He had often daydreamed about owning a sword. "Give it away? How could you give a sword like that away?"

Tam snorted. "Not much use in herding sheep, now is it? Can't plow a field or harvest a crop with it." For a long minute he stared at the sword as if wondering what he was doing with such a thing. At last he let out a heavy sigh. "But if I am not just taken by a black fancy, if our luck runs sour, maybe in the next few days we'll be glad I tucked it in that old chest, instead." He slid the sword smoothly back into its sheath and wiped his hand on his shirt with a grimace. "The stew should be ready. I'll dish it out while you fix the tea."

Rand nodded and got the tea canister, but he wanted to know everything. Why would Tam have bought a sword? He could not imagine. And where had Tam come by it? How far away? No one ever left the Two Rivers; or very few, at least. He had always vaguely supposed his father must have gone outside—his mother



had been an outlander—but a sword . . . ? He had a lot of questions to ask once they had settled at the table.

The tea water was boiling fiercely, and he had to wrap a cloth around the kettle's handle to lift it off the hook. Heat soaked through immediately. As he straightened from the fire, a heavy thump at the door rattled the lock. All thoughts of the sword, or the hot kettle in his hand, flew away.

"One of the neighbors," he said uncertainly. "Master Dautry wanting to borrow. . . ." But the Dautry farm, their nearest neighbor, was an hour away even in the daylight, and Oren Dautry, shameless borrower that he was, was still not likely to leave his house by dark.

Tam softly placed the stew-filled bowls on the table. Slowly he moved away from the table. Both of his hands rested on his sword hilt. "I don't think—" he began, and the door burst open, pieces of the iron lock spinning across the floor.

A figure filled the doorway, bigger than any man Rand had ever seen, a figure in black mail that hung to his knees, with spikes at wrists and elbows and shoulders. One hand clutched a heavy, scythe-like sword; the other hand was flung up before his eyes as if to shield them from the light.

Rand felt the beginnings of an odd sort of relief. Whoever this was, it was not the black-cloaked rider. Then he saw the curled ram's horns on the head that brushed the top of the doorway, and where mouth and nose should have been was a hairy muzzle. He took in all of it in the space of one deep breath that he let out in a terrified yell as, without thinking, he hurled the hot kettle at that half-human head.

The creature roared, part scream of pain, part animal snarl, as boiling water splashed over its face. Even as the kettle struck, Tam's sword flashed. The roar abruptly became a gurgle, and the huge shape toppled back. Before it finished falling, another was trying to claw its way past. Rand glimpsed a misshapen head topped by spike-like horns before Tam struck again, and two huge bodies blocked the door. He realized his father was shouting at him.

"Run, lad! Hide in the woods!" The bodies in the doorway jerked as others outside tried to pull them clear. Tam thrust a shoulder under the massive table; with a grunt he heaved it over atop the tangle. "There are too many to hold! Out the back! Go! Go! I'll follow!"

Even as Rand turned away, shame filled him that he obeyed so quickly. He wanted to stay and help his father, though he could not imagine how, but fear had him by the throat, and his legs moved on their own. He dashed from the room, toward the back of the house, as fast as he had ever run in his life. Crashes and shouts from the front door pursued him.

He had his hands on the bar across the back door when his eye fell on the iron lock that was never locked. Except that Tam had done just that tonight. Letting the bar stay where it was, he darted to a side window, flung up the sash and threw back the shutters. Night had replaced twilight completely. The full moon and drifting clouds made dappled shadows chase one another across the farmyard.

Shadows, he told himself. Only shadows. The back door creaked as someone outside, or something, tried to push it open. His mouth went dry. A crash shook the door in its frame and lent him speed; he slipped through the window like a hare going to ground, and cowered against the side of the house. Inside the room, wood splintered like thunder.

He forced himself up to a crouch, made himself peer inside, just with one eye, just at the corner of the window. In the dark he could not make out much, but more than he really wanted to see. The door hung askew, and shadowed shapes moved cautiously into the room, talking in low, guttural voices. Rand understood none of what was said; the language sounded harsh, unsuited to a human tongue. Axes and spears and spiked things dully reflected stray glimmers of moonlight. Boots scraped on the floor, and there was a rhythmic click, as of hooves, as well.

He tried to work moisture back into his mouth. Drawing a deep, ragged breath, he shouted as loudly as he could. "They're coming in the back!" The words came out in a croak, but at least they came out. He had not been sure they would. "I'm outside! Run, father!" With the last word he was sprinting away from the farmhouse.

Coarse-voiced shouts in the strange tongue raged from the back room. Glass shattered, loud and sharp, and something thudded heavily to the ground behind him. He guessed one of them had broken through the window rather than try to squeeze through the opening, but he did not look back to see if he was right. Like a fox running from hounds he darted into the nearest moon-cast shadows as if headed for the woods, then dropped to his belly and slithered back to the barn and its larger, deeper shadows. Something fell across his

shoulders, and he thrashed about, not sure if he was trying to fight or escape, until he realized he was grappling with the new hoe handle Tam had been shaping.

Idiot! For a moment he lay there, trying to stop panting. Coplin fool idiot! At last he crawled on along the back of the barn, dragging the hoe handle with him. It was not much, but it was better than nothing. Cautiously he looked around the corner at the farmyard and the house.

Of the creature that had jumped out after him there was no sign. It could be anywhere. Hunting him, surely. Even creeping up on him at that very moment.

Frightened bleats filled the sheep pen to his left; the flock milled as if trying to find an escape. Shadowed shapes flickered in the lighted front windows of the house, and the clash of steel on steel rang through the darkness. Suddenly one of the windows burst outward in a shower of glass and wood as Tam leaped through it, sword still in hand. He landed on his feet, but instead of running away from the house he dashed toward the back of it, ignoring the monstrous things scrambling after him through the broken window and the doorway.

Rand stared in disbelief. Why was he not trying to get away? Then he understood. Tam had last heard his voice from the rear of the house. "Father!" he shouted. "I'm over here!"

In mid-stride Tam whirled, not running toward Rand, but at an angle away from him. "Run, lad!" he shouted, gesturing with the sword as if to someone ahead of him. "Hide!" A dozen huge forms streamed after him, harsh shouts and shrill howls shivering the air.

Rand pulled back into the shadows behind the barn. There he could not be seen from the house, in case any of the creatures were still inside. He was safe; for the moment, at least. But not Tam. Tam, who was trying to lead those things away from him. His hands tightened on the hoe handle, and he had to clench his teeth to stop a sudden laugh. A hoe handle. Facing one of those creatures with a hoe handle would not be much like playing at quarterstaves with Perrin. But he could not let Tam face what was chasing him alone.

"If I move like I was stalking a rabbit," he whispered to himself, "they'll never hear me, or see me." The eerie cries echoed in the darkness, and he tried to swallow. "More like a pack of starving wolves." Soundlessly he slipped away

from the barn, toward the forest, gripping the hoe handle so hard that his hands hurt.

At first, when the trees surrounded him, he took comfort from them. They helped hide him from whatever the creatures were that had attacked the farm. As he crept through the woods, though, moon shadows shifted, and it began to seem as if the darkness of the forest changed and moved, too. Trees loomed malevolently; branches writhed toward him. But were they just trees and branches? He could almost hear the growling chuckles stifled in their throats while they waited for him. The howls of Tam's pursuers no longer filled the night, but in the silence that replaced them he flinched every time the wind scraped one limb against another. Lower and lower he crouched, and moved more and more slowly. He hardly dared to breathe for fear he might be heard.

Suddenly a hand closed over his mouth from behind, and an iron grip seized his wrist. Frantically he clawed over his shoulder with his free hand for some hold on the attacker.

"Don't break my neck, lad," came Tam's hoarse whisper.

Relief flooded him, turning his muscles to water. When his father released him he fell to his hands and knees, gasping as if he had run for miles. Tam dropped down beside him, leaning on one elbow.

"I wouldn't have tried that if I had thought how much you've grown in the last few years," Tam said softly. His eyes shifted constantly as he spoke, keeping a sharp watch on the darkness. "But I had to make sure you didn't speak out. Some Trollocs can hear like a dog. Maybe better."

"But Trollocs are just. . . ." Rand let the words trail off. Not just a story, not after tonight. Those things could be Trollocs or the Dark One himself for all he knew. "Are you sure?" he whispered. "I mean . . . Trollocs?"

"I'm sure. Though what brought them to the Two Rivers. . . . I never saw one before tonight, but I've talked with men who have, so I know a little. Maybe enough to keep us alive. Listen closely. A Trolloc can see better than a man in the dark, but bright lights blind them, for a time at least. That may be the only reason we got away from so many. Some can track by scent or sound, but they're said to be lazy. If we can keep out of their hands long enough, they should give up."

That made Rand feel only a little better. "In the stories they hate men, and serve the Dark One."

"If anything belongs in the Shepherd of the Night's flocks, lad, it is Trollocs. They kill for the pleasure of killing, so I've been told. But that's the end of my knowledge, except that they cannot be trusted unless they're afraid of you, and then not far."

Rand shivered. He did not think he would want to meet anyone a Trolloc was afraid of. "Do you think they're still hunting for us?"

"Maybe, maybe not. They don't seem very smart. Once we got into the forest, I sent the ones after me off toward the mountains without much trouble." Tam fumbled at his right side, then put his hand close to his face. "Best act as if they are, though."

"You're hurt."

"Keep your voice down. It's just a scratch, and there is nothing to be done about it now, anyway. At least the weather seems to be warming." He lay back with a heavy sigh. "Perhaps it won't be too bad spending the night out."

In the back of his mind Rand had just been thinking fond thoughts of his coat and cloak. The trees cut the worst of the wind, but what gusted through still sliced like a frozen knife. Hesitantly he touched Tam's face, and winced. "You're on fire. I have to get you to Nynaeve."

"In a bit, lad."

"We don't have any time to waste. It's a long way in the dark." He scrambled to his feet and tried to pull his father up. A groan barely stifled by Tam's clenched teeth made Rand hastily ease him back down.

"Let me rest a while, boy. I'm tired."

Rand pounded his fist on his thigh. Snug in the farmhouse, with a fire and blankets, plenty of water and willowbark, he might have been willing to wait for daybreak before hitching Bela and taking Tam into the village. Here was no fire, no blankets, no cart, and no Bela. But those things were still back at the house. If he could not carry Tam to them, perhaps he could bring some of them, at least, to Tam. If the Trollocs were gone. They had to go sooner or later.

He looked at the hoe handle, then dropped it. Instead he drew Tam's sword. The blade gleamed dully in the pale moonlight. The long hilt felt odd in his hand; the weight and heft were strange. He slashed at the air a few times before stopping with a sigh. Slashing at air was easy. If he had to do it against a Trolloc he was surely just as likely to run instead, or freeze stiff so he could not move at all until the Trolloc swung one of those odd swords and. . . . Stop it! It's not helping anything!

As he started to rise, Tam caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

"We need the cart," he said gently. "And blankets." He was shocked at how easily he pulled his father's hand from his sleeve. "Rest, and I'll be back."

"Careful," Tam breathed.

He could not see Tam's face in the moonlight, but he could feel his eyes on him. "I will be." As careful as a mouse exploring a hawk's nest, he thought.

As silently as another shadow, he slid into the darkness. He thought of all the times he had played tag in the woods with his friends as children, stalking one another, straining not to be heard until he put a hand on someone's shoulder. Somehow he could not make this seem the same.

Creeping from tree to tree, he tried to make a plan, but by the time he reached the edge of the woods he had made and discarded ten. Everything depended on whether or not the Trollocs were still there. If they were gone, he could simply walk up to the house and take what he needed. If they were still there. . . . In that case, there was nothing for it but go back to Tam. He did not like it, but he could do Tam no good by getting killed.

He peered toward the farm buildings. The barn and the sheep pen were only dark shapes in the moonlight. Light spilled from the front windows of the house, though, and through the open front door. Just the candles father lit, or are there Trollocs waiting?

He jumped convulsively at a nighthawk's reedy cry, then sagged against a tree, shaking. This was getting him nowhere. Dropping to his belly, he began to crawl, holding the sword awkwardly before him. He kept his chin in the dirt all the way to the back of the sheep pen.

Crouched against the stone wall, he listened. Not a sound disturbed the night. Carefully he eased up enough to look over the wall. Nothing moved in the farmyard. No shadows flickered against the lit windows of the house, or in the doorway. Bela and the cart first, or the blankets and other things. It was the light that decided him. The barn was dark. Anything could be waiting inside, and he would have no way of knowing until it was too late. At least he would be able to see what was inside the house.

As he started to lower himself again, he stopped suddenly. There was no sound. Most of the sheep might have settled down already and gone back to sleep, though it was not likely, but a few were always awake even in the middle of the night, rustling about, bleating now and again. He could barely make out the shadowy mounds of sheep on the ground. One lay almost beneath him.

Trying to make no noise, he hoisted himself onto the wall until he could stretch out a hand to the dim shape. His fingers touched curly wool, then wetness; the sheep did not move. Breath left him in a rush as he pushed back, almost dropping the sword as he fell to the ground outside the pen. They kill for fun. Shakily he scrubbed the wetness from his hand in the dirt.

Fiercely he told himself that nothing had changed. The Trollocs had done their butchery and gone. Repeating that in his mind, he crawled on across the farmyard, keeping as low as he could, but trying to watch every direction, too. He had never thought he would envy an earthworm.

At the front of the house he lay close beside the wall, beneath the broken window, and listened. The dull thudding of blood in his ears was the loudest sound he heard. Slowly he reared up and peered inside.

The stewpot lay upside down in the ashes on the hearth. Splintered, broken wood littered the room; not a single piece of furniture remained whole. Even the table rested at an angle, two legs hacked to rough stubs. Every drawer had been pulled out and smashed; every cupboard and cabinet stood open, many doors hanging by one hinge. Their contents were strewn over the wreckage, and everything was dusted with white. Flour and salt, to judge from the slashed sacks tossed down by the fireplace. Four twisted bodies made a tangle in the remnants of the furnishings. Trollocs.

Rand recognized one by its ram's horns. The others were much the same, even in their differences, a repulsive melange of human faces distorted by muzzles, horns, feathers, and fur. Their hands, almost human, only made it worse. Two

wore boots; the others had hooves. He watched without blinking until his eyes burned. None of the Trollocs moved. They had to be dead. And Tam was waiting.

He ran in through the front door and stopped, gagging at the stench. A stable that had not been mucked out in months was the only thing he could think of that might come close to matching it. Vile smears defiled the walls. Trying to breathe through his mouth, he hurriedly began poking through the mess on the floor. There had been a waterbag in one of the cupboards.

A scraping sound behind him sent a chill to his marrow, and he spun, almost falling over the remains of the table. He caught himself, and moaned behind teeth that would have chattered had he not had them clenched until his jaw ached.

One of the Trollocs was getting to its feet. A wolf's muzzle jutted out below sunken eyes. Flat, emotionless eyes, and all too human. Hairy, pointed ears twitched incessantly. It stepped over one of its dead companions on sharp goat hooves. The same black mail the others wore rasped against leather trousers, and one of the huge, scythe-curved swords swung at its side.

It muttered something, guttural and sharp, then said, "Others go away. Narg stay. Narg smart." The words were distorted and hard to understand, coming from a mouth never meant for human speech. Its tone was meant to be soothing, he thought, but he could not take his eyes off the stained teeth, long and sharp, that flashed every time the creature spoke. "Narg know some come back sometime. Narg wait. You no need sword. Put sword down."

Until the Trolloc spoke Rand had not realized that he held Tam's sword wavering before him in both hands, its point aimed at the huge creature. It towered head and shoulders above him, with a chest and arms to dwarf Master Luhhan.

"Narg no hurt." It took a step closer, gesturing. "You put sword down." The dark hair on the backs of its hands was thick, like fur.

"Stay back," Rand said, wishing his voice were steadier. "Why did you do this? Why?"

"Vlja daeg roghda!" The snarl quickly became a toothy smile. "Put sword down. Narg no hurt. Myrddraal want talk you." A flash of emotion crossed the distorted face. Fear. "Others come back, you talk Myrddraal." It took another step, one big hand coming to rest on its own sword hilt. "You put sword down."



Rand wet his lips. Myrddraal! The worst of the stories was walking tonight. If a Fade was coming, it made a Trolloc pale by comparison. He had to get away. But if the Trolloc drew that massive blade he would not have a chance. He forced his lips into a shaky smile. "All right." Grip tightening on the sword, he let both hands drop to his sides. "I'll talk."

The wolf-smile became a snarl, and the Trolloc lunged for him. Rand had not thought anything that big could move so fast. Desperately he brought his sword up. The monstrous body crashed into him, slamming him against the wall. Breath left his lungs in one gasp. He fought for air as they fell to the floor together, the Trolloc on top. Frantically he struggled beneath the crushing weight, trying to avoid thick hands groping for him, and snapping jaws.

Abruptly the Trolloc spasmed and was still. Battered and bruised, half suffocated by the bulk on top of him, for a moment Rand could only lie there in disbelief. Quickly he came to his senses, though, enough to writhe out from under the body, at least. And body it was. The bloodied blade of Tam's sword stood out from the center of the Trolloc's back. He had gotten it up in time after all. Blood covered Rand's hands, as well, and made a blackish smear across the front of his shirt. His stomach churned, and he swallowed hard to keep from being sick. He shook as hard as he had in the worst of his fear, but this time in relief at still being alive.

Others come back, the Trolloc had said. The other Trollocs would be returning to the farmhouse. And a Myrddraal, a Fade. The stories said Fades were twenty feet tall, with eyes of fire, and they rode shadows like horses. When a Fade turned sideways, it disappeared, and no wall could stop them. He had to do what he had come for, and get away quickly.

Grunting with the effort he heaved the Trolloc's body over to get to the sword—and almost ran when open eyes stared at him. It took him a minute to realize they were staring through the glaze of death.

He wiped his hands on a tattered rag—it had been one of Tam's shirts only that morning—and tugged the blade free. Cleaning the sword, he reluctantly dropped the rag on the floor. There was no time for neatness, he thought with a laugh that he had to clamp his teeth shut to stop. He did not see how they could ever clean the house well enough for it to be lived in again. The horrible stench had probably already soaked right into the timbers. But there was no time to think of that. No time for neatness. No time for anything, maybe.

He was sure he was forgetting any number of things they would need, but Tam was waiting, and the Trollocs were coming back. He gathered what he could think of on the run. Blankets from the bedrooms upstairs, and clean cloths to bandage Tam's wound. Their cloaks and coats. A waterbag that he carried when he took the sheep to pasture. A clean shirt. He did not know when he would have time to change, but he wanted to get out of his blood-smeared shirt at the first opportunity. The small bags of willowbark and their other medicines were part of a dark, muddy-looking pile he could not bring himself to touch.

One bucket of the water Tam had brought in still stood by the fireplace, miraculously unspilled and untouched. He filled the waterbag from it, gave his hands a hasty wash in the rest, and made one more quick search for anything he might have forgotten. He found his bow among the wreckage, broken cleanly in two at the thickest point. He shuddered as he let the pieces fall. What he had gathered already would have to do, he decided. Quickly he piled everything outside the door.

The last thing before leaving the house, he dug a shuttered lantern from the mess on the floor. It still held oil. Lighting it from one of the candles, he closed the shutters—partly against the wind, but mostly to keep from drawing attention—and hurried outside with the lantern in one hand and the sword in the other. He was not sure what he would find in the barn. The sheep pen kept him from hoping too much. But he needed the cart to get Tam to Emond's Field, and for the cart he needed Bela. Necessity made him hope a little.

