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With his coming are the dread fires born again. The hills burn, and the land turns sere. The tides of men run out, and the hours dwindle. The wall is pierced, and the veil of parting raised. Storms rumble beyond the horizon, and the fires of heaven purge the earth. There is no salvation without destruction, no hope this side of death.

—fragment from *The Prophecies of the Dragon* believed translated by N'Delia Basolaine, First Maid and Swordfast to Raidhen of Hoi Cuchone (circa 400 AB, the Tenth Age)

## *PROLOGUE: The First Sparks Fall*



Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan absently fingered the long, seven-striped stole about her shoulders, the stole of the Amyrlin Seat, as she sat behind her wide writing table. Many would have accounted her beautiful, at first glance, but a second look made it clear that the severity of her ageless, Aes Sedai face was not a momentary matter. Today there was something more, a light of anger in her dark eyes. If anyone had noticed.

She barely listened to the women arrayed on stools before her. Their dresses were every colour from white to the darkest red, in silk or wool as each woman's taste dictated, yet all but one wore their formal shawls, embroidered White Flame of Tar Valon centred on their backs, coloured fringe proclaiming their Ajahs, as though this were a meeting of the Hall of the Tower. They discussed reports and rumours of events in the world, trying to sift fact from fancy, trying to decide the Tower's course of action, but they seldom even glanced at the woman behind the table, the woman they had sworn to obey. Elaida could not keep her full attention on them. They did not know what was really important. Or rather, they knew and feared to speak of it.

"There is apparently something happening in Shienar." That was Danelle, slight and often seemingly lost in a dream, the only Brown sister present. Green and Yellow also had only one sister apiece, and none of the three Ajahs was pleased about that. There were no Blues. Now Danelle's big blue eyes looked thoughtfully inward; an unnoticed ink smudge stained her cheek, and her dark grey wool dress was rumpled. "There are rumours of skirmishes. Not with Trollocs, and not Aiel, though raids through the Niamh Passes appear to have increased. Between Shienarans. Unusual for the Borderlands. They seldom fight each other."

"If they intend to have a civil war, they have chosen the proper time for it," Alviarin said coolly. Tall and slim and all in white silk, she was the one without a shawl. The stole of the Keeper around her shoulders was white also, to show she had been raised from the White Ajah. Not Red, Elaida's former Ajah, as tradition held. Whites were always cool. "The Trollocs might as well have vanished. The entire Blight seems quiet enough for two farmers and a Novice to guard."

Teslyn's bony fingers shuffled papers on her lap, though she did not look at them. One of four Red sisters there—more than any other Ajah—she ran Elaida a close second for severity, though no-one had ever thought her beautiful. "Better perhaps if it did no be so quiet," Teslyn said, her Illianer accent strong. "I did receive a message this morning that the Marshal-General of Saldaea does have an army on the move. No toward the Blight, but in the opposite direction. South and east. He would no ever have done that if the Blight did no seem to be asleep."

"Then word of Mazrim Taim is seeping out." Alviarin could have been discussing the weather or the price of carpets instead of a potential disaster. Much effort had gone into capturing Taim, and as much into hiding his escape. No good to the Tower if the world learned they could not hold on to a false Dragon once he was taken. "And it seems that Queen Tenobia, or Davram Bashere, or both thinks we cannot be trusted to deal with him again."

Dead quiet fell at the mention of Taim. The man could channel—he had been on his way to Tar Valon to be Gentled, cut off from the One Power forever, when he was broken free—yet that was not what curbed tongues. Once the existence of a man able to channel the One Power had been the deepest anathema; hunting such men down was the main reason of existence for the Red, and every Ajah helped as it could. But now most of the women beyond the table shifted on their stools, refusing to meet each other's eyes, because speaking of Taim brought them too close to another subject they did not want to speak aloud. Even Elaida felt bile rise in her stomach.

Apparently Alviarin experienced no such reluctance. One corner of her mouth quirked momentarily in what might have been smile or grimace. "I will redouble our efforts to retake Taim. And I suggest that a sister be dispatched to counsel Tenobia. Someone used to overcoming the sort of stubborn resistance that young woman will put up."

Others rushed to help fill the silence.

Joline shifted her green-fringed shawl on slender shoulders and smiled, though it seemed a bit forced. "Yes. She needs an Aes Sedai at her shoulder. Someone able to handle Bashere. He has excessive influence with Tenobia. He must move his army back where it can be used if the Blight wakes up." Too much bosom showed in the gap of her shawl, and her pale green silk was too snug, too clinging. And she smiled too much for Elaida's liking. Especially at men. Greens always did.

"The last thing we need now is another army on the march," Shemerin, the Yellow sister, said quickly. A slightly plump woman, she had somehow never really managed the outward calm of Aes Sedai; there was often a strain of anxiety around her eyes, and more so of late.

"And someone to Shienar," added Javindhra, another Red. Despite smooth cheeks, her angular face was hard enough to hammer nails. Her voice was harsh. "I don't like trouble of this sort in the Borderlands. The last thing we need is Shienar weakening itself to the point where a Trolloc army could break through."

"Perhaps." Alviarin nodded, considering. "But there are agents in Shienar—Red, I am sure, and perhaps others?" The four Red sisters nodded tightly, reluctantly; no-one else did. "—who can warn us if these small clashes become anything to worry us."

It was an open secret that every Ajah except the White, devoted to logic and philosophy as it was, had watchers and listeners scattered through the nations to varying degrees, though the Yellow network was believed to be a pitiful thing. There was nothing of sickness or Healing they could learn from those who could not channel. Some individual sisters had their own eyes-and-ears, though perhaps even more closely guarded than agents of the Ajahs. The Blues had had the most extensive, both Ajah and personal.

"As for Tenobia and Davram Bashere," Alviarin went on, "are we agreed that they must be dealt with by sisters?" She hardly waited for heads to nod. "Good. It is done. Memara will do nicely; she will take no nonsense from Tenobia, while never letting her see the leash. Now. Does anyone have fresh word out of Arad Doman or Valreis? If we do not do something there soon, we may find that Pedron Niall and the Whitecloaks have sway from Bandar Eban to the Zandarakh Mountains. Eanellein, you have something?" Arad Doman and Valreis were racked by civil wars, and worse. There was no order anywhere. Elaida was surprised they would bring it up.

"Only a rumour," the Grey sister replied. Her silk dress, matching the fringe on her shawl, was finely cut and scooped low at the neck. Often Elaida thought the woman should have been Green, so concerned was she with her looks and clothes. "Almost everyone in those poor lands is a refugee, including those who might send news. But Queen Aliyeh has not been seen in public for several weeks at last report, and with so many prominent Domani disappearing of late, speculation over her health runs wild."

"There is talk, too, that the High General of the Faithful Sons has refused to obey Selene's orders concerning the Dragonsworn in Valreis," Vivienne interjected smoothly. She was usually smooth, the way ice is smooth. Her white dress contrasted starkly with her dark brown skin.

The equally dark Red, Ivone, nodded, making her cloud of curly black hair sway gently. "There's trouble all over. The Panarch Amathera has apparently vanished, and it seems an Aes Sedai may have been involved..."

Elaida's hand tightened on her stole. Nothing touched her face, but her eyes smouldered. The matter of the Saldaean army was done. At least Memara was Red; that was a surprise. But they had not even asked her opinion. It was done. The startling possibility that an Aes Sedai was involved in the disappearance of the Panarch—if this was not another of the thousand improbable tales that drifted from the south—could not take Elaida's mind from that. There were Aes Sedai scattered from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World, and the Blues at least might do anything. Less than a month since they had all knelt to swear fealty to her as the embodiment of the White Tower, and now the decision was made without so much as a glance in her direction.

The Amyrlin's study sat only a few levels up in the White Tower, yet this room was the heart of the Tower as surely as the Tower itself, the colour of bleached bone, was the heart of the great island city of Tar Valon, cradled in the River Erinin. And Tar Valon was, or should be, the heart of the world. The room spoke of the power wielded by the long line of women who had occupied it, floor of polished redstone from the Mountains of Mist, tall fireplace of golden Kaltori marble, walls panelled in pale, oddly striped wood marvellously carved with unknown birds and beasts more than a

thousand years ago. Stone like glittering pearls framed the tall, arched windows that let onto the balcony overlooking the Amyrlin's private garden, the only stone like it known, salvaged from a nameless city swallowed by the Sea of Storms during the Breaking of the World. A room of power, a reflection of Amyrlins who had made thrones dance to their calling for nearly three thousand years. And they did not even ask her opinion.

It happened too often, this slighting. Worst—most bitter of all, perhaps—they usurped her authority without even thinking of it. They knew how she had come to the stole, knew their aid had put it on her shoulders. She herself had been too much aware of that. But they presumed too far. It would soon be time to do something about that. But not quite yet.

She had put her own stamp on the room, as much as possible, with a writing table ornately carved in triple-linked rings and a heavy chair that raised an inlaid ivory Flame of Tar Valon above her dark hair like a large snowy teardrop. Three boxes of Altaran lacquerwork were arranged on the table, precisely equidistant from each other; one held the finest of her collection of carved miniatures. A white vase on a simple plinth against one wall held red roses that filled the room with sweet fragrance. There had been no rain since she was raised, but fine blossoms were always available with the Power; she had always liked flowers. They could be so easily pruned and trained to produce beauty.

Two paintings hung where, seated, she could see them merely by lifting her head. The others avoided looking at them; among all the Aes Sedai who came to Elaida's study, only Alviarin ever so much as glanced at them.

"Is there any news of Elayne?" Andaya asked diffidently. A thin, birdlike little woman, outwardly timid despite Aes Sedai features, the second Grey looked an unlikely mediator, but was in fact one of the best. There were still faint traces of Tarabon in her voice. "Or Galad? If Morgase discovers that we have lost her stepson, she may begin to ask more questions concerning the whereabouts of her daughter, yes? And if she learns we have lost the Daughter-Heir, Andor may become as closed to us as Amadicia."

A few women shook their heads—there was no news, and Javindhra said, "A Red sister is in place in the Royal Palace. Newly raised, so she can easily pass for other than Aes Sedai." She meant that the woman had not yet taken on the agelessness that came with long use of the Power. Someone trying to guess the age of any woman in the study would have fumbled over a range of twenty years, and in some cases would be off by twice that. "Young Jesse is well trained, though, quite strong, and a good observer. Morgase is absorbed in putting forward her claim to the Cairhienin throne." Several women shifted on their stools, and as if realizing she had stepped close to dangerous ground, Javindhra hurried on. "And her new lover, Lord Gaebrial, seems to be keeping her occupied otherwise." Her thin mouth narrowed even further. "She is completely besotted with the man."

"I wouldn't have thought her so easily swayed," another of the Reds, Fillipa, put in with the appropriate degree of scorn. She didn't know Morgase the way Elaida did, however. The woman had always been too fond of men. Her efforts to rid her of that presumptuous bard had only briefly chilled her ardour.

"He keeps her concentrated on Cairhien," Alviarin said. "The situation there is nearly as bad as in Valreis and Arad Doman, with every House contending for the Sun Throne, and famine everywhere. Morgase will re-establish order, but it will take time for her to have the throne secure. Until that is done, she will have little energy left to worry about other matters, even the Daughter-Heir. And I set a clerk the task of sending occasional letters; the woman does a good imitation of Elayne's hand. Morgase will keep until we can secure proper control of her again."

Elaida frowned slightly over that. Cairhien was far away from Andor. Even if the Lion Throne wasn't struggling to maintain its current borders, attempting to annex Cairhien would have been overly ambitious of Morgase. Why would she heed this Gaebrial's advice when that advice was so foolish? She was fond of men, but she was not stupid.

"At least we still have her son in hand." Joline smiled.

"Gawyn do hardly be in hand," Teslyn said sharply. "Those Younglings of his do skirmish with Whitecloaks on both sides of the river. He does act on his own as much as at our direction."

The other White, Ayako, shook her head slowly. "The lack of self-control that some people have ... It is sad to see."

"He will be brought under control," Alviarin said. Elaida was beginning to find that constant cool composure hateful.

"Speaking of the Whitecloaks," Danelle put in, "it appears that Pedron Niall is conducting secret negotiations, trying to convince Altara to cede land to Illian, and thus keep the Council of Nine from invading."

Safely back from the precipice, the women on the other side of the table nattered on, deciding whether the Lord Captain Commander's negotiations might gain too much influence for the Children of the Light. Perhaps they should be disrupted so the Tower could step in and replace him.

Elaida's mouth twisted. The Tower had often in its history been cautious of necessity—too many feared them, too many distrusted them—but it had never *feared* anything or anyone. Now, it feared.

She raised her eyes to the paintings. One consisted of three wooden panels depicting Bonwhin, the last Red to have been raised to the Amyrlin Seat, a thousand years before, and the reason no Red had worn the stole since. Until Elaida. Bonwhin, tall and proud, ordering Aes Sedai in their manipulations of Artur Hawkwing; Bonwhin, defiant, on the white walls of Tar Valon, under siege by Hawkwing's forces; and Bonwhin, kneeling and humbled, before the Hall of the Tower as they stripped her of stole and staff for nearly destroying the Tower.

Many wondered why Elaida had had the triptych retrieved from the storerooms where it had lain covered in dust; if none spoke openly, she had still heard the whispers. They did not understand that constant reminder of the price of failure was necessary.

The second painting was in the new fashion, on stretched canvas, a copy of a street artist's sketch from the distant west. That one caused even more unease among the Aes Sedai who saw it. Two men fought among clouds, seemingly in the sky, wielding lightning for weapons. One had a mature face with eyes of purest black. The other was tall and young, with reddish hair. It was the youth who caused the fear, who made even Elaida's teeth clench. She was not sure if it was in anger, or to keep them from chattering. But fear could and must be controlled. Control was all.

"We are done, then," Alviarin said, rising smoothly from her stool. The others copied her, adjusting skirts and shawls in preparation for leaving. "In three days, I will expect—"

"Have I given you leave to go, daughters?" Those were the first words Elaida had spoken since telling them to be seated. They looked at her in surprise. Surprise! Some moved back toward the stools, but not with any haste. And not a word of apology. She had let this go on much too long. "Since you are standing, you will remain so until I am done." A moment of confusion caught those half-seated, and she continued as they straightened again uncertainly. "I have heard no mention of the search for that woman and her companions."

No need to name *that woman*, Elaida's predecessor. They knew who she meant, and Elaida found it harder every day even to think the former Amyrlin's name. All of her current problems—all!—could be laid at *that woman's* feet.

"It is difficult," Alviarin said evenly, "since we have bolstered the rumours that she was executed." The woman had ice for blood. Elaida met her eyes firmly until she added a belated "Mother," but it, too, was placid, even casual.

Elaida swung her gaze to the others, made her voice steel. "Joline, you have charge of that search, and of the investigation of her escape. In both cases I hear of nothing but difficulties. Perhaps a daily penance will help you increase your diligence, daughter. Write out what you think suitable and submit it to me. Should I find it—less than suitable, I will triple it."

Joline's ever-present smile faded in satisfactory fashion. She opened her mouth, then closed it again under Elaida's steady stare. Finally, she curtsied deeply. "As you command, Mother." The words were tight, the meekness forced, but it would do. For now.

"And what of trying to bring back those who fled?" If anything, Elaida's tone was even harder. The return of the Aes Sedai who had run away when *that woman* was deposed meant the return of Blues to the Tower. She was not sure she could ever trust any Blue. But then, she was not sure she could ever bring herself to trust any who had fled instead of hailing her ascension. Yet the Tower must be whole again.

Javindhra was overseeing that task. "Again, there are difficulties." Her features remained as severe as ever, but she licked her lips quickly at the storm that swept silently across Elaida's face. "Mother."

Elaida shook her head. "I will not hear of difficulties, daughter. Tomorrow you will place before me a list of everything you have done, including all measures taken to see the world does not learn of any dissension in the Tower." That was deadly important; there was a new Amyrlin, but the world must see the Tower as united and strong as ever. "If you do not have enough time for the work I give you, perhaps you should give up your place as Sitter for the Red in the Hall. I must consider it."

"That will not be necessary, Mother," the hard-faced woman said hurriedly. "You will have the report you require tomorrow. I am sure many will start returning soon."

Elaida was not so certain, however much she wanted it—the Tower must be strong; it *must!*—but her point was made. Troubled thoughtfulness marked every eye but Alviarin's. If Elaida was ready to come down on one of her own former Ajah, and even harder on a Green who had been with her from the first day, perhaps they had made a mistake in treating her as a ceremonial effigy. Perhaps they had put her on the Amyrlin Seat, but now she was the Amyrlin. A few more examples in the coming days should drive it home. If necessary, she would have every woman here doing penance till they begged mercy.

"There are Tairen soldiers in Cairhien, as well as Andoran," she went on, ignoring averted eyes. "Tairen soldiers sent by the man who took the Stone of Tear." Shemerin clasped her plump hands tight, and Teslyn flinched. Only Alviarin remained unruffled as a frozen pond. Elaida flung out her hand and pointed to the painting of two men fighting with lightning. "Look at it. Look! Or I will have every last one of you on hands and knees scrubbing floors! If you have not the backbone even to look at a painting, what courage can you have for what is to come? Cowards are no use to the Tower!"

Slowly they raised their eyes, shuffling feet like nervous girls instead of Aes Sedai. Only Alviarin merely looked, and only she appeared untouched. Shemerin wrung her hands, and tears actually welled in her eyes. Something would have to be done about Shemerin.

"Rand al'Thor. A man who can channel." The words left Elaida's mouth like a whip. They made her own stomach knot up till she feared she might vomit. Somehow she kept her face smooth and pressed on, pushed the words out, stones from a sling. "A man fated to go mad and wreak horror with the Power before he dies. But more than that. Arad Doman and Valreis and everything between is a ruin of rebellion because of him. If the war and famine in Cairhien cannot be tied to him of a certainty, he surely precipitates a greater war there, between Tear and Andor, when the Tower needs peace! In Ghealdan, some mad Shienaran preaches of him to crowds too great for Alliandre's army to contain. The greatest danger the Tower has ever faced, the greatest threat the world has ever faced, and you cannot make yourselves speak of him? You cannot gaze at his image?"

Silence answered her. All save Alviarin looked as though their tongues were frozen. Most stared at the young man in the painting, birds hypnotized by a snake.

"Rand al'Thor." The name tasted bitter on Elaida's lips. Once she had had that young man, so innocent in appearance, within arm's reach. And she had not seen what he was. Her predecessor had known—had known for the Light alone knew how long, and had left him to run wild. *That woman* had told her a great deal before escaping, had said things, when put hard to the question, that Elaida would not let herself believe—if the Forsaken were truly free, all might be lost—but somehow she had managed to refuse some answers. And then escaped before she could be put to the question again. *That woman* and Moiraine. *That woman* and the Blue had known all along. Elaida intended to have them both back in the Tower. They would tell every last scrap of what they knew. They would plead on their knees for death before she was done.

She forced herself to go on, though the words curdled in her mouth. "Rand al'Thor is the Dragon Reborn, daughters." Shemerin's knees gave way, and she sat down hard on the floor. Some of the others appeared to have weak knees as well. Elaida's eyes flogged them with scorn. "There can be no doubt of it. He is the one spoken of in the Prophecies. The Dark One is breaking free of his prison, the Last Battle is coming, and the Dragon Reborn must be there to face him or the world is doomed to fire and destruction so long as the Wheel of Time turns. And he runs free, daughters. We do not know where he is. We know a dozen places he is not. He is no longer in Tear. He is not here in the Tower, safely shielded, as he should be. He brings the whirlwind down on the world, and we must stop it if there is to be any hope of surviving Tarmon Gai'don. We must have him in hand to see he fights in the Last Battle. Or do any of you believe he will go willingly to his prophesied death to save the world? A man who must be going mad already? We must have him in control!"

“Mother,” Alviarin began with that irritating lack of emotion, but Elaida stopped her with a glare.

“Putting our hands on Rand al’Thor is more important by far than skirmishes in Shienar or whether the Blight is quiet, more important than finding Elayne or Galad, more important even than Mazrim Taim. You will find him. You *will!* When next I see you, each of you will be ready to tell me in detail what you have done to make it so. Now you may leave me, daughters.”

A ripple of unsteady curtsies, breathy murmurs of “As you command, Mother,” and they came close to running, Joline helping Shemerin wobble to her feet. The Yellow sister would do nicely for the next example; some would be necessary, to make sure none of them slid back, and she was too weak to be allowed in this council. Of course, this council would not be allowed to continue much longer in any case. The Hall would hear her words, and leap.