The barn doors stood open, one creaking on its hinges as it shifted in the wind. The interior looked as it always had, at first. Then his eyes fell on empty stalls, the stall doors ripped from their hinges. Bela and the cow were gone. Quickly he went to the back of the barn. The cart lay on its side, half the spokes broken out of its wheels. One shaft was only a foot-long stump.

The despair he had been holding at bay filled him. He was not sure he could carry Tam as far as the village even if his father could bear to be carried. The pain of it might kill Tam more quickly than the fever. Still, it was the only chance left. He had done all he could do here. As he turned to go, his eyes fell on the hacked-off cart shaft lying on the straw-strewn floor. Suddenly he smiled.

Hurriedly he set the lantern and the sword on the straw-covered floor, and in the next instant he was wrestling with the cart, tipping it back over to fall upright with a snap of more breaking spokes, then throwing his shoulder into it

to heave it over on the other side. The undamaged shaft stood straight out. Snatching up the sword he hacked at the well-seasoned ash. To his pleased surprise great chips flew with his strokes, and he cut through as quickly as he could have with a good axe.

When the shaft fell free, he looked at the sword blade in wonder. Even the best-sharpened axe would have dulled chopping through that hard, aged wood, but the sword looked as brightly sharp as ever. He touched the edge with his thumb, then hastily stuck it in his mouth. The blade was still razor-sharp.

But he had no time for wonder. Blowing out the lantern—there was no need to have the barn burn down on top of everything else—he gathered up the shafts and ran back to get what he had left at the house.

Altogether it made an awkward burden. Not a heavy one, but hard to balance and manage, the cart shafts shifting and twisting in his arms as he stumbled across the plowed field. Once back in the forest they were even worse, catching on trees and knocking him half off his feet. They would have been easier to drag, but that would leave a clear trail behind him. He intended to wait as long as possible before doing that.

Tam was right where he had left him, seemingly asleep. He hoped it was sleep. Suddenly fearful, he dropped his burdens and put a hand to his father's face. Tam still breathed, but the fever was worse.

The touch roused Tam, but only into a hazy wakefulness. "Is that you, boy?" he breathed. "Worried about you. Dreams of days gone. Nightmares." Murmuring softly, he drifted off again.

"Don't worry," Rand said. He lay Tam's coat and cloak over him to keep off the wind. "I'll get you to Nynaeve just as quick as I can." As he went on, as much to reassure himself as for Tam's benefit, he peeled off his bloodstained shirt, hardly even noticing the cold in his haste to be rid of it, and hurriedly pulled on the clean one. Throwing his old shirt away made him feel as if he had just had a bath. "We'll be safe in the village in no time, and the Wisdom will set everything right. You'll see. Everything's going to be all right."

That thought was like a beacon as he pulled on his coat and bent to tend Tam's wound. They would be safe once they reached the village, and Nynaeve would cure Tam. He just had to get him there.

## CHAPTER 6 - The Westwood

In the moonlight Rand could not really see what he was doing, but Tam's wound seemed to be only a shallow gash along the ribs, no longer than the palm of his hand. He shook his head in disbelief. He had seen his father take more of an injury than that and not even stop work except to wash it off. Hastily he searched Tam from head to foot for something bad enough to account for the fever, but the one cut was all he could find.

Small as it was, that lone cut was still grave enough; the flesh around it burned to the touch. It was even hotter than the rest of Tam's body, and the rest of him was hot enough to make Rand's jaws clench. A scalding fever like that could kill, or leave a man a husk of what he had once been. He soaked a cloth with water from the skin and laid it across Tam's forehead.

He tried to be gentle about washing and bandaging the gash on his father's ribs, but soft groans still interrupted Tam's low muttering. Stark branches loomed around them, threatening as they shifted as in the wind. Surely the Trollocs would go on their way when they failed to find Tam and him, when they came back to the farmhouse and found it still empty. He tried to make himself believe it, but the wanton destruction at the house, the senselessness of it, left little room for belief of that sort. Believing they would give up short of killing everyone and everything they could find was dangerous, a foolish chance he could not afford to take.

Trollocs. Light above, Trollocs! Creatures out of a gleeman's tale coming out of the night to bash in the door. And a Fade. Light shine on me, a Fade!

Abruptly he realized he was holding the untied ends of the bandage in motionless hands. Frozen like a rabbit that's seen a hawk's shadow, he thought scornfully. With an angry shake of his head he finished tying the bandage around Tam's chest.

Knowing what he had to do, even getting on with it, did not stop him being afraid. When the Trollocs came back they would surely begin searching the forest around the farm for some trace of the people who had escaped them. The body of the one he had killed would tell them those people were not far off. Who knew what a Fade would do, or could do? On top of that, his father's comment about Trollocs' hearing was as loud in his mind as if Tam had just said it. He found himself resisting the urge to put a hand over Tam's mouth, to still

his groans and murmurs. Some track by scent. What can I do about that? Nothing. He could not waste time worrying over problems he could do nothing about.

"You have to keep quiet," he whispered in his father's ear. "The Trollocs will be back."

Tam spoke in hushed, hoarse tones. "You're still lovely, Kari. Still lovely as a girl."

Rand grimaced. His mother had been dead fifteen years. If Tam believed she was still alive, then the fever was even worse than Rand had thought. How could he be kept from speaking, now that silence might mean life?

"Mother wants you to be quiet," Rand whispered. He paused to clear his throat of a sudden tightness. She had had gentle hands; he remembered that much. "Kari wants you to be quiet. Here. Drink."

Tam gulped thirstily from the waterskin, but after a few swallows he turned his head aside and began murmuring softly again, too low for Rand to understand. He hoped it was too low to be heard by hunting Trollocs, too.

Hastily he got on with what was needed. Three of the blankets he wove around and between the shafts cut from the cart, contriving a makeshift litter. He would only be able to carry one end, letting the other drag on the ground, but it would have to do. From the last blanket he cut a long strip with his belt knife, then tied one end of the strip to each of the shafts.

As gently as he could, he lifted Tam onto the litter, wincing with every moan. His father had always seemed indestructible. Nothing could harm him; nothing could stop him, or even slow him down. For him to be in this condition almost robbed Rand of what courage he had managed to gather. But he had to keep on. That was all that kept him moving. He had to.

When Tam finally lay on the litter, Rand hesitated, then took the sword belt from his father's waist. When he fastened it around himself, it felt odd there; it made him feel odd. Belt and sheath and sword together only weighed a few pounds, but when he sheathed the blade it seemed to drag at him like a great weight.

Angrily he berated himself. This was no time or place for foolish fancies. It was only a big knife. How many times had he daydreamed about wearing a sword and having adventures? If he could kill one Trolloc with it, he could surely fight off any others as well. Only, he knew all too well that what had happened in the farmhouse had been the purest luck. And his daydream adventures had never included his teeth chattering, or running for his life through the night, or his father at the point of death.

Hastily he tucked the last blanket around Tam, and laid the waterskin and the rest of the cloths beside his father on the litter. With a deep breath he knelt between the shafts and lifted the strip of blanket over his head. It settled across his shoulders and under his arms. When he gripped the shafts and straightened, most of the weight was on his shoulders. It did not seem like very much. Trying to keep a smooth pace, he set out for Emond's Field, the litter scraping along behind him.

He had already decided to make his way to the Quarry Road and follow that to the village. The danger would almost certainly be greater along the road, but Tam would receive no help at all if he got them lost trying to find his way through the woods and the dark.

In the darkness he was almost out onto the Quarry Road before he knew it. When he realized where he was, his throat tightened like a fist. Hurriedly he turned the litter around and dragged it back into the trees a way, then stopped to catch his breath and let his heart stop pounding. Still panting, he turned east, toward Emond's Field.

Traveling through the trees was more difficult than taking Tam down the road, and the night surely did not help, but going out onto the road itself would be madness. The idea was to reach the village without meeting any Trollocs; without even seeing any, if he had his wish. He had to assume the Trollocs were still hunting them, and sooner or later they would realize the two had set off for the village. That was the most likely place to go, and the Quarry Road the most likely route. In truth, he found himself closer to the road than he liked. The night and the shadows under the trees seemed awfully bare cover in which to hide from the eyes of anyone traveling along it.

Moonlight filtering through bare branches gave only enough illumination to fool his eyes into thinking they saw what was underfoot. Roots threatened to trip him at every step, old brambles snagged his legs, and sudden dips or rises in the ground had him half falling as his foot met nothing but air where he

expected firm earth, or stumbling when his toe struck dirt while still moving forward. Tam's mutterings broke into a sharp groan whenever one of the shafts bumped too quickly over root or rock.

Uncertainty made him peer into the darkness until his eyes burned, listen as he had never listened before. Every scrape of branch against branch, every rustle of pine needles, brought him to a halt, ears straining, hardly daring to breathe for fear he might not hear some warning sound, for fear he might hear that sound. Only when he was sure it was just the wind would he go on.

Slowly weariness crept into his arms and legs, driven home by a night wind that mocked his cloak and coat. The weight of the litter, so little at the start, now tried to pull him to the ground. His stumbles were no longer all from tripping. The almost constant struggle not to fall took as much out of him as did the actual work of pulling the litter. He had been up before dawn to begin his chores, and even with the trip to Emond's Field he had done almost a full day's work. On any normal night he would be resting before the fireplace, reading one of Tam's small collection of books before going to bed. The sharp chill soaked into his bones, and his stomach reminded him that he had had nothing to eat since Mistress al'Vere's honeycakes.

He muttered to himself, angry at not taking some food at the farm. A few minutes more could not have made any difference. A few minutes to find some bread and cheese. The Trollocs would not have come back in just a few minutes more. Or just the bread. Of course, Mistress al'Vere would insist on putting a hot meal in front of him once they reached the inn. A steaming plate of her thick lamb stew, probably. And some of that bread she had been baking. And lots of hot tea.

"They came over the Dragonwall like a flood," Tam said suddenly, in a strong, angry voice, "and washed the land with blood. How many died for Laman's sin?"

Rand almost fell from surprise. Warily he lowered the litter to the ground and untangled himself. The strip of blanket left a burning groove in his shoulders. Shrugging to work the knots out, he knelt beside Tam. Fumbling for the waterbag, he peered through the trees, trying vainly in the dim moonlight to see up and down the road, not twenty paces away. Nothing moved there but shadows. Nothing but shadows.

"There isn't any flood of Trollocs, father. Not now, anyway. We'll be safe in Emond's Field soon. Drink a little water."

Tam brushed aside the waterbag with an arm that seemed to have regained all of its strength. He seized Rand's collar, pulling him close enough to feel the heat of his father's fever in his own cheek. "They called them savages," Tam said urgently. "The fools said they could be swept aside like rubbish. How many battles lost, how many cities burned, before they faced the truth? Before the nations stood together against them?" He loosed his hold on Rand, and sadness filled his voice. "The field at Marath carpeted with the dead, and no sound but the cries of ravens and the buzzing of flies. The topless towers of Cairhien burning in the night like torches. All the way to the Shining Walls they burned and slew before they were turned back. All the way to—"

Rand clamped a hand over his father's mouth. The sound came again, a rhythmic thudding, directionless in the trees, fading then growing stronger again as the wind shifted. Frowning, he turned his head slowly, trying to decide from where it came. A flicker of motion caught the corner of his eye, and in an instant he was crouched over Tam. He was startled to feel the hilt of the sword clutched tight in his hand, but most of him concentrated on the Quarry Road as if the road were the only real thing in the entire world.

Wavering shadows to the east slowly resolved themselves into a horse and rider followed up the road by tall, bulky shapes trotting to keep up with the animal. The pale light of the moon glittered from spearheads and axe blades. Rand never even considered that they might be villagers coming to help. He knew what they were. He could feel it, like grit scraping his bones, even before they drew close enough for moonlight to reveal the hooded cloak swathing the horseman, a cloak that hung undisturbed by the wind. All of the shapes appeared black in the night, and the horse's hooves made the same sounds that any other's would, but Rand knew this horse from any other.

Behind the dark rider came nightmare forms with horns and muzzles and beaks, Trollocs in a double file, all in steps, boots and hooves striking the ground at the same instant as if obeying a single mind. Rand counted twenty as they ran past. He wondered what kind of man would dare turn his back on so many Trollocs. Or on one, for that matter.

The trotting column disappeared westward, thumping footfalls fading into the darkness, but Rand remained where he was, not moving a muscle except to breathe. Something told him to be certain, absolutely certain, they were gone before he moved. At long last he drew a deep breath and began to straighten.



This time the horse made no sound at all. In eerie silence the dark rider returned, his shadowy mount stopping every few steps as it walked slowly back down the road. The wind gusted higher, moaning through the trees; the horseman's cloak lay still as death. Whenever the horse halted, that hooded head swung from side to side as the rider peered into the forest, searching. Exactly opposite Rand the horse stopped again, the shadowed opening of the hood turning toward where he crouched above his father.

Rand's hand tightened convulsively on the sword hilt. He felt the gaze, just as he had that morning, and shivered again from the hatred even if he could not see it. That shrouded man hated everyone and everything, everything that lived. Despite the cold wind, sweat beaded on Rand's face.

Then the horse was moving on, a few soundless steps and stop, until all Rand could see was a barely distinguishable blur in the night far down the road. It could have been anything, but he had not taken his eyes off it for a second. If he lost it, he was afraid the next time he saw the black-cloaked rider might be when that silent horse was on top of him.

Abruptly the shadow was rushing back, passing him in a silent gallop. The rider looked only ahead of him as he sped westward into the night, toward the Mountains of Mist. Toward the farm.

Rand sagged, gulping air and scrubbing cold sweat off his face with his sleeve. He did not care any more about why the Trollocs had come. If he never found out why, that would be fine, just as long as it was all ended.

With a shake he gathered himself, hastily checking his father. Tam was still murmuring, but so softly Rand could not make out the words. He tried to give him a drink, but the water spilled over his father's chin. Tam coughed and choked on the trickle that made it into his mouth, then began muttering again as if there had not been any interruption.

Rand splashed a little more water on the cloth on Tam's forehead, pushed the waterbag back on the litter, and scrambled between the shafts again.

He started out as if he had had a good night's sleep, but the new strength did not last long. Fear masked his tiredness in the beginning, but though the fear remained, the mask melted away quickly. Soon he was back to stumbling forward, trying to ignore hunger and aching muscles. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other without tripping.

In his mind he pictured Emond's Field, shutters thrown back and the houses lit for Winternight, people shouting greetings as they passed back and forth on their visits, fiddles filling the streets with "Jaem's Folly" and "Heron on the Wing." Haral Luhhan would have one too many brandies and start singing "The Wind in the Barley" in a voice like a bullfrog—he always did—until his wife managed to shush him, and Cenn Buie would decide to prove he could still dance as well as ever, and Mat would have something planned that would not quite happen the way he intended, and everybody would know he was responsible even if no one could prove it. He could almost smile thinking about how it would be.

After a time Tam spoke up again.

"Avendesora. It's said it makes no seed, but they brought a cutting to Cairhien, a sapling. A royal gift of wonder for the king." Though he sounded angry, he was barely loud enough for Rand to understand. Anyone who could hear him would be able to hear the litter scraping across the ground, too. Rand kept on, only half listening. "They never make peace. Never. But they brought a sapling, as a sign of peace. Five hundred years it grew. Five hundred years of peace with those who make no peace with strangers. Why did he cut it down? Why? Blood was the price for Avendoraldera. Blood the price for Laman's pride." He faded off into muttering once more.

Tiredly Rand wondered what fever-dream Tam could be having now. Avendesora. The Tree of Life was supposed to have all sorts of miraculous qualities, but none of the stories mentioned any sapling, or any "they." There was only the one, and that belonged to the Green Man.

Only that morning he might have felt foolish at musing over the Green Man and the Tree of Life. They were only stories. Are they? Trollocs were just stories this morning. Maybe all the stories were as real as the news the peddlers and merchants brought all the gleeman's tales and all the stories told at night in front of the fireplace. Next he might actually meet the Green Man, or an Ogier giant, or a wild, black-veiled Aielman.

Tam was talking again, he realized, sometimes only murmuring, sometimes loud enough to understand. From time to time he stopped to pant for breath, then went on as if he thought he had been speaking the whole time.

“... battles are always hot, even in the snow. Sweat heat. Blood heat. Only death is cool. Slope of the mountain ... only place didn't stink of death. Had to get away from smell of it ... sight of it. ... heard a baby cry. Their women fight alongside the men, sometimes, but why they had let her come, I don't ... gave birth there alone, before she died of her wounds. ... covered the child with her cloak, but the wind ... blown the cloak away. ... child, blue with the cold. Should have been dead, too. ... crying there. Crying in the snow. I couldn't just leave a child. ... no children of our own. ... always knew you wanted children. I knew you'd take it to your heart, Kari. Yes, lass. Rand is a good name. A good name.”

Suddenly Rand's legs lost the little strength they had. Stumbling, he fell to his knees. Tam moaned with the jolt, and the strip of blanket cut into Rand's shoulders, but he was not aware of either. If a Trolloc had leaped up in front of him right then, he would just have stared at it. He looked over his shoulder at Tam, who had sunk back into wordless murmurs. Fever-dreams, he thought dully. Fevers always brought bad dreams, and this was a night for nightmares even without a fever.

“You are my father,” he said aloud, stretching back a hand to touch Tam, “and I am—” The fever was worse. Much worse.

Grimly he struggled to his feet. Tam murmured something, but Rand refused to listen to any more. Throwing his weight against the improvised harness he tried to put all of his mind into taking one leaden step after another, into reaching the safety of Emond's Field. But he could not stop the echo in the back of his mind. He's my father. It was just a fever-dream. He's my father. It was just a fever-dream. Light, who am I?

## CHAPTER 7 - Out of the Woods

Gray first light came while Rand still trudged through the forest. At first he did not really see. When he finally did, he stared at the fading darkness in surprise. No matter what his eyes told him, he could hardly believe he had spent all night trying to travel the distance from the farm to Emond's Field. Of course, the Quarry Road by day, rocks and all, was a far cry from the woods by night. On the other hand, it seemed days since he had seen the black-cloaked rider on the road, weeks since he and Tam had gone in for their supper. He no longer felt the strip of cloth digging into his shoulders, but then he felt nothing in his shoulders except numbness, nor in his feet, for that matter. In between, it was another matter. His breath came in labored pants that had long since set his throat and lungs to burning, and hunger twisted his stomach into queasy sickness.

Tam had fallen silent some time before. Rand was not sure how long it had been since the murmurs ceased, but he did not dare halt now to check on Tam. If he stopped he would never be able to force himself to start out again. Anyway, Whatever Tam's condition, he could do nothing beyond what he was doing. The only hope lay ahead, in the village. He tried wearily to increase his pace, but his wooden legs continued their slow plod. He barely even noticed the cold, or the wind.

Vaguely he caught the smell of woodsmoke. At least he was almost there if he could smell the village chimneys. A tired smile had only begun on his face, though, when it turned to a frown. Smoke lay heavy in the air—too heavy. With the weather, a fire might well be blazing on every hearth in the village, but the smoke was still too strong. In his mind he saw again the Trollocs on the road. Trollocs coming from the east, from the direction of Emond's Field. He peered ahead, trying to make out the first houses, and ready to shout for help at the first sight of anyone, even Cenn Buie or one of the Coplins. A small voice in the back of his head told him to hope someone there could still give help.

Suddenly a house became visible through the last bare-branched trees, and it was all he could do to keep his feet moving. Hope turning to sharp despair, he staggered into the village.