All save Alviarin went.

For a long moment after the door had closed behind the others, the two women met each other’s eyes. Alviarin had been the first, the very first, to hear and agree with the charges against Elaida’s predecessor. And Alviarin knew full well why she wore the Keeper’s stole instead of someone from the Red. The Red Ajah had favoured Elaida unanimously, but the White had not done so, and without wholehearted support from the White, many others might not have come round, in which case Elaida would have been in a cell instead of sitting on the Amyrlin Seat. That is, if the remains of her head were not decorating a spike for the ravens to play with. Alviarin would not be so easily intimidated as the others. If she could be intimidated at all. There was a disturbing feel of equal-to-equal in Alviarin’s unwavering gaze.

A tap at the door sounded loud in the quiet. “Come!” Elaida snapped.

One of the Accepted, a pale, slender girl, stepped hesitantly into the room and immediately dropped a curtsy so low her white skirt with its seven bands of colour at the hem made a wide pool around her on the floor. From the wideness of her blue eyes and the way she kept them on the floor, she had caught the mood of the women leaving. Where Aes Sedai left shaking, an Accepted went at great peril. “M-Mother, Master F-Fain is here. He said you w-would see him at th-this hour.” The girl swayed in her crouch, on the point of falling over from stark fear.

“Then send him in, girl, instead of keeping him waiting,” Elaida growled, but she would have had the girl’s hide if she had not kept the man outside. The anger she held back from Alviarin—she would not let herself think that she did not dare show it—that anger welled up. “And if you cannot learn to speak properly, perhaps the kitchens are a better place for you than the Amyrlin’s anteroom. Well? Are you going to do as you were told? Move, girl! And tell the Mistress of Novices you need to be taught to obey with alacrity!”

The girl squeaked something that might have been a correct response and darted out. *That woman* had been too soft on the students, too. Why, that simpering little chit Aery had gotten herself pregnant by the Cauthon wretch, and her predecessor had meant only to keep her in isolation until she gave birth, then take the child from her and have it given for adoption, instead of expelling Aery from the Tower entirely. Elaida had changed those orders at once. No-one how got themselves into such a quandary was worthy of being Aes Sedai, no matter how strong in the Power.

With an effort, Elaida got hold of herself. It did not concern her whether Silviana, the new Mistress of Novices, beat the girl to incoherence or let her off with a lecture. She barely saw Novices or Accepted unless they intruded on her, and cared less. It was Alviarin she wanted humbled and on her knees.

But Fain, now. She tapped one finger against her lips. A bony little man with a big nose, who had appeared at the Tower only days earlier in dirty, once-fine clothes too big for him, arrogant and cringing by turns, seeking audience with the Amyrlin. Except for those who served the Tower, men came there only under duress or in great need, and none asked to speak to the Amyrlin. A fool, in some ways, or conceivably a half-wit; he claimed to be from Murandy, but spoke in various accents, sometimes slipping from one to another in midsentence. Yet it seemed he might be useful.

Alviarin was still looking at her, so icily complacent, just a hint in her eyes of the questions she must have about Fain. Elaida’s face hardened. Almost she reached for *saidar*, the female half of the True Source, to teach the woman her place with the Power. But that was not the way. Alviarin might even resist, and fighting like a farmgirl in a stableyard was no method for the Amyrlin to make

her authority plain. Yet Alviarin would learn to yield to her as surely as the others would. The first step would be leaving Alviarin in the dark concerning Master Fain, or whatever his real name was.

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Padan Fain put the frantic young Accepted out of his mind as he stepped into the Amyrlin's study; she was a toothsome bit, and he liked them fluttering like birds in the hand, but there were more important matters to concentrate on now. Dry-washing his hands, he ducked his head suitably low, suitably humbly, but the two awaiting him seemed unaware of his presence at first, locked eye-to-eye as they were. It was all he could do not to stretch out a hand to caress the tension between them. Tension and division wove everywhere through the White Tower. All to the good. Tension could be tweaked, division exploited, as need be.

He had been surprised to find Elaida on the Amyrlin Seat. Better than what he had expected though. In many ways she was not so tough, he had heard, as the woman who had worn the stole before her. Harder, yes, and more cruel, but more brittle, too. More difficult to bend, likely, but easier to break. If either became necessary. Still, one Aes Sedai, one Amyrlin even, was much like another to him. Fools. Dangerous fools, true, but useful dupes at times.

Finally they realized he was there, the Amyrlin frowning slightly at being taken by surprise, the Keeper of the Chronicles unchanging. "You may go now, daughter," Elaida said firmly, a slight but definite emphasis on "now". Oh, yes. The tensions, the cracks in power. Cracks where seeds could be planted. Fain caught himself on the point of giggling.

Alviarin hesitated before giving the briefest of curtseys. As she swept out of the room, her eyes brushed across him, expressionless yet disconcerting. Unconsciously he huddled, hunching his shoulders protectively; his upper lip fluttered in a half-snarl at her slim back. On occasion he had the feeling, just for an instant, that she knew too much about him, but he could not have said why. Her cool face, cool eyes, they never changed. At those times he wanted to make them change. Fear. Agony. Pleading. He nearly laughed at the thought. No point, of course. She could know nothing. Patience, and he could be done with her and her never-changing eyes.

The Tower held things worth a little patience in its strongrooms. The Horn of Valere was there, the fabled Horn made to call dead heroes back from the grave for the Last Battle. Even most of the Aes Sedai were ignorant of that, but he knew how to sniff out things. The dagger was there. He felt its pull where he stood. He could have pointed to it. It was his, a part of him, stolen and mired away here by these Aes Sedai. Having the dagger would make up for so much lost; he was not sure how, but he was sure it would. For Aridhol lost. Too dangerous to return to Aridhol, perchance to be trapped there again. He shivered. So long trapped. Not again.

Of course, no-one called it Aridhol any longer, but Shadar Logoth. Where the Shadow Waits. An apt name. So much had changed. Even himself. Padan Fain. Mordeth. Ordeith. Sometimes he was uncertain which name was really his, who he really was. One thing was sure. He was not what anyone thought. Those who believed they knew him were badly mistaken. He was transfigured, now. A force unto himself, and beyond any other power. They would all learn, eventually.

Suddenly he realized with a start that the Amyrlin had said something. Casting about in his mind, he found it. "Yes, Mother, the coat suits me very well." He ran a hand down the black velvet to show how fine he found it, as if garments mattered. "'Tis a very good coat. I am thanking you kindly, Mother." He was prepared to suffer more of her trying to make him feel at ease, ready to kneel and kiss her ring, but this time she went straight to the heart.

"Tell me more of what you know of Rand al'Thor, Master Fain."

Fain's eyes went to the painting of the two men, and as he gazed at it, his back straightened. Al'Thor's portrait tugged at him almost as much as the man would, sent rage and hate roiling along his veins. Because of that young man, he had suffered pain beyond remembering, pain he did not let himself remember, and suffered far worse than pain. He had been broken and remade because of al'Thor. Of course, that remaking had given him the means of revenge, but that was beside the point. Beside his desire for al'Thor's destruction, everything else dimmed from sight.

When he turned back to the Amyrlin, he did not realize his manner was as commanding as hers, meeting her stare for stare. "Rand al'Thor is devious and sly, uncaring of anyone or anything but his own power." Fool woman. "He's never a one to do what you expect." But if she could put al'Thor

in his hands ... "He is difficult to lead—very difficult—but I believe it can be done. First you must tie a string to one of the few he trusts ..." If she gave him al'Thor, he might leave her alive when he finally went, even if she was Aes Sedai.

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Lounging in a gilded chair in his shirtsleeves, one booted leg over the padded arm, Rahvin smiled as the woman standing before the fireplace repeated what he had told her. There was a slight glaze in her large, brown eyes. A young, pretty woman, even in the plain grey woollens she had adopted for disguise, but that was not what interested him about her.

No breath of air stirred through the room's tall windows. Sweat rolled down the woman's face as she spoke, and beaded on the narrow face of the other man present. For all of that man's fine red silk coat with its golden embroidery, he stood as stiffly as a servant, which he was in a way, if of his own free will, unlike the woman. Of course, he was deaf and blind for the moment.

Rahvin handled the flows of Spirit he had woven around the pair delicately. There was no need to damage valuable servants.

He did not sweat, of course. He did not let the summer's lingering heat touch him. He was a tall man, large, dark and handsome despite the white streaking his temples. Compulsion had presented no difficulties with this woman.

A scowl twisted his face. It did with some. A few—a very few—had a strength of self so firm that their minds searched, even if unaware, for crevices through which to slide away. It was his bad luck that he still had some small need for one such. She could be handled, but she kept trying to find escape without knowing she was trapped. Eventually that one would no longer be needed, of course; he would have to decide whether to send her on her way or be rid of her more permanently. Dangers lay either way. Nothing that could threaten him, of course, but he was a careful man, meticulous. Small dangers had a way of growing if ignored, and he always chose his risks with a measure of prudence. To kill her, or keep her?

The cessation of the woman's speech pulled him from his reverie. "When you leave here," he told her, "you will remember nothing of this visit. You will remember only taking your usual morning walk." She nodded, eager to please him, and he tied off the strands of Spirit lightly, so they would evaporate from her mind shortly after she reached the street. Repeated use of Compulsion made obedience easier even when it was not in use, but while it was, there was always a danger it might be detected.

Still, this one was well in hand, so he might as well use her to relieve him of his irritation. He casually untied the laces of his trousers and fished out his flaccid cock. "Take off your clothes and come pleasure me," he commanded.

The girl moved at once to do so, stripping herself gracelessly, revealing an appealing slender body with a fine pair of breasts. She was untrimmed, rather to his annoyance, with a bush as brown as the hair on her head, and nearly as long. These were graceless times he now lived in. But he didn't mean to keep her, so he didn't bother ordering her to shave, as he had his pet queen.

As accustomed as he was to making women strip, the sight of her naked body was nowhere near enough to bring him to hardness. So he gestured at himself peremptorily. "Suck it until I am hard."

The girl went to her knees before him, and that glazed and worshipful look in her eyes accomplished more than the sight of her tits jiggling as she undressed had. The feel of her mouth closing around his penis did more. She sucked, exactly as he'd told her, but that was all she did. Irritated, he took hold of her head and physically moved it up and down his growing shaft. Using her that way pleased him, especially when he got to look into her confused eyes, so big and innocent, as he did it; but it would have pleased him more if she'd known to do it herself.

Her ministrations were enough to get him hard, at least. "Now use your cunt instead," he said. She took him out of her mouth, but only to frown in confusion. "My what, master?"

"Your cunt," he repeated, then rolled his eyes as her expression. She didn't know the word. He'd learned this language less than a year ago, yet he knew words that she did not. Such was the quality of education here. "Your ... pussy. Privates. Your *ghul*." Annoyed, he reached out and grabbed her roughly by the place in question, making her yelp. "This! Put it around me."

She shuffled over until she was poised above him, and obediently lowered her dry little hole to touch the head of his cock. He didn't bother triggering the pleasure receptors in her brain. He wasn't overly into it, so the added tightness would serve him well. Her comfort was irrelevant, of course. She pushed herself down upon him, taking his gloriously huge shaft into her tight little body. That sight never ceased to please him. That she simply sat there once she had taken him all the way in pleased him significantly less.

*By the Great Lord! I'm going to have to walk her through it.* The Aes Sedai of this time were a lot less fun to play with than he'd hoped, as ignorant of sex as they were. A closer examination of the place they were joined revealed her to have been a virgin, even at her age. He wished he could have found it unsurprising.

"Move your cunt up and down my cock, you useless slut," he said, letting out a great sigh of disgust.

"Yes, master. I'm sorry, master," the girl said pathetically. She began to move as ordered, jerking up and down gracelessly. Her unpractised ministrations stirred his pleasure a little, but nowise near to the peaks to which he was accustomed. He was beginning to think he'd have to do the unthinkable—get up off his chair and fuck her himself.

He let her bounce for a little bit longer, but soon grew tired of her efforts. "Up! Go to the desk and bend over it. I'll do it myself."

She got off him, and he found admitted pleasure in watching the way her cheeks moved as she walked away from him towards the desk, head hung. She lent over it as ordered, her ass displayed for his use. He decided that he did, in fact, want to use it. She'd annoyed him.

"You are utterly worthless, girl," he told her as he spread her cheeks to give himself access to her back passage. "In future, when you are reporting to me, I want you in the least flattering dress you can find. I don't want you tempting me into doing this again. I've had teenagers who were better at this than you." So saying, he shoved his cock inside her ass, ramming it home as hard as he could. He didn't know whether the sob she let out was for his words or the pain of her violation, and he didn't care in the slightest.

Rahvin pounded her ass hard, spreading her wide and using her rough. She was nice and tight, at least, she had that much going for her. Not that she'd be tight at all once he was done, of course. No woman was, after they'd had a taste of him. But for now she made for a nice cocksleeve.

He held her by the hair as he ravaged her ass, moving in the short, quick, jerky way that he knew would bring him off fastest. The girl took it without objection, of course. They all did. His power saw to that. She took his come in her ass without objection, too, though she made some strange, confused noises when she felt him spurting inside her. Truly useless.

Though not completely so. "Suck me clean," he told her, a tad breathlessly, once he was done and had pulled himself back out.

She turned around, wincing at the pain in her ass, and went to her knees before him again. She took his soiled cock in her mouth without a word of complaint. She looked up at him with that worshipful expression he so liked, and he smiled down as he watched her lick the mingled dirt of his come and her own shit from his cock. At least the encounter hadn't been a complete waste of his time.

He let it go on for some time, but eventually got bored and ordered her to dress herself once more. The other man in the room had seen and heard nothing, bound as he was. And he didn't see the horrified expression struggling to break out on the girl's red face, as she put her plain grey dress back on.

That done, he released Elegar's mind as well. Lord Elegar. A minor noble, but faithful to his vows. He licked his thin lips nervously and glanced at the woman, then went immediately to one knee before Rahvin. Friends of the Dark—Darkfriends they were called, now—had begun learning just how strictly they would be kept to their vows now that Rahvin and the others were freed.

"Take her to the street by back ways," Rahvin said, "and leave her there. She is not to be seen."

"It will be as you say, Great Master," Elegar said, bowing where he knelt. Rising, he backed from Rahvin's presence, bowing and pulling the woman along by one arm. She went docilely, of course, her eyes still fogged. Elegar would ask her no questions. He knew enough to be well aware that there were things he did not want to know.

"One of your play pretties?" a woman's voice said behind him as the carved door closed.  
"Have you taken to dressing them like that?"

Snatching at *saidin*, he filled himself with the Power, the taint on the male half of the True Source rolling off the protection of his bonds and oaths, the ties to what he knew as a greater power than the Light, or even the Creator.

In the middle of the chamber a gateway stood above the red-and-gold carpet, an opening to somewhere else. He had a brief view of a chamber lined with snowy silken hangings before it vanished, leaving a woman, clad in white and belted in woven silver. The slight tingle in his skin, like a faint chill, was all that told him she had channelled. Tall and slender, she was as beautiful as he was handsome, her dark eyes bottomless pools, her hair, decorated with silver stars and crescents, falling in perfect black waves to her shoulders. Most men would have felt their mouths go dry with desire.

"What do you mean to come sneaking up on me, Lanfear?" he demanded roughly. He did not let go of the Power, but rather prepared several nasty surprises in case he had need. "If you want to speak with me, send an emissary, and I will decide when and where. And if."

Lanfear smiled that sweet, treacherous smile. "You were always a pig, Rahvin, but seldom a fool. That woman is Aes Sedai. What if they miss her? Do you also send out heralds to announce where you are?"

"Channel?" he sneered. "She is not strong enough to be allowed outdoors without a keeper. They call untutored children Aes Sedai when half of what they know is self-taught tricks and the other half barely scratches the surface."

"Would you still be so complacent if those untutored children put a circle of thirteen around you?" The cool mockery in her voice stabbed him, but he did not let it show.

"I take my precautions, Lanfear. Rather than one of my 'play pretties', as you call them, she is the Tower's spy here. Now she reports exactly what I want her to, and she is eager to do so. Those who serve the Chosen in the Tower told me right where to find her." The day would come soon when the world gave up the name Forsaken and knelt to the Chosen. It had been promised, so very long ago. "Why have you come, Lanfear? Surely not in aid of defenceless women."

She merely shrugged. "You can play with your toys as much as you wish, so far as I am concerned. You offer little in the way of hospitality, Rahvin, so you will forgive me if ..." A silver pitcher rose from a small table by Rahvin's bed and tilted to pour dark wine into a gold-chased goblet. As the pitcher settled, the goblet floated to Lanfear's hand. He felt nothing beyond a slight tingle, of course, saw no flows being woven; he had never liked that. That she would be able to see as little of his weaving was only a slight redressing of the balance.

"Why?" he demanded again.

She sipped calmly before speaking. "Since you avoid the rest of us, a few of the Chosen will be coming here. I came first so you would know it is not an attack."

"Others? Some plan of yours? What need have I of someone else's designs?" Suddenly he laughed, a deep, rich sound. "So it is no attack, is it? You were never one for attacking openly, were you? Not as bad as Moghedien, perhaps, but you did always favour the flanks and the rear. I will trust you this time, enough to hear you out. As long as you are under my eye." Who trusted Lanfear behind him deserved the knife he might well find in his back. Not that she was so very trustworthy even when watched; her temper was uncertain at best. "Who else is supposed to be part of this?"

He had clearer warning this time—it was male work—as another gateway opened, showing marble arches opening onto wide stone balconies, and gulls wheeling and crying in a cloudless blue sky. Finally a man appeared and stepped through, the way closing behind him.

Sammael was compact, solid and larger-seeming than he truly was, his stride quick and active, his manner abrupt. Blue-eyed and golden-haired, with a neat square-trimmed beard, he would perhaps have been above the ordinary in looks except for a slanting scar, as if a red-hot poker had been dragged across his face from hairline to jaw. He could have had it removed as soon as it was made, all those long years ago, but he had elected not to.

Linked to *saidin* as tightly as Rahvin—this close Rahvin could feel it, dimly—Sammael eyed him warily. "I expected serving maids and dancing girls, Rahvin. Have you finally wearied of your sport after all these years?" Lanfear laughed softly into her wine.

"Did someone mention sport?"

Rahvin had not even noticed the opening of a third gateway, showing a large room full of pools and fluted columns, nearly nude acrobats and attendants wearing less. Oddly, a lean old woman in a wrinkled dress sat disconsolately among the performers. Two servants in filmy bits of nothing

much, a well-muscled man bearing a wrought-gold tray and a beautiful, voluptuous woman, anxiously pouring wine from a cut-crystal flagon into a matching goblet on the tray, followed the true arrival before the opening winked out.

In any other company but Lanfear's, Graendal would have been accounted a stunningly beautiful woman, lush and ripe. Her gown was green silk, cut low. A ruby the size of a hen's egg nestled between her breasts, and a coronet encrusted with more rested on her long, sun-coloured hair. Beside Lanfear she was merely plumply pretty. If the inevitable comparison bothered her, her amused smile gave no sign of it.

Golden bracelets clattered as she waved a heavily beringed hand generally behind her; the female servant quickly slipped the goblet into her grasp with a fawning smile mirrored by the man. Graendal took no notice. "So," she said gaily. "Four of the remaining Chosen in one place. And no one trying to kill anyone. Who would have expected it before the Great Lord of the Dark returns? Ishamael did manage to keep us from one another's throats for a time, but this..."

"Do you always speak so freely in front of your servants?" Sammael said with a grimace. Graendal blinked, glanced back at the pair as if she had forgotten them. "They won't speak out of turn. They worship me. Don't you?" The two fell to their knees, practically babbling their fervent love of her. It was real; they actually did love her. Now. After a moment, she frowned slightly, and the servants froze, mouths open in midword. "They do go on. Still, they won't bother you now, will they?"

Rahvin shook his head, wondering who they were, or had been. Physical beauty was not enough for Graendal's servants; they had to have power or position as well. A former lord for a footman, a lady to draw her bath; that was Graendal's taste. Indulging herself was one thing, but she was wasteful. This pair might have been of use, properly manipulated, but the level of compulsion Graendal employed surely left them good for little more than decoration. The woman had no true finesse.

Another gateway opened, woven of *saidin*, though it was not the anticipated Ketvarcade who stepped through, but Balthamel, wearing that habitual smirk or hers. She was well-made, too, her hair as dark as Lanfear's, her skin a bit tanner, and her eyes a striking green, but knowing that she was just that—made—was a turn off for him. He supposed it was no great surprise that she'd want in on this—whatever it was. Balthamel had always been a great one for lurking at the edges, and snatching any scraps of power of glory that were left unattended before scampering back to the squalid shadows in which she belonged. Just as unsurprising was the absence of Be'lal; he would not dare show his face in a meeting like this, not after having shown his weakness by letting al'Thor best him. Weakness was not forgiven among the Chosen.

"Siry, activate all defences," he said quietly. It irritated him that he had to say it at all, and irritated him more that he had to let these people hear him say it. But standing in their presence without the added protection of his *valdarhei* would have been madness. He had no doubt they had activated their own before coming here, in the privacy of their own strongholds. "Should I expect more, Lanfear?" he growled. "Have you convinced Demandred to stop thinking he is all but the Great Lord's heir?"

"I doubt he is arrogant enough for that," Lanfear replied smoothly. "He can see where it took Ishamael. And that is the point. A point Graendal raised. Once we were many, immortal. Now one of us is dead, another left in a state not far from it though he still breathes, and yet a third has betrayed us. We five are all who meet here today, and enough."

"Are you certain Asmodean went over?" Sammael demanded. "He never had the courage to take a chance before. Where did he find the heart to join a lost cause?"

Lanfear's brief smile was amused. "He had the courage for an ambush he thought would set him above the rest of us. And when his choice became death or a doomed cause, it took little courage for him to choose."

"And little time, I'll wager." The scar made Sammael's sneer even more biting. "If you were close enough to him to know all of this, why did you leave him alive? You could have killed him before he knew you were there."

"I am not as quick to kill as you. It is final, with no going back, and there are usually other, more profitable ways. Besides, to put it in terms you would understand, I did not want to launch a frontal assault against superior forces."

"Is he really so strong?" Rahvin asked quietly. "This Rand al'Thor. Could he have overwhelmed you, face-to-face?" Not that he himself could not, if it came to it, or Sammael, though Graendal would likely link with Lanfear if either of the men tried. And who knew what Balthamel would do? For that matter, both women were probably filled to bursting with the Power right that moment, ready to strike at the slightest suspicion of either man. Or of each other. But this farmboy. An untrained shepherd! Untrained unless Asmodean was trying.

"He is Lews Therin Telamon reborn," Lanfear said just as softly, "and Lews Therin was as strong as any." Sammael absently rubbed the scar across his face; it had been Lews Therin who gave it to him. Three thousand years ago and more, well before the Breaking of the World, before the Great Lord was imprisoned, before so much, but Sammael never forgot.

"Well," Graendal put in, "have we come around at last to what we are here to discuss?"

Rahvin gave a displeased start. The two servants were frozen still—or again, rather. Sammael muttered in his beard.

"Come around at last to what should have been done long ago," Balthamel said sourly.

"If this Rand al'Thor really is Lews Therin Telamon reborn," Graendal went on, settling herself on the man's back where he crouched on all fours, "I am surprised you haven't tried to snuggle him into your bed, Lanfear. Or would it be so easy? I seem to remember Lews Therin led you by the nose not the other way around. Squelched your little tantrums. Sent you running to fetch his wine, in a manner of speaking." She set her own wine on the tray, held out rigidly by the sightlessly kneeling woman. "You were so obsessed with him you'd have stretched out at his feet if he said 'rug'."

Lanfear's dark eyes glittered for a moment before she regained control of herself. "He may be Lews Therin reborn, but he is not Lews Therin himself."

"How do you know?" Graendal asked, smiling as if it were all a joke. "It may well be that, as many believe, all are born and reborn as the Wheel turns, but nothing like this has ever happened that I have read. A specific man reborn according to prophecy. Who knows what he is?"

Lanfear gave a disparaging smirk. "I have observed him closely. He is no more than the shepherd he seems, still more naive than not." Scorn faded to seriousness. "But now he has Asmodean, weak ally as he is. And even before Asmodean, one of the Chosen died confronting him."

Rahvin made a dismissive gesture. "Moridin was a fanatical fool. He had all the finesse of a rabid dog."

Balthamel winced. "Even so, it could have been hoped his *sa'angreal* would have made up for that. Unfortunately, al'Thor's proved stronger."

Hers were not the only eyes to light up hungrily at the thought of possessing that *sa'angreal* themselves. Sammael's did, too, but he was no more eager to go and fight for it than Rahvin was.

"Let him whittle away the dead wood," Sammael said gruffly. He wove flows of Air to drag a chair across the carpet and sprawled with his boots crossed at the ankle and one arm over the low, carved back. Anyone who believed he was at ease was a fool; Sammael had always liked to dupe his enemies into thinking they could take him by surprise. "More for the rest of us on the Day of Return. Or do you think he might win Tarmon Gai'don, Lanfear? Even if he stiffens Asmodean's backbone, he has no Companions this time. With Asmodean or alone, the Great Lord will extinguish him like a broken sar-light."

The look Lanfear gave him bristled with contempt. "How many of us will be alive when the Great Lord is freed at last? Will he come after you next, Sammael? You might like that. You could finally get rid of that scar if you defeated him. But I forget. How many times did you face him in the War of Power? Did you ever win? I cannot seem to remember." Without pause she rounded on Graendal. "Or it might be you. He is reluctant to hurt women for some reason, but you won't even be able to make Asmodean's choice. You cannot teach him any more than a stone could. Unless he decides to keep you as one of his pets. He actually shares your inclinations, in this life. That would be a change for you, would it not? Instead of deciding which of your pretties pleases you best, you could learn to please."

Graendal's face contorted, and Rahvin prepared to shield himself against whatever the two women might hurl at one another, prepared to Travel at even a whiff of Balefire. Then he sensed Sammael gathering the Power, sensed a difference in it—Sammael would call it seizing a tactical advantage—and bent to grab the other man's arm. Sammael shook him off angrily, but the moment had passed. The two women were looking at them now, not each other. Neither could know what had

almost happened, but clearly something had passed between Rahvin and Sammael, and suspicion lit their eyes.

"I want to hear what Lanfear has to say." He did not look at Sammael, but meant it for him. "There must be more to this than a foolish attempt to frighten us." Sammael jerked his head in what might have been a nod or merely disgruntlement. It would have to do.

"Oh, there is, though a little fright could not hurt." Lanfear's dark eyes still held distrust, but her voice was as clear as still water. "Ishamael tried to control him and failed, tried to kill him in the end and failed, but Ishamael tried bullying and fear, and bullying does not work with Rand al'Thor."

"Ishamael was more than half-mad," Sammael muttered, "and less than half-human."

"Is that what we are?" Graendal arched an eyebrow. "Merely human? Surely we are something more. This is human." She stroked a finger down the cheek of the woman kneeling beside her. "A new word will have to be created to describe us."

"Whatever we are," Lanfear said, "we can succeed where Ishamael failed." She was leaning slightly forward, as if to force the words on them. Lanfear seldom showed tension. Why now?

"Why only we five?" Rahvin asked. The other "why" would have to wait.

"Why more?" was Lanfear's reply. "If we can present the Dragon Reborn kneeling to the Great Lord on the Day of Return, why share the honour—and the rewards—further than need be? And perhaps he can even be used to—how did you put it, Sammael?—whittle away the dead wood."

It was the sort of answer Rahvin could understand. Not that he trusted her, of course, or any of the others, but he understood ambition. The Chosen had plotted among themselves for position up to the day Lews Therin had imprisoned them in sealing up the Great Lord's prison, and they had begun again the day they were freed. He just had to be sure Lanfear's plot did not disrupt his own plans. "Speak on," he told her.

"First, someone else is trying to control him. Perhaps to kill. I suspect Moghedien or Demandred. Moghedien has always tried to work from the shadows, and Demandred always did hate Lews Therin." Sammael smiled, or perhaps grimaced, but his hatred was a pale thing beside Demandred's, though for better cause.

"How do you know it is not one of us here?" Graendal asked glibly.

Lanfear's smile showed as many teeth as the other woman's, and as little warmth. "Because you three choose to carve out niches for yourselves and secure your power while the rest slash at each other. And because I already know exactly what Balthamel wants." If anything, that smile became colder when she looked her way. "And other reasons. I told you I keep a close watch on Rand al'Thor."

It was true, what she said of them. Rahvin himself preferred diplomacy and manipulation to open conflict, though he would not shy from it if needed. Sammael's way had always been armies and conquest; he would not go near Lews Therin, even reborn as a shepherd, until he was sure of victory. Graendal, too, followed conquest, though her methods did not involve soldiers; for all her concern with her toys, she took one solid step at a time. Openly to be sure, as the Chosen reckoned such things, but never stretching too far at any step.

"You know I can keep an eye on him unseen," Lanfear continued, "but the rest of you must stay clear or run the risk of detection. We must draw him back ..."

Graendal leaned forward, interested, and Sammael began to nod as she went on. Rahvin reserved judgment. It might well work. And if not ... If not, he saw several ways to shape events to his advantage. This might work out very well indeed.

## CHAPTER 1: Fanning the Sparks



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 Tenth Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the great forest called Braem Woods. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

North and east it blew, dry, beneath a sun of molten gold. There had been no rain for long weeks in the land below, and the late-summer heat grew day by day. Brown leaves came early dotted some trees, and naked stones baked where small streams had run. In an open place where grass had vanished and only thin, withered brush held the soil with its roots, the wind began uncovering long-buried stones. They were weathered and worn, and no human eye would have recognized them for the remains of a city remembered in story yet otherwise forgotten.

Scattered villages appeared before the wind reached the border of Andor, and fields where worried farmers trudged arid furrows. The forest had long since thinned to thickets by the time the wind swept dust down the lone street of a village called Kore Springs. The springs were beginning to run low this summer. A few dogs lay panting in the shelter, and two shirtless boys ran, beating a stuffed bladder along the ground with sticks. Nothing else stirred, save the wind and the dust and the creaking sign above the door of the inn, red brick and thatch-roofed like every other building along the street. At two stories, it was the tallest and largest structure in Kore Springs, a neat and orderly little town. The saddled horses hitched in front of the inn barely twitched their tails. The inn's carved sign proclaimed the Good Queen's Justice.

Blinking against the dust, Min kept an eye pressed to the crack in the shed's rough wall. She could just make out one shoulder of the guard on the shed door, but her attention was all for the inn further on. She wished the name were less ominously apt. Their judge, the local lord, had apparently arrived some time ago, but she had missed seeing him. No doubt he was hearing the farmer's charges; Admer Nem, along with his brothers and cousins and all their wives, had seemed in favour of an immediate hanging before one of the lord's retainers happened by. She wondered what the penalty was here for burning up a man's barn, and his milkcows with it. By accident, of course, but she did not think that would count for much when it all began with trespass.

Logain had gotten away in the confusion, abandoning them—he would, burn him!—and she did not know whether to be happy about that or not. It was he who had knocked Nem down when they were discovered just before dawn, sending the man's lantern flying into the straw. The blame was his, if anyone's. Only sometimes he had trouble watching what he said. Perhaps as well he was gone.

Twisting to lean back against the wall, she wiped sweat from her brow, though it only sprang out again. The inside of the shed was stifling, but her two companions did not appear to notice. Siuan lay stretched out on her back in a dark woollen riding dress much like Min's, staring at the shed roof, idly tapping her chin with a straw. Coppery-skinned Leane, willowy and as tall as most men, sat cross-legged in her pale shift, working on her dress with needle and thread. They had been allowed to keep their saddlebags, after they were searched for swords or axes or anything else that might help them escape.

"What's the penalty for burning down a barn in Andor?" Min asked.

"If we are lucky," Siuan replied without moving, "a strapping in the village square. Not so lucky, and it will be a flogging."

"Light!" Min breathed. "How can you call that *luck*?"

Siuan rolled onto her side and propped herself up on an elbow. She was a sturdy woman, short of beautiful though beyond handsome, and looked no more than a few years older than Min, but those sharp blue eyes had a commanding presence that did not belong on a young woman awaiting trial in a backcountry shed. Sometimes Siuan was as bad as Logain about forgetting herself; maybe

worse. "When a strapping is done," she said in a brook-no-nonsense, do-not-be-foolish tone, "it is done, and we can be on our way. It wastes less of our time than any other penalty I can think of. Considerably less than hanging, say. Though I don't think it will come to that, from what I remember of Andoran law."

Wheezing laughter shook Min for a moment; it was that or cry. "Time? The way we are going, we've nothing but time. I swear we have been through every village between here and Tar Valon, and found nothing. Not a glimmer, not a whisper. I don't think there is any gathering. And we are on foot, now. From what I overheard, Logain took the horses with him. Afoot and locked in a shed awaiting the Light knows what!"

"Watch names," Siuan whispered sharply, shooting a meaning glance at the rough door with the guard on the other side. "A flapping tongue can put you in the net instead of the fish."

Min grimaced, partly because she was growing tired of Siuan's Tairen fisherman's sayings, and partly because the other woman was right. So far they had outrun awkward news—deadly was a better word than awkward—but some news had a way of leaping a hundred miles in a day. Siuan had been travelling as Mara, Leane as Amaena, and Logain had taken the name Dalyn, after Siuan convinced him Guaire was a fool's choice. Min still did not think anyone would recognize her own name, but Siuan insisted on calling her Serenla. Even Logain did not know their true names.

The real trouble was that Siuan was not going to give up. Weeks of utter failure, and now this, yet any mention of heading for Tear, which was sensible, set off a tempest that quailed even Logain. The longer they had searched without finding what Siuan sought, the more temper she had developed.

*Not that she couldn't crack rocks with it before.* Min was wise enough to keep that particular thought to herself.

Leane finally finished with her dress and tugged it on over her head, doubling her arms behind her to do up the buttons. Min could not see why she had gone to the trouble; she herself hated needlework of any sort. The neckline was a little lower now, showing a bit of Leane's bosom, and it fit in a snugger way there and perhaps around the hips. But what was the point, here? No-one was going to ask her to dance in this roasting shed.

Digging into Min's saddlebags, Leane pulled out the wooden box of paints and powders and whatnots that Laras had forced on Min before they set out. Min had kept meaning to throw it away, but somehow she had never gotten around to it. There was a small mirror inside the hinged lid of the box, and in moments Leane was at work on her face with small rabbit-fur brushes. She had never shown any particular interest in the things before. Now she appeared vexed that there was only a blackwood hairbrush and a small ivory comb to use on her hair. She even muttered about the lack of a way to heat the curling iron! Her dark hair had grown since they began Siuan's search, but it still came well short of her shoulders.

After watching a bit, Min asked, "What are you up to, Le—Amaena?" She avoided looking at Siuan. She could guard her tongue; it was just being cooped up and baked alive, that on top of the coming trial. A hanging or a public strapping. What a choice! "Have you decided to take up flirting?" It was meant for a joke—Leane was all business and efficiency—something to lighten the moment, but the other woman surprised her.

"Yes," Leane said briskly, peering wide-eyed into the mirror while she carefully did something to her eyelashes. "And if I flirt with the right man, perhaps we will not need to worry about strappings or anything else. At the least, I might get us lighter sentences."

Hand half-raised to wipe her face again, Min gasped—it was like an owl announcing it meant to become a hummingbird—but Siuan merely sat up facing Leane with a level "What brought this on?"

Had Siuan directed that gaze at her, Min suspected she would have confessed to things she had forgotten. When Siuan concentrated on you like that, you found yourself curtsying and leaping to do as you were told before you realized it. Even Logain did, most of the time. Except for the curtsy.

Leane calmly stroked a tiny brush along her cheekbones and examined the result in the small mirror. She did glance at Siuan, but whatever she saw, she answered in the same crisp tones she always used. "My mother was a merchant, you know, in furs and timber mainly. I once saw her fog an Amadician lord's mind till he consigned his entire year's timber harvest to her for half the amount he wanted, and I doubt he realized what had happened until he was nearly back home. If then. He sent her a moonstone bracelet, later. Domani women don't deserve the whole reputation they have—stiff-

necked prigs going by hearsay built most of it—but we have earned some. My mother and my aunts taught me along with my sisters and cousins, of course.”

Looking down at herself, she shook her head, then returned to her ministrations with a sigh. “But I fear I was as tall as I am today on my fourteenth naming day. All knees and elbows, like a colt that grew too fast. And not long after I could walk across a room without tripping twice, I learned—” She drew a deep breath. “—learned my life would take me another way than being a merchant. And now that is gone, too. About time I put to use what I was taught all those years ago. Under the circumstances, I can’t think of a better time or place.”

Siuan studied her shrewdly a moment more. “That isn’t the reason. Not the whole reason. Out with it.”

Hurling a small brush into the box, Leane blazed up in a fury. “The whole reason? I do not know the whole reason. I only know I need something in my life to replace—what is gone. You yourself told me that is the only hope of surviving. Revenge falls short, for me. I know your cause is necessary, and perhaps even right, but the Light help me, that is not enough either; I can’t make myself be as involved as you. Maybe I came too late to it. I will stay with you, but it isn’t enough.”

Anger faded as she began resealing pots and vials and replacing them, though she used more force than was strictly necessary. There was the merest hint of rose scent about her. “I know flirting isn’t something to fill up the emptiness, but it is enough to fill an idle moment. Maybe being who I was born to be will suffice. I just do not know. This isn’t a new idea; I always wanted to be like my mother and my aunts, daydreamed of it sometimes after I was grown.”

Leane’s face became pensive, and the last things went into the box more gently. “I think perhaps I’ve always felt I was masquerading as someone else, building up a mask until it became second nature. There was serious work to be done, more serious than merchanting, and by the time I realized there was another way I could have gone even so, I had the mask on too firmly to take off. Well, that is done with, now, and the mask is coming off. I even considered beginning with Logain a week ago, for practice. But I am out of practice, and I think he is the kind of man who might hear more promises than you meant to offer, and expect to have them fulfilled.” A small smile suddenly appeared on her lips. “My mother always said if that happened, you had miscalculated badly; if there was no back way out, you had to either abandon dignity and run, or pay the price and consider it a lesson.” The smile took on a roguish cast. “My Aunt Resara said you paid the price and enjoyed it.”

Min could only shake her head. It was as if Leane had become a different woman. Talking that way about ...! Even hearing it, she could hardly believe. Come to that, Leane actually looked different. For all of the work with brushes, there was not a hint of paint or powder on her face that Min could see, yet her lips seemed fuller, her cheekbones higher, her eyes larger. She was a more than pretty woman at any time, but now her beauty was magnified fivefold.

Siuan was not quite finished, though. “And if this country lord is one like Logain?” she said softly. “What will you do then?”

Leane drew herself up stiff-backed on her knees and swallowed hard before answering, but her voice was perfectly level. “Given the alternatives, what choice would you make?”

Neither blinked, and the silence stretched.

Before Siuan could answer—if she meant to; Min would have given a pretty to hear it—the chain and lock rattled on the other side of the door.

The other two women got slowly to their feet, gathering their saddlebags in calm preparation, but Min leaped up wishing she had her belt knife. *Fool thing to wish for*, she thought. *Just get me in worse trouble. I’m no bloody hero in a story. Even if I jumped the guard—*

The door opened, and a man with a long leather jerkin over his shirt filled the doorway. Not a fellow to be attacked by a young woman, even with a knife. Maybe not even with an axe. Wide was the word for him, and thick. The few hairs remaining on his head were more white than not, but he looked hard as an old oak stump. “Time for you girls to stand before the lord,” he said gruffly. “Will you walk, or must we haul you like grain sacks? You go, either way, but I’d as soon not have to carry you in this heat.”

Peeking past him, Min saw two more men waiting, grey-haired but just as hard, if not quite so big.

“We will walk,” Siuan told him dryly.

“Good. Come, then. Step along. Lord Gareth won’t like being kept waiting.”

Promise to walk or no, each man took one of them firmly by the arm as they started up the dusty dirt street. The balding man's hand encircled Min's arm like a manacle. *So much for running for it*, she thought bitterly. She considered kicking his booted ankle to see if that would loosen his grip, but he looked so solid she suspected all it would earn her was a sore toe and being dragged the rest of the way.