Charred piles of rubble stood in the places of half the houses of Emond's Field. Soot-coated brick chimneys thrust like dirty fingers from heaps of blackened timbers. Thin wisps of smoke still rose from the ruins. Grimy-faced villagers,

some yet in their night clothes, poked through the ashes, here pulling free a cookpot, there simply prodding forlornly at the wreckage with a stick. What little had been rescued from the flames dotted the streets; tall mirrors and polished sideboards and highchests stood in the dust among chairs and tables buried under bedding, cooking utensils, and meager piles of clothing and personal belongings.

The destruction seemed scattered at random through the village. Five houses marched untouched in one row, while in another place a lone survivor stood surrounded by desolation.

On the far side of the Winespring Water, the three huge Bel Tine bonfires roared, tended by a cluster of men. Thick columns of black smoke bent northward with the wind, flecked by careless sparks. One of Master al'Vere's Dhurran stallions was dragging something Rand could not make out over the ground toward the Wagon Bridge, and the flames.

Before he was well out of the trees, a sooty-faced Haral Luhhan hurried to him, clutching a woodsman's axe in one thick-fingered hand. The burly blacksmith's ash-smeared nightshirt hung to his boots, the angry red welt of a burn across his chest showing through a ragged tear. He dropped to one knee beside the litter. Tam's eyes were closed, and his breathing came low and hard.

"Trollocs, boy?" Master Luhhan asked in a smoke-hoarse voice. "Here, too. Here, too. Well, we may have been luckier than anyone has a right to be, if you can credit it. He needs the Wisdom. Now where in the Light is she? Egwene!"

Egwene, running by with her arms full of bedsheets torn into bandages, looked around at them without slowing. Her eyes stared at something in the far distance; dark circles made them appear even larger than they actually were. Then she saw Rand and stopped, drawing a shuddering breath. "Oh, no, Rand, not your father? Is he . . . ? Come, I'll take you to Nynaeve."

Rand was too tired, too stunned, to speak. All through the night Emond's Field had been a haven, where he and Tam would be safe. Now all he could seem to do was stare in dismay at her smoke-stained dress. He noticed odd details as if they were very important. The buttons down the back of her dress were done up crookedly. And her hands were clean. He wondered why her hands were clean when smudges of soot marked her cheeks.

Master Luhhan seemed to understand what had come over him. Laying his axe across the shafts, the blacksmith picked up the rear of the litter and gave it a gentle push, prodding him to follow Egwene. He stumbled after her as if walking in his sleep. Briefly he wondered how Master Luhhan knew the creatures were Trollocs, but it was a fleeting thought. If Tam could recognize them, there was no reason why Haral Luhhan could not.

"All the stories are real," he muttered.

"So it seems, lad," the blacksmith said. "So it seems."

Rand only half heard. He was concentrating on following Egwene's slender shape. He had pulled himself together just enough to wish she would hurry, though in truth she was keeping her pace to what the two men could manage with their burden. She led them halfway down the Green, to the Calder house. Char blackened the edges of its thatch, and smut stained the whitewashed walls. Of the houses on either side only the foundation stones were left, and two piles of ash and burned timbers. One had been the house of Berin Thane, one of the miller's brothers. The other had been Abell Cauthon's. Mat's father. Even the chimneys had toppled.

"Wait here," Egwene said, and gave them a look as if expecting an answer. When they only stood there, she muttered something under her breath, then dashed inside.

"Mat," Rand said. "Is he . . .?"

"He's alive," the blacksmith said. He set down his end of the litter and straightened slowly. "I saw him a little while ago. It's a wonder any of us are alive. The way they came after my house, and the forge, you'd have thought I had gold and jewels in there. Alsbet cracked one's skull with a frying pan. She took one look at the ashes of our house this morning and set out hunting around the village with the biggest hammer she could dig out of what's left of the forge, just in case any of them hid instead of running away. I could almost pity the thing if she finds one." He nodded to the Calder house. "Mistress Calder and a few others took in some of those who were hurt, the ones with no home of their own still standing. When the Wisdom's seen Tam, we'll find him a bed. The inn, maybe. The Mayor offered it already, but Nynaeve said the hurt folk would heal better if there weren't so many of them together."

Rand sank to his knees. Shrugging out of his blanket harness, he wearily busied himself with checking Tam's covers. Tam never moved or made a sound, even when Rand's wooden hands jostled him. But he was still breathing, at least. My father. The other was just the fever talking. "What if they come back?" he said dully.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," Master Luhhan said uneasily. "If they come back. . . . Well, they're gone, now. So we pick up the pieces, build up what's been torn down." He sighed, his face going slack as he knuckled the small of his back. For the first time Rand realized that the heavyset man was as tired as he was himself, if not more so. The blacksmith looked at the village, shaking his head. "I don't suppose today will be much of a Bel Tine. But we'll make it through. We always have." Abruptly he took up his axe, and his face firmed. "There's work waiting for me. Don't you worry, lad. The Wisdom will take good care of him, and the Light will take care of us all. And if the Light doesn't, well, we'll just take care of ourselves. Remember, we're Two Rivers folk."

Still on his knees, Rand looked at the village as the blacksmith walked away, really looked for the first time. Master Luhhan was right, he thought, and was surprised that he was not surprised by what he saw. People still dug in the ruins of their homes, but even in the short time he had been there more of them had begun to move with a sense of purpose. He could almost feel the growing determination. But he wondered. They had seen Trollocs; had they seen the black-cloaked rider? Had they felt his hatred?

Nynaeve and Egwene appeared from the Calder house, and he sprang to his feet. Or rather, he tried to spring to his feet; it was more of a stumbling lurch that almost put him on his face in the dust.

The Wisdom dropped to her knees beside the litter without giving him so much as a glance. Her face and dress were even dirtier than Egwene's, and the same dark circles lined her eyes, though her hands, too, were clean. She felt Tam's face and thumbed open his eyelids. With a frown she pulled down the coverings and eased the bandage aside to look at the wound. Before Rand could see what lay underneath she had replaced the wadded cloth. Sighing, she smoothed the blanket and cloak back up to Tam's neck with a gentle touch, as if tucking a child in for the night.

"There's nothing I can do," she said. She had to put her hands on her knees to straighten up. "I'm sorry, Rand."

For a moment he stood, not understanding, as she started back to the house, then he scrambled after her and pulled her around to face him. "He's dying," he cried.

"I know," she said simply, and he sagged with the matter-of-factness of it.

"You have to do something. You have to. You're the Wisdom."

Pain twisted her face, but only for an instant, then she was all hollow-eyed resolve again, her voice emotionless and firm. "Yes, I am. I know what I can do with my medicines, and I know when it's too late. Don't you think I would do something if I could? But I can't. I can't, Rand. And there are others who need me. People I can help."

"I brought him to you as quickly as I could," he mumbled. Even with the village in ruins, there had been the Wisdom for hope. With that gone, he was empty.

"I know you did," she said gently. She touched his cheek with her hand. "It isn't your fault. You did the best anyone could. I am sorry, Rand, but I have others to tend to. Our troubles are just beginning, I'm afraid."

Vacantly he stared after her until the door of the house closed behind her. He could not make any thought come except that she would not help.

Suddenly he was knocked back a step as Egwene cannoned into him, throwing her arms around him. Her hug was hard enough to bring a grunt from him any other time; now he only looked silently at the door behind which his hopes had vanished.

"I'm so sorry, Rand," she said against his chest. "Light, I wish there was something I could do."

Numbly he put his arms around her. "I know. I . . . I have to do something, Egwene. I don't know what, but I can't just let him. . . ." His voice broke, and she hugged him harder.

"Egwene!" At Nynaeve's shout from the house, Egwene jumped. "Egwene, I need you! And wash your hands again!"

She pushed herself free from Rand's arms. "She needs my help, Rand."



“Egwene!”

He thought he heard a sob as she spun away from him. Then she was gone, and he was left alone beside the litter. For a moment he looked down at Tam, feeling nothing but hollow helplessness. Suddenly his face hardened. “The Mayor will know what to do,” he said, lifting the shafts once more. “The Mayor will know.” Bran al’Vere always knew what to do. With weary obstinacy he set out for the Winespring Inn.

Another of the Dhurran stallions passed him, its harness straps tied around the ankles of a big shape draped with a dirty blanket. Arms covered with coarse hair dragged in the dirt behind the blanket, and one corner was pushed up to reveal a goat’s horn. The Two Rivers was no place for stories to become horribly real. If Trollocs belonged anywhere it was in the world outside, for places where they had Aes Sedai and false Dragons and the Light alone knew what else come to life out of the tales of gleemen. Not the Two Rivers. Not Emond’s Field.

As he made his way down the Green, people called to him, some from the ruins of their homes, asking if they could help. He heard them only as murmurs in the background, even when they walked alongside him for a distance as they spoke. Without really thinking about it he managed words that said he needed no help, that everything was being taken care of. When they left him, with worried looks, and sometimes a comment about sending Nynaeve to him, he noticed that just as little. All he let himself be aware of was the purpose he had fixed in his head. Bran al’Vere could do something to help Tam. What that could be he tried not to dwell on. But the Mayor would be able to do something, to think of something.

The inn had almost completely escaped the destruction that had taken half the village. A few scorch marks marred its walls, but the red roof tiles glittered in the sunlight as brightly as ever. All that was left of the peddler’s wagon, though, were blackened iron wheel-rims leaning against the charred wagon box, now on the ground. The big round hoops that had held up the canvas cover slanted crazily, each at a different angle.

Thom Merrill sat cross-legged on the old foundation stones, carefully snipping singed edges from the patches on his cloak with a pair of small scissors. He set down cloak and scissors when Rand drew near. Without asking if Rand needed or wanted help, he hopped down and picked up the back of the litter.

"Inside? Of course, of course. Don't you worry, boy. Your Wisdom will take care of him. I've watched her work, since last night, and she has a deft touch and a sure skill. It could be a lot worse. Some died last night. Not many, perhaps, but any at all are too many for me. Old Fain just disappeared, and that's the worst of all. Trollocs will eat anything. You should thank the Light your father's still here, and alive for the Wisdom to heal."

Rand blotted out the words—He is my father!—reducing the voice to meaningless sound that he noticed no more than a fly's buzzing. He could not bear any more sympathy, any more attempts to boost his spirits. Not now. Not until Bran al'Vere told him how to help Tam.

Suddenly he found himself facing something scrawled on the inn door, a curving line scratched with a charred stick, a charcoal teardrop balanced on its point. So much had happened that it hardly surprised him to find the Dragon's Fang marked on the door of the Winespring Inn. Why anyone would want to accuse the innkeeper or his family of evil, or bring the inn bad luck, was beyond him, but the night had convinced him of one thing. Anything was possible. Anything at all.

At a push from the gleeman he lifted the latch, and went in.

The common room was empty except for Bran al'Vere, and cold, too, for no one had found time to lay a fire. The Mayor sat at one of the tables, dipping his pen in an inkwell with a frown of concentration on his face and his gray-fringed head bent over a sheet of parchment. Nightshirt tucked hastily into his trousers and bagging around his considerable waist, he absently scratched at one bare foot with the toes of the other. His feet were dirty, as if he had been outside more than once without bothering about boots, despite the cold. "What's your trouble?" he demanded without looking up. "Be quick with it. I have two dozen things to do right this minute, and more that should have been done an hour ago. So I have little time or patience. Well? Out with it!"

"Master al'Vere?" Rand said. "It's my father."

The Mayor's head jerked up. "Rand? Tam!" He threw down the pen and knocked over his chair as he leaped up. "Perhaps the Light hasn't abandoned us altogether. I was afraid you were both dead. Bela galloped into the village an hour after the Trollocs left, lathered and blowing as if she'd run all the way from the farm, and I thought. . . . No time for that, now. We'll take him upstairs." He seized the rear of the litter, shouldering the gleeman out of the way. "You go

get the Wisdom, Master Merrill. And tell her I said hurry, or I'll know the reason why! Rest easy, Tam. We'll soon have you in a good, soft bed. Go, gleeman, go!"

Thom Merrill vanished through the doorway before Rand could speak. "Nynaeve wouldn't do anything. She said she couldn't help him. I knew . . . I hoped you'd think of something."

Master al'Vere looked at Tam more sharply, then shook his head. "We will see, boy. We will see." But he no longer sounded confident. "Let's get him into a bed. He can rest easy, at least."

Rand let himself be prodded toward the stairs at the back of the common room. He tried hard to keep his certainty that somehow Tam would be all right, but it had been thin to begin with, he realized, and the sudden doubt in the Mayor's voice shook him.

On the second floor of the inn, at the front, were half a dozen snug, well-appointed rooms with windows overlooking the Green. Mostly they were used by the peddlers, or people down from Watch Hill or up from Deven Ride, but the merchants who came each year were often surprised to find such comfortable rooms. Three of them were taken now, and the Mayor hurried Rand to one of the unused ones.

Quickly the down comforter and blankets were stripped back on the wide bed, and Tam was transferred to the thick feather mattress, with goose-down pillows tucked under his head. He made no sound beyond hoarse breathing as he was moved, not even a groan, but the Mayor brushed away Rand's concern, telling him to set a fire to take the chill off the room. While Rand dug wood and kindling from the woodbox next to the fireplace, Bran threw back the curtains on the window, letting in the morning light, then began to gently wash Tam's face. By the time the gleeman returned, the blaze on the hearth was warming the room.

"She will not come," Thom Merrill announced as he stalked into the room. He glared at Rand, his bushy white brows drawing down sharply. "You didn't tell me she had seen him already. She almost took my head off."

"I thought . . . I don't know . . . maybe the Mayor could do something, could make her see. . . ." Hands clenched in anxious fists, Rand turned from the fireplace to Bran. "Master al'Vere, what can I do?" The rotund man shook his

head helplessly. He laid a freshly dampened cloth on Tam's forehead and avoided meeting Rand's eye. "I can't just watch him die, Master al'Vere. I have to do something." The gleeman shifted as if to speak. Rand rounded on him eagerly. "Do you have an idea? I'll try anything."

"I was just wondering," Thom said, tamping his long-stemmed pipe with his thumb, "if the Mayor knew who scrawled the Dragon's Fang on his door." He peered into the bowl, then looked at Tam and replaced the unlit pipe between his teeth with a sigh. "Someone seems not to like him anymore. Or maybe it's his guests they don't like."

Rand gave him a disgusted look and turned away to stare into the fire. His thoughts danced like the flames, and like the flames they concentrated fixedly on one thing. He would not give up. He could not just stand there and watch Tam die. My father, he thought fiercely. My father. Once the fever was gone, that could be cleared up as well. But the fever first. Only, how?

Bran al'Vere's mouth tightened as he looked at Rand's back, and the glare he directed at the gleeman would have given a bear pause, but Thom just waited expectantly as if he had not noticed it.

"It's probably the work of one of the Congars, or a Coplin," the Mayor said finally, "though the Light alone knows which. They're a large brood, and if there's ill to be said of someone, or even if there isn't, they'll say it. They make Cenn Buie sound honey-tongued."

"That wagonload who came in just before dawn?" the gleeman asked. "They hadn't so much as smelled a Trolloc, and all they wanted to know was when Festival was going to start, as if they couldn't see half the village in ashes."

Master al'Vere nodded grimly. "One branch of the family. But none of them are very different. That fool Darl Coplin spent half the night demanding I put Mistress Moiraine and Master Lan out of the inn, out of the village, as if there would be any village at all left without them."

Rand had only half listened to the conversation, but this last tugged him to speak. "What did they do?"

"Why, she called ball lightning out of a clear night sky," Master al'Vere replied. "Sent it darting straight at the Trollocs. You've seen trees shattered by it. The Trollocs stood it no better."

"Moiraine?" Rand said incredulously, and the Mayor nodded.

"Mistress Moiraine. And Master Lan was a whirlwind with that sword of his. His sword? The man himself is a weapon, and in ten places at once, or so it seemed. Burn me, but I still wouldn't believe it if I couldn't step outside and see. . . ." He rubbed a hand over his bald head. "Winternight visits just beginning, our hands full of presents and honeycakes and our heads full of wine, then the dogs snarling, and suddenly the two of them burst out of the inn, running through the village, shouting about Trollocs. I thought they'd had too much wine. After all . . . Trollocs? Then, before anyone knew what was happening, those . . . those things were right in the streets with us, slashing at people with their swords, torching houses, howling to freeze a man's blood." He made a sound of disgust in his throat. "We just ran like chickens with a fox in the henyard till Master Lan put some backbone into us."

"No need to be so hard," Thom said. "You did as well as anyone could. Not every Trolloc lying out there fell to the two of them."

"Umm . . . yes, well." Master al'Vere gave himself a shake. "It's still almost too much to believe. An Aes Sedai in Emond's Field. And Master Lan is a Warder."

"An Aes Sedai?" Rand whispered. "She can't be. I talked to her. She isn't. . . . She doesn't. . . ."

"Did you think they wore signs?" the Mayor said wryly. "'Aes Sedai' painted across their backs, and maybe, 'Danger, stay away?'" Suddenly he slapped his forehead. "Aes Sedai. I'm an old fool, and losing my wits. There's a chance, Rand, if you're willing to take it. I can't tell you to do it, and I don't know if I'd have the nerve, if it were me."

"A chance?" Rand said. "I'll take any chance, if it'll help."

"Aes Sedai can heal, Rand. Burn me, lad, you've heard the stories. They can cure where medicines fail. Gleeman, you should have remembered that better than I. Gleemen's tales are full of Aes Sedai. Why didn't you speak up, instead of letting me flail around?"

"I'm a stranger here," Thom said, looking longingly at his unlit pipe, "and Goodman Coplin isn't the only one who wants nothing to do with Aes Sedai. Best the idea came from you."

"An Aes Sedai," Rand muttered, trying to make the woman who had smiled at him fit the stories. Help from an Aes Sedai was sometimes worse than no help at all, so the stories said, like poison in a pie, and their gifts always had a hook in them, like fishbait. Suddenly the coin in his pocket, the coin Moiraine had given him, seemed like a burning coal. It was all he could do not to rip it out of his coat and throw it out the window.

"Nobody wants to get involved with Aes Sedai, lad," the Mayor said slowly. "It is the only chance I can see, but it's still no small decision. I cannot make it for you, but I have seen nothing but good from Mistress Moiraine . . . Moiraine Sedai, I should call her, I suppose. Sometimes"—he gave a meaningful look at Tam—"you have to take a chance, even if it's a poor one."

"Some of the stories are exaggerated, in a way," Thom added, as if the words were being dragged from him. "Some of them. Besides, boy, what choice do you have?"

"None," Rand sighed. Tam still had not moved a muscle; his eyes were sunken as if he had been sick a week. "I'll . . . I'll go find her."

"The other side of the bridges," the gleeman said, "where they are . . . disposing of the dead Trollocs. But be careful, boy. Aes Sedai do what they do for reasons of their own, and they aren't always the reasons others think."

The last was a shout that followed Rand through the door. He had to hold onto the sword hilt to keep the scabbard from tangling in his legs as he ran, but he would not take the time to remove it. He clattered down the stairs and dashed out of the inn, tiredness forgotten for the moment. A chance for Tam, however small, was enough to overcome a night without sleep, for a time at least. That the chance came from an Aes Sedai, or what the price of it might be, he did not want to consider. And as for actually facing an Aes Sedai. . . . He took a deep breath and tried to move faster.

The bonfires stood well beyond the last houses to the north, on the Westwood side of the road to Watch Hill. The wind still carried the oily black columns of smoke away from the village, but even so a sickly sweet stink filled the air, like a roast left hours too long on the spit. Rand gagged at the smell, then swallowed hard when he realized its source. A fine thing to do with Bel Tine fires. The men tending the fires had cloths tied over their noses and mouths, but their grimaces made it plain the vinegar dampening the cloths was not enough. Even

if it did kill the stench, they still knew the stench was there, and they still knew what they were doing.