Leane appeared lost in thought; she half-made small gestures with her free hand, and her lips moved silently as though reviewing what she meant to say, but she kept shaking her head and starting over again. Introspection wrapped Siuan, too, but she wore an openly worried frown, even chewing her underlip; Siuan never showed that much unease. All in all, the pair of them did nothing for Min's confidence.

The beam-ceilinged common room of the Good Queen's Justice did less. Lank-haired Admer Nem, a yellowed bruise around his swollen eye, stood to one side with half a dozen equally stout brothers and cousins and their wives, all in their best coats or aprons. The farmers eyed the three prisoners with a mixture of anger and satisfaction that made Min's stomach sink. If anything, the farmwives' glares were worse, pure hate. The rest of the walls were lined six deep with villagers, all garbed for the work they had interrupted for this. The blacksmith still wore his leather apron, and a number of women had sleeves rolled up, arms dusted with flour. The room buzzed with their murmuring among themselves, the elders as much as the few children, and their eyes latched onto the three women as avidly as the Nems' did. Min thought this must be as much excitement as Kore Springs had ever witnessed. She had seen a crowd with this mood once—at an execution.

The tables had been removed, except for one placed in front of the long brick fireplace. A bluff-faced, stocky man, his hair thick with grey, sat facing them in a well-cut coat of dark green silk, hands folded in front of him on the tabletop. A slim woman who showed as much age stood beside the table in a fine, grey wool dress embroidered with white flowers around the neck. The local lord, Min supposed, and his lady; country nobility little better informed of the world than their tenants and crofters.

The guards situated them in front of the lord's table and melted into the watchers. The woman in grey stepped forward, and the murmurs died.

"All here attend and give ear," the woman announced, "for justice will be meted today by Lord Gareth Bryne. Prisoners, you are called before the judgment of Lord Bryne." Not the lord's lady, then; an official of some sort. Gareth Bryne? The last Min remembered, he was Captain-General of the Queen's Guards, in Caemlyn. If it was the same man. She glanced at Siuan, but Siuan had her eye locked on the wide floorboards in front of her feet. Whoever he was, this Bryne looked weary.

"You are charged," the woman in grey went on, "with trespass by night, arson and destruction of a building and its contents, the killing of valuable livestock, assault on the person of Admer Nem, and the theft of a purse said to contain gold and silver. It is understood that the assault and theft were the work of your companion, who escaped, but you three are equally culpable under the law."

She paused to let it sink in, and Min exchanged rueful glances with Leane. Logain would have to add theft to the stew. He was probably halfway to Ghealdan by now, if not more distant yet.

After a moment the woman began again. "Your accusers are here to face you." She gestured to the cluster of Nems. "Admer Nem, you will give your testimony."

The stout man eased forward in a blend of self-importance and self-consciousness, tugging at his coat where the wooden buttons strained over his middle, running his hands through thinning hair that kept dropping into his face. "Like I said, Lord Gareth, it was like this ..."

He gave a fairly straightforward account of discovering them in the hayloft and ordering them out, though he made Logain near a foot taller and turned the man's single blow into a fight where Nem gave as good as he got. The lantern fell, the hay went up, and the rest of the family came spilling out of the farmhouse into the predawn; the prisoners were seized and the barn burned to the ground, and then the loss of the purse from the house was discovered. He did slight the part where Lord Bryne's retainer rode by as some of the family were bringing out ropes and eyeing tree limbs.

When he started on the "fight" again—this time he seemed to be winning—Bryne cut him off. "That will be enough, Master Nem. You may step back."

Instead, a round-faced one of the Nem women, of an age to be Admer's wife, joined him. Round-faced, but not soft; round like a frying pan or a river rock. And flushed with something more

than anger. "You whip these hussies good, Lord Gareth, hear? Whip them good, and ride them to Jornhill on a rail!"

"No-one called on you to speak, Maigan," the slim woman in grey said sharply. "This is a trial, not a petition meeting. You and Admer step back. Now." They obeyed, Admer with a shade more alacrity than Maigan. The grey-clad woman turned to Min and her companions. "If you wish to offer testimony, in defence or mitigation, you may now give it." There was no sympathy in her voice, nor anything else for that matter.

Min expected Siuan to speak—she always took the lead, did the talking—but Siuan never stirred or raised her eyes. Instead, it was Leane who moved toward the table, her eyes on the man behind it.

She stood as straight as ever, but her usual walk—a graceful stride, but a stride—had become a sort of glide, with just a hint of willowy sway to it. Somehow her hips and bosom seemed more obvious. Not that she flaunted anything; the way she moved just made you aware. "My lord, we are three helpless women, refugees from the storms that sweep the world." Her usually brisk tones were gone, changed to a velvety soft caress. There was a light in her dark eyes, a sort of smouldering challenge. "Penniless and lost, we took shelter in Master Nem's barn. It was wrong, I know, but we were afraid of the night." A small gesture, hands half-raised, the insides of her wrists to Bryne, made her seem for a moment utterly helpless. Only for that moment, though. "The man Dalyn was a stranger to us really, a man who offered us his protection. In these days, women alone must have a protector, my lord, yet I fear we made a poor choice." A widening of the eyes, an entreating look, said he could make a better for them. "It was indeed he who attacked Master Nem, my lord; we would have fled or worked to repay our night's lodging." Stepping around the side of the table, she knelt gracefully beside Bryne's chair and gently rested the fingers of one hand on his wrist as she gazed up into his eyes. A tremble touched her voice, but her slight smile was enough to set any man's heart racing. It—suggested. "My lord, we are guilty of some small crime, yet not so much as we are charged with. We throw ourselves on your mercy. I beg you, my lord, have pity on us, and protect us."

For a long moment, Bryne stared back into her eyes. Then, clearing his throat roughly, he scraped back his chair, rose, and walked around the opposite end of the table from her. There was a stir among the villagers and farmers, men clearing their throats as their lord had done, women muttering under their breath. Bryne stopped in front of Min. "What is your name, girl?"

"Min, my lord." She caught a muffled grunt from Siuan and hastily added, "Serenla Min. Everyone calls me Serenla, my lord."

"Your mother must have had a premonition," he murmured with a smile. He was not the first to react to the name in a like way. "Do you have any statement to make, Serenla?"

"Only that I am very sorry, my lord, and it really wasn't our fault. Dalyn did it all. I ask for mercy, my lord." That did not seem much alongside Leane's plea—anything at all would seem insignificant beside Leane's performance—but it was the best she could find. Her mouth was as dry as the street outside. What if he did decide to hang them?

Nodding, he moved over to Siuan, who was still studying the floor. Cupping a hand under her chin, he raised her eyes to his. "And what is your name, girl?"

With a jerk of her head, Siuan pulled her chin free and took a step back. "Mara, my lord," she whispered. "Mara Tomanes."

Min groaned softly. Siuan was plainly frightened, yet at the same time she stared at the man defiantly. Min more than half-expected her to demand Bryne let them walk away on the instant. He asked her if she wished to make a statement, and she denied it in another unsteady whisper, but all the while looking at him as though she were the one in charge. She might be controlling her tongue, but certainly not her eyes.

After a time, Bryne turned away. "Take your place with your friends, girl," he told Leane as he returned to his chair. She joined them with a look of open frustration, and what in anyone else Min would have called a touch of petulance.

"I have reached my decision," Bryne said to the room at large. "The crimes are serious, and nothing I have heard alters the facts. If three men sneak into another's house to steal his candlesticks and one of them attacks the owner, all three are equally guilty. There must be recompense. Master Nem, I will give you the cost of rebuilding your barn, plus the price of six milkcows." The stout farmer's eyes brightened, until Bryne added, "Caralin will disburse the coin to you when she is

content as to costs and prices. Some of your cows were going dry, I hear." The slim woman in grey nodded in satisfaction. "For the bump on your head, I award you one silver mark. Don't complain," he said firmly as Nem opened his mouth. "Maigan has given you worse for drinking too much." A ripple of laughter among the onlookers greeted that, not diminished at all by Nem's half-abashed glares, and perhaps spurred by the tightlipped look Maigan gave her husband. "I will also replace the amount of the stolen purse. Once Caralin has satisfied herself as to how much was in it." Nem and his wife appeared equally disgruntled, but they held their tongues; it was plain he had given them what he would. Min began to feel hope.

Leaning his elbows on the table, Bryne turned his attention to her and the other two. His slow words tied her stomach into a knot. "You three will work for me, at the normal wages for whatever tasks you are given, until the coin I've paid out is repaid to me. Do not think I am being lenient. If you swear an oath that satisfies me you don't have to be guarded, you can work in my manor. If not, it means the fields, where you can be under someone's eyes every minute. Wages are lower in the fields, but it is your decision."

Frantically she racked her brain for the weakest oath that might satisfy. She did not like breaking her word in any circumstances, but she meant to be gone as soon as a chance presented, and she did not want too heavy an oathbreaking on her conscience.

Leane seemed to be searching, too, but Siuan barely hesitated before kneeling and folding her hands over her heart. Her eyes seemed fastened to Bryne's, and the challenge had not faded one bit. "By the Light and my hope of salvation and rebirth, I swear to serve you in whatever way you require for as long as you require, or may the Creator's face turn from me forever and darkness consume my soul." She delivered the words in a breathy whisper, but they created a dead silence. There was no oath stronger, unless it was the one a woman took on being made Aes Sedai, and the Oath Rod bound her to that as surely as to a part of her flesh.

Leane stared at Siuan; then she was on her knees, too. "By the Light and my hope of salvation and rebirth ..."

Min floundered desperately, searching for some way out. Swearing a lesser oath than they did meant the fields for certain, and someone watching her every instant, but this oath ... By what she had been taught, breaking it would be not much less than murder, maybe no less. Only there was no way out. The oath, or who knew how many years labouring in a field all day and probably locked up at night. Sinking down beside the other two women, she muttered the words, but inside she was howling. *Siuan, you utter fool! What have you gotten me into now? I can't stay here! I have to go to Rand! Oh, Light, help me!*

"Well," Bryne breathed when the last word was spoken, "I did not expect that. But it does suffice. Caralin, would you take Master Nem somewhere and find out what he thinks his losses amount to? And clear everyone else but these three out of here, too. And make arrangements to transport them to the manor. Under the circumstances, I don't think guards will be necessary."

The slim woman gave him a harassed look, but in short order she had everyone moving out in a milling throng. Admer Nem and his male kin stuck close to her, his face especially painted with avarice. The Nem women looked scarcely less greedy, but they still spared a few hard glowers for Min and the other two, who remained kneeling as the room emptied out. For herself, Min did not believe her legs could hold her up. The same phrases repeated over and over in her mind. *Oh, Siuan, why? I can't stay here. I can't!*

"We have had a few refugees through here," Bryne said when the last of the villagers had gone. He leaned back in his chair, studying them. "But never as odd a threesome as you. A Domani. A Tairen?" Siuan nodded curtly. She and Leane stood up, the slender, coppery-skinned woman delicately brushing her knees, Siuan simply standing. Min managed to join them, on wobbly legs. "And you, Serenla." Once more he gave the ghost of a smile at the name. "Somewhere in the east of Andor, unless I mistake your accent."

"Baerlon," she muttered, then bit her tongue too late. Someone might know Min was from Baerlon.

"I've heard of nothing in the east to make refugees," he said in a questioning tone. When she remained silent, he did not press it. "After you have worked off your debt, you will be welcome to remain in my service. Life can be hard for those who've lost their homes, and even a maid's cot is better than sleeping under a bush."

"Thank you, my lord," Leane said caressingly, making a curtsy so graceful that even in her rough riding dress it looked part of a dance. Min's echo was leaden, and she did not trust her knees for a curtsy. Siuan simply stood there staring at him and said nothing at all.

"A pity your companion took your horses. Four horses would reduce your debt by some."

"He was a stranger, and a rogue," Leane told him, in a voice suitable for something far more intimate. "I for one am more than happy to exchange his protection for yours, my lord."

Bryne eyed her—appreciatively, Min thought—but all he said was "At least you will be safely away from the Nems at the manor."

There was no reply for that. Min supposed scrubbing floors in Bryne's manor would not be much different from scrubbing floors in the Nem farmhouse. *How do I get out of this? Light, how?*

The silence went on, except for Bryne drumming his fingers on the table. Min would have thought he was at a loss for what to say next, but she did not think this man was ever off balance. More likely he was irritated that only Leane appeared to be showing any gratitude; she supposed their sentence could have been much worse, from his point of view. Perhaps Leane's heated glances and stroking tones had worked after a fashion, but Min found herself wishing the woman had remained the way she was. Being hung up by the wrists in the village square would be better than this.

Finally Caralin returned, muttering to herself. She sounded prickly, reporting to Bryne. "It will take days to get straight answers from those Nems, Lord Gareth. Admer would have five new barns and fifty cows, if I let him. At least I believe there really was a purse, but as to how much was in it ..." She shook her head and sighed. "I will find out, eventually. Joni is ready to take these girls to the manor, if you are done with them."

"Take them away, Caralin," Bryne said, rising. "When you've sent them off, join me at the brickyard." He sounded weary again. "Thad Haren says he needs more water if he's to keep making bricks, and the Light alone knows where I will find it for him." He strode out of the common room as if he had forgotten all about the three women who had just sworn to serve him.

Joni turned out to be the wide, balding man who had come for them in the shed, waiting now in front of the inn beside a high-wheeled cart enclosed by a round canvas cover, with a lean brown horse in the shafts. A few of the villagers stood about to watch their departure, but most seemed to have gone back to their homes and out of the heat. Gareth Bryne was already far down the dirt street.

"Joni will see you safely to the manor," Caralin said. "Do as you are told, and you will not find the life hard." For a moment she considered them, dark eyes nearly as sharp as Siuan's; then she nodded to herself as if satisfied and hurried off after Bryne.

Joni held the curtains open for them at the back of the cart, but let them clamber up unaided and find places to sit on the cart bed. There was not so much as a handful of straw for padding, and the heavy covering trapped the heat. He said not a word. The cart rocked as he climbed up on the driver's seat, hidden by the canvas. Min heard him cluck to the horse, and the cart lurched off, wheels creaking slightly, bumping over occasional potholes.

There was just enough of a crack in the covering at the back for Min to watch the village dwindle behind them and vanish, replaced alternately by long thickets and rail-fenced fields. She felt too stunned to speak. Siuan's grand cause was to end scrubbing pots and floors. She should never have helped the woman, never stayed with her. She should have ridden for Tear at the first opportunity.

"Well," Leane said suddenly, "that worked out not badly at all." She was back to her usual brisk voice again, but there was a flush of excitement—excitement!—in it, and a high colour in her cheeks. "It could have been better, but practice will take care of that." Her low laugh was almost a giggle. "I never realized how much fun it would be. When I actually felt his pulse racing ..." For a moment she held out her hand the way she had placed it on Bryne's wrist. "I don't think I ever felt so alive, so aware. Aunt Resara used to say men were better sport than hawks, but I never really understood until today."

Holding herself against the sway of the cart, Min goggled at her. "You have gone mad," she said finally. "How many years have we sworn away? Two? Five? I suppose you hope Gareth Bryne will spend them dandling you on his knee! Well, I hope he turns you over it. Every day!" The startled look on Leane's face did nothing for Min's temper. Did she expect Min to take it as calmly as she appeared to? But it was not Leane that Min was really angry with. She twisted around to glare a Siuan.

"And you! When you decide to give up, you don't do it small. You just surrender like a lamb at slaughter. Why did you choose *that* oath? Light, why?"

"Because," Siuan replied, "it was the one oath I could be sure would keep him from setting people to watch us night and day, manor house or not." Lying half stretched out on the rough planks of the cart, she made it sound the most obvious thing in the world. And Leane appeared to agree with her.

"You mean to break it," Min said after a moment. It came out in a shocked whisper, but even so she glanced worriedly at the canvas curtains that hid Joni. She did not think he could have heard.

"I mean to do what I must," Siuan said firmly, but just as softly. "In two or three days, when I can be sure they really aren't watching us especially, we will leave. I fear we must take horses, since ours are gone. Bryne must have good stables. I will regret that." And Leane just sat there like a cat with cream on her whiskers. She must have realized from the first; that was why she had not hesitated in swearing.

"You will regret stealing horses?" Min said hoarsely. "You plan to break an oath anyone but a Darkfriend would keep, and you regret stealing horses? I can't believe either of you. I don't *know* either of you."

"Do you really mean to stay and scrub pots," Leane asked, her voice just as low as theirs, "when Rand is out there with your heart in his pocket?"

Min glowered silently. She wished they had never learned she was in love with Rand al'Thor. Sometimes she wished she had never learned it. A man who barely knew she was alive, a man like that. What he was no longer seemed as important as the fact that he had left her, but it was all of a piece, really. She wanted to say she would keep her oath, forget about Rand for however long it took her to work off her debt. Only, she could not open her mouth. *Burn him! If I'd never met him, I wouldn't be in this pickle!*

When the silence between them had gone on far too long for Min's liking, broken only by the rhythmic creak of the wheels and the soft thud of the horse's hooves, Siuan spoke. "I mean to do as I swore to do. When I have finished what I *must* do first. I did not swear to serve him immediately; I was careful not to even imply it, strictly speaking. A fine point, I know, and one Gareth Bryne might not appreciate, but true all the same."

Min sagged in amazement, letting herself lurch with the cart's slow motion. "You intend to run away, then come back in a few years and hand yourselves over to Bryne? The man will sell your hides to a tannery. *Our* hides." Not until she said that did she realize she had accepted Siuan's solution. Run away, then come back and ... *I can't! I love Rand. And he wouldn't notice if Gareth Bryne made me work in his kitchens the rest of my life!*

"Not a man to cross, I agree," Siuan sighed. "I met him once—before. I was terrified he might recognize my voice today. Faces may change, but voices don't." She touched her own face wonderingly, as she sometimes did, apparently unaware of doing so. "Faces do change," she murmured. Then her tone firmed. "I've paid heavy prices already for what I had to do, and I will pay this one. Eventually. If you must drown or ride a lionfish, you ride and hope for the best. That is all there is to it, Serenla."

"Being a servant is far from the future I would choose," Leane said, "but it *is* in the future, and who knows what may happen before? I can remember too well when I thought I had no future." A small smile appeared on her lips, her eyes half-closed dreamily, and her voice became velvet. "Besides, I don't think he will sell our hides at all. Give me a few years of practice, and then a few minutes with Lord Gareth Bryne, and he will greet us with open arms and put us up in his best rooms. He'll deck us with silks, and offer his carriage to carry us wherever we want to go."

Min left her wrapped in her fantasy. Sometimes she thought the other two both lived in dreamworlds. Something else occurred to her. A small thing, but it was beginning to irritate. "Ah, Mara, tell me something. I've noticed some people smile when you call me by name. Serenla. Bryne did, and he said something about my mother having a premonition. Why?"

"In the Old Tongue," Siuan replied, "it means 'stubborn daughter'. You did have a stubborn streak when we first met. A mile wide and a mile deep." Siuan said that! Siuan, the most stubborn woman in the whole world! Her smile was as wide as her face. "Of course, you do seem to be coming along. At the next village, you might use Chalinda. That means 'sweet girl'. Or maybe—"

Suddenly the cart gave a harder lurch than any before, then picked up speed as if the horse were reaching for a gallop. Bumping around like grain on a chaffing sieve, the three women stared at one another in surprise. Then Siuan levered herself up and pulled aside the canvas hiding the driver's seat. Joni was gone. Throwing herself across the wooden seat, Siuan grabbed the reins and reared back, hauling the horse to a halt. Min threw open the back curtains, searching.

The road ran through a thicket here, nearly a small forest of oak and elm, pine and leatherleaf. The dust of their short dash was still settling, some of it on Joni, where he lay sprawled by the side of the hard-packed dirt road sixty or so paces back.

Instinctively Min leaped down and ran back to kneel beside the big man. He was still breathing but his eyes were closed and a bloody gash on the side of his head was coming up in a purple lump.

Leane pushed her aside and felt Joni's head with sure fingers. "He will live," she said crisply.

"Nothing seems broken, but he will have a headache for days after he wakes." Sitting back on her heels, she folded her hands, and her voice saddened. "There is nothing I can do for him in any case. Burn me, I promised myself I would not cry over it again."

"The question—" Min swallowed and started again. "The question is, do we load him in the back of the cart and take him on to the manor, or do we—go?" *Light, I'm no better than Siuan!*

"We could carry him as far as the next farm," Leane said slowly.