Two of the men were untying the harness straps of one of the big Dhurrans from a Trolloc's ankles. Lan, squatting beside the body, had tossed back the blanket enough to reveal the Trolloc's shoulders and goat-snouted head. As Rand trotted up the Warder unfastened a metal badge, a blood-red enameled trident, from one spiked shoulder of the Trolloc's shirt of black mail.

"Ko'bal," he announced. He bounced the badge on his palm and snatched it out of the air with a growl. "That makes seven bands so far."

Moiraine, seated cross-legged on the ground a short distance off, shook her head tiredly. A walking staff, covered from end to end in carved vines and flowers, lay across her knees, and her dress had the rumpled look of having been worn too long. "Seven bands. Seven! That many have not acted together since the Trolloc Wars. Bad news piles on bad news. I am afraid, Lan. I thought we had gained a march, but we may be further behind than ever."

Rand stared at her, unable to speak. An Aes Sedai. He had been trying to convince himself that she would not look any different now that he knew who . . . what he was looking at, and to his surprise she did not. She was no longer quite so pristine, not with wisps of her hair sticking out in all directions and a faint streak of soot across her nose, yet not really different, either. Surely there must be something about an Aes Sedai to mark her for what she was. On the other hand, if outward appearance reflected what was inside, and if the stories were true, then she should look closer to a Trolloc than to a more than handsome woman whose dignity was not dented by sitting in the dirt. And she could help Tam. Whatever the cost, there was that before anything else.

He took a deep breath. "Mistress Moiraine . . . I mean, Moiraine Sedai." Both turned to look at him, and he froze under her gaze. Not the calm, smiling gaze he remembered from the Green. Her face was tired, but her dark eyes were a hawk's eyes. Aes Sedai. Breakers of the world. Puppeteers who pulled strings and made thrones and nations dance in designs only the women from Tar Valon knew.

"A little more light in the darkness," the Aes Sedai murmured. She raised her voice. "How are your dreams, Rand al'Thor?"

He stared at her. "My dreams?"

"A night like that can give a man bad dreams, Rand. If you have nightmares, you must tell me of it. I can help with bad dreams, sometimes."

"There's nothing wrong with my. . . It's my father. He's hurt. It's not much more than a scratch, but the fever is burning him up. The Wisdom won't help. She says she can't. But the stories—" She raised an eyebrow, and he stopped and swallowed hard. Light, is there a story with an Aes Sedai where she isn't a villain? He looked at the Warder, but Lan appeared more interested in the dead Trolloc than in anything Rand might say. Fumbling his way under her eyes, he went on. "I . . . ah . . . it's said Aes Sedai can heal. If you can help him . . . anything you can do for him . . . Whatever the cost. . . I mean. . . ." He took a deep breath and finished up in a rush. "I'll pay any price in my power if you help him. Anything."

"Any price," Moiraine mused, half to herself. "We will speak of prices later, Rand, if at all. I can make no promises. Your Wisdom knows what she is about. I will do what I can, but it is beyond my power to stop the Wheel from turning."

"Death comes sooner or later to everyone," the Warder said grimly, "unless they serve the Dark One, and only fools are willing to pay that price."

Moiraine made a clucking sound. "Do not be so gloomy, Lan. We have some reason to celebrate. A small one, but a reason." She used the staff to pull herself to her feet. "Take me to your father, Rand. I will help him as much as I am able. Too many here have refused to let me help at all. They have heard the stories, too," she added dryly.

"He's at the inn," Rand said. "This way. And thank you. Thank you!"

They followed, but his pace took him quickly ahead. He slowed impatiently for them to catch up, then darted ahead again and had to wait again.

"Please hurry," he urged, so caught up in actually getting help for Tam that he never considered the temerity of prodding an Aes Sedai. "The fever is burning him up."

Lan glared at him. "Can't you see she's tired? Even with an angreal, what she did last night was like running around the village with a sack of stones on her back. I don't know that you are worth it, shepherd, no matter what she says."



Rand blinked and held his tongue.

"Gently, my friend," Moiraine said. Without slowing her pace, she reached up to pat the Warder's shoulder. He towered over her protectively, as if he could give her strength just by being close. "You think only of taking care of me. Why should he not think the same of his father?" Lan scowled, but fell silent. "I am coming as quickly as I can, Rand, I promise you."

The fierceness of her eyes, or the calm of her voice—not gentle, exactly; more firmly in command—Rand did not know which to believe. Or perhaps they did go together. Aes Sedai. He was committed, now. He matched his stride to theirs, and tried not to think of what the price might be that they would talk about later.

## CHAPTER 8 - A Place of Safety

While he was still coming through the door Rand's eyes went to his father—his father no matter what anyone said. Tam had not moved an inch; his eyes were still shut, and his breath came in labored gasps, low and rasping. The white-haired gleeman cut off a conversation with the Mayor—who was bent over the bed again, tending Tam—and gave Moiraine an uneasy look. The Aes Sedai ignored him. Indeed, she ignored everyone except for Tam, but at him she stared with an intent frown.

Thom stuck his unlit pipe between his teeth, then snatched it out again and glowered at it. "Man cannot even smoke in peace," he muttered. "I had better make sure some farmer doesn't steal my cloak to keep his cow warm. At least I can have my pipe out there." He hurried out of the room.

Lan stared after him, his angular face as expressionless as a rock. "I do not like that man. There is something about him I don't trust. I did not see a hair of him last night."

"He was there," Bran said, watching Moiraine uncertainly. "He must have been. His cloak did not get singed in front of the fireplace."

Rand did not care if the gleeman had spent the night hiding in the stable. "My father?" he said to Moiraine pleadingly.

Bran opened his mouth, but before he could speak Moiraine said, "Leave me with him, Master al'Vere. There is nothing you can do here now except get in my way."

For a minute Bran hesitated, torn between dislike of being ordered about in his own inn and reluctance to disobey an Aes Sedai. Finally, he straightened to clap Rand on the shoulder. "Come along, boy. Let us leave Moiraine Sedai to her . . . ah . . . her. . . There's plenty you can give me a hand with downstairs. Before you know it Tam will be shouting for his pipe and a mug of ale."

"Can I stay?" Rand spoke to Moiraine, though she did not really seem to be aware of anyone besides Tam. Bran's hand tightened, but Rand ignored him. "Please? I'll keep out of your way. You won't even know I am here. He's my father," he added with a fierceness that startled him and widened the Mayor's

eyes in surprise. Rand hoped the others put it down to tiredness, or the strain of dealing with an Aes Sedai.

"Yes, yes," Moiraine said impatiently. She had tossed her cloak and staff carelessly across the only chair in the room, and now she pushed up the sleeves of her gown, baring her arms to her elbows. Her attention never really left Tam, even while she spoke. "Sit over there. And you, too, Lan." She gestured vaguely in the direction of a long bench against the wall. Her eyes traveled slowly from Tam's feet to his head, but Rand had the prickly feeling that she was looking beyond him in some fashion. "You may talk if you wish," she went on absently, "but do it quietly. Now, you go, Master al'Vere. This is a sickroom, not a gathering hall. See that I am not disturbed."

The Mayor grumbled under his breath, though not loudly enough to catch her attention, of course, squeezed Rand's shoulder again, then obediently, if reluctantly, closed the door behind him.

Muttering to herself, the Aes Sedai knelt beside the bed and rested her hands lightly on Tam's chest. She closed her eyes, and for a long time she neither moved nor made a sound.

In the stories Aes Sedai wonders were always accompanied by flashes and thunderclaps, or other signs to indicate mighty works and great powers. The Power. The One Power, drawn from the True Source that drove the Wheel of Time. That was not something Rand wanted to think about, the Power involved with Tam, himself in the same room where the Power might be used. In the same village was bad enough. For all he could tell, though, Moiraine might just as well have gone to sleep. But he thought Tam's breathing sounded easier. She must be doing something. So intent was he that he jumped when Lan spoke softly.

"That is a fine weapon you wear. Is there by chance a heron on the blade, as well?"

For a moment Rand stared at the Warder, not grasping what it was he 115 was talking about. He had completely forgotten Tam's sword in the lather of dealing with an Aes Sedai. It did not seem so heavy anymore. "Yes, there is. What is she doing?"

"I'd not have thought to find a heron-mark sword in a place like this," Lan said.

"It belongs to my father." He glanced at Lan's sword, the hilt just visible at the edge of his cloak; the two swords did look a good deal alike, except that no herons showed on the Warder's. He swung his eyes back to the bed. Tam's breathing did sound easier; the rasp was gone. He was sure of it. "He bought it a long time ago."

"Strange thing for a sheepherder to buy."

Rand spared a sidelong look for Lan. For a stranger to wonder about the sword was prying. For a Warder to do it. . . . Still, he felt he had to say something. "He never had any use for it, that I know of. He said it had no use. Until last night, anyway. I didn't even know he had it till then."

"He called it useless, did he? He must not always have thought so." Lan touched the scabbard at Rand's waist briefly with one finger. "There are places where the heron is a symbol of the master swordsman. That blade must have traveled a strange road to end up with a sheepherder in the Two Rivers."

Rand ignored the unspoken question. Moiraine still had not moved. Was the Aes Sedai doing anything? He shivered and rubbed his arms, not sure he really wanted to know what she was doing. An Aes Sedai.

A question of his own popped into his head then, one he did not want to ask, one he needed an answer to. "The Mayor—" He cleared his throat, and took a deep breath. "The Mayor said the only reason there's anything left of the village is because of you and her." He made himself look at the Warder. "If you had been told about a man in the woods . . . a man who made people afraid just by looking at them . . . would that have warned you? A man whose horse doesn't make any noise? And the wind doesn't touch his cloak? Would you have known what was going to happen? Could you and Moiraine Sedai have stopped it if you'd known about him?"

"Not without half a dozen of my sisters," Moiraine said, and Rand started. She still knelt by the bed, but she had taken her hands from Tam and half turned to face the two of them on the bench. Her voice never raised, but her eyes pinned Rand to the wall. "Had I known when I left Tar Valon that I would find Trollocs and Myrddraal here, I would have brought half a dozen of them, a dozen, if I had to drag them by the scruffs of their necks. By myself, a month's warning would have made little difference. Perhaps none. There is only so much one person can do, even calling on the One Power, and there were probably well over a hundred Trollocs scattered around this district last night. An entire fist."

"It would still have been good to know," Lan said sharply, the sharpness directed at Rand. "When did you see him, exactly, and where?"

"That's of no consequence now," Moiraine said. "I will not have the boy thinking he is to blame for something when he is not. I am as much to blame. That accursed raven yesterday, the way it behaved, should have warned me. And you, too, my old friend." Her tongue clicked angrily. "I was overconfident to the point of arrogance, sure that the Dark One's touch could not have spread so far. Nor so heavily, not yet. So sure."

Rand blinked. "The raven? I don't understand."

"Carion eaters." Lan's mouth twisted in distaste. "The Dark One's minions often find spies among creatures that feed on death. Ravens and crows, mainly. Rats, in the cities, sometimes."

A quick shiver ran through Rand. Ravens and crows as spies of the Dark One? There were ravens and crows everywhere now. The Dark One's touch, Moiraine had said. The Dark One was always there—he knew that—but if you tried to walk in the Light, tried to live a good life, and did not name him, he could not harm you. That was what everybody believed, what everybody learned with his mother's milk. But Moiraine seemed to be saying. . . .

His glance fell on Tam, and everything else was pushed right out of his head. His father's face was noticeably less flushed than it had been, and his breathing sounded almost normal. Rand would have leaped up if Lan had not caught his arm. "You've done it."

Moiraine shook her head and sighed. "Not yet. I hope it is only not yet. Trolloc weapons are made at forges in the valley called Thakan'dar, on the very slopes of Shayol Ghul itself. Some of them take a taint from that place, a stain of evil in the metal. Those tainted blades make wounds that will not heal unaided, or cause deadly fevers, strange sicknesses that medicines cannot touch. I have soothed your father's pain, but the mark, the taint, is still in him. Left alone, it will grow again, and consume him."

"But you won't leave it alone." Rand's words were half plea, half command. He was shocked to realize he had spoken to an Aes Sedai like that, but she seemed not to notice his tone.

"I will not," she agreed simply. "I am very tired, Rand, and I have had no chance to rest since last night. Ordinarily it would not matter, but for this kind of hurt. . . This"—she took a small bundle of white silk from her pouch—"is an angreal." She saw his expression. "You know of angreal, then. Good."

Unconsciously he leaned back, further away from her and what she held. A few stories mentioned angreal, those relics of the Age of Legends that Aes Sedai used to perform their greatest wonders. He was startled to see her unwrap a smooth ivory figurine, age-darkened to deep brown. No longer than her hand, it was a woman in flowing robes, with long hair falling about her shoulders.

"We have lost the making of these," she said. "So much is lost, perhaps never to be found again. So few remain, the Amyrlin Seat almost did not allow me to take this one. It is well for Emond's Field, and for your father, that she did give her permission. But you must not hope too much. Now, even with it, I can do little more than I could have without it yesterday, and the taint is strong. It has had time to fester."

"You can help him," Rand said fervently. "I know you can."

Moiraine smiled, a bare curving of her lips. "We shall see." Then she turned back to Tam. One hand she laid on his forehead; the other cupped the ivory figure. Eyes closed, her face took on a look of concentration. She scarcely seemed to breathe.

"That rider you spoke of," Lan said quietly, "the one who made you afraid—that was surely a Myrddraal."

"A Myrddraal!" Rand exclaimed. "But Fades are twenty feet tall and. . . ." The words faded away under the Warder's mirthless grin.

"Sometimes, shepherd, stories make things larger than truth. Believe me, the truth is big enough with a Halfman. Halfman, Lurk, Fade, Shadowman; the name depends on the land you're in, but they all mean Myrddraal. Fades are Trolloc spawn, throwbacks almost to the human stock the Dreadlords used to make the Trollocs. Almost. But if the human strain is made stronger, so is the taint that twists the Trollocs. Halfmen have powers of a kind, the sort that stem from the Dark One. Only the weakest Aes Sedai would fail to be a match for a Fade, one against one, but many a good man and true has fallen to them. Since the wars that ended the Age of Legends, since the Forsaken were bound, they

have been the brain that tells the Trolloc fists where to strike. In the days of the Trolloc Wars, Halfmen led the Trollocs in battle, under the Dreadlords."

"He scared me," Rand said faintly. "He just looked at me, and. . . ." He shivered.

"No need for shame, shepherd. They scare me, too. I've seen men who have been soldiers all their lives freeze like a bird facing a snake when they confronted a Halfman. In the north, in the Borderlands along the Great Blight, there is a saying. The look of the Eyeless is fear."

"The Eyeless?" Rand said, and Lan nodded.

"Myrddraal see like eagles, in darkness or in light, but they have no eyes. I can think of few things more dangerous than facing a Myrddraal. Moiraine Sedai and I both tried to kill the one that was here last night, and we failed every time. Halfmen have the Dark One's own luck."

Rand swallowed. "A Trolloc said the Myrddraal wanted to talk to me. I didn't know what it meant."

Lan's head jerked up; his eyes were blue stones. "You talked to a Trolloc?"

"Not exactly," Rand stammered. The Warder's gaze held him like a trap. "It talked to me. It said it wouldn't hurt me, that the Myrddraal wanted to talk to me. Then it tried to kill me." He licked his lips and rubbed his hand along the nobby leather of the sword hilt. In short, choppy sentences he explained about returning to the farmhouse. "I killed it, instead," he finished. "By accident, really. It jumped at me, and I had the sword in my hand."

Lan's face softened slightly, if rock could be said to soften. "Even so, that is something to speak of, shepherd. Until last night there were few men south of the Borderlands who could say they had seen a Trolloc, much less killed one."

"And fewer still who have slain a Trolloc alone and unaided," Moiraine said wearily. "It is done, Rand. Lan, help me up."

The Warder sprang to her side, but he was no quicker than Rand darting to the bed. Tam's skin was cool to the touch, though his face had a pale, washed-out look, as if he had spent far too long out of the sun. His eyes were still closed, but he drew the deep breaths of normal sleep.

"He will be all right now?" Rand asked anxiously.

"With rest, yes," Moiraine said. "A few weeks in bed, and he will be as good as ever." She walked unsteadily, despite holding Lan's arm. He swept her cloak and staff from the chair cushion for her to sit, and she eased herself down with a sigh. With a slow care she rewrapped the angreal and returned it to her pouch.

Rand's shoulders shook; he bit his lip to keep from laughing. At the same time he had to scrub a hand across his eyes to clear away tears. "Thank you."

"In the Age of Legends," Moiraine went on, "some Aes Sedai could fan life and health to flame if only the smallest spark remained. Those days are gone, though—perhaps forever. So much was lost; not just the making of angreal. So much that could be done which we dare not even dream of, if we remember it at all. There are far fewer of us now. Some talents are all but gone, and many that remain seem weaker. Now there must be both will and strength for the body to draw on, or even the strongest of us can do nothing in the way of Healing. It is fortunate that your father is a strong man, both in body and spirit. As it is, he used up much of his strength in the fight for life, but all that is left now is for him to recuperate. That will take time, but the taint is gone."

"I can never repay you," he told her without taking his eyes from Tam, "but anything I can do for you, I will. Anything at all." He remembered the talk of prices, then, and his promise. Kneeling beside Tam he meant it even more than before, but it still was not easy to look at her. "Anything. As long as it does not hurt the village, or my friends."

Moiraine raised a hand dismissively. "If you think it is necessary. I would like to talk with you, anyway. You will no doubt leave at the same time we do, and we can speak at length then."

"Leave!" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. "Is it really that bad? Everyone looked to me as if they were ready to start rebuilding. We are pretty settled folk in the Two Rivers. Nobody ever leaves."

"Rand—"

"And where would we go? Padan Fain said the weather is just as bad everywhere else. He's . . . he was . . . the peddler. The Trollocs. . . ." Rand swallowed, wishing Thom Merrill had not told him what Trollocs ate. "The best I can see to do is stay right here where we belong, in the Two Rivers, and put things back



together. We have crops in the ground, and it has to warm enough for the shearing, soon. I don't know who started this talk about leaving—one of the Coplins, I'll bet—but whoever it was—"

"Shepherd,er," Lan broke in, "you talk when you should be listening."

He blinked at both of them. He had been half babbling, he realized, and he had rambled on while she tried to talk. While an Aes Sedai tried to talk. He wondered what to say, how to apologize, but Moiraine smiled while he was still thinking.

"I understand how you feel, Rand," she said, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that she really did. "Think no more of it." Her mouth tightened, and she shook her head. "I have handled this badly, I see. I should have rested, first, I suppose. It is you who will be leaving, Rand. You who must leave, for the sake of your village."

"Me?" He cleared his throat and tried again. "Me?" It sounded a little better this time. "Why do I have to go? I don't understand any of this. I don't want to go anywhere."

Moiraine looked at Lan, and the Warder unfolded his arms. He looked at Rand from under his leather headband, and Rand had the feeling of being weighed on invisible scales again. "Did you know," Lan said suddenly, "that some homes were not attacked?"

"Half the village is in ashes," he protested, but the Warder waved it away.

"Some houses were only torched to create confusion. The Trollocs ignored them afterwards, and the people who fled from them as well, unless they actually got in the way of the true attack. Most of the people who've come in from the outlying farms never saw a hair of a Trolloc, and that only at a distance. Most never knew there was any trouble until they saw the village."

"I did hear about Darl Coplin," Rand said slowly. "I suppose it just didn't sink in."