Siuan came up to them, leading the cart horse as if afraid the placid animal might bite. One glance at the man on the ground, and she frowned. "He never had that falling off the cart. I don't see root or rock here to cause it." She started studying the wood around them, and a man rode out of the trees on a tall black stallion, leading three mares, one shaggy and two hands shorter than the others.

He was a tall man in a blue silk coat, with a sword at his side, his hair curling to broad shoulders, darkly handsome despite a hardening as though misfortune had marked him deeply. And he was the last man Min expected to see.

"Is this your work?" Siuan demanded of him.

Logain smiled as he reined in beside the cart, though there was little amusement in it. "A sling is a useful thing, Mara. You are lucky I am here. I didn't expect you to leave the village for some hours yet, and barely able to walk then. The local lord was indulgent, it seems." Abruptly his face went even darker, and his voice was rough stone. "Did you think I would leave you to your fate? Maybe I should have. You made promises to me, Mara. I want the revenge you promised. I've followed you on this search, though you won't tell me what for. I've asked no questions as to how you plan to give me what you promised. But I will tell you this now. Your time is growing short. End your search soon, and deliver your promises, or I will leave you to find your own way. You'll quickly find most villages offer small sympathy to penniless strangers. Three pretty women alone? The sight of this," he touched the sword at his hip, "has kept you safe more times than you can know. Find what you are seeking soon, Mara."

He had not been so arrogant at the beginning of their journey. Then he had been humbly thankful for *their* help—as humbly as a man like Logain could manage, anyway. It seemed that time—and a lack of results—had withered his gratitude.

Siuan did not flinch away from his stare. "I hope to," she said firmly. "But if you want to go, then leave our horses and go! If you won't row, get out of the boat and swim by yourself! See how far you get with your revenge alone."

Logain's big hands tightened on his reins until Min heard his knuckles crack. He shivered with emotions in strong check. "I will stay a while longer, Mara," he said finally. "A little while longer."

For an instant, to Min's eyes, a halo flared around his head, a radiant crown of gold and blue. Siuan and Leane saw nothing, of course, though they knew what she could do. Sometimes she saw things about people—viewings, she called them—images or auras. Sometimes she knew what they meant. That woman would marry. That man would die. Small matters or grand events, joyous or bleak, there was never any rhyme or reason to who or where or when. Aes Sedai and Warders always had auras; most people never did. It was not always pleasant, knowing.

She had seen Logain's halo before, and she knew what it meant. Glory to come. But for him, perhaps above all men, surely that made no sense at all. His horse and his sword and his coat had come from playing at dice, though Min was not certain how fair the games had been. He had nothing

else, and no prospects except Siuan's promises, and how could Siuan ever keep them? His very name was likely a death sentence. It just made no sense.

Logain's humour returned as suddenly as it had gone. Pulling a fat, roughly woven purse from his belt, he jangled it at them. "I've come by a few coins. We won't have to sleep in another barn for a while."

"We heard of it," Siuan said dryly. "I suppose I should have expected no better from you."

"Think of it as a contribution to your search." She stretched out her hand, but he tied the purse back to his belt with a faintly mocking grin. "I would not want to taint your hand with stolen coin, Mara. Besides, this way perhaps I can be sure you won't run off and leave me." Siuan looked as if she could have bitten a nail in two, but she said nothing. Standing in his stirrups, Logain peered down the road toward Kore Springs. "I see a flock of sheep coming this way, and a pair of boys. Time for us to ride. They'll carry word of this as fast as they can run." Settling back down, he glanced at Joni still lying there unconscious. "And they'll fetch help for that fellow. I don't think I hit him hard enough to hurt him badly."

Min shook her head; the man continually surprised her. She would not have thought he would spare a second thought for a man whose head he had just cracked.

Siuan and Leane wasted no time scrambling into their high-cantled saddles, Leane onto the grey mare she called Moonflower, Siuan onto the short, shaggy mare she hadn't bothered naming. It was more of a scramble for Siuan. She was no horsewoman; after weeks in the saddle she still treated the sedate mare like a fiery-eyed warhorse. Leane handled Moonflower with effortless ease. Min knew she was somewhere in between; she climbed onto Wildrose, her bay, with considerably more grace than Siuan, considerably less than Leane.

"Do you think he will come after us?" Min asked as they started south, away from Kore Springs at a trot. She meant the question for Siuan, but it was Logain who answered.

"The local lord? I doubt he thinks you important enough. Of course, he may send a man, and he'll certainly spread your descriptions. We will ride as far as we can manage before stopping, and again tomorrow." It seemed he was taking charge.

"We aren't important enough," Siuan said, bouncing awkwardly in her saddle. She might have been wary of the horse, but the look she directed at Logain's back said his challenge to her authority would not last long.

For herself, Min hoped Bryne considered them unimportant. He probably did. As long as he never learned their real names. Logain quickened the stallion's pace, and she heeled Wildrose to keep up, putting her thoughts ahead, not behind.

\* \* \*

Tucking his leather gauntlets behind his sword belt, Gareth Bryne picked up the curl-brimmed velvet hat from his writing table. The hat was the latest fashion from Caemlyn. Caralin had seen to that; he had no care for fashion, but she thought he should dress suitably for his position, and it was the silks and velvets she laid out for him in the mornings.

As he set the high-crowned hat on his head, he caught sight of his shadowy reflection in one of the study windows. Fitting that it was so wavy and thin. Squint as much as he would, his grey hat and grey silk coat, embroidered with silver scrolls down the sleeves and collar, looked nothing like the helmet and armour he was used to. That was over and done. And this ... This was something to fill empty hours. That was all.

"Are you certain you want to do this, Lord Gareth?"

He turned from the window to where Caralin stood beside her own writing table, across the room from his. Hers was piled with the estate account books. She had run his estates all the years he had been gone, and without doubt she still made a better job of it than he did.

"If you had set them to work for Admer Nem, as the law required," she went on, "this would be none of your affair at all."

"But I did not," he told her. "And would not if I had it to do again. You know as well as I do, Nem and his male kin would be trying to corner those girls day and night. And Maigan and the rest of the women would make their lives the Pit of Doom, that is if all three girls didn't accidentally fall down a well and drown."

"Even Maigan would not use a well," Caralin said dryly, "not with the weather we've been having. Still, I take your point, Lord Gareth. But they have had most of a day and a night to run in any direction. You will locate them as soon by sending out word of them. If they can be found."

"Thad can find them." Thad was over seventy, but he could still track yesterday's wind across stone by moonlight, and he had been more than happy to turn the brickyard over to his son.

"If you say so, Lord Gareth." She and Thad did not get on. "Well, when you bring them back, I can certainly use them in the house."

Something in her voice, casual as it was, pricked his attention. A touch of satisfaction.

Practically from the day he arrived home Caralin had introduced a succession of pretty maids and farmgirls into the manor house, all willing and eager to help the lord forget his miseries. "They are oathbreakers, Caralin. I fear it's the fields for them."

A brief, exasperated tightening of her lips confirmed his suspicions, but she kept her tone indifferent. "The other two perhaps, Lord Gareth, but the Domani girl's grace would be wasted in the fields, and would suit serving at table very well. A remarkably pretty young woman. Still, it will be as you wish, of course."

So that was the one Caralin had picked out. A remarkably pretty young woman indeed.

Though oddly different from the Domani women he had met. A touch hesitant here, a touch too fast there. Almost as if she were just now trying out her arts for the first time. That was impossible, of course. Domani women trained their daughters to twine men around their fingers almost from the cradle. Not that she had been ineffective, he admitted. If Caralin had sprung her on him among the farmgirls ... Remarkably pretty.

So why was it not her face that kept filling his mind? Why did he find himself thinking of a pair of blue eyes? Challenging him as though wishing she had a sword, afraid and refusing to yield to fear. Mara Tomanes. He had been sure she was one to keep her word, even without oaths. "I will bring her back," he muttered to himself. "I will know why she broke oath."

"As you say, my lord," Caralin said. "I thought she might do for your bedchamber maid. Sela is getting a bit old to be running up and down the stairs to fetch for you at night."

Gareth blinked at her. What? Oh. The Domani girl. He shook his head at Caralin's foolishness. But was he being any less foolish? He was the lord here; he should remain here to take care of his people. Yet Caralin had taken better care than he knew how, all the years he was gone. He knew camps and soldiers and campaigns, and maybe a bit of how to manoeuvre in court intrigues. She was right. He should take off his sword and this fool hat, and have Caralin write out their descriptions, and ...

Instead, he said, "Keep a close eye on Admer Nem and his kin. They'll try to cheat you as much as they can."

"As you say, my lord." The words were perfectly respectful; the tone told him to go teach his grandfather to shear sheep. Chuckling to himself, he went outside.

The manor house was really little more than a tremendously overgrown farmhouse, two rambling stories of brick and stone under a slate roof, added to again and again by generations of Brynes. House Bryne had owned this land—or it had owned them—since Andor was wrought from the wreckage of Artur Hawkwing's empire a thousand years before, and for all that time it had sent its sons off to fight Andor's wars. He would fight no more wars, but it was too late for House Bryne. There had been too many wars, too many battles. He was the last of the blood. No wife, no son, no daughter. The line ended with him. All things had to end; the Wheel of Time turned.

Twenty men waited beside saddled horses on the stone-paved yard in front of the manor house. Men even greyer than he, mostly, if they had hair. Experienced soldiers all, former squadmen, squadron leaders and bannermen who had served with him at one time or another in his career. Joni Shagrin, who had been Senior Bannerman of the Guards, was right at the front with a bandage around his temples, though Bryne knew for a fact his daughters had set their children to keep him in his bed. He was one of the few who had any family, here or anywhere else. Most had chosen to come serve Gareth Bryne again rather than drink away their pensions over reminiscences no-one but another old soldier wanted to hear.

All wore swords belted over their coats, and a few carried long, steel-tipped lances that had hung for years on a wall until this morning. Every saddle had a fat blanket roll behind, and bulging saddlebags, plus a pot or kettle and full water bags, just as if they were riding out on campaign instead

of a week's jaunt to chase down three women who set fire to a barn. Here was a chance to relive old days, or pretend to.

He wondered if that was what was rousing him out. He was certainly too old to go riding off after a set of pretty eyes on a woman young enough to be his daughter. Maybe his granddaughter. *I am not that big a fool*, he told himself firmly. Caralin could manage things better with him not getting in the way.

A lanky bay gelding came galloping up the oak lane that led down to the road, and the rider threw himself out of the saddle before the animal came to a full stop; the man half-stumbled but still managed to put fist to heart in a proper salute. Barim Halle, who served under him as a senior squadman years ago, was hard and wiry, with a leather egg for a head and white eyebrows that seemed to be trying to make up for the lack of other hair. "You been recalled to Caemlyn, my Captain-General?" he panted.

"No," Gareth said, too sharply. "What do you mean riding in here as though you had Valreio cavalry on your tail?" Some of the other horses were frisking, catching the bay's mood.

"Never rode that hard unless we was chasing them, my lord." Barim's grin faded when the man saw he was not laughing. "Well, my lord, I seen the horses, and I reckoned—" The man took another look at his face and cut off that line. "Well, actually, I got some news, too. I been over to New Braem to see my sister, and I heard plenty."

New Braem was older than Andor—"old" Braem had been destroyed in the Trolloc Wars, a thousand years before Artur Hawkwing—and it was a good place for news. A middling-sized border town well to the west of his estates, on the road from Caemlyn to Tar Valon. Even with Morgase's current attitude, the merchants would keep that road busy. "Well, out with it, man. If there's news, what is it?"

"Uh, just trying to figure where to start, my lord." Barim straightened unconsciously, as though making a report. "Most important, I reckon, they say Tear has fallen. Aielmen took the Stone itself, and the Sword That Cannot Be Touched has flat been touched. Somebody drew it, they say."

"An Aielman drew it?" Gareth said incredulously. An Aiel would die before he touched a sword; he had seen it happen, in the Aiel War. Though it was said *Callandor* was not really a sword at all. Whatever that meant.

"They didn't say, my lord. I heard names; Ren somebody or other most often. But they was talking it like fact, not rumour. Like everybody knew."

Gareth's forehead creased in a frown. Worse than troubling, if true. If *Callandor* had been drawn, then the Dragon was Reborn. According to the Prophecies, that meant the Last Battle was coming, the Dark One breaking free. The Dragon Reborn would save the world, so the Prophecies said. And destroy it. This was news enough by itself to have set Halle galloping, if he had thought twice.

But the leathery fellow was not finished. "Word come down from Tar Valon is near as big, my lord. They say there's a new Amyrlin Seat. Elaida, my lord, who was the Queen's advisor." Blinking suddenly, Halle hurried on; Morgase was forbidden ground, and every man on the estate knew it, though Gareth had never said so. "They say the old Amyrlin, Siuan Sanche, was Stilled and executed. And Logain died, too. That false Dragon they caught and Gentled last year. They talked it like it was true, my lord. Some of them claimed they was in Tar Valon when it all happened."

Logain was no great news, even if he had started a war in Ghealdan by claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. There had been several false Dragons the last few years. He could channel, though that was a fact. Until the Aes Sedai Gentled him. Well, he was not the first man to be caught and Gentled, cut off from the Power so he could never channel again. They said men like that, whether false Dragons or just poor fools the Red Ajah took against, never lived long. It was said they gave up wanting to live.

Siuan Sanche, though, that was news. He had met her once, nearly three years ago. A woman who demanded obedience and gave no reasons. Tough as an old boot, with a tongue like a file and a temper like that of a bear with a sore tooth. He would have expected her to tear any upstart claimant limb from limb with her bare hands. Stilling was the same as Gentling for a man, but more rare by far. Especially for an Amyrlin Seat. Only two Amyrlins in three thousand years had suffered that fate, so far as the Tower admitted, though it was possible they could have hidden two dozen more; the Tower

was very good at hiding what they wanted hidden. But an execution on top of Stilling seemed unnecessary. It was said women survived Stilling no better than men did Gentling.

It all stank of trouble. Everyone knew the Tower had secret alliances, strings tied to thrones and powerful lords and ladies. With a new Amyrlin raised in this fashion, some would surely try to test whether the Aes Sedai still watched as closely. And once this fellow in Tear quelled any opposition—not that there was likely to be much if he really did have the Stone—he would move, against Illian or Ghealdan. The question was, how quickly could he move? Would forces be gathered against him, or for him? He had to be the true Dragon Reborn, but the Houses would go both ways, and the people, too. And if petty squabbles broke out because the Tower—

“Old fool,” he muttered. Seeing Barim give a start, he added, “Not you. Another old fool.” None of this was his affair any longer. Except to decide which way House Bryne went, when the time came. Not that anyone would care, except to know whether or not to attack him. Bryne had never been a powerful House, or large.

“Uh, my lord?” Barim glanced at the men waiting with their horses. “Do you think you might need me, my lord?”

Without even asking where or why. He was not the only one bored with country life. “Catch up to us when you have your gear together. We’ll be heading south on the Four Kings Road to start.” Barim saluted and dashed away, dragging his horse behind him.

Climbing into his saddle, Gareth swung his arm forward without a word, and the men fell into a column of twos behind him as they headed down the oak lane. He meant to have answers. If he had to take this Mara by the scruff of the neck and shake her, he would have answers.

## *CHAPTER 2: Kindling the Fire*



The High Lady Alteima Mercandes relaxed as the gates of the Royal Palace of Andor swung open and her carriage rolled in. She had not been certain they would open. It had surely taken long enough to get a note taken in, and longer still to have a reply. Her maid, a thin girl acquired here in Caemlyn, goggled and all but bounced on the seat across from her at the excitement of actually entering the palace.

Snapping open her lace fan, Alteima tried to cool herself. It was still well short of midday; the heat would grow worse yet. To think she had always thought of Andor as cool. Hastily she reviewed what she meant to say one last time. She was a pretty woman—she knew exactly how pretty—with large brown eyes that made some mistakenly think her innocent, even harmless. She knew she was neither, but it suited her very well to have others believe her so. Especially here, today. This carriage had taken almost the last of the gold she had managed to carry away when she fled Tear. If she was to re-establish herself, she needed powerful friends, and there was none more powerful in Andor than the woman she had come to see.

The carriage halted near a fountain in a column-ringed courtyard, and a servant in red-and-white livery rushed to open the door. Alteima barely glanced at the courtyard or the serving man; her mind was all on the meeting ahead. Black hair spilled to the middle of her back from beneath a close-fitting cap of seed pearls, and more pearls lined the tiny pleats of her high-necked gown of watery green silk. She had met Morgase once, briefly, five years ago during a state visit; a woman who radiated power, as reserved and stately as one should expect of a queen, and also proper, in the Andoran way. Which meant prim. The rumours in the city that she had a lover—a man not much liked, it seemed—did not fit that very well, of course. But from what Alteima remembered, the formality of the gown—and the high neck—should please Morgase.

As soon as Alteima's slippers were firmly on the paving stones, the maid, Cara, leaped down and began fussing over the fall of the pleats. Until Alteima snapped her fan shut and slapped the girl's wrist with it; a courtyard was no place for that. Cara—such a foolish name—flinched back, clutching her wrist with a wounded look and the beginnings of tears.

Alteima compressed her lips in irritation. The girl did not even know how to take mild reproof. She had been fooling herself: the girl would not do; she was too obviously untrained. But a lady had to have a maid, especially if she was to differentiate herself from the mass of refugees in Andor. She had seen men and women labouring in the sun, even begging in the streets, while wearing the remnants of Cairhienin nobles' garb. She thought she had recognized one or two. Perhaps she should take one of them in service; who could know the duties of a lady's maid better than a lady? And if they were reduced to working with their hands, they should leap at the chance. It might be amusing to have a former "friend" for a maid. Too late for today, though. And an untrained maid, a local girl, said a little too clearly that Alteima was at the edge of her resources, only one step removed from those beggars herself.

She put on a look of concerned gentleness. "Did I hurt you, Cara?" she said sweetly. "Remain here in the carriage and soothe your wrist. I am certain someone will bring you cool water to drink." The mindless gratitude on the girl's face was stupefying.

The liveried men, well trained, stood looking at nothing at all. Still, word of Alteima's kindness would spread, if she knew anything about servants.

A tall young man appeared before her in the white-collared red coat and burnished breastplate of the Queen's Guard, bowing with a hand to his sword hilt. "I am Guardsman-Lieutenant Tallanvor, High Lady. If you will come with me, I will escort you to Queen Morgase." He offered an arm, which she took, but otherwise she was scarcely aware of him. She had no interest in soldiers unless generals and lords.

As he attended her down broad corridors seemingly full of scurrying men and women in livery—they took care not to impede her way, of course—she subtly examined the fine wall hangings, the ivory-inlaid chests and highchests, the bowls and vases of chased gold or silver, or thin Sea Folk porcelain. The Royal Palace did not display as much wealth as the Stone of Tear, but Andor was still a wealthy land, perhaps even as wealthy as Tear. An older lord would do nicely, malleable for a woman still young, perhaps a touch feeble and infirm. With vast estates. That would be a beginning, while she found out exactly where the strings of power lay in Andor. A few words exchanged with Morgase some years ago were not much of an introduction, but she had that which a powerful queen must want and need. Information.

Finally Tallanvor ushered her into a large sitting room with a high ceiling painted in birds and clouds and open sky, where ornately carved and gilded chairs stood before a polished white marble fireplace. A part of Alteima's mind noted with amusement that the wide red-and-gold carpet was Tairen work. The young man went to one knee. "My Queen," he said in a suddenly rough voice, "as you have commanded, I bring you the High Lady Alteima, of Tear."

Morgase waved him away. "You are welcome, Alteima. It is good to see you again. Sit, and we will talk."

Alteima managed a curtsy and murmured thanks before taking a chair. Envy curdled inside her. She had remembered Morgase as a beautiful woman, but the golden-haired reality told her how pale that memory had grown. Morgase was a rose in full bloom, ready to overshadow every other flower. Alteima did not blame the young soldier for stumbling on his way out. She was just glad he was gone, so she would not have to be aware of him looking at the two of them, comparing.

Yet, there were changes, too. Vast changes. Morgase, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand, so very reserved and stately and proper, wore a gown of shimmering white silk that showed enough bosom to shock a tavern maid in the Maule. It clung to hip and thigh close enough to suit a Taraboner jade. The rumours were clearly true. Morgase had a lover. And for her to have altered so much, it was equally clear that she tried to please this Gaebrial, not make him please her. Morgase still radiated power and a presence that filled the room, but that dress transformed both to something less.

Alteima was doubly glad she had worn a high neck. A woman that deep in a man's thrall could lash out in a jealous rage on the smallest provocation or none at all. If she met Gaebrial, she would present him as near indifference as civility would allow. Even being suspected of *thinking* of poaching Morgase's lover could get her a hangman's noose instead of a rich husband on his last legs. She herself would have done the same.

A woman in red-and-white livery brought wine, an excellent Murandian, and poured it into crystal goblets deeply engraved with the rearing Lion of Andor. As Morgase took a goblet, Alteima noticed her ring, a golden serpent eating its own tail. The Great Serpent ring was worn by some women who had trained in the White Tower, as Morgase had, without becoming Aes Sedai, as well as by Aes Sedai themselves. It was a thousand-year tradition for the Queens of Andor to be Tower trained. But rumours were on every lip of a break between Morgase and Tar Valon, and the anti-Aes Sedai sentiment in the streets could have been quashed quickly had Morgase wanted to. Why was she still wearing the ring? Alteima would be careful of her words until she knew the answer.

The liveried woman withdrew to the far end of the room, out of earshot but close enough to see when the wine needed replenishing.

Taking a sip, Morgase said, "It is long since we met. Is your husband well? Is he in Caemlyn with you?"

Hastily Alteima shuffled her plans. She had not thought Morgase knew she had a husband, but she had always been able to think on the run. "Tedosian was well when I last saw him." The Light send he died soon. As well to get on with it. "He was of some question about serving this Rand al'Thor, and that is a dangerous chasm to straddle. Why, lords have been hung as if they were common criminals."

"Rand al'Thor," Morgase mused softly. "I met him once. He did not look like one who would name himself the Dragon Reborn. A frightened shepherd boy, trying not to show it. Yet thinking back, he seemed to be looking for some—escape." Her blue eyes looked inward. "Elaida warned me of him." She seemed unaware of having spoken those last words.

“Elaida was your advisor then?” Alteima said cautiously. She knew it was so, and it made the rumours of a break all the more difficult to believe. She had to know if it was true. “You have replaced her, now that she is Amyrlin?”

Morgase’s eyes snapped back into focus. “I have not!” The next instant her voice softened again. “My daughter, Elayne, is training in the Tower. She has already been raised to the Accepted.”

Alteima fluttered her fan, hoping sweat was not breaking out on her forehead. If Morgase did not know her own feelings toward the Tower, there was no way to speak safely. Her plans teetered on the edge of a precipice.

Then Morgase rescued them, and her. “You say your husband was of two minds about Rand al’Thor. And you?”

She nearly sighed with relief. Morgase might be behaving like an untutored farmgirl over this Gaebriel, but she still had her sense when it came to power and possible dangers to her realm. “I observed him closely, of course, in the Stone.” That should plant the seed, if it needed planting. “He can channel, and a man who can channel is always to be feared. Yet he is the Dragon Reborn. There is no doubt. The Stone fell, and *Callandor* was in his hand when it did. The Prophecies ... I fear must leave decisions of what to do about the Dragon Reborn to those who are wiser than I. I only know that I am afraid to remain where he rules. Even a High Lady of Tear cannot match the courage of the Queen of Andor.”

The golden-haired woman gave her a shrewd look that made her afraid she had overdone the flattery. Some did not like it too open. But Morgase merely leaned back in her chair and sipped her wine. “Tell me about him, this man who is supposed to save us, and destroy us doing it.”

Success. Or at least, the beginnings of it. “He is a dangerous man beyond any question of the Power. A lion seems lazy, half-asleep, until suddenly he charges; then he is all speed and power. Rand al’Thor seems innocent, not lazy, and naive, not asleep, but when he charges ... He has no proper respect for person or position at all. I did not exaggerate when I said he has hanged lords. He is a breeder of anarchy. In Tear under his new laws, even a High Lord or Lady can be called before a magistrate, to be fined or worse, on the charges of the meanest peasant or fisherman. He ...”

She kept strictly to the truth as she saw it; she could tell the truth as quickly as a lie when it was necessary. Morgase sipped her wine and listened; Alteima might have thought her lounging indolently, except that her eyes showed she was taking in every word and storing it. “You must understand,” Alteima finished, “that I have only touched the surface. Rand al’Thor and what he has done in Tear are subjects for hours.”

“You will have them,” Morgase said, and in her mind Alteima smiled. Success. “Is it true,” the Queen went on, “that he brought Aiel with him to the Stone?”

“Oh, yes. Great savages with their faces hidden half the time, and even the women ready to kill as soon as look. They followed him like dogs, terrorizing everyone, and took whatever they wanted from the Stone.”

“I had thought it must be the wildest rumour,” Morgase reflected. “There have been rumours this past year, but they have not come out of the Waste in twenty years, not since the Aiel War. The world certainly does not need this Rand al’Thor bringing the Aiel down on us again.” Her look sharpened again. “You said ‘followed’. They have gone?”

Alteima nodded. “Just before I left Tear. And he went with them.”

“With them!” Morgase exclaimed. “I feared he was in Cairhien right this—”

“You have a guest, Morgase? I should have been told, so I could greet her.”

A big man strode into the room, tall, his gold-embroidered red silk coat fitting massive shoulders and a deep chest. Alteima did not need to see the radiant look on Morgase’s face to name him as Lord Gaebriel; the assurance with which he had interrupted the Queen did that. He lifted a finger, and the serving woman curtsied and left quickly; he did not ask Morgase’s permission to dismiss her servants from her presence, either. He was darkly handsome, incredibly so, with wings of white at his temples.

Composing her face to commonplace, Alteima put on a marginally welcoming smile, suitable for an elderly uncle with neither power, wealth nor influence. He might be gorgeous, but even if he did not belong to Morgase, he was not a man she would try manipulating unless she absolutely had to. There was perhaps even more of an air of power about him than about Morgase.

Gaebril stopped by Morgase and put his hand on her bare shoulder in a very familiar way. She clearly came close to resting her cheek on the back of his hand, but his eyes were on Alteima. She was used to men looking at her, but these eyes made her shift uneasily; they were far too penetrating, saw far too much.

"You come from Tear?" The sound of his deep voice sent a tingle through her; her skin, even her bones, felt as though she had been dipped in icy water, but oddly her momentary anxiety melted.

It was Morgase who answered; Alteima could not seem to find her tongue with him watching her. "This is the High Lady Alteima, Gaebril. She has been telling me all about the Dragon Reborn. She was in the Stone of Tear when it fell. Gaebril, there really were Aiel—" The pressure of his hand cut her off. Irritation flashed across her face, but then it was gone, replaced by a smile beaming up at him.

His eyes, still on Alteima, sent that shiver through her again, and this time she gasped aloud. "So much talking must have fatigued you, Morgase," he said without shifting his gaze. "You do too much. Go to your bedchamber and sleep. Go now. I will wake you when you have rested enough."

Morgase stood immediately, still smiling at him devotedly. Her eyes seemed slightly glazed. "Yes, I am tired. I will take a nap now, Gaebril."

She glided from the room with never a glance at Alteima, but Alteima's attention was all on Gaebril. Her heart beat faster; her breath quickened. He was surely the handsomest man she had ever seen. The grandest, the strongest, the most powerful ... Superlatives rolled through her mind like a flood.

Gaebril paid no more attention to Morgase's leaving than she did. Taking the chair the Queen had vacated, he leaned back with his boots stretched out in front of him. "Tell me why you came to Caemlyn, Alteima." Again the chill ran through her. "The absolute truth, but keep it brief. You can give me details later if I want them."

She did not hesitate. "I tried to poison my husband and had to flee before Tedosian and that trull Estanda could kill me instead, or worse. Rand al'Thor meant to let them do it, as an example. Telling made her cringe. Not because it was a truth she had kept hidden so much as because she found she wanted to please him more than anything else in the world, and she feared that he might send her away. But he wanted the truth. "I chose Caemlyn because I could not bear Illian and though Andor is little better, Cairhien is in near ruins and Ghealdan is so backwards. In Caemlyn, I can find a wealthy husband, or one who thinks he is my protector if need be, and use his power to—"

He stopped her with a wave of his hand, chuckling. "A vicious little cat, though pretty. Perhaps pretty enough to keep, with your teeth and claws drawn." Suddenly his face became more intent. "Tell me what you know of Rand al'Thor, and especially his friends, if he has any, his companions, his allies."

She told him, talking until her mouth and throat went dry, and her voice cracked and rasped. She never raised her goblet until he told her to drink; then she gulped the wine down and spoke on. She could please him. She could please him better than Morgase could think of.

\* \* \*

The maids working in Morgase's bedchamber dropped hasty curtsies, surprised to see her there in the middle of the morning. Waving them out of the room, she climbed onto her bed still in her dress. For a time she lay staring at the gilded carvings of the bedposts. No Lions of Andor here, but roses. For the Rose Crown of Andor, but roses suited her better than lions.

*Stop being stubborn*, she chided herself, then wondered why. She had told Gaebril she was tired, and ... Or had he told her? Impossible. She was the Queen of Andor, and no man told her to do anything. *Gareth*. Now why had she thought of Gareth Bryne? He had certainly never told her to do anything; the Captain-General of the Queen's Guards obeyed the Queen, not the other way around. But he had been stubborn, entirely capable of digging in his heels until she came around to his way. *Why am I thinking of him? I wish he were here*. That was ridiculous. She had sent him away for opposing her; about what no longer seemed quite clear, but that was not important. He had opposed her. She could remember the feelings she had had for him only dimly, as though he had been gone for years. Surely it had not been so long? *Stop being stubborn!*

Her eyes closed, and she fell immediately into sleep, a sleep troubled by restless dreams of running from something she could not see.

Morgase's sleep was disturbed some time later, when the bed shook with the impact of a body. She opened her eyes, expecting to see Gaebrol. And there he was, already half-naked. She was not expecting to see Alteima, however, but there she was, too, her high-necked dress undone to allow her large breasts to spill free. As she stared, her lover's hands reached around from where he knelt behind the other woman, and began to squeeze those breasts roughly.

Morgase sat up on the bed, face red with anger. "What do you think you are doing!?"

That Alteima was alarmed by her reaction was understandable—she would have the chit flogged for this!—but that she looked a bit confused, too, was pure madness.

Gaebrol had the sheer gall to be annoyed at her for interrupting. The touch of his hand to Alteima's pearl-capped head was enough to make her eyes glaze over with pleasure; the look in his dark eyes almost did the same to Morgase. "There is no need to be alarmed, Morgase. Having you both will please me. You want to please me, don't you?"

Warmth flooded through her mind, and her loins. "Yes, of course, master. But ..." *But what?*

Gaebrol chuckled. "Then take off your clothes. And let her watch you do it." He took hold of Alteima's long hair and pulled back, holding her in place.

Her trembling hands moved to undo the buttons of her white gown. It didn't take much to expose her breasts, what with how scandalously low-cut the dress was. Why had she started wearing such things? Oh. Yes. Gaebrol said to. She pulled up her skirts and rose to her knees so she could haul the dress up over her head. She wasn't wearing any underwear beneath, for that, too, was as he preferred. She even took a razor to her own body every day to ensure she was smooth for him, as Alteima could now plainly see. Morgase's face flushed with something more than arousal.

Yet, she knelt there and watched as her lover lifted another woman's skirts and shoved his magnificent dark cock into that stranger's body, right there on her bed.

Alteima moaned wantonly at being penetrated. Her hips rolled and she started squeezing her own breast as Gaebrol took her. The queen watched, her own juices flowing down her thighs, jealously wishing it was her that he was using. The white pearls in the woman's hair contrasted prettily against her dark tresses. Gaebrol's grip on them tightened.

"You are mine now, too. Aren't you?" he said in his deep voice.

"Yes, master," Alteima moaned.

"And you, Morgase? Are you still my adoring little fucktoy?"

Outrage spiked in her, but the touch of his eyes soon quelled it. He was so magnificent. She would do anything for him. "Of course, my love. I belong to you."

His rich laugh made her tingle all over. "Then come around back, and bring that clever tongue of yours to bear. You can help inspire me to give my other pet what she craves."

She moved as he instructed, but slowly, confused as to what he was asking. She touched his broad shoulders with her hands, kissed the sides of his neck while he was thrusting into Alteima. But that wasn't what Gaebrol meant.

"Lower, Morgase. All the way down. I want you to lick my balls, and that which is above them ..."

*Lick his—!*? She trembled again, but not with pleasure. Almost she refused, but somehow she found herself trailing kisses down his muscular back. When she reached the small of his back, he stopped thrusting and waited expectantly.

She didn't want to but somehow Morgase found herself putting her face against the dark cheeks of Gaebrol's butt and running her tongue up and down his crack. She tasted the sweat on his large, hairy balls. And she tasted something else, too.

"That's nice. Swirl your tongue around it," he sighed.

And she did. Light help her, she did.

"I never imagined she was so—" Alteima began, but Gaebrol silenced her with a sharp slap across her bottom.

"She is whatever I want her to be. As all women should be," he said. That was true. It should not be, but it was. "Deeper, Morgase, stick it in as far in as you can."

So the queen stretched forth her tongue and thrust it as deep into her master's butt as she could, tasting all that was there. Her face was red, and tears leaked from her eyes for some reason as she performed that most worthy of acts on his magnificence. She could tell from his sigh that he was enjoying it. He began to rock back and forth, fucking Alteima slowly. Morgase's face remained in place as he did so, licking and tonguing him all the while.

For some reason, her pussy had responded to the act by growing almost painfully hot. She needed to touch it, and did, fingering herself roughly as she pleasured her master.

She was still fingering herself when she felt him contracting, and kept on doing it, and licking his ass and balls, while he was emptying himself into Alteima's dirty cleft. She kept licking long after he was done, in fact, only stopping when a powerful orgasm finally roared through her body, leaving her kneeling on the bed with both hands between her legs, screaming disgracefully at the pleasure that wracked her.

When her vision cleared enough that she could see, she found Gaebrial and Alteima both smirking at her in a way that made a dim flame of hatred kindle within her fractured heart. What was wrong with her? Why would she allow such things? Why did it feel so good? They were questions to which Morgase had no answers, but they were ones to which she knew she had to find those answers. Somehow.

## CHAPTER 3: Embracing the Flames



Rand and Elayne didn't need to exchange words while they made love in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. The techniques he'd learned from Seana saw to that. Elayne had claimed it was like a temporary Warder bond when he'd explained it to her, but he vehemently disagreed. His experience with Warder bonds was nowhere near as wonderful as this.

It was to her childhood room in the palace at Caemlyn that she'd taken him, after their weekly meeting, and it was there that she took him inside her, too. On red silk sheets, under a bright morning light, naked and beautiful she lay beneath him, smooth pale legs wrapped around his rocking hips as she sang her joy sweetly in his ear.

He could feel it, too, every surge of pleasure that moved through her sending an echo through him, just as his pleasure echoed through her. It felt so good. *She* felt so good. He clutched her tightly to his broad chest. There was pleasure for them both from that as well, her sensitive breasts being pressed against him, and rubbed each time he moved.

"Light, Rand, this was a wonderful idea," she gasped. Her hands were busy on his body, more so than they had been during previous trysts. She could tell now how much he liked it, and that emboldened her to explore his back and buttocks with her soft fingers.

Her hair—a lighter, more golden shade of red than his own—fanned out behind her on the sheets as he leaned back to stare down at her beautiful face, flushed now with passion. To think that such a magnificent woman was willing to put with the likes of him. It boggled the mind. But every time he tried to drive her away, by reminding her of the fate that awaited a male channeler like him, the madness and death, or by confessing his indiscretions with other women, she refused to do the sensible thing and leave him.

He cupped her face gently between his branded palms, the dragons tattooed around his forearms shining no less than her hair in the morning light of *Tel'aran'rhiad*. "I love you," he whispered, staring down into those huge blue eyes.

Elayne's grin woke the dimples in her cheeks. "I love you, too!" she said, and began rocking her hips against his even more ardently.

It wasn't just her physical pleasure that this linking he'd done in the World of Dreams allowed to be echoed. Her joy radiated at him as well. If anything, that was even more welcome than the thrill of sex. To think that he could inspire such feelings for her, to *know* that she meant what she said. It was unbelievable. It shattered his beliefs and left him adrift in a place even stranger than this dreamworld. There was a knowing gladness in the eyes that smiled up at him. He kissed her deeply.

When he angled his cock just so, to seek out the spots that would bring her, would bring *them*, the most pleasure, Elayne broke their kiss with a high-pitched cry. She raised her hands as if in surrender as she took all he had to give her, eyes squeezed shut, cheeks red, moaning each time he moved. His hands found hers, and their fingers entwined.

With their minds and bodies linked in that way, it was almost inevitable that they would climax together. And so they did. He had no way of knowing who started it, only that the sudden crashing wave of ecstasy that struck them commanded a second one to come in response. Rand collapsed atop her, his forehead resting on the sheets beside her head, gasping. It was almost too much to bear, pleasure approaching pain. Elayne's legs had gone slack, spread wide and shaking.

They lay there for some time, wracked by pleasure, hearts hammering against each other at a pace that was almost frightening, before Rand forced himself to pull out of her glorious heat and roll over onto his back.

"Blood and ashes," he swore softly.

"That was ... something," Elayne said. She pressed her knees together, her hands going to her privates as if to shield them from pain.

"A bit too much?" he asked.

"No! I loved it. It was just ... something. Extreme, one might say."

He ran his fingers through his now sweat-damp hair. It hadn't been like that with Seana, when she'd shown him the technique. It had been nice, sure, but not that ... extreme, as she said. But then, he only *liked* Seana. He loved Elayne. "I think perhaps we should be careful about using this. *Tel'aran'rhiad* is dangerous in a great many ways."

Elayne rolled over to rest her head on his shoulder. "That might be wise. A little treat, every once in a while. The normal way is fine with me."

He put his arm around her shoulder, and hugged her close. The bond between them was a thing of the dreamworld rather than the real one. It was here he had made it and it was here than he unmade it now. He pictured the mirrors in his mind, just as Seana had taught him, seeing them both reflecting each other, but now instead of making those reflections overlap, he separated them once more. Awareness of Elayne faded from his mind, and awareness of him from hers. It was a loss in many ways, but a relief as well.

He hugged her tighter and kissed her forehead, lest she feel pushed away. He no longer knew for sure, and perhaps that was a good thing. "Are you sure it wouldn't be better to dock at Tear instead of Ebou Dar?"

"I don't recall asking for your approval," she said.

"I can't imagine you ever would." He wasn't particularly sure that Tear would have been any safer than Ebou Dar, but at least it would have been familiar.

"Nynaeve wouldn't allow it even so. She is eager to get off the ship. This journey has been nowhere near as pleasant as our trip on the Wavedancer. Or as fast." She touched his face gently. "At least we got rid of that vile collar. You need not fear it, my love."

He didn't like admitting fear at all, but the idea of being leashed as a *damane* was admittedly horrifying. He rubbed her bare shoulders. "Thank you."

"Are you sure using Rhuidean as your base is wise? It is the Aiel's sacred city, after all, not a mere stopover town."

It was tempting, but he kept his tongue in check. "Times change. And Rhuidean is no longer what it was." In more ways than one. The damage he'd done there during his battle with Asmodean still haunted him. He wasn't about to tell her that, though. No-one knew that he'd captured a Forsaken as a teacher save for Lanfear, and he meant to keep it that way. It did no good to set his trap for the man only for one of his friends to kill him for his crimes. Or, worse, turn against Rand over sparing the life of a man as vile as Asmodean. "The Aiel will have to adapt. Who knows? Perhaps in the future it will be the capital of a united Aiel nation."

She said nothing of that. Whether what he suggested would be a good or bad thing was an open question. "I wish we could spend the night together again. I liked waking up beside you."

"Me too. But it's nice that we can meet like this, even though we're so far away from one another."

She cuddled against him and sighed. "That's true. We should both get some real sleep, though. Will you miss me?"

"Of course!"

"Good. I shall miss you also. Until next time, Rand."

"Until then. Be safe."

She smiled once more, and then faded out of his arms and their dream. She'd gotten good at doing that willingly now. She'd gotten good at a lot of things.

He remained there for a while longer, stretching on the luxurious bed. His own bedroom in Rhuidean was much less extravagant. It held other pleasures, though, ones far superior to mere silk.