"Two farms were attacked," Lan went on. "Yours and one other. Because of Bel Tine everyone who lived at the second farm was already in the village. Many people were saved because the Myrddraal was ignorant of Two Rivers customs.

Festival and Winternight made its task all but impossible, but it did not know that."

Rand looked at Moiraine, leaning back in the chair, but she said nothing, only watched him, a finger laid across her lips. "Our farm, and who else's?" he asked finally.

"The Aybara farm," Lan replied. "Here in Emond's Field, they struck first at the forge, and the blacksmith's house, and Master Cauthon's house."

Rand's mouth was suddenly dry. "That's crazy," he managed to get out, then jumped as Moiraine straightened.

"Not crazy, Rand," she said. "Purposeful. The Trollocs did not come to Emond's Field by happenstance, and they did not do what they did for the pleasure of killing and burning, however much that delighted them. They knew what, or rather who, they were after. The Trollocs came to kill or capture young men of a certain age who live near Emond's Field."

"My age?" Rand's voice shook, and he did not care. "Light! Mat. What about Perrin?"

"Alive and well," Moiraine assured him, "if a trifle sooty."

"Ban Crawe and Lem Thane?"

"Were never in any danger," Lan said. "At least, no more than anyone else."

"But they saw the rider, the Fade, too, and they're the same age as I am."

"Master Crawe's house was not even damaged," Moiraine said, "and the miller and his family slept through half the attack before the noise woke them. Ban is ten months older than you, and Lem eight months younger." She smiled dryly at his surprise. "I told you I asked questions. And I also said young men of a certain age. You and your two friends are within weeks of one another. It was you three the Myrddraal sought, and none others."

Rand shifted uneasily, wishing she would not look at him like that, as if her eyes could pierce his brain and read what lay in every corner of it. "What would they want with us? We're just farmers, shepherds."

"That is a question that has no answer in the Two Rivers," Moiraine said quietly, "but the answer is important. Trollocs where they have not been seen in almost two thousand years tells us that much."

"Lots of stories tell about Trolloc raids," Rand said stubbornly. "We just never had one here before. Warders fight Trollocs all the time."

Lan snorted. "Boy, I expect to fight Trollocs along the Great Blight, but not here, nearly six hundred leagues to the south. That was as hot a raid last night as I'd expect to see in Shienar, or any of the Borderlands."

"In one of you," Moiraine said, "or all three, there is something the Dark One fears."

"That . . . that's impossible." Rand stumbled to the window and stared out at the village, at the people working among the ruins. "I don't care what's happened, that is just impossible." Something on the Green caught his eye. He stared, then realized it was the blackened stump of the Spring Pole. A fine Bel Tine, with a peddler, and a gleeman, and strangers. He shivered, and shook his head violently. "No. No, I'm a shepherd. The Dark One can't be interested in me."

"It took a great deal of effort," Lan said grimly, "to bring so many Trollocs so far without raising a hue and cry from the Borderlands to Caemlyn and beyond. I wish I knew how they did it. Do you really believe they went to all that bother just to burn a few houses?"

"They will be back," Moiraine added.

Rand had his mouth open to argue with Lan, but that brought him up short. He spun to face her. "Back? Can't you stop them? You did last night, and you were surprised, then. Now you know they are here."

"Perhaps," Moiraine replied. "I could send to Tar Valon for some of my sisters; they might have time to make the journey before we need them. The Myrddraal knows I am here, too, and it probably will not attack—not openly, at least—lacking reinforcements, more Myrddraal and more Trollocs. With enough Aes Sedai and enough Warders, the Trollocs can be beaten off, though I cannot say how many battles it will take."

A vision danced in his head, of Emond's Field all in ashes. All the farms burned. And Watch Hill, and Deven Ride, and Taren Ferry. All ashes and blood. "No," he said, and felt a wrenching inside as if he had lost his grip on something. "That's why I have to leave, isn't it? The Trollocs won't come back if I am not here." A last trace of obstinacy made him add, "If they really are after me."

Moiraine's eyebrows raised as if she were surprised that he was not convinced, but Lan said, "Are you willing to bet your village on it, shepherd? Your whole Two Rivers?"

Rand's stubbornness faded. "No," he said again, and felt that emptiness inside again, too. "Perrin and Mat have to go, too, don't they?" Leaving the Two Rivers. Leaving his home and his father. At least Tam would get better. At least he would be able to hear him say all that on the Quarry Road had been nonsense. "We could go to Baerlon, I suppose, or even Caemlyn. I've heard there are more people in Caemlyn than in the whole Two Rivers. We'd be safe there." He tried out a laugh that sounded hollow. "I used to daydream about seeing Caemlyn. I never thought it would come about like this."

There was a long silence, then Lan said, "I would not count on Caemlyn for safety. If the Myrddraal want you badly enough, they will find a way. Walls are a poor bar to a Halfman. And you would be a fool not to believe they want you very badly indeed."

Rand thought his spirits had sunk as low as they possibly could, but at that they slid deeper.

"There is a place of safety," Moiraine said softly, and Rand's ears pricked up to listen. "In Tar Valon you would be among Aes Sedai and Warders. Even during the Trolloc Wars the forces of the Dark One feared to attack the Shining Walls. The one attempt was their greatest defeat until the very end. And Tar Valon holds all the knowledge we Aes Sedai have gathered since the Time of Madness. Some fragments even date from the Age of Legends. In Tar Valon, if anywhere, you will be able to learn why the Myrddraal want you. Why the Father of Lies wants you. That I can promise."

A journey all the way to Tar Valon was almost beyond thinking. A journey to a place where he would be surrounded by Aes Sedai. Of course, Moiraine had healed Tam—or it looked as if she had, at least—but there were all those stories. It was uncomfortable enough to be in a room with one Aes Sedai, but to

be in a city full of them. . . . And she still had not demanded her price. There was always a price, so the stories said.

"How long will my father sleep?" he asked at last. "I . . . I have to tell him. He shouldn't just wake and find me gone." He thought he heard Lan give a sigh of relief. He looked at the Warder curiously, but Lan's face was as expressionless as ever.

"It is unlikely he will wake before we depart," Moiraine said. "I mean to go soon after full dark. Even a single day of delay could be fatal. It will be best if you leave him a note."

"In the night?" Rand said doubtfully, and Lan nodded.

"The Halfman will discover we are gone soon enough. There is no need to make things any easier for it than we must."

Rand fussed with his father's blankets. It was a very long way to Tar Valon. "In that case. . . . In that case, I had better go find Mat and Perrin."

"I will attend to that." Moiraine got to her feet briskly and donned her cloak with suddenly restored vigor. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he tried very hard not to flinch. She did not press hard, but it was an iron grip that held him as surely as a forked stick held a snake. "It will be best if we keep all of this just among us. Do you understand? The same ones who put the Dragon's Fang on the inn door might make trouble if they knew."

"I understand." He drew a relieved breath when she took her hand away.

"I will have Mistress al'Vere bring you something to eat," she went on just as if she had not noticed his reaction. "Then you need to sleep. It will be a hard journey tonight even if you are rested."

The door closed behind them, and Rand stood looking down at Tam—looking at Tam, but seeing nothing. Not until that very minute had he realized that Emond's Field was a part of him as much as he was a part of it. He realized it now because he knew that was what he had felt tearing loose. He was apart from the village, now. The Shepherd of the Night wanted him. It was impossible—he was only a farmer—but the Trollocs had come, and Lan was right about one thing. He could not risk the village on the chance Moiraine was wrong. He could

not even tell anyone; the Coplins really would make trouble about something like that. He had to trust an Aes Sedai.

"Don't wake him, now," Mistress al'Vere said, as the Mayor shut the door behind his wife and himself. The cloth-covered tray she carried gave off delicious, warm smells. She set it on the chest against the wall, then firmly moved Rand away from the bed.

"Mistress Moiraine told me what he needs," she said softly, "and it does not include you falling on top of him from exhaustion. I've brought you a bite to eat. Don't let it get cold, now."

"I wish you wouldn't call her that," Bran said peevishly. "Moiraine Sedai is proper. She might get mad."

Mistress al'Vere gave him a pat on the cheek. "You just leave me to worry about that. She and I had a long talk. And keep your voice down. If you wake Tam, you'll have to answer to me and Moiraine Sedai." She put an emphasis on Moiraine's title that made Bran's insistence seem foolish. "The two of you keep out of my way." With a fond smile for her husband, she turned to the bed and Tam.

Master al'Vere gave Rand a frustrated look. "She's an Aes Sedai. Half the women in the village act as if she sits in the Women's Circle, and the rest as if she were a Trolloc. Not a one of them seems to realize you have to be careful around Aes Sedai. The men may keep looking at her sideways, but at least they aren't doing anything that might provoke her."

Careful, Rand thought. It was not too late to start being careful. "Master al'Vere," he said slowly, "do you know how many farms were attacked?"

"Only two that I've heard of so far, including your place." The Mayor paused, frowning, then shrugged. "It doesn't seem enough, with what happened here. I should be glad of it, but. . . . Well, we'll probably hear of more before the day is out."

Rand sighed. No need to ask which farms. "Here in the village, did they. . . . I mean, was there anything to show what they were after?"

"After, boy? I don't know that they were after anything, except maybe killing us all. It was just the way I said. The dogs barking, and Moiraine Sedai and Lan

running through the streets, then somebody shouted that Master Luhhan's house and the forge were on fire. Abell Cauthon's house flared up—odd that; it's nearly in the middle of the village. Anyway, the next thing the Trollocs were all among us. No, I don't think they were after anything." He gave an abrupt bark of a laugh, and cut it short with a wary look at his wife. She did not look around from Tam. "To tell the truth," he went on more quietly, "they seemed almost as confused as we were. I doubt they expected to find an Aes Sedai here, or a Warder."

"I suppose not," Rand said, grimacing.

If Moiraine had told the truth about that, she probably had told the truth about the rest, too. For a moment he thought about asking the Mayor's advice, but Master al'Vere obviously knew little more about Aes Sedai than anyone else in the village. Besides, he was reluctant to tell even the Mayor what was going on—what Moiraine said was going on. He was not sure if he was more afraid of being laughed at or being believed. He rubbed a thumb against the hilt of Tam's sword. His father had been out into the world; he must know more about Aes Sedai than the Mayor did. But if Tam really had been out of the Two Rivers, then maybe what he had said in the Westwood. . . . He scrubbed both hands through his hair, scattering that line of thought.

"You need sleep, lad," the Mayor said.

"Yes, you do," Mistress al'Vere added. "You're almost falling down where you stand."

Rand blinked at her in surprise. He had not even realized she had left his father. He did need sleep; just the thought set off a yawn.

"You can take the bed in the next room," the Mayor said. "There's already a fire laid."

Rand looked at his father; Tam was still deep in sleep, and that made him yawn again. "I'd rather stay in here, if you don't mind. For when he wakes up."

Sickroom matters were in Mistress al'Vere's province, and the Mayor left it to her. She hesitated only a moment before nodding. "But you let him wake on his own. If you bother his sleep. . . ." He tried to say he would do as she ordered, but the words got tangled in yet another yawn. She shook her head with a smile.

"You will be asleep yourself in no time at all. If you must stay, curl up next to the fire. And drink a little of that beef broth before you doze off."

"I will," Rand said. He would have agreed to anything that kept him in that room. "And I won't wake him."

"See that you do not," Mistress al'Vere told him firmly, but not in an unkindly way. "I'll bring you up a pillow and some blankets."

When the door finally closed behind them, Rand dragged the lone chair in the room over beside the bed and sat down where he could watch Tam. It was all very well for Mistress al'Vere to talk about sleep—his jaws cracked as he stifled a yawn—but he could not sleep yet. Tam might wake at any time, and maybe only stay awake a short while. Rand had to be waiting when he did.

He grimaced and twisted in the chair, absently shifting the sword hilt out of his ribs. He still felt backward about telling anyone what Moiraine had said, but this was Tam, after all. This was. . . . Without realizing it he set his jaw determinedly. My father. I can tell my father anything.

He twisted a little more in the chair and put his head against the chairback. Tam was his father, and nobody could tell him what to say or not say to his father. He just had to stay awake until Tam woke up. He just had to. . . .



## CHAPTER 9 - Tellings of the Wheel

Rand's heart pounded as he ran, and he stared in dismay at the barren hills surrounding him. This was not just a place where spring was late in coming; spring had never come here, and never would come. Nothing grew in the cold soil that crunched under his boots, not so much as a bit of lichen. He scrambled past boulders, twice as tall as he was; dust coated the stone as if never a drop of rain had touched it. The sun was a swollen, blood-red ball, more fiery than on the hottest day of summer and bright enough to sear his eyes, but it stood stark against a leaden cauldron of a sky where clouds of sharp black and silver roiled and boiled on every horizon. For all the swirling clouds, though, no breath of breeze stirred across the land, and despite the sullen sun the air burned cold like the depths of winter.

Rand looked over his shoulder often as he ran, but he could not see his pursuers. Only desolate hills and jagged black mountains, many topped by tall plumes of dark smoke rising to join the milling clouds. If he could not see his hunters, though, he could hear them, howling behind him, guttural voices shouting with the glee of the chase, howling with the joy of blood to come. Trollocs. Coming closer, and his strength was almost gone.

With desperate haste he scrambled to the top of a knife-edged ridge, then dropped to his knees with a groan. Below him a sheer rock wall fell away, a thousand-foot cliff plummeting into a vast canyon. Steamy mists covered the canyon floor, their thick gray surface rolling in grim waves, rolling and breaking against the cliff beneath him, but more slowly than any ocean wave had ever moved. Patches of fog glowed red for an instant as if great fires had suddenly flared beneath, then died. Thunder rumbled in the depths of the valley, and lightning crackled through the gray, sometimes striking up at the sky.

It was not the valley itself that sapped his strength and filled the empty spaces left with helplessness. From the center of the furious vapors a mountain thrust upward, a mountain taller than any he had ever seen in the Mountains of Mist, a mountain as black as the loss of all hope. That bleak stone spire, a dagger stabbing at the heavens, was the source of his desolation. He had never seen it before, but he knew it. The memory of it flashed away like quicksilver when he tried to touch it, but the memory was there. He knew it was there.

Unseen fingers touched him, pulled at his arms and legs, trying to draw him to the mountain. His body twitched, ready to obey. His arms and legs stiffened as if

he thought he could dig his fingers and toes into the stone. Ghostly strings entwined around his heart, pulling him calling him to the spire mountain. Tears ran down his face, and he sagged to the ground. He felt his will draining away like water out of a holed bucket. Just a little longer, and he would go where he was called. He would obey, do as he was told. Abruptly he discovered another emotion: anger. Push him, pull him, he was not a sheep to be prodded into a pen. The anger squeezed itself into one hard knot, and he clung to it as he would have clung to a raft in a flood.

Serve me, a voice whispered in the stillness of his mind. A familiar voice. If he listened hard enough he was sure he would know it. Serve me. He shook his head to try to get it out of his head. Serve me! He shook his fist at the black mountain. "The Light consume you, Shai'tan!"

Abruptly the smell of death lay thick around him. A figure loomed over him, in a cloak the color of dried blood, a figure with a face. . . . He did not want to see the face that looked down at him. He did not want to think of that face. It hurt to think of it, turned his mind to embers. A hand reached toward him. Not caring if he fell over the edge, he threw himself away. He had to get away. Far away. He fell, flailing at the air, wanting to scream, finding no breath for screaming, no breath at all.

Abruptly he was no longer in the barren land, no longer falling. Winter-brown grass flattened under his boots; it seemed like flowers. He almost laughed to see scattered trees and bushes, leafless as they were, dotting the gently rolling plain that now surrounded him. In the distance reared a single mountain, its peak broken and split, but this mountain brought no fear or despair. It was just a mountain, though oddly out of place there, with no other in sight.

A broad river flowed by the mountain, and on an island in the middle of that river was a city such as might live in a gleeman's tale, a city surrounded by high walls gleaming white and silver beneath the warm sun. With mingled relief and joy he started for the walls, for the safety and serenity he somehow knew he would find behind them.

As he came closer he made out soaring towers, many joined by wondrous walkways that spanned the open air. High bridges arched from both banks of the river to the island city. Even at a distance he could see lacy stonework on those spans, seemingly too delicate to withstand the swift waters that rushed beneath them. Beyond those bridges lay safety. Sanctuary.

Of a sudden a chill ran along his bones; an icy clamminess settled on his skin, and the air around him turned fetid and dank. Without looking back he ran, ran from the pursuer whose freezing fingers brushed his back and tugged at his cloak, ran from the light-eating figure with the face that. . . . He could not remember the face, except as terror. He did not want to remember the face. He ran, and the ground passed beneath his feet, rolling hills and flat plain . . . and he wanted to howl like a dog gone mad. The city was receding before him. The harder he ran, the further away drifted the white shining walls and haven. They grew smaller, and smaller, until only a pale speck remained on the horizon. The cold hand of his pursuer clutched at his collar. If those fingers touched him he knew he would go mad. Or worse. Much worse. Even as that surety came to him he tripped and fell . . .

"Noooo!" he screamed.

. . . and grunted as paving stones smacked the breath out of him. Wonderingly he got to his feet. He stood on the approaches to one of the marvelous bridges he had seen rearing over the river. Smiling people walked by on either side of him, people dressed in so many colors they made him think of a field of wildflowers. Some of them spoke to him, but he could not understand, though the words sounded as if he should. But the faces were friendly, and the people gestured him onward, over the bridge with its intricate stonework, onward toward the shining, silver-streaked walls and the towers beyond. Toward the safety he knew waited there.

He joined the throng streaming across the bridge and into the city through massive gates set in tall, pristine walls. Within was a wonderland where the meanest structure seemed a palace. It was as though the builders had been told to take stone and brick and tile and create beauty to take the breath of mortal men. There was no building, no monument that did not make him stare with goggling eyes. Music drifted down the streets, a hundred different songs, but all blending with the clamor of the crowds to make one grand, joyous harmony. The scents of sweet perfumes and sharp spices, of wondrous foods and myriad flowers, all floated in the air, as if every good smell in the world were gathered there.

The street by which he entered the city, broad and paved with smooth, gray stone, stretched straight before him toward the center of the city. At its end loomed a tower larger and taller than any other in the city, a tower as white as fresh-fallen snow. That tower was where safety lay, and the knowledge he sought. But the city was such as he had never dreamed of seeing. Surely it would

not matter if he delayed just a short time in going to the tower? He turned aside onto a narrower street, where jugglers strolled among hawkers of strange fruits.

Ahead of him down the street was a snow-white tower. The same tower. In just a little while, he thought, and rounded another corner. At the far end of this street, too, lay the white tower. Stubbornly he turned another corner, and another, and each time the alabaster tower met his eyes. He spun to run away from it . . . and skidded to a halt. Before him, the white tower. He was afraid to look over his shoulder, afraid it would be there, too.

The faces around him were still friendly, but shattered hope filled them now, hope he had broken. Still the people gestured him forward, pleading gestures. Toward the tower. Their eyes shone with desperate need, and only he could fulfill it, only he could save them.

Very well, he thought. The tower was, after all, where he wanted to go.

Even as he took his first step forward disappointment faded from those about him, and smiles wreathed every face. They moved with him, and small children strewed his path with flower petals. He looked over his shoulder in confusion, wondering who the flowers were meant for, but behind him were only more smiling people gesturing him on. They must be for me, he thought, and wondered why that suddenly did not seem strange at all. But wonderment lasted only a moment before melting away; all was as it should be.

First one, then another of the people began to sing, until every voice was lifted in a glorious anthem. He still could not understand the words, but a dozen interweaving harmonies shouted joy and salvation. Musicians capered through the on-flowing crowd, adding flutes and harps and drums in a dozen sizes to the hymn, and all the songs he had heard before blended in without seam. Girls danced around him, laying garlands of sweet-smelling blossoms across his shoulders, twining them about his neck. They smiled at him, their delight growing with every step he took. He could not help but smile back. His feet itched to join in their dance, and even as he thought of it he was dancing, his steps fitting as if he had known it all from birth. He threw back his head and laughed; his feet were lighter than they had ever been, dancing with. . . . He could not remember the name, but it did not seem important.

It is your destiny, a voice whispered in his head, and the whisper was a thread in the paean.

Carrying him like a twig on the crest of a wave, the crowd flowed into a huge square in the middle of the city, and for the first time he saw that the white tower rose from a great palace of pale marble, sculpted rather than built, curving walls and swelling domes and delicate spires fingering the sky. The whole of it made him gasp in awe. Broad stairs of pristine stone led up from the square, and at the foot of those stairs the people halted, but their song rose ever higher. The swelling voices buoyed his feet. Your destiny, the voice whispered, insistent now, eager.

He no longer danced, but neither did he stop. He mounted the stairs without hesitation. This was where he belonged.

Scrollwork covered the massive doors at the top of the stairs, carvings so intricate and delicate that he could not imagine a knife blade fine enough to fit. The portals swung open, and he went in. They closed behind him with an echoing crash like thunder.

“We have been waiting for you,” the Myrddraal hissed.

Rand sat bolt upright, gasping for breath and shivering, staring. Tam was still asleep on the bed. Slowly his breathing slowed. Half-consumed logs blazed in the fireplace with a good bed of coals built up around the fire-irons; someone had been there to tend it while he slept. A blanket lay at his feet, where it had fallen when he woke. The makeshift litter was gone, too, and his and Tam’s cloaks had been hung by the door.

He wiped cold sweat from his face with a hand that was none too steady and wondered if naming the Dark One in a dream brought his attention the same way that naming him aloud did.

Twilight darkened the window; the moon was well up, round and fat, and evening stars sparkled above the Mountains of Mist. He had slept the day away. He rubbed a sore spot on his side. Apparently he had slept with the sword hilt jabbing him in the ribs. Between that and an empty stomach and the night before, it was no wonder he had had nightmares.

His belly rumbled, and he got up stiffly and made his way to the table where Mistress al’Vere had left the tray. He twitched aside the white napkin. Despite

the time he had slept, the beef broth was still warm, and so was the crusty bread. Mistress al'Vere's hand was plain; the tray had been replaced. Once she decided you needed a hot meal, she did not give up till it was inside you.

He gulped down some broth, and it was all he could do to put some meat and cheese between two pieces of bread before stuffing it in his mouth. Taking big bites, he went back to the bed.

Mistress al'Vere had apparently seen to Tam, as well. Tam had been undressed, his clothes now clean and neatly folded on the bedside table, and a blanket was drawn up under his chin. When Rand touched his father's forehead, Tam opened his eyes.

"There you are, boy. Marin said you were here, but I couldn't even sit up to see. She said you were too tired for her to wake just so I could look at you. Even Bran can't get around her when she has her mind set."

Tam's voice was weak, but his gaze was clear and steady. The Aes Sedai was right, Rand thought. With rest he would be as good as ever.

"Can I get you something to eat? Mistress al'Vere left a tray."

"She fed me already . . . if you can call it that. Wouldn't let me have anything but broth. How can a man avoid bad dreams with nothing but broth in his. . . ." Tam fumbled a hand from under the cover and touched the sword at Rand's waist. "Then it wasn't a dream. When Marin told me I was sick, I thought I had been. . . . But you're all right. That is all that matters. What of the farm?"

Rand took a deep breath. "The Trollocs killed the sheep. I think they took the cow, too, and the house needs a good cleaning." He managed a weak smile. "We were luckier than some. They burned half the village."

He told Tam everything that had happened, or at least most of it. Tam listened closely, and asked sharp questions, so he found himself having to tell about returning to the farmhouse from the woods, and that brought in the Trolloc he had killed. He had to tell how Nynaeve had said Tam was dying to explain why the Aes Sedai had tended him instead of the Wisdom. Tam's eyes widened at that, an Aes Sedai in Emond's Field. But Rand could see no need to go over every step of the journey from the farm, or his fears, or the Myrddraal on the road. Certainly not his nightmares as he slept by the bed. Especially he saw no

reason to mention Tam's ramblings under the fever. Not yet. Moiraine's story, though: there was no avoiding that.

"Now that's a tale to make a gleeman proud," Tam muttered when he was done. "What would Trollocs want with you boys? Or the Dark One, Light help us?"

"You think she was lying? Master al'Vere said she was telling the truth about only two farms being attacked. And about Master Luhhan's house, and Master Cauthon's."

For a moment Tam lay silent before saying, "Tell me what she said. Her exact words, mind, just as she said them."

Rand struggled. Who ever remembered the exact words they heard? He chewed at his lip and scratched his head, and bit by bit he brought it out, as nearly as he could remember. "I can't think of anything else," he finished. "Some of it I'm not too sure she didn't say a little differently, but it's close, anyway."

"It's good enough. It has to be, doesn't it? You see, lad, Aes Sedai are tricky. They don't lie, not right out, but the truth an Aes Sedai tells you is not always the truth you think it is. You take care around her."

"I've heard the stories," Rand retorted. "I'm not a child."

"So you're not, so you're not." Tam sighed heavily, then shrugged in annoyance. "I should be going along with you, just the same. The world outside the Two Rivers is nothing like Emond's Field."

That was an opening to ask about Tam going outside and all the rest of it, but Rand did not take it. His mouth fell open, instead. "Just like that? I thought you would try to talk me out of it. I thought you'd have a hundred reasons I should not go." He realized he had been hoping Tam would have a hundred reasons, and good ones.

"Maybe not a hundred," Tam said with a snort, "but a few did come to mind. Only they don't count for much. If Trollocs are after you, you will be safer in Tar Valon than you could ever be here. Just remember to be wary. Aes Sedai do things for their own reasons, and those are not always the reasons you think."

"The gleeman said something like that," Rand said slowly.

"Then he knows what he's talking about. You listen sharp, think deep, and guard your tongue. That's good advice for any dealings beyond the Two Rivers, but most especially with Aes Sedai. And with Warders. Tell Lan something, and you've as good as told Moiraine. If he's a Warder, then he's bonded to her as sure as the sun rose this morning, and he won't keep many secrets from her, if any."

Rand knew little about the bonding between Aes Sedai and Warders, though it played a big part in every story about Warders he had ever heard. It was something to do with the Power, a gift to the Warder, or maybe some sort of exchange. The Warders got all sorts of benefits, according to the stories. They healed more quickly than other men, and could go longer without food or water or sleep. Supposedly they could sense Trollocs, if they were close enough, and other creatures of the Dark One, too, which explained how Lan and Moiraine had tried to warn the village before the attack. As to what the Aes Sedai got out of it, the stories were silent, but he was not about to believe they did not get something.

"I'll be careful," Rand said. "I just wish I knew why. It doesn't make any sense. Why me? Why us?"

"I wish I knew, too, boy. Blood and ashes, I wish I knew." Tam sighed heavily. "Well, no use trying to put a broken egg back in the shell, I suppose. How soon do you have to go? I'll be back on my feet in a day or two, and we can see about starting a new flock. Oren Dautry has some good stock he might be willing to part with, with the pastures all gone, and so does Jon Thane."

"Moiraine . . . the Aes Sedai said you had to stay in bed. She said weeks." Tam opened his mouth, but Rand went on. "And she talked to Mistress al'Vere."

"Oh. Well, maybe I can talk Marin around." Tam did not sound hopeful of it, though. He gave Rand a sharp look. "The way you avoided answering means you have to leave soon. Tomorrow? Or tonight?"

"Tonight," Rand said quietly, and Tam nodded sadly.

"Yes. Well, if it must be done, best not to delay. But we will see about this 'weeks' business." He plucked at his blankets with more irritation than strength. "Perhaps I'll follow in a few days anyway. Catch you up on the road. We will see if Marin can keep me in bed when I want to get up."



There was a tap at the door, and Lan stuck his head into the room. "Say your goodbyes quickly, shepherd, and come. There may be trouble."

"Trouble?" Rand said, and the Warder growled at him impatiently.

"Just hurry!"

Hastily Rand snatched up his cloak. He started to undo the sword belt, but Tam spoke up.

"Keep it. You will probably have more need of it than I, though, the Light willing, neither of us will. Take care, lad. You hear?"

Ignoring Lan's continued growls, Rand bent to grab Tam in a hug. "I will come back. I promise you that."

"Of course you will." Tam laughed. He returned the hug weakly, and ended by patting Rand on the back. "I know that. And I'll have twice as many sheep for you to tend when you return. Now go, before that fellow does himself an injury."

Rand tried to hang back, tried to find the words for the question he did not want to ask, but Lan entered the room to catch him by the arm and pull him into the hall. The Warder had donned a dull gray-green tunic of overlapping metal scales. His voice rasped with irritation.

"We have to hurry. Don't you understand the word trouble?"

Outside the room Mat waited, cloaked and coated and carrying his bow. A quiver hung at his waist. He was rocking anxiously on his heels, and he kept glancing off toward the stairs with what seemed to be equal parts impatience and fear. "This isn't much like the stories, Rand, is it?" he said hoarsely.

"What kind of trouble?" Rand demanded, but the Warder ran ahead of him instead of answering, taking the steps down two at a time. Mat dashed after him with quick gestures for Rand to follow.

Shrugging into his cloak, he caught up to them downstairs. Only a feeble light filled the common room; half the candles had burned out and most of the rest were guttering. It was empty except for the three of them. Mat stood next to

one of the front windows, peeping out as if trying not to be seen. Lan held the door open a crack and peered into the inn yard.

Wondering what they could be watching, Rand went to join him. The Warder muttered at him to take a care, but he did open the door a trifle wider to make room for Rand to look, too.

At first he was not sure exactly what he was seeing. A crowd of village men, some three dozen or so, clustered near the burned-out husk of the peddler's wagon, night pushed back by the torches some of them carried. Moiraine faced them, her back to the inn, leaning with seeming casualness on her walking staff. Hari Coplin stood in the front of the crowd with his brother, Darl, and Bili Congar. Cenn Buie was there, as well, looking uncomfortable. Rand was startled to see Hari shake his fist at Moiraine.

"Leave Emond's Field!" the sour-faced farmer shouted. A few voices in the crowd echoed him, but hesitantly, and no one pushed forward. They might be willing to confront an Aes Sedai from within a crowd, but none of them wanted to be singled out. Not by an Aes Sedai who had every reason to take offense.

"You brought those monsters!" Darl roared. He waved a torch over his head, and there were shouts of, "You brought them!" and "It's your fault!" led by his cousin Bili.

Hari elbowed Cenn Buie, and the old thatcher pursed his lips and gave him a sidelong glare. "Those things . . . those Trollocs didn't appear until after you came," Cenn muttered, barely loud enough to be heard. He swung his head from side to side dourly as if wishing he were somewhere else and looking for a way to get there. "You're an Aes Sedai. We want none of your sort in the Two Rivers. Aes Sedai bring trouble on their backs. If you stay, you will only bring more."

His speech brought no response from the gathered villagers, and Hari scowled in frustration. Abruptly he snatched Darl's torch and shook it in her direction. "Get out!" he shouted. "Or we'll burn you out!"

Dead silence fell, except for the shuffling of a few feet as men drew back. Two Rivers folk could fight back if they were attacked, but violence was far from common, and threatening people was foreign to them, beyond the occasional shaking of a fist. Cenn Buie, Bili Congar, and the Coplins were left out front alone. Bili looked as if he wanted to back away, too.

Hari gave an uneasy start at the lack of support, but he recovered quickly. "Get out!" he shouted again, echoed by Darl and, more weakly, by Bili. Hari glared at the others. Most of the crowd failed to meet his eye.

Suddenly Bran al'Vere and Haral Luhhan moved out of the shadows, stopping apart from both the Aes Sedai and the crowd. In one hand the Mayor casually carried the big wooden maul he used to drive spigots into casks. "Did someone suggest burning my inn?" he asked softly.

The two Coplins took a step back, and Cenn Buie edged away from them. Bili Congar dived into the crowd. "Not that," Darl said quickly. "We never said that, Bran . . . ah, Mayor."

Bran nodded. "Then perhaps I heard you threatening to harm guests in my inn?"

"She's an Aes Sedai," Hari began angrily, but his words cut off as Haral Luhhan moved.

The blacksmith simply stretched, thrusting thick arms over his head, tightening massive fists until his knuckles cracked, but Hari looked at the burly man as if one of those fists had been shaken under his nose. Haral folded his arms across his chest. "Your pardon, Hari. I did not mean to cut you off. You were saying?"

But Hari, shoulders hunched as though he were trying to draw into himself and disappear, seemed to have nothing more to say.

"I'm surprised at you people," Bran rumbled. "Paet al'Caar, your boy's leg was broken last night, but I saw him walking on it today—because of her. Eward Candwin, you were lying on your belly with a gash down your back like a fish for cleaning, till she laid hands on you. Now it looks as if it happened a month ago, and unless I misdoubt there'll barely be a scar. And you, Cenn." The thatcher started to fade back into the crowd, but stopped, held uncomfortably by Bran's gaze. "I'd be shocked to see any man on the Village Council here, Cenn, but you most of all. Your arm would still be hanging useless at your side, a mass of burns and bruises, if not for her. If you have no gratitude, have you no shame?"

Cenn half lifted his right hand, then looked away from it angrily. "I cannot deny what she did," he muttered, and he did sound ashamed. "She helped me, and others," he went on in a pleading tone, "but she's an Aes Sedai, Bran. If those

Trollocs didn't come because of her, why did they come? We want no part of Aes Sedai in the Two Rivers. Let them keep their troubles away from us."

A few men, safely back in the crowd, shouted then. "We want no Aes Sedai troubles!" "Send her away!" "Drive her out!" "Why did they come if not because of her?"

A scowl grew on Bran's face, but before he could speak Moiraine suddenly whirled her vine-carved staff above her head, spinning it with both hands. Rand's gasp echoed that of the villagers, for a hissing white flame flared from each end of the staff, standing straight out like spearpoints despite the rod's whirling. Even Bran and Haral edged away from her. She snapped her arms down straight out before her, the staff parallel to the ground, but the pale fire still jetted out, brighter than the torches. Men shied away, held up hands to shield their eyes from the pain of that brilliance.

"Is this what Aemon's blood has come to?" The Aes Sedai's voice was not loud, but it overwhelmed every other sound. "Little people squabbling for the right to hide like rabbits? You have forgotten who you were, forgotten what you were, but I had hoped some small part was left, some memory in blood and bone. Some shred to steel you for the long night coming."

No one spoke. The two Coplins looked as if they never wanted to open their mouths again.

Bran said, "Forgotten who we were? We are who we always have been. Honest farmers and shepherds and craftsmen. Two Rivers folk."

"To the south," Moiraine said, "lies the river you call the White River, but far to the east of here men call it still by its rightful name. Manetherendrelle. In the Old Tongue, Waters of the Mountain Home. Sparkling waters that once coursed through a land of bravery and beauty. Two thousand years ago Manetherendrelle flowed by the walls of a mountain city so lovely to behold that Ogier stonemasons came to stare in wonder. Farms and villages covered this region, and that you call the Forest of Shadows, as well, and beyond. But all of those folk thought of themselves as the people of the Mountain Home, the people of Manetheren.

"Their King was Aemon al Caar al Thorin, Aemon son of Caar son of Thorin, and Eldrene ay Ellan ay Carlan was his Queen. Aemon, a man so fearless that the greatest compliment for courage any could give, even among his enemies, was

to say a man had Aemon's heart. Eldrene, so beautiful that it was said the flowers bloomed to make her smile. Bravery and beauty and wisdom and a love that death could not sunder. Weep, if you have a heart, for the loss of them, for the loss of even their memory. Weep, for the loss of their blood."

She fell silent then, but no one spoke. Rand was as bound as the others in the spell she had created. When she spoke again, he drank it in, and so did the rest.

"For nearly two centuries the Trolloc Wars had ravaged the length and breadth of the world, and wherever battles raged, the Red Eagle banner of Manetheren was in the forefront. The men of Manetheren were a thorn to the Dark One's foot and a bramble to his hand. Sing of Manetheren, that would never bend knee to the Shadow. Sing of Manetheren, the sword that could not be broken.

"They were far away, the men of Manetheren, on the Field of Bekkar, called the Field of Blood, when news came that a Trolloc army was moving against their home. Too far to do else but wait to hear of their land's death, for the forces of the Dark One meant to make an end of them. Kill the mighty oak by hacking away its roots. Too far to do else but mourn. But they were the men of the Mountain Home.

"Without hesitation, without thought for the distance they must travel, they marched from the very field of victory, still covered in dust and sweat and blood. Day and night they marched, for they had seen the horror a Trolloc army left behind it, and no man of them could sleep while such a danger threatened Manetheren. They moved as if their feet had wings, marching further and faster than friends hoped or enemies feared they could. At any other day that march alone would have inspired songs. When the Dark One's armies swooped down upon the lands of Manetheren, the men of the Mountain Home stood before it, with their backs to the Tarendrelle."

Some villager raised a small cheer then, but Moiraine kept on as if she had not heard. "The host that faced the men of Manetheren was enough to daunt the bravest heart. Ravens blackened the sky; Trollocs blackened the land. Trollocs and their human allies. Trollocs and Darkfriends in tens of tens of thousands, and Dreadlords to command. At night their cook-fires outnumbered the stars, and dawn revealed the banner of Ba'alzamon at their head. Ba'alzamon, Heart of the Dark. An ancient name for the Father of Lies. The Dark One could not have been free of his prison at Shayol Ghul, for if he had been, not all the forces of humankind together could have stood against him, but there was power

there. Dreadlords, and some evil that made that light-destroying banner seem no more than right and sent a chill into the souls of the men who faced it.

"Yet, they knew what they must do. Their homeland lay just across the river. They must keep that host, and the power with it, from the Mountain Home. Aemon had sent out messengers. Aid was promised if they could hold for but three days at the Tarendrelle. Hold for three days against odds that should overwhelm them in the first hour. Yet somehow, through bloody assault and desperate defense, they held through an hour, and the second hour, and the third. For three days they fought, and though the land became a butcher's yard, no crossing of the Tarendrelle did they yield. By the third night no help had come, and no messengers, and they fought on alone. For six days. For nine. And on the tenth day Aemon knew the bitter taste of betrayal. No help was coming, and they could hold the river crossings no more."

"What did they do?" Hari demanded. Torchfires flickered in the chill night breeze, but no one made a move to draw a cloak tighter.

"Aemon crossed the Tarendrelle," Moiraine told them, "destroying the bridges behind him. And he sent word throughout his land for the people to flee, for he knew the powers with the Trolloc horde would find a way to bring it across the river. Even as the word went out, the Trolloc crossing began, and the soldiers of Manetheren took up the fight again, to buy with their lives what hours they could for their people to escape. From the city of Manetheren, Eldrene organized the flight of her people into the deepest forests and the fastness of the mountains.

"But some did not flee. First in a trickle, then a river, then a flood, men went, not to safety, but to join the army fighting for their land. Shepherds with bows, and farmers with pitchforks, and woodsmen with axes. Women went, too, shouldering what weapons they could find and marching side by side with their men. No one made that journey who did not know they would never return. But it was their land. It had been their fathers', and it would be their children's, and they went to pay the price of it. Not a step of ground was given up until it was soaked in blood, but at the last the army of Manetheren was driven back, back to here, to this place you now call Emond's Field. And here the Trolloc hordes surrounded them."