When Rand woke in the night, he was painfully erect, as he often was after encounters in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. He also wasn't alone in the bed.

Deep, regular breaths in the darkness. A pair of heat sources to either side, making the harsh night of the Aiel Waste feel cosy. It was all as it had been when he went to sleep, save for his state of arousal. He had been thoroughly sated when he drifted off, having taken them both. Merile had lain atop Raine, their softness's pressing against each other, his hardness dipping into first one and then the other. The sight of their slender young bodies writhing against each other had been more than beautiful, and the memory of it teased him now.

But he did not try to wake them from their slumber. He just shifted on the bed in an effort to get comfortable. Perhaps in the morning.

It took quite some time before Rand got back to sleep that night, but he slept well once he did. He woke at dawn, as was his wont, but found he was not the first up that morning.

"Met with someone in the wolfdream, didn't you?" Raine said when she saw him stir. Her callused hand was on his shaft, rubbing it gently.

"Elayne."

"A good bitch. She will make a strong member of the pack," she said.

"Please never say that where she can hear, or the 'pack' may end up fighting itself."

Raine frowned. "I ... will try." She was quiet then, so he took hold of the leather collar she almost always wore and brought her lips to his. He only released her when he felt her smile.

The wolfsister's pale cheeks coloured, and she hid her golden eyes from him. Down she went, disappearing under their blankets, kissing her way across his chest and stomach. She kissed the head of his cock, too, and ran her tongue along its sensitive flesh. Rand closed his eyes again, glad to let her administer to him. She curled up at his side and sucked upon his manhood while her hand ran up and down him, nice and slow.

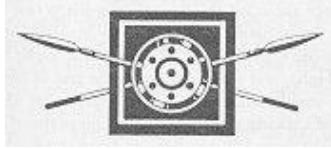
With Merile sleeping soundly beside them, that was all they could do. Rand didn't try to fight it when he felt his orgasm getting close. He came in Raine's mouth and she swallowed it all. Once she'd sucked him dry, she crawled back up his side, and they repeated the procedure, only now with him kissing his way down her body, sucking on her stiff little nipple, teasing the tender flesh around it with his tongue. Across her stomach and down between her thighs he went. She was already sopping wet when his lips touched hers, and he set about making her even wetter, dipping his fingers inside while his tongue caressed her most sensitive spot.

For good or ill, Raine lacked his self-control. Her moans were muffled, but not so muffled that Merile didn't stir, wordless questions tumbling sleepily from her lips.

He found her thigh with his other hand, and caressed it steadily. It wasn't long before she'd yawned herself to awareness and he heard an "Oh" of realisation. She didn't object to his touch, but spread her legs to allow him better access. His fingers rubbed her much as his tongue was rubbing Raine.

Though his erection had long since faded, Rand spent a long time down under those covers that morning. He didn't emerge again until both girls had reached their climaxes. It was, so far as he was concerned, the best way to start the day.

## CHAPTER 4: Blood of Their Blood



When he descended the curving staircase that morning, it was to a much friendlier reception than any other man would have enjoyed, albeit one that almost made Rand wish for some proper hostility.

Like those of most Aiel, the eyes of those who greeted him were all blue or grey or green, and their hair, light brown or yellow or red, was cut short except for a tail at the nape of the neck. Full quivers balanced the long-bladed knives at their belts, and they wore cased horn bows on their backs. Each carried three or four short, long-bladed spears and a round, bull-hide buckler. Aielwomen who did not want hearth and children had their own warrior society, *Far Dareis Mai*, the Maidens of the Spear.

Except for *gai'shain*, men were not allowed beneath a Roof of the Maidens, not any man, not in any hold in the Waste. A chief or a Maiden's blood kin could die trying, though in fact no Aielman would ever think of it. It was the same for any society so far as he knew; only members and the *gai'shain* were allowed inside.

The wide, white-tiled corridors and great rooms inside were full of Maidens, sitting about on bright cushions, talking, tending to weapons, playing cat's cradle, or stones, or Thousand Flowers, an Aiel game that involved laying out patterns of flat bits of stone carved with what seemed a hundred different symbols. Of course, a profusion of *gai'shain* moved smoothly about their chores, cleaning, serving, mending, seeing to oil lamps that ranged from simple glazed pottery to gilded loot from somewhere to the tall stand-lamps that had been found in the city. In most rooms, colourful carpets and bright tapestries covered the floors and walls, in nearly as many patterns and styles as there were carpets and tapestries. The walls and ceilings themselves were detailed mosaics, of forests and rivers and skies that had never been seen in the Waste.

Young or old, the Maidens smiled when they saw him, and some nodded familiarly or even patted his shoulder. Others called out, asking how he was, had he eaten, would he like the *gai'shain* to bring him wine or water? He responded briefly, though with answering smiles. He was well, and neither hungry nor thirsty. He kept walking, not even slowing when he spoke. Slowing would lead inevitably to stopping, and he was not up to that this morning.

*Far Dareis Mai* had adopted him, after a fashion. Some treated him as a son, others as a brother. Age seemed not to come into it; women with white in their hair might talk to him as a brother over tea, while Maidens no more than a year older than he tried to make sure he wore the proper clothes for the heat. There was no avoiding the mothering; they simply did it, and he could not see how to make them stop, short of using the Power against the whole lot of them.

He had thought of trying to have another society provide his guards—*Shae'en M'taal*, the Stone Dogs, perhaps, or *Aethan Dor*, the Red Shields; Rhuarc had been a Red Shield before becoming chief—only, what reason could he possibly give? Not the truth, certainly. Just thinking about explaining that to Rhuarc and the others made him uncomfortable; Aiel humour being what it was, even sour old Han would likely break his ribs laughing. Any reason at all would probably offend the honour of every last Maiden. At least they rarely mothered him except under the Roof, where there was no-one to see but themselves, and *gai'shain* who knew better than to speak of anything that happened there. “The Maidens,” he had once said, “carry my honour.” Everyone remembered that, and the Maidens were as proud of it as if he had given them all thrones. But it had turned out that they carried it in a manner they chose.

That was why he hastened past them, and hoped the escort he would be unable to escape was not too large this time.

Once outside the tall bronze doors, he passed through a shaded entry supported by thick columns sixty feet high, bright blue and fluted in spirals, and descended the deep stairs that ran the full width of the building.

The outside of Rhuidean’s new Roof of the Maidens was a patterned mosaic of glazed tiles, white and blue in spirals that appeared endless to the eye, and a huge window of coloured glass

directly above the columns showed a black-haired woman fifteen feet tall, in complicated blue robes, right hand upraised, either to bless or command a halt. Her face was serene and stern at the same time. Whoever she had been, she was surely no Aiel, not with that pale skin and those dark eyes. An Aes Sedai, perhaps.

Rhuidean had never been finished, and many of the city's tall buildings had been badly damaged during the battle Rand had fought here with the Forsaken Asmodean. That same battle had dispersed the dome of fog that had once forbidden entry to all save prospective chiefs or Wise Ones of the Aiel. Even with the city lying exposed now, the Aiel had been reluctant to move in. Perhaps Rand should have respected that, and made his camp elsewhere while he waited for the rest of the clans to gather. But he was not a great one for respecting tradition, and the central location, huge buildings, and ready access to water made Rhuidean the most obvious place to settle.

He was glad of the shade cast by those towering structures when he stepped out of the Roof of the Maidens that morning. It kept him relatively cool. But for that shade, the heat of the Aiel Waste would have been enough to cook him in his fine white coat. Had the vines and thorns that decorated the cuffs and shoulders been real gold instead of simple embroidery, he imaged the heat might have melted them right off, but they were no more truly gold than the Dragons that now twined around his forearms as proof that he was the *Car'a'carn* of the Aiel. Proof to some, at least. There was another who bore those Dragons, and not everyone was convinced that it was he and not Rand who was the fake.

He took a deep breath of the dry air. Couladin was a problem for another day. The Taardad, Nakai, Goshien, Shaarad, Chareen and Tomanelle clans were with him now, while Couladin had only his Shaido. That left the Codarra, Miagoma, Daryne, Shiande and Reyn clans undeclared. Rhuarc was confident the Reyn would join them, since their chief had fought with him and Janduin—Rand's father by blood—in the Aiel War. They should have Couladin badly outnumbered. They should.

The Aiel clans and septs and societies had all claimed one of Rhuidean's towers for themselves. No banners proclaimed which of the oddly tall and wide structures belonged to which organisation, but the Aiel never seemed to have any trouble telling, unlike Rand. It wasn't the Aiel he was to meet with first this morning anyway.

He found Lan at the usual spot, standing in his shirtsleeves with a pair of wooden practice swords in his hands and not a hint of impatience on his hard face. The grey at the temples of the dark hair that brushed his shoulders might have led some fools to think him past his prime, but he remained the deadliest swordsman in the world. Rand was glad to have him as a teacher, and caught the wooden sword he wordlessly tossed his way with practiced ease.

He checked the sudden and equally wordless attack with rather less ease, but check it he did. Around and around they danced in that isolated square, their boots scraping across the dusty old tiles. Their dance went on for some time, with neither man taking hits, until Lan stepped back and put his blade in low guard.

"Not bad, sheepherder. You are learning."

Rand allowed himself a smile. He was learning a lot of things. Once they were done here, it would be off to meet with Rhuarc and the other Aiel. There he would learn how to use the short spears they favoured, though he himself never carried one. More interestingly, he would train in their method of fighting with their hands and feet. After that, he had lessons with "Jasin Natael", and before he'd be able to get a proper sleep at night he'd have to meet with Seana in *Tel'aran'rhol* to learn how to control the dreamworld. Yes, he was learning a lot. There were not enough hours in the day to learn all that he needed to learn.

"You have the makings of a fine Warder," a musical voice said from behind. "Is that what you aspire to be, or are there more important lessons you should be attending?"

Rand sighed softly and turned to face Moiraine. It didn't help that the Aes Sedai's rebuke echoed his own thoughts. Trying to stop her from taking charge of everything was hard enough, without being confronted with the truth that she would have done a better job of a lot of those things than he did. For all that she looked like a pretty young woman of diminutive stature, there were decades of experience behind those big dark eyes, and a cold resolve hardened her pale ageless face.

"I'm learning as much as I can, as fast as I can," he said.

"You are learning the wrong things, from the wrong people," said Moiraine, giving Lan what passed for an apologetic look from her. "You have soldiers to do your fighting for you, in the unlikely

event that the One Power is not enough to deal with any threat. There are other, more important things, that you need to learn. Political concerns, for example. We should speak alone, you and I. Make time in your day.”

But Rand was already looking away. A lesson on politics from her would only be another lecture on why he should stop trying to unite the Aiel, and abandon the idea of leading them across the Dragonwall. Or why he should submit to the White Tower so that its reflected authority would unite the nations behind him—behind it, with him as its figurehead, more like. He’d heard it all before. For all her experience, and despite how long they had known each other, Moiraine could not be trusted. He would have liked to have benefitted from her wisdom, but the price was too high.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, but she saw through his attempt at politics right away.

“Time is running short, Rand. Neither of us can afford this stubbornness.” To his surprise, Moiraine almost sounded upset.

“There is more to being a man than knowing how to fight,” Lan said angrily. That was a surprise, too. Moiraine’s upset must be genuine, for her stoic Warder to get angry on her behalf.

He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to upset her, but nothing had changed. The reasons that he couldn’t trust her remained as true as they had always been.

“I’ll be happy to listen to anything you can tell me about the nations and their politics,” he hedged, “but right now I have appointments to keep. We can talk later.”

Moiraine sighed heavily. “Later.” The frown Lan directed at her was as open a display of concern as Rand had ever seen from him.

The whole thing left him feeling very strange, so he escaped the scene as soon as he could.

His time with the Aiel proved a bit more pleasant. It wasn’t just Rhuarc, Jurainai, Roidan and the other, experienced fighters that gathered on the outskirts of the city. Some of the younger men were there, too, including Mangin, Zell and Giladin, all three of whom Rand had started to think of as friends. His uncle Jecht was there as well. That last was both a good and a bad thing. Good in that Jecht was a skilled fighter who had absolutely no compunctions about pushing Rand to excel, even if that meant leaving him bruised and embarrassed. Bad in that, despite their relationship, he was having a hard time getting on with the man.

“Janduin would not have gone down that easy,” the weathered *Far Aldazar Din* said, looking down on Rand after having swept his feet out from under him and driven an open palm into his chin, sending him crashing to the hot sands. “He would not have revealed our history, either.”

They shared a general height and colouring with Rand, the gathered Aiel, but he stood apart from them due to more than his choice of clothing, so different from the browns and greys of their *cadin’sor*. Why they were so upset about learning their ancestors had been pacifists was beyond him. It was ancient history. Whatever his blood, he was no Aiel.

“I’m not Janduin,” he said, getting back up for another round.

“Obviously,” Jecht sneered.

He felt his lips peel back from his teeth. “Close, were you? Was it after his death that you started hitting the *oosquai* so hard?”

It was a good and a bad thing to say. Good in that it made Jecht’s tan face flush even darker, and inspired him to fight harder. Bad in that it left Rand to limp his way back into the city after the morning’s training ended.

He didn’t limp alone, unfortunately.

“You cannot do it, kid,” his uncle said smugly. “But do not worry. You are not the only one. No-one else can do it. I am the best!”

Rand eyed him askance. Jecht was good, sure, but he didn’t think he believed that boast. Roidan was far bigger, and Rhuarc was at least as skilled. And in Rhuarc’s case Rand was always left with the feeling that he was holding back, staying cool, concealing his true abilities. The exact opposite of Jecht.

“That kind of attitude usually starts a lot of unnecessary fights, where I come from,” he said. He was glad that the others were far ahead, though far from certain they hadn’t heard. “And wins few friends.”

Jecht waved away such concerns. “Let them talk. I am still the best.”

He grunted. “Were you better than Janduin?” His father by blood was long dead, and Rand had never met him. It shouldn’t matter. But a curiosity was in him.

A grimness came over Jecht, and he walked for a time with a downcast mouth. “Punching things was not what made Janduin great. He could still have broken you in half, though,” he said at last. “Such a bloody waste, it was. Dead so young, and all over some wetlander chit and her brat.” He looked at Rand then, and there was no mistaking the anger and resentment in his grey eyes.

They shared blood and colouring, but little else. “It’s a pity he decided to end it that way,” he said calmly. “But the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” He had enough to feel guilty about; he wasn’t going to let Jecht foist responsibility for Janduin’s fate off on him.

He hadn’t been going anywhere in particular, just walking along at his uncle’s side as they talked, but Jecht had had more of a destination in mind, for when they turned the next corner he saw a group of Aiel gathered outside the cavernous doorway of one of the towers, the one the Taardad clan had claimed as theirs. He recognised only a couple of the Aiel, but they all knew him on sight. Knew him, and loved him not, from the looks on their faces.

Disliking those looks, and the numbers, Rand reached for and seized the One Power, allowing *saidin*, the male half of the power that drove the Wheel of Time, to flood into him, enhancing his senses and filling him with the thrilling, addictive ecstasy that it always did. It filled him with the corrupting taint that the Dark One had covered it with as well, a taint that would drive him mad, if it had not already, and kill him, if his enemies didn’t get there first. Despite that, he could not stop using *saidin*. It was not just its addictive nature; he needed it if he was to complete the tasks that had been placed upon him.

Other Aiel converged on the scene, shorter and slimmer, for the most part, but clad in the same greys and browns, hooded and with their veils hanging across their chests. These ones were Maidens of the Spear—Rand’s assigned bodyguards. He might have thought it coincidence that they appeared now, if he’d been a fool. Even watching, he hadn’t noticed them shadowing him.

“The wetlander shows himself,” one of the Aiel men said. Jecht lengthened his stride, until he stood between them and Rand.

“He showed himself at Alcair Dal,” said another, a greying man with a long face that Rand had seen before, back at his father’s former hold.

“And in the sweat tents,” said a younger man he barely recognised, with a mocking half-smile.

“Is there a reason we’re speaking? Because there’s work I need to be doing,” Rand said coldly.

“Since when has the need of a wetlander been my concern?” sneered the greying man.

“Since a wetlander became *Car’a’carn*,” his uncle Jecht said, with a hard frown. “You do not have to like him, Resh. I do not either. But *ji’e’toh* must be obeyed.”

“Thanks,” Rand muttered.

But Resh was unmoved by the rebuke. “A wetlander will never be *Car’a’carn* of the Aiel.” Angry mutters of agreement came from the men gathered around him, many of them Taardad. He couldn’t help but notice Nici and Shyala among the Maidens who’d come to stand around him now, both of them Shaido. *Everywhere I go, I break things. People. Bonds. Customs. Worlds.* It was not a proud thought.

“Is that what this is?” asked Jecht. “Do you mean to abandon your clan, as those other cowards abandoned theirs?”

The men did not back down. Many hefted spears as though thinking of answering his sharp words with something sharper. “The clan I served is gone. Soon I will be, too,” Resh said bitterly.

Rand watched in grim silence. This was not the first such desertion, though it was the first time one of the groups had confronted him directly. That he had been raised in the wetlands counted against him with many Aiel, as he’d known it would. The secret history he’d revealed, and the presence of a rival claimant for the title of *Car’a’carn*, had only made it worse. A lot of the Aiel wanted nothing to do with Rand al’Thor. Some of those were content to abandon him for parts unknown, even if that meant abandoning their clans as well. Others went over to Couladin, bolstering his numbers to the point that the numerical advantage that Rand, with the support of so many other chiefs, should have enjoyed, was brought into question. None of the deserters had tried to kill him. Yet ...

He felt no great warmth towards these men, but duty demanded he speak. “Our war is against the Shadow, not each other. Wetlander, Aiel. Shaido, Taardad. These things do not matter. Only the victory of the Light over the Shadow matters. Every warrior will be needed in that battle. The Last Battle. That is your duty, as it is mine. Remember it.”

Some of the Aiel looked embarrassed, but not Resh. "Curse the Light, and curse you. I no longer belong here," he said. Rand thought he might attack him then, but the man spun on his heel and stalked away. Most of the others went with him, but a few stayed, shamed perhaps by Rand's words. One of those was a young, yellow-haired fellow Rand had seen at Iron Hold when he first visited. He shuffled his feet sulkily now, but did not move to follow Resh and his cronies.

"*Algai d'isiswai* of the Iron Mountain, abandoning sept and clan. Never thought I would see such a disgrace," Jecht sneered. He gave the young man who'd stayed a taste of his sneer, too. "Fucking cowards."

The youth flushed in response. "I have trained all my life for this battle. I am not afraid of you! I am not afraid of anything!"

"Well said, Bast," a woman's voice said, cutting in before Jecht could unleash the angry words gathering on his tongue. "I am glad you came to your senses." It was his aunt Sunadai who came to the entrance of the Taardad roof, each step she took making her prodigious bosom bounce under the *algode* blouse she wore and clacking her many necklaces together. She wore the bulky brown skirt that most Aiel women who were not wed to the spear favoured, and added a forbidding frown for good measure. "Even the Taardad are not immune," she said, watching Resh and the others leave. Her son Rovan was with her, and mirrored her frown.

Those were not the only departures in recent times. Many of the Aiel leaders had gone back to their septs, feeling they were needed there more than here with Rand, to smooth over the damage he had done by revealing their true history. Heirn, for example, had left a few days ago for the hold of the Jindo, leaving most of his warriors here under Rhuarc's command. Rand's kin had not left for Iron Hold with their sept chief Duncan, though, to his relief. It was a strange but exciting new experience, having a family.

"How many is that now?" Rand asked. It was troubling. Some deserters he could accept, but too many would completely negate the point of his coming to the Waste in the first place. Should he move against Couladin rather than waiting for him to start it? Would it even stop the desertions if he did?

"Too many," Sunadai said grimly.

"It would not have happened if the *Car'a'carn* had been a real Aiel," Estel said. She stood with three other Maidens—Viola, Ani and Reyla—from her sept, the Black Rock Shaarad. Jheran had warned him about them, saying they had often feuded with his own sept in the past, and were the most likely to refuse to follow him in following Rand. All four women were yellow-haired and pretty, all four looked at him with ice-cold eyes.

The look Sunadai gave them was no warmer. "Each man or woman carries their own honour inside them, where no-one else can touch it. You alone are responsible for your choices. None other. Only children and the weak whine that another *made* them do or feel something. Are Aiel weak? Are you?"