Her voice held the sound of cold tears. "Trolloc dead and the corpses of human renegades piled up in mounds, but always more scrambled over those charnel heaps in waves of death that had no end. There could be but one finish. No man

or woman who had stood beneath the banner of the Red Eagle at that day's dawning still lived when night fell. The sword that could not be broken was shattered.

"In the Mountains of Mist, alone in the emptied city of Manetheren, Eldrene felt Aemon die, and her heart died with him. And where her heart had been was left only a thirst for vengeance, vengeance for her love, vengeance for her people and her land. Driven by grief she reached out to the True Source, and hurled the One Power at the Trolloc army. And there the Dreadlords died wherever they stood, whether in their secret councils or exhorting their soldiers. In the passing of a breath the Dreadlords and the generals of the Dark One's host burst into flame. Fire consumed their bodies, and terror consumed their just-victorious army.

"Now they ran like beasts before a wildfire in the forest, with no thought for anything but escape. North and south they fled. Thousands drowned attempting to cross the Tarendelle without the aid of the Dreadlords, and at the Manetherendelle they tore down the bridges in their fright at what might be following them. Where they found people, they slew and burned, but to flee was the need that gripped them. Until, at last, no one of them remained in the lands of Manetheren. They were dispersed like dust before the whirlwind. The final vengeance came more slowly, but it came, when they were hunted down by other peoples, by other armies in other lands. None was left alive of those who did murder at Aemon's Field.

"But the price was high for Manetheren. Eldrene had drawn to herself more of the One Power than any human could ever hope to wield unaided. As the enemy generals died, so did she die, and the fires that consumed her consumed the empty city of Manetheren, even the stones of it, down to the living rock of the mountains. Yet the people had been saved.

"Nothing was left of their farms, their villages, or their great city. Some would say there was nothing left for them, nothing but to flee to other lands, where they could begin anew. They did not say so. They had paid such a price in blood and hope for their land as had never been paid before, and now they were bound to that soil by ties stronger than steel. Other wars would wrack them in years to come, until at last their corner of the world was forgotten and at last they had forgotten wars and the ways of war. Never again did Manetheren rise. Its soaring spires and splashing fountains became as a dream that slowly faded from the minds of its people. But they, and their children, and their children's children, held the land that was theirs. They held it when the long centuries had

washed the why of it from their memories. They held it until, today, there is you. Weep for Manetheren. Weep for what is lost forever."

The fires on Moiraine's staff winked out, and she lowered it to her side as if it weighed a hundred pounds. For a long moment the moan of the wind was the only sound. Then Paet al'Caar shouldered past the Coplins.

"I don't know about your story," the long-jawed farmer said. "I'm no thorn to the Dark One's foot, nor ever likely to be, neither. But my Wil is walking because of you, and for that I am ashamed to be here. I don't know if you can forgive me, but whether you will or no, I'll be going. And for me, you can stay in Emond's Field as long as you like."

With a quick duck of his head, almost a bow, he pushed back through the crowd. Others began to mutter then, offering shamefaced penitence before they, too, slipped away one by one. The Coplins, sour-mouthed and scowling once more, looked at the faces around them and vanished into the night without a word. Bili Congar had disappeared even before his cousins.

Lan pulled Rand back and shut the door. "Let's go, boy." The Warder started for the back of the inn. "Come along, both of you. Quickly!"

Rand hesitated, exchanging a wondering glance with Mat. While Moiraine had been telling the story, Master al'Vere's Dhurrans could not have dragged him away, but now something else held his feet. This was the real beginning, leaving the inn and following the Warder into the night. . . . He shook himself, and tried to firm his resolve. He had no choice but to go, but he would come back to Emond's Field, however far or long this journey was.

"What are you waiting for?" Lan asked from the door that led out of the back of the common room. With a start Mat hurried to him.

Trying to convince himself that he was beginning a grand adventure, Rand followed them through the darkened kitchen and out into the stableyard.



## CHAPTER 10 - Leavetaking

A single lantern, its shutters half closed, hung from a nail on a stall post, casting a dim light. Deep shadows swallowed most of the stalls. As Rand came through the doors from the stableyard, hard on the heels of Mat and the Warder, Perrin leaped up in a rustle of straw from where he had been sitting with his back against a stall door. A heavy cloak swathed him.

Lan barely paused to demand, "Did you look the way I told you, blacksmith?"

"I looked," Perrin replied. "There's nobody here but us. Why would anybody hide—"

"Care and a long life go together, blacksmith." The Warder ran a quick eye around the shadowed stable and the deeper shadows of the hayloft above, then shook his head. "No time," he muttered, half to himself. "Hurry, she says."

As if to suit his words, he strode quickly to where the five horses stood tethered, bridled and saddled at the back of the pool of light. Two were the black stallion and white mare that Rand had seen before. The others, if not quite so tall or so sleek, certainly appeared to be among the best the Two Rivers had to offer. With hasty care Lan began examining cinches and girth straps, and the leather ties that held saddlebags, water-skins, and blanketrolls behind the saddles.

Rand exchanged shaky smiles with his friends, trying hard to look as if he really was eager to be off.

For the first time Mat noticed the sword at Rand's waist, and pointed to it. "You becoming a Warder?" He laughed, then swallowed it with a quick glance at Lan. The Warder apparently took no notice. "Or at least a merchant's guard," Mat went on with a grin that seemed only a little forced. He hefted his bow. "An honest man's weapon isn't good enough for him."

Rand thought about flourishing the sword, but Lan being there stopped him. The Warder was not even looking in his direction, but he was sure the man was aware of everything that went on around him. Instead he said with exaggerated casualness, "It might be useful," as if wearing a sword were nothing out of the ordinary.

Perrin moved, trying to hide something under his cloak. Rand glimpsed a wide leather belt encircling the apprentice blacksmith's waist, with the handle of an axe thrust through a loop on the belt.

"What do you have there?" he asked.

"Merchant's guard, indeed," Mat hooted.

The shaggy-haired youth gave Mat a frown that suggested he had already had more than his fair share of joking, then sighed heavily and tossed back his cloak to uncover the axe. It was no common woodsman's tool. A broad half-moon blade on one side of the head and a curved spike on the other made it every bit as strange for the Two Rivers as Rand's sword. Perrin's hand rested on it with a sense of familiarity, though.

"Master Luhhan made it about two years ago, for a wool-buyer's guard. But when it was done the fellow wouldn't pay what he had agreed, and Master Luhhan would not take less. He gave it to me when"—he cleared his throat, then shot Rand the same warning frown he'd given Mat—"when he found me practicing with it. He said I might as well have it since he couldn't make anything useful from it."

"Practicing," Mat snickered, but held up his hands soothingly when Perrin raised his head. "As you say. It's just as well one of us knows how to use a real weapon."

"That bow is a real weapon," Lan said suddenly. He propped an arm across the saddle of his tall black and regarded them gravely. "So are the slings I've seen you village boys with. Just because you never used them for anything but hunting rabbits or chasing a wolf away from the sheep makes no difference. Anything can be a weapon, if the man or woman who holds it has the nerve and will to make it so. Trollocs aside, you had better have that clear in your minds before we leave the Two Rivers, before we leave Emond's Field, if you want to reach Tar Valon alive."

His face and voice, cold as death and hard as a rough-hewn gravestone, stifled their smiles and their tongues. Perrin grimaced and pulled his cloak back over the axe. Mat stared at his feet and stirred the straw on the stable floor with his toe. The Warder grunted and went back to his checking, and the silence lengthened.

"It isn't much like the stories," Mat said, finally.

"I don't know," Perrin said sourly. "Trollocs, a Warder, an Aes Sedai. What more could you ask?"

"Aes Sedai," Mat whispered, sounding as if he were suddenly cold.

"Do you believe her, Rand?" Perrin asked. "I mean, what would Trollocs want with us?"

As one, they glanced at the Warder. Lan appeared absorbed in the white mare's saddle girth, but the three of them moved back toward the stable door, away from Lan. Even so, they huddled together and spoke softly.

Rand shook his head. "I don't know, but she had it right about our farms being the only ones attacked. And they attacked Master Luhhan's house and the forge first, here in the village. I asked the Mayor. It's as easy to believe they are after us as anything else I can think of." Suddenly he realized they were both staring at him.

"You asked the Mayor?" Mat said incredulously. "She said not to tell anybody."

"I didn't tell him why I was asking," Rand protested. "Do you mean you didn't talk to anybody at all? You didn't let anybody know you're going?"

Perrin shrugged defensively. "Moiraine Sedai said not anybody."

"We left notes," Mat said. "For our families. They'll find them in the morning. Rand, my mother thinks Tar Valon is the next thing to Shayol Ghul." He gave a little laugh to show he did not share her opinion. It was not very convincing. "She'd try to lock me in the cellar if she believed I was even thinking of going there."

"Master Luhhan is stubborn as stone," Perrin added, "and Mistress Luhhan is worse. If you'd seen her digging through what's left of the house, saying she hoped the Trollocs did come back so she could get her hands on them. . . ."

"Burn me, Rand," Mat said, "I know she's an Aes Sedai and all, but the Trollocs were really here. She said not to tell anybody. If an Aes Sedai doesn't know what to do about something like this, who does?"

"I don't know." Rand rubbed at his forehead. His head hurt; he could not get that dream out of his mind. "My father believes her. At least, he agreed that we had to go."

Suddenly Moiraine was in the doorway. "You talked to your father about this journey?" She was clothed in dark gray from head to foot, with a skirt divided for riding astride, and the serpent ring was the only gold she wore now.

Rand eyed her walking staff; despite the flames he had seen, there was no sign of charring, or even soot. "I couldn't go off without letting him know."

She eyed him for a moment with pursed lips before turning to the others. "And did you also decide that a note was not enough?" Mat and Perrin talked on top of each other, assuring her they had only left notes, the way she had said. Nodding, she waved them to silence, and gave Rand a sharp look. "What is done is already woven in the Pattern. Lan?"

"The horses are ready," the Warder said, "and we have enough provisions to reach Baerlon with some to spare. We can leave at any time. I suggest now."

"Not without me." Egwene slipped into the stable, a shawl-wrapped bundle in her arms. Rand nearly fell over his own feet.

Lan's sword had come half out of its sheath; when he saw who it was he shoved the blade back, his eyes suddenly flat. Perrin and Mat began babbling to convince Moiraine they had not told Egwene about leaving. The Aes Sedai ignored them; she simply looked at Egwene, tapping her lips thoughtfully with one finger.

The hood of Egwene's dark brown cloak was pulled up, but not enough to hide the defiant way she faced Moiraine. "I have everything I need here. Including food. And I will not be left behind. I'll probably never get another chance to see the world outside the Two Rivers."

"This isn't a picnic trip into the Waterwood, Egwene," Mat growled. He stepped back when she looked at him from under lowered brows.

"Thank you, Mat. I wouldn't have known. Do you think you three are the only ones who want to see what's outside? I've dreamed about it as long as you have, and I don't intend to miss this chance."

"How did you find out we were leaving?" Rand demanded. "Anyway, you can't go with us. We aren't leaving for the fun of it. The Trollocs are after us." She gave him a tolerant look, and he flushed and stiffened indignantly.

"First," she told him patiently, "I saw Mat creeping about, trying hard not to be noticed. Then I saw Perrin attempting to hide that absurd great axe under his cloak. I knew Lan had bought a horse, and it suddenly occurred to me to wonder why he needed another. And if he could buy one, he could buy others. Putting that with Mat and Perrin sneaking about like bull calves pretending to be foxes . . . well, I could see only one answer. I don't know if I'm surprised or not to find you here, Rand, after all your talk about daydreams. With Mat and Perrin involved, I suppose I should have known you would be in it, too."

"I have to go, Egwene," Rand said. "All of us do, or the Trollocs will come back."

"The Trollocs!" Egwene laughed incredulously. "Rand, if you've decided to see some of the world, well and good, but please spare me any of your nonsensical tales."

"It's true," Perrin said as Mat began, "The Trollocs—"

"Enough," Moiraine said quietly, but it cut their talk as sharply as a knife. "Did anyone else notice all of this?" Her voice was soft, but Egwene swallowed and drew herself up before answering.

"After last night, all they can think about is rebuilding, that and what to do if it happens again. They couldn't see anything else unless it was pushed under their noses. And I told no one what I suspected. No one."

"Very well," Moiraine said after a moment. "You may come with us."

A startled expression darted across Lan's face. It was gone in an instant, leaving him outwardly calm, but furious words erupted from him. "No, Moiraine!"

"It is part of the Pattern, now, Lan."

"It is ridiculous!" he retorted. "There's no reason for her to come along, and every reason for her not to."

"There is a reason for it," Moiraine said calmly. "A part of the Pattern, Lan." The Warder's stony face showed nothing, but he nodded slowly.

"But, Egwene," Rand said, "the Trollocs will be chasing us. We won't be safe until we get to Tar Valon."

"Don't try to frighten me off," she said. "I am going."

Rand knew that tone of voice. He had not heard it since she decided that climbing the tallest trees was for children, but he remembered it well. "If you think being chased by Trollocs will be fun," he began, but Moiraine interrupted.

"We have no time for this. We must be as far away as possible by daybreak. If she is left behind, Rand, she could rouse the village before we have gone a mile, and that would surely warn the Myrddraal."

"I would not do that," Egwene protested.

"She can ride the gleeman's horse," the Warder said. "I'll leave him enough to buy another."

"That will not be possible," came Thom Merrilin's resonant voice from the hayloft. Lan's sword left its sheath this time, and he did not put it back as he stared up at the gleeman.

Thom tossed down a blanketroll, then slung his cased flute and harp across his back and shouldered bulging saddlebags. "This village has no use for me, now, while on the other hand, I have never performed in Tar Valon. And though I usually journey alone, after last night I have no objections at all to traveling in company."

The Warder gave Perrin a hard look, and Perrin shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't think of looking in the loft," he muttered.

As the long-limbed gleeman scrambled down the ladder from the loft, Lan spoke, stiffly formal. "Is this part of the Pattern, too, Moiraine Sedai?"

"Everything is a part of the Pattern, my old friend," Moiraine replied softly. "We cannot pick and choose. But we shall see."

Thom put his feet on the stable floor and turned from the ladder, brushing straw from his patch-covered cloak. "In fact," he said in more normal tones, "you might say that I insist on traveling in company. I have given many hours

over many mugs of ale to thinking of how I might end my days. A Trolloc's cookpot was not one of the thoughts." He looked askance at the Warder's sword. "There's no need for that. I am not a cheese for slicing."

"Master Merrill," Moiraine said, "we must go quickly, and almost certainly in great danger. The Trollocs are still out there, and we go by night. Are you sure that you want to travel with us?"

Thom eyed the lot of them with a quizzical smile. "If it is not too dangerous for the girl, it can't be too dangerous for me. Besides, what gleeman would not face a little danger to perform in Tar Valon?"

Moiraine nodded, and Lan scabbarded his sword. Rand suddenly wondered what would have happened if Thom had changed his mind, or if Moiraine had not nodded. The gleeman began saddling his horse as if similar thoughts had never crossed his mind, but Rand noticed that he eyed Lan's sword more than once.

"Now," Moiraine said. "What horse for Egwene?"

"The peddler's horses are as bad as the Dhurrans," the Warder replied sourly. "Strong, but slow plodders."

"Bela," Rand said, getting a look from Lan that made him wish he had kept silent. But he knew he could not dissuade Egwene; the only thing left was to help. "Bela may not be as fast as the others, but she's strong. I ride her sometimes. She can keep up."

Lan looked into Bela's stall, muttering under his breath. "She might be a little better than the others," he said finally. "I don't suppose there is any other choice."

"Then she will have to do," Moiraine said. "Rand, find a saddle for Bela. Quickly, now! We have tarried too long already."

Rand hurriedly chose a saddle and blanket in the tack room, then fetched Bela from her stall. The mare looked back at him in sleepy surprise when he put the saddle on her back. When he rode her, it was barebacked; she was not used to a saddle. He made soothing noises while he tightened the girth strap, and she accepted the oddity with no more than a shake of her mane.

Taking Egwene's bundle from her, he tied it on behind the saddle while she mounted and adjusted her skirts. They were not divided for riding astride, so her wool stockings were bared to the knee. She wore the same soft leather shoes as all the other village girls. They were not at all suited for journeying to Watch Hill, much less Tar Valon.

"I still think you shouldn't come," he said. "I wasn't making it up about the Trollocs. But I promise I will take care of you."

"Perhaps I'll take care of you," she replied lightly. At his exasperated look she smiled and bent down to smooth his hair. "I know you'll look after me, Rand. We will look after each other. But now you had better look after getting on your horse."

All of the others were already mounted and waiting for him, he realized. The only horse left riderless was Cloud, a tall gray with a black mane and tail that belonged to Jon Thane, or had. He scrambled into the saddle, though not without difficulty as the gray tossed his head and pranced sideways as Rand put his foot in the stirrup, and his scabbard caught in his legs. It was not chance that his friends had not chosen Cloud. Master Thane often raced the spirited gray against merchants' horses, and Rand had never known him to lose, but he had never known Cloud to give anyone an easy ride, either. Lan must have given a huge price to make the miller sell. As he settled in the saddle Cloud's dancing increased, as if the gray were eager to run. Rand gripped the reins firmly and tried to think that he would have no trouble. Perhaps if he convinced himself, he could convince the horse, too.

An owl hooted in the night outside, and the village people jumped before they realized what it was. They laughed nervously and exchanged shamefaced looks.

"Next thing, field mice will chase us up a tree," Egwene said with an unsteady chuckle.

Lan shook his head. "Better if it had been wolves."

"Wolves!" Perrin exclaimed, and the Warder favored him with a flat stare.

"Wolves don't like Trollocs, blacksmith, and Trollocs don't like wolves, or dogs, either. If I heard wolves I would be sure there were no Trollocs waiting out there for us." He moved into the moonlit night, walking his tall black slowly.



Moiraine rode after him without a moment's hesitation, and Egwene kept hard to the Aes Sedai's side. Rand and the gleeman brought up the rear, following Mat and Perrin.

The back of the inn was dark and silent, and dappled moon shadows filled the stableyard. The soft thuds of the hooves faded quickly, swallowed by the night. In the darkness the Warder's cloak made him a shadow, too. Only the need to let him lead the way kept the others from clustering around him. Getting out of the village without being seen was going to be no easy task, Rand decided as he neared the gate. At least, without being seen by villagers. Many windows in the village emitted pale yellow light, and although those glows seemed very small in the night now, shapes moved frequently within them, the shapes of villagers watching to see what this night brought. No one wanted to be caught by surprise again.

In the deep shadows beside the inn, just on the point of leaving the stableyard, Lan abruptly halted, motioning sharply for silence.

Boots rattled on the Wagon Bridge, and here and there on the bridge moonlight glinted off metal. The boots clattered across the bridge, grated on gravel, and approached the inn. No sound at all came from those in the shadow. Rand suspected his friends, at least, were too frightened to make a noise. Like him.

The footsteps halted before the inn in the grayness just beyond the dim light from the common-room windows. It was not until Jon Thane stepped forward, a spear propped on his stout shoulder, an old jerkin sewn all over with steel disks straining across his chest, that Rand saw them for what they were. A dozen men from the village and the surrounding farms, some in helmets or pieces of armor that had lain dust-covered in attics for generations, all with a spear or a woodaxe or a rusty bill.

The miller peered into a common-room window, then turned with a curt, "It looks right here." The others formed in two ragged ranks behind him, and the patrol marched into the night as if stepping to three different drums.

"Two Dha'vol Trollocs would have them all for breakfast," Lan muttered when the sound of their boots had faded, "but they have eyes and ears." He turned his stallion back. "Come."

Slowly, quietly, the Warder took them back across the stableyard, down the bank through the willows and into the Winespring Water. So close to the Winespring itself the cold, swift water, gleaming as it swirled around the horses' legs, was deep enough to lap against the soles of the riders' boots.

Climbing out on the far bank, the line of horses wound its way under the Warder's deft direction, keeping away from any of the village houses. From time to time Lan stopped, signing them all to be quiet, though no one else heard or saw anything. Each time he did, however, another patrol of villagers and farmers soon passed. Slowly they moved toward the north edge of the village.

Rand peered at the high-peaked houses in the dark, trying to impress them on his memory. A fine adventurer I am, he thought. He was not even out of the village yet, and already he was homesick. But he did not stop looking.

They passed beyond the last farmhouses on the outskirts of the village and into the countryside, paralleling the North Road that led to Taren Ferry. Rand thought that surely no night sky elsewhere could be as beautiful as the Two Rivers sky. The clear black seemed to reach to forever, and myriad stars gleamed like points of light scattered through crystal. The moon, only a thin slice less than full, appeared almost close enough to touch, if he stretched, and. . . .

A black shape flew slowly across the silvery ball of the moon. Rand's involuntary jerk on the reins halted the gray. A bat, he thought weakly, but he knew it was not. Bats were a common sight of an evening, darting after flies and bitemes in the twilight. The wings that carried this creature might have the same shape, but they moved with the slow, powerful sweep of a bird of prey. And it was hunting. The way it cast back and forth in long arcs left no doubt of that. Worst of all was the size. For a bat to seem so large against the moon it would have had to be almost within arm's reach. He tried to judge in his mind how far away it must be, and how big. The body of it had to be as large as a man, and the wings. . . . It crossed the face of the moon again, wheeling suddenly downward to be engulfed by the night.

He did not realize that Lan had ridden back to him until the Warder caught his arm. "What are you sitting here and staring at, boy? We have to keep moving." The others waited behind Lan.

Half expecting to be told he was letting fear of the Trollocs overcome his sense, Rand told what he had seen. He hoped that Lan would dismiss it as a bat, or a trick of his eyes.

Lan growled a word, sounding as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. "Draghkar." Egwene and the other Two Rivers folk stared at the sky nervously in all directions, but the gleeman groaned softly.

"Yes," Moiraine said. "It is too much to hope otherwise. And if the Myrddraal has a Draghkar at his command, then he will soon know where we are, if he does not already. We must move more quickly than we can cross-country. We may still reach Taren Ferry ahead of the Myrddraal, and he and his Trollocs will not cross as easily as we."

"A Draghkar?" Egwene said. "What is it?"

It was Thom Merrilin who answered her hoarsely. "In the war that ended the Age of Legends, worse than Trollocs and Halfmen were created."

Moiraine's head jerked toward him as he spoke. Not even the dark could hide the sharpness of her look.

Before anyone could ask the gleeman for more, Lan began giving directions. "We take to the North Road, now. For your lives, follow my lead, keep up and keep together."

He wheeled his horse about, and the others galloped wordlessly after him.

## CHAPTER 11 - The Road to Taren Ferry

On the hard-packed dirt of the North Road the horses stretched out, manes and tails streaming back in the moonlight as they raced northward, hooves pounding a steady rhythm. Lan led the way, black horse and shadow-clad rider all but invisible in the cold night. Moiraine's white mare, matching the stallion stride for stride, was a pale dart speeding through the dark. The rest followed in a tight line, as if they were all tied to a rope with one end in the Warder's hands.

Rand galloped last in line, with Thom Merrilin just ahead and the others less distinct beyond. The gleeman never turned his head, reserving his eyes for where they ran, not what they ran from. If Trollocs appeared behind, or the Fade on its silent horse, or that flying creature, the Draghkar, it would be up to Rand to sound an alarm.

Every few minutes he craned his neck to peer behind while he clung to Cloud's mane and reins. The Draghkar. . . . Worse than Trollocs and Fades, Thom had said. But the sky was empty, and only darkness and shadows met his eyes on the ground. Shadows that could hide an army.

Now that the gray had been let loose to run, the animal sped through the night like a ghost, easily keeping pace with Lan's stallion. And Cloud wanted to go faster. He wanted to catch the black, strained to catch the black. Rand had to keep a firm hand on the reins to hold him back. Cloud lunged against his restraint as if the gray thought this were a race, fighting him for mastery with every stride. Rand clung to saddle and reins with every muscle taut. Fervently he hoped his mount did not detect how uneasy he was. If Cloud did, he would lose the one real edge he held, however precariously.

Lying low on Cloud's neck, Rand kept a worried eye on Bela and on her rider. When he had said the shaggy mare could stay with the others, he had not meant on the run. She kept up now only by running as he had not thought she could. Lan had not wanted Egwene in their number. Would he slow for her if Bela began to flag? Or would he try to leave her behind? The Aes Sedai and the Warder thought Rand and his friends were important in some way, but for all of Moiraine's talk of the Pattern, he did not think they included Egwene in that importance.

If Bela fell back, he would fall back, too, whatever Moiraine and Lan had to say about it. Back where the Fade and the Trollocs were. Back where the Draghkar was. With all his heart and desperation he silently shouted at Bela to run like the wind, silently tried to will strength into her. Run! His skin prickled, and his bones felt as if they were freezing, ready to split open. The Light help her, run! And Bela ran.

On and on they sped, northward into the night, time fading into an indistinct blur. Now and again the lights of farmhouses flashed into sight, then disappeared as quickly as imagination. Dogs' sharp challenges faded swiftly behind, or cut off abruptly as the dogs decided they had been chased away. They raced through darkness relieved only by watery pale moonlight, a darkness where trees along the road loomed up without warning, then were gone. For the rest, murk surrounded them, and only a solitary night-bird's cry, lonely and mournful, disturbed the steady pounding of hooves.

Abruptly Lan slowed, then brought the file of horses to a stop. Rand was not sure how long they had been moving, but a soft ache filled his legs from gripping the saddle. Ahead of them in the night, lights sparkled, as if a tall swarm of fireflies held one place among the trees.

Rand frowned at the lights in puzzlement, then suddenly gasped with surprise. The fireflies were windows, the windows of houses covering the sides and top of a hill. It was Watch Hill. He could hardly believe they had come so far. They had probably made the journey as fast as it had ever been traveled. Following Lan's example, Rand and Thom Merrill dismounted. Cloud stood head down, sides heaving. Lather, almost indistinguishable from the horse's smoky sides, flecked the gray's neck and shoulders. Rand thought that Cloud would not be carrying anyone further that night.

"Much as I would like to put all these villages behind me," Thom announced, "a few hours rest would not go amiss right now. Surely we have enough of a lead to allow that?"

Rand stretched, knuckling the small of his back. "If we're stopping the rest of the night in Watch Hill, we may as well go on up."

A vagrant gust of wind brought a fragment of song from the village, and smells of cooking that made his mouth water. They were still celebrating in Watch Hill. There had been no Trollocs to disturb their Bel Tine. He looked for Egwene. She was leaning against Bela, slumped with weariness. The others were climbing

down as well, with many a sigh and much stretching of aching muscles. Only the Warder and the Aes Sedai showed no visible sign of fatigue.

"I could do with some singing," Mat put in tiredly. "And maybe a hot mutton pie at the White Boar." Pausing, he added, "I've never been further than Watch Hill. The White Boar's not nearly as good as the Winespring Inn."

"The White Boar isn't so bad," Perrin said. "A mutton pie for me, too. And lots of hot tea to take the chill off my bones."

"We cannot stop until we are across the Taren," Lan said sharply. "Not for more than a few minutes."

"But the horses," Rand protested. "We'll run them to death if we try to go any further tonight. Moiraine Sedai, surely you—"

He had vaguely noticed her moving among the horses, but he had not paid any real attention to what she did. Now she brushed past him to lay her hands on Cloud's neck. Rand fell silent. Suddenly the horse tossed his head with a soft whicker, nearly pulling the reins from Rand's hands. The gray danced a step sideways, as restive as if he had spent a week in a stable. Without a word Moiraine went to Bela.

"I did not know she could do that," Rand said softly to Lan, his cheeks hot.

"You, of all people, should have suspected it," the Warder replied. "You watched her with your father. She will wash all the fatigue away. First from the horses, then from the rest of you."

"The rest of us. Not you?"

"Not me, sheepherder. I don't need it, not yet. And not her. What she can do for others, she cannot do for herself. Only one of us will ride tired. You had better hope she does not grow too tired before we reach Tar Valon."

"Too tired for what?" Rand asked the Warder.

"You were right about your Bela, Rand," Moiraine said from where she stood by the mare. "She has a good heart, and as much stubbornness as the rest of you Two Rivers folk. Strange as it seems, she may be the least weary of all."

A scream ripped the darkness, a sound like a man dying under sharp knives, and wings swooped low above the party. The night deepened in the shadow that swept over them. With panicked cries the horses reared wildly.

The wind of the Draghkar's wings beat at Rand with a feel like the touch of slime, like chittering in the dank dimness of a nightmare. He had no time even to feel the fear of it, for Cloud exploded into the air with a scream of his own, twisting desperately as if attempting to shake off some clinging thing. Rand, hanging onto the reins, was jerked off his feet and dragged across the ground, Cloud screaming as though the big gray felt wolves tearing at his hocks.

Somehow he maintained his grip on the reins; using the other hand as much as his legs he scrambled onto his feet, taking leaping, staggering steps to keep from being pulled down again. His breath came in ragged pants of desperation. He could not let Cloud get away. He threw out a frantic hand, barely catching the bridle. Cloud reared, lifting him into the air; Rand clung helplessly, hoping against hope that the horse would quieten.

The shock of landing jarred Rand to his teeth, but suddenly the gray was still, nostrils flaring and eyes rolling, stiff-legged and trembling. Rand was trembling as well, and all but hanging from the bridle. That jolt must have shaken the fool animal, too, he thought. He took three or four deep, shaky breaths. Only then could he look around and see what had happened to the others.

Chaos reigned among the party. They clutched reins against jerking heads, trying with little success to calm the rearing horses that dragged them about in a milling mass. Only two seemingly had no trouble at all with their mounts. Moiraine sat straight in her saddle, the white mare stepping delicately away from the confusion as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened. On foot, Lan scanned the sky, sword in one hand and reins in the other; the sleek black stallion stood quietly beside him.

Sounds of merrymaking no longer came from Watch Hill. Those in the village must have heard the cry, too. Rand knew they would listen awhile, and perhaps watch for what had caused it, then return to their jollity. They would soon forget the incident, its memory submerged by song and food and dance and fun. Perhaps when they heard the news of what had happened in Emond's Field some would remember, and wonder. A fiddle began to play, and after a moment a flute joined in. The village was resuming its celebration.

"Mount!" Lan commanded curtly. Sheathing his sword, he leaped onto the stallion. "The Draghkar would not have showed itself unless it had already reported our whereabouts to the Myrddraal." Another strident shriek drifted down from far above, fainter but no less harsh. The music from Watch Hill silenced raggedly once more. "It tracks us now, marking us for the Halfman. He won't be far."

The horses, fresh now as well as fear-struck, pranced and backed away from those trying to mount. A cursing Thom Merrill was the first into his saddle, but the others were up soon after. All but one.

"Hurry, Rand!" Egwene shouted. The Draghkar gave shrill voice once more, and Bela ran a few steps before she could rein the mare in. "Hurry!"

With a start Rand realized that instead of trying to mount Cloud he had been standing there staring at the sky in a vain attempt to locate the source of those vile shrieks. More, all unaware, he had drawn Tam's sword as if to fight the flying thing.

His face reddened, making him glad for the night to hide him. Awkwardly, with one hand occupied by the reins, he re-sheathed the blade, glancing hastily at the others. Moiraine, Lan, and Egwene all were looking at him, though he could not be sure how much they could see in the moonlight. The rest seemed too absorbed with keeping their horses under control to pay him any mind. He put a hand on the pommel and reached the saddle in one leap, as if he had been doing the like all his life. If any of his friends had noticed the sword, he would surely hear about it later. There would be time enough to worry about it then.

As soon as he was in the saddle they were all off at a gallop again, up the road and by the dome-like hill. Dogs barked in the village; their passage was not entirely unnoticed. Or maybe the dogs smelled Trollocs, Rand thought. The barking and the village lights alike vanished quickly behind them.

They galloped in a knot, horses all but jostling together as they ran. Lan ordered them to spread out again, but no one wanted to be even a little alone in the night. A scream came from high overhead. The Warder gave up and let them run clustered.

Rand was close behind Moiraine and Lan, the gray straining in an effort to force himself between the Warder's black and the Aes Sedai's trim mare. Egwene and the gleeman raced on either flank of him, while Rand's friends crowded in



behind. Cloud, spurred by the Draghkar's cries, ran beyond anything Rand could do to slow him even had he wished to, yet the gray could not gain so much as a step on the other two horses.

The Draghkar's shriek challenged the night.

Stout Bela ran with neck outstretched and tail and mane streaming in the wind of her running, matching the larger horses' every stride. The Aes Sedai must have done something more than simply ridding her of fatigue.

Egwene's face in the moonlight was smiling in excited delight. Her braid streamed behind like the horses' manes, and the gleam in her eyes was not all from the moon, Rand was sure. His mouth dropped open in surprise, until a swallowed biteme set him off into a fit of coughing.

Lan must have asked a question, for Moiraine suddenly shouted over the wind and the pounding of hooves. "I cannot! Most especially not from the back of a galloping horse. They are not easily killed, even when they can be seen. We must run, and hope."

They galloped through a tatter of fog, thin and no higher than the horses' knees. Cloud sped through it in two strides, and Rand blinked, wondering if he had imagined it. Surely the night was too cold for fog. Another patch of ragged gray whisked by them to one side, larger than the first. It had been growing, as if the mist oozed from the ground. Above them, the Draghkar screamed in rage. Fog enveloped the riders for a brief moment and was gone, came again and vanished behind. The icy mist left a chill dampness on Rand's face and hands. Then a wall of pale gray loomed before them, and they were suddenly enshrouded. The thickness of it muffled the sound of their hooves to dullness, and the cries from overhead seemed to come through a wall. Rand could only just make out the shapes of Egwene and Thom Merrill on either side of him.

Lan did not slow their pace. "There is still only one place we can be going," he called, his voice sounding hollow and directionless.

"Myrddraal are sly," Moiraine replied. "I will use its own slyness against it." They galloped on silently.

Slaty mist obscured both sky and ground, so that the riders, themselves turned to shadow, appeared to float through night clouds. Even the legs of their own horses seemed to have vanished.

Rand shifted in his saddle, shrinking away from the icy fog. Knowing that Moiraine could do things, even seeing her do them, was one thing; having those things leave his skin damp was something else again. He realized he was holding his breath, too, and called himself nine kinds of idiot. He could not ride all the way to Taren Ferry without breathing. She had used the One Power on Tam, and he seemed all right. Still, he had to make himself let that breath go and inhale. The air was heavy, but if colder it was otherwise no different than that on any other foggy night. He told himself that, but he was not sure he believed it.

Lan encouraged them to keep close, now, to stay where each could see the outlines of others in that damp, frosty grayness. Yet the Warder still did not slacken his stallion's dead run. Side by side, Lan and Moiraine led the way through the fog as if they could see clearly what lay ahead. The rest could only trust and follow. And hope.

The shrill cries that had hounded them faded as they galloped, and then were gone, but that gave small comfort. Forest and farmhouses, moon and road were shrouded and hidden. Dogs still barked, hollow and distant in the gray haze, when they passed farms, but there was no other sound save the dull drumming of their horses' hooves. Nothing in that featureless ashen fog changed. Nothing gave any hint of the passage of time except the growing ache in thigh and back.

It had to have been hours, Rand was sure. His hands had clutched his reins until he was not sure he could release them, and he wondered if he would ever walk properly again. He glanced back only once. Shadows in the fog raced behind him, but he could not even be certain of their number. Or even that they really were his friends. The chill and damp soaked through his cloak and coat and shirt, soaked into his bones, so it seemed. Only the rush of air past his face and the gather and stretch of the horse beneath him told him he was moving at all. It must have been hours.

"Slow," Lan called suddenly. "Draw rein."

Rand was so startled that Cloud forced between. Lan and Moiraine, forging ahead for half a dozen strides before he could pull the big gray to a halt and stare.

Houses loomed in the fog on all sides, houses strangely tall to Rand's eye. He had never seen this place before, but he had often heard descriptions. That

tallness came from high redstone foundations, necessary when the spring melt in the Mountains of Mist made the Taren overflow its banks. They had reached Taren Ferry.

Lan trotted the black warhorse past him. "Don't be so eager, shepherd."

Discomfited, Rand fell into place without explaining as the party moved deeper into the village. His face was hot, and for the moment the fog was welcome.

A lone dog, unseen in the cold mist, barked at them furiously, then ran away. Here and there a light appeared in a window as some early-riser stirred. Other than the dog, no sound save the muted clops of their horses' hooves disturbed the last hour of the night.

Rand had met few people from Taren Ferry. He tried to recall what little he knew about them. They seldom ventured down into what they called "the lower villages," with their noses up as if they smelled something bad. The few he had met bore strange names, like Hilltop and Stoneboat. One and all, Taren Ferry folk had a reputation for slyness and trickery. If you shook hands with a Taren Ferry man, people said, you counted your fingers afterwards.

Lan and Moiraine stopped before a tall, dark house that looked exactly like any other in the village. Fog swirled around the Warder like smoke as he leaped from his saddle and mounted the stairs that rose to the front door, as high above the street as their heads. At the top of the stairs Lan hammered with his fist on the door.

"I thought he wanted quiet," Mat muttered.

Lan's pounding went on. A light appeared in the window of the next house, and someone shouted angrily, but the Warder kept on with his drumming.

Abruptly the door was flung back by a man in a nightshirt that flapped about his bare ankles. An oil lamp in one hand illumined a narrow face with pointed features. He opened his mouth angrily, then let it stay open as his head swiveled to take in the fog, eyes bulging. "What's this?" he said. "What's this?" Chill gray tendrils curled into the doorway, and he hurriedly stepped back away from them.

"Master Hightower," Lan said. "Just the man I need. We want to cross over on your ferry."

"He never even saw a high tower," Mat snickered. Rand made shushing motions at his friend. The sharp-faced fellow raised his lamp higher and peered down at them suspiciously.

After a minute Master Hightower said crossly, "The ferry goes over in daylight. Not in the night. Not ever. And not in this fog, neither. Come back when the sun's up and the fog's gone."

He started to turn away, but Lan caught his wrist. The ferryman opened his mouth angrily. Gold glinted in the lamplight as the Warder counted out coins one by one into the other's palm. Hightower licked his lips as the coins clinked, and by inches his head moved closer to his hand, as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

"And as much again," Lan said, "when we are safely on the other side. But we leave now."

"Now?" Chewing his lower lip, the ferrety man shifted his feet and peered out at the mist-laden night, then nodded abruptly. "Now it is. Well, let loose my wrist. I have to rouse my haulers. You don't think I pull the ferry across myself, do you?"

"I will wait at the ferry," Lan said flatly. "For a little while." He released his hold on the ferryman.

Master Hightower jerked the handful of coins to his chest and, nodding agreement, hastily shoved the door closed with his hip.