Growls of no and never issued from all the Black Rock girls save Ani, who just stared at his aunt indifferently.

While some of the other Maidens dressed down the Black Rock ones, Sunadai just let her silent stare show them how unconvinced she was before turning her frown on him. "The other Wise Ones have been complaining about you, Rand al'Thor."

A wry smile crept its way onto Rand's face. "That is not the most shocking bit of news I've ever gotten."

"Being complained about is what he does best," Jecht said helpfully.

Sunadai and Jecht usually got along but she didn't smile at his barb. She was a very good-looking woman with long yellow hair, and older than she appeared. Rand accounted her the least predictable of Janduin's siblings. Dana was the prototypical Aiel, solemn and honourable, wholly dedicated to their code of *ji'e'toh*; Jecht was Jecht, and if atypical of an Aiel, still predictable in his own way. But Sunadai could rip him for doing something dumb one minute and rip someone else for being mean to him the next.

"What were they complaining about this time?" he asked as he stepped beneath the Taardad roof, unchallenged by the guards squatting outside. Within was a high-ceilinged room which seemed all the more cavernous for the complete lack of furniture. The only comforts to be seen were some

cushions thrown in piles at the corners, on which various Aiel now lounged, and a few pitchers of precious water being watched over by silent *gai'shain* in their hooded white robes.

"You being unmarried," his aunt said.

Rand jerked to a halt. One of his cousins—young Ricu, who shared her mother's colouring if not her physique—bounded up from the pillows on which she'd been chatting with her friends at hearing what the topic was.

"Who are you marrying, Rand?" she asked excitedly.

"No-one," he choked.

Some of the other Aiel, all female, had turned their attention his way, too. Even Aviendha, who hated him vocally, ended her talk with a fellow Wise One's apprentice in order to turn her hard, green-eyed stare on him. His uncle Jecht—his unmarried uncle Jecht—made himself scarce. Standing between him and the deserters was one thing, but his look made plain that this was a battle he had no intention of fighting.

"Some Chareen girls were being recommended, when I left. Do you like big breasts? Of course you do," his buxom aunt said. "All boys do. Susana, daughter of Erim, is quite well endowed, and Sorelia claims her greatdaughter Patti is even more so. Other clans were putting their women forward, too. Jheran's Jana has his exotic hair, but she is a skinny little thing. Though I suppose some people like that," she added quickly, noticing Ricu's crestfallen look. "Aeron claims that one of Bruan's daughters has inherited his build and is almost old enough to marry. If you want strong sons, there could be no better choice, she says."

Rand had winced internally all the way through the horrifying tirade, but that last overcame his self-control and had him gaping at his aunt openly. Bruan was big enough that you could cut him up and make two normal-sized men out of the parts. There was no way his girl had a comparable build. Trying to imagine it nearly broke his brain. All he could see was Bruan in a wedding dress, the seams bursting. He wanted to run.

Sunadai's gaze came to rest on Aviendha, for some reason. "And, of course, there is no shortage of beautiful women among the Taardad clan. Some of the Wise Ones from the other clans feel that we already have too much influence with you, however."

"They are right," Aviendha said quickly. His aunt frowned at her.

"I do not see what the problem is," Ricu put in. "Just form a *harem* and marry all of them."

Aviendha turned on her angrily. "It is not his decision to make!"

The girls glared at each other until Sunadai stepped between them. "Her words were correct." Her daughter sighed when she took Aviendha's part, but did not argue.

"Though that does not mean that he cannot influence the decision," Aviendha told Ricu, surprisingly graciously. If it had been him she'd corrected, he'd no doubt there would have been hotter words exchanged.

Rand was reminded suddenly of Emond's Field, the nearest village to the farm he'd grown up on. Back there, the women had always been hounding the men to get married. His friend Mat had disappeared into the Waterwood on a "hunting trip" that lasted several weeks once, after his mother had gotten a bit too vocal about the virtues of Nela Thane. Rand suddenly understood why. They were all sounding far too serious for his taste. He had no intention of marrying anyone.

"I have to go. I have work to do," he said, jumping hastily into the moment's silence. "I need to talk to Natael."

Sunadai scowled at him. "You have work to do with the gleeman? Do not be a fool, Rand al'Thor. This is far more important."

But Rand was already marching stiffly for the exit. "Important work. Very important. Can't talk, too much to do," he said, as he fled the women and their crazy suggestions.

## CHAPTER 5: Stuck in a Rut



There was nothing to do, was the thing. And it was all Rand's fault for dragging him back to bloody Rhuidean—the last place in the world he wanted to be, short of Tar Valon, or maybe Tear, or Emond's Field. A place he didn't want to be, was the point!

Mat sat on the low wall that surrounded one of the city's sadly dry fountains, and was grateful of the shade offered by the tall buildings around him. Some of those buildings had been taller, the last time he'd visited, but that was something that he didn't want to think about. He just needed to survive until Rand left the Waste again, then he could ride for the hills and never look back, finally put the Dragon Reborn and all the dangers he brought behind him. Drink and gamble and dance and fuck his way into old age, free of all this madness. He just needed to get out of the Waste first.

Unfortunately, his best chance of doing that without Rand had proven singularly unwilling to depart the man's company. What profit Kadere and his bloody peddlers imaged they might find here was beyond him. If the fool wanted to get himself killed, it would have been nice if he'd done it after taking Mat back to Cairhien with him, but no, he just had to stick around, trapping Mat here along with him. It was all so bloody unfair!

The only positive was that it meant Isendre was stuck here, too. Not that she seemed any more disturbed by the prospect than Kadere was. She was more interested in swaying her hips Rand's way than in fleeing his company like a sensible person. Rand was oddly disinterested in that. If a girl as good-looking as Isendre had been pursuing Mat Cauthon, she'd not have had to work very hard to catch him. It was weird that Rand ignored her the way he did. Weird and possibly useful. Thwarted girls liked to inspire jealousy in those that thwarted them, and who better for that than Rand's childhood friend?

He wondered if she'd visit this square again today. The peddlers often did, though the Aiel never let them get close enough to touch any of the items piled around the great burned tree in the middle of the square. *Avendesora* was looking a lot crispier than it had the last time Mat saw it. Best not to think about that, either. He wasn't sure who had ordered the items protected. It could have been the Aiel themselves, or Rand, but his money was on Moiraine. The Aes Sedai came here even more often than the peddlers did, to poke around among the scattered items. Looking for *ter'angreal* and the like, if he was any judge.

Mat shuddered and clutched his black-hafted spear tighter. Only a fool willingly sought out anything to do with the One Power. He needed to get away from Rand. Even if he hadn't been a channeler himself, there were too many other channelers around him these days.

Which was why he shot to his feet and angled for the nearest exit that wouldn't have him passing, or trying to pass, the Aiel guards as soon as he recognised the tall, red-haired figure striding across the square. He didn't look directly at him as he made his hasty exit, but he could still see him out of the corner of his eye. Rand altered course, intending to intercept him. *Burn me! And him! What does he want? I told him it was over. I told him I was leaving. Why won't he leave me be?*

"Mat. I need to speak to you," he called before Mat could escape.

"How is that my problem, your High and Mightyness?" he asked, but he stopped in his tracks even so. He wasn't about to have anyone thinking he was running away.

Rand sighed softly. "Maybe it isn't. But I want to make use of that red doorway to the other world, and before I do that I need to know the dangers. That means picking your brain."

"Oh, burn me! I told you I don't want to talk about them!" Those fox-like things on the other side of that *ter'angreal* doorway had tried to kill him when he'd gone and tried to ask them about his future. He thought they might have done something else to him, too. Ever since he came back, he'd felt ... different.

"Understandable. But I need you to, since I don't fancy ending up hanging from that tree." Rand's grey eyes slid to *Avendesora* briefly, and a guilty shadow crossed his face. "Especially since I can't be sure anyone would be able to revive me if I did end up there."

Mat scowled at him. Was he trying to make him feel guilty? Just because he'd been the one to cut the noose from his neck didn't mean he had to do whatever he wanted! Even if letting him do that had sometimes been fun. "There's an easy solution to that problem. Just stay far away from those bloody foxes, like a sensible person."

"I wish I could," Rand said grimly, "but they could give me an advantage over my enemies. And I need all the advantages I can get."

Mat rolled his eyes. "You've got the One Power, *Callandor*, the Aiel, and who knows what else. I'd say you are well-stocked with advantages."

But Rand just shook his head. "Not well enough, not when the Dark One is the enemy."

"Well, you'll just have to go without this one."

"I need this, Mat. How hard can it be to just tell me what they said and how it all went so wrong? It's not like I'm asking you to tell me what answers they gave you." Rand's patience was visibly fraying, something that it had once taken a lot more than this to cause. How much longer before the madness had him altogether? Would it happen suddenly, or would it be a gradual slide? He needed to get away before it was too late.

Mat suddenly found it hard to meet that stormy gaze. "You don't need it, believe me. Any sane man would stay far away from those people."

"Why?"

"Because they cheat!"

"How?"

Anger brought his eyes back to Rand's. "Don't try to manipulate me, you bloody Aes Sedai!" Rand snorted. "I'm hardly that. And how is asking you questions manipulating?"

"You're trying to make me feel bad for not helping. Well, it won't work!" he said, crossing his arms. It was just his luck that Isendre chose that moment to enter the square. Mat uncrossed his arms in a hurry and put a less petulant look on his face. Bloody Rand, ruining everything as usual.

His old friend followed his gaze to the dark-haired beauty, with her pale, heart-shaped face. She was pale elsewhere, too, but would not stay that way much longer if the Maidens didn't let her put her clothes back on. Mat licked his lips, but looked away. They only liked you staring when they invited you to stare. Though quite the lecher, there was no admiration in the way Rand looked at her. "That one is bad news. Worse than those people on the other side of the doorway," he said quietly.

"Now I know you're mad!" Mat scoffed. "Why would any sane man think that?"

Rand was quiet for a time, then sighed again. "I can't tell you."

"Then we're even," he said absently, his eyes following the dark-haired beauty. "She's up for fun, with no commitments. That's my kind of girl, whatever you say."

"That girl would sell her mother for a few coppers. She's dangerous, and not to be trusted," Rand said quietly.

They watched as Isendre strolled along, her arm interlocked with Kadere's. The stocky peddler she'd come here with was almost certainly her lover, but that had never stopped her from flirting with Rand right in front of him, or driven Kadere to show any of the jealousy that might have been expected in the situation. He didn't even seem bothered by her lack of dress, either. When Isendre saw them watching, her full lips curled into a warm smile. For Rand, who looked back stone-faced. Not Mat or his best smile, who'd been trying to get with her for weeks. Typical.

She disentangled herself from Kadere and came their way, hips swaying, bare breasts jiggling slightly with each step. Ignoring Rand's grimace, he put on a welcoming smile for her. "Hey there, Isendre. You're looking well. Very well. It's good to have a bit of shade isn't it? It'll be even better to get out of this bloody wasteland altogether. Any idea when the caravan will leave?"

Irritation flashed in her dark eyes. Her smile stayed fixed on Rand, who had gone back to his still-faced disapproval. "That is up to the great king here. The rest of us can only serve him ... in any way we can ..."

Such an open invitation but Rand just stood there, jaw clenched. He must be mad already.

"Don't be bloody rude, al'Thor. A good Theren man should treat women better."

That won him a scowl. "I didn't hear you complaining about my manners when I tied Alanna over that saddle."

The memory was so sweet that Mat had to snicker. "Ah, she was just an Aes Sedai, not a beautiful flower like Isendre here."

"You mastered an Aes Sedai like that? You are a mighty lord indeed. I wonder what else you could master ... Or who ..." Isendre said. To Rand. Who turned his face away. There was no justice in the world!

"I have work to do. We'll talk about this again, Mat."

"Why? I already bloody answered, al'Thor," he called as Rand strode off. He wasn't about to let himself be pushed around, even by a channeler. Especially by a channeler. Work? More likely the horny bastard was off to cavort with his gang of girls. When he turned his scowl away from Rand's back, he found Isendre looking at him with a new consideration that he liked. She returned his smile this time. "Are the two of you friends or rivals?"

"We're neither," he said at once, but then he had to stop and think about it. What was the real answer to that question? He couldn't find it, and Isendre's smile soon distracted him from the search. "Ah, who cares? I'd rather talk about you. Do you like to dance? I'm a really good dancer."

She shuddered daintily. "I'll never be able to hear that word without thinking of these terrible Aiel and their ... dancing."

Boldly he reached out and set his hand on her bare shoulder, as if to offer comfort. "Don't worry about them, they won't dare do anything while you're with us. With me."

"He wants something from you. Is he jealous?"

His smile broadened. "Why wouldn't he be?"

Isendre watched him for a moment. He saw her make her decision. After that, it all went surprisingly fast. Mat wasn't at all embarrassed to walk the streets with a naked woman at his side, for all that the fool Aiel were more interested in sneering and muttering *da'tsang* than ogling Isendre as she swayed and bounced along. Before he knew it he was back in the room he'd taken under the Taardad roof. There was no bed, just a pallet near the wide window with its makeshift curtains. There were no chairs, either, just a collection of colourful cushions. Not that he would have cared even if he hadn't had much more interesting things on his mind just then.

Isendre hadn't spoken very much on the trip there, and spoke even less once they arrived. Her lips found his, not with passion but with practiced assurance. Soft sweetness became sharp pain when she took his lower lip between her teeth and nipped him playfully. Her smile was full of promises and Mat found himself starting to respond.

But when he tried to embrace her, she swatted his hands away. Down onto the pallet she pushed him, before kneeling at his side. She undid his belt with ease but did not reach inside. Instead, she traced the growing size of him through his dark breeches, her fingers pressing down and driving him closer and closer to hardness.

Whatever she saw on his face made her laugh softly. She pulled his breeches down a bit and pushed up his shirt, exposing flesh, caressing around his centre now but not touching what he most wanted her to touch. He pawed at one flaring hip as she did it but it was some time before she sat back on her heels, and let him touch the bounties above. Isendre's breasts were full and pert; he marvelled at their softness. She marvelled, too, but at his hardness, for Mat's cock was making a tent of his smallclothes by then.

"Oh, what is it you want to do with that big thing?" she teased.

"I'd rather show you than tell you," he said.

He silenced her laugh with a kiss and before he knew it he was on top of her. His fingers found her sex but he only had a moment to test its dryness before she was rolling on top of him, the jewellery she wore touching him coldly where her warm flesh did not. She leaned forward and fed him a breast and his eager hands went to work on her silky flesh, kneading her ass while he sucked on her tit. Even so, she was still surprisingly dry when he eventually returned his hand to her pussy.

It was a little off-putting but her smiles and touches remained encouraging so he shrugged it off. It was Isendre who put him inside her. She stroked his cock with her hand for a while before positioning herself above him and sinking down.

"I'm going to show you the best time you've ever had," she told him, her dark eyes intent on his. "You won't be able to help but talk about it."

Mat's brows rose at that boast—he was no blushing virgin. But he was no bloody fool, either, and wasn't about to challenge her claims, not while she was kneeling atop him and rolling her hips like that. As it turned out, she wasn't just talking from vanity. Isendre was good. Well, no, she wasn't

at all good. She was probably quite bad, if you wanted to be truthful. But she was really skilled at working a cock.

Up and down her hips went. Round and round. Grinding herself against every side of him, all while cupping and squeezing her own breasts, adding a visual display to match the physical performance. And performance it was, for she never did get very aroused, not even with his full manhood inside her. The way her dark hair bounced around her pale shoulders was eye-catching, too. The dark hair of her sex curtained his as she rubbed herself up and down him, pushing him closer and closer to a climax.

“I can’t lie. You really know what you’re doing,” he gasped.

For the first time, he saw her genuine smile; it was full of hard pride. “Of course. I’m the best. Why else would they—?”

Before he could wonder why she stopped talking, Isendre’s hips began moving at a breakneck pace. She rode him like he was a wild stallion. He actually had to grab the pillows in an effort to steady himself as she gave his cock a working over the likes of which it had never seen. Thought fled his mind, leaving only animal pleasure. Soon enough, his come was fleeing his body, too, rushing out of him to flood her womb while he gritted his teeth and hung on for dear life.

“Blood and ashes,” he swore at last as he lay sprawled on the pallet. “That was worth the wait.”

“If you say so,” she muttered.

“Huh?”

“Of course it was,” she said cheerfully. “And don’t worry—I won’t hold it against you if you go boasting to your friends about it. I know what you men are like.”

He barely heard her. His mind was as numbed by the pleasure as his body had been. He barely even regretted it when she climbed off him. And when she took her leave, he could only summon enough energy to make a cursory attempt at stopping her. Strange girl. Fun fuck, though, which was what mattered most.

## *CHAPTER 6: Questions of Consent*



"You do not look well, Rand al'Thor. Have you been eating properly?" Lamelle asked.

He looked up from the dusty tiles, at which he'd been staring unseeing. "I'm fine. Just thinking."

It was the wrong thing to say. He knew it as soon as the words left his mouth. Lamelle just continued to look concerned, but most of the other Maidens that walked with him grinned like feral cats that had spotted a mouse.

"Thinking? I did not know you could do that," said Enaila.

"Is that why you look so grumpy? Has it hurt your head?" Liah asked with mock concern.

Rand ignored them. They never missed a chance to tweak his nose. Letting them think it annoyed him would just make it worse.

Careen grinned. "I think Amindha might have hurt his other head yesterday."

"It's just as well I have Merile here to Heal me, then."

The girl in question had been strolling along at his side but now she blinked up at him.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, Dani says I'm getting good at that." Her big green eyes widened. "I'm not supposed to mention that, am I? Uh oh. It's a secret. Don't tell Moiraine!"

The dozen Maidens, who would once have pretended the little Tinker wasn't even there, focused their attention on her now. Reactions were mixed, and had been ever since he'd revealed the Aiel's secret history at Alcair Dal. Lanky Renay assured her they would say nothing, but Jolien and Branwen questioned that, wondering where their duty lay. Pale-haired Viola stared at Merile with an open hostility that did not surprise him, since she barely tolerated even Rand's presence in Aiel lands, while pretty Nerise frowned, her uncommonly-dark eyes on the Lost One, but her thoughts turned inward as if torn at how to respond. Rand wasn't sure if he'd done Merile a favour by revealing the history her people shared with the Aiel, or made things worse for her. At least they would speak to her now.

But that wasn't always a positive thing. "Is this how you will destroy us? By reducing us to these useless cowards?" Ayla asked bitterly. Her first-sister Lidya said nothing, but looked equally as grim.

"I would not resist it, but I would not like it, either," said Cami. "Of course, life is merely a dream that we all must wake from someday."

Rand watched her carefully. A pretty girl about his age, fit and strong, with yellow hair and vibrant blue eyes, she had everything to live for yet spoke so casually of ending her life. Many Aiel had already left in response to his revelations. How many felt as Cami did? The thought horrified him.

"What is lost is not coming back. It is too late," said Ani. Short, by Aiel standards, and not much older than him. It was rare for her to speak. The defiance and seriousness with which she spoke now did nothing to settle his mood.

"The Way of the Leaf isn't that bad. You'd like it if you tried it, lots of outsiders do," said Merile unhelpfully.

Not a one of the Aiel looked heartened by that. Rand's reluctance to offend Merile stilled his tongue only for a moment. There were things more important. "The last thing I want is the Aiel going back to that. As far as I'm concerned, they were right to abandon it, and should have done so earlier. Pacifism won't save the world from the Shadow. Or even do much to help save it."

"Worthless. Pointless," Ani agreed in a low voice. Her eyes remained cold, though.

He rested his hand on Merile's shoulder to try to take the sting out of what he'd said, but she shrugged him off. "I should go talk to Dani. Or someone," she sulked.

"I know where Daniele Rulonir can be found," Nerise was quick to point out.

She led them through the streets of Rhuidean, while Rand tried and failed to engage Merile in conversation. Being ignored only saddened him, but Branwen took it a different way.

"Have you no ability to defend yourself, even with words? No self-respect?" She scowled at Merile's refusal to answer. "I cannot believe we were ever so weak. That we walked as constant victims."

"Those days are gone," Nerise said quietly, as she wended through the streets.

The Aiel they passed—warrior or otherwise—paused what they were doing when they saw Rand, and watched him go by with faces as still and hard as those of statues. That didn't necessarily mean anything, since the Aiel were not an expressive people by nature, but it still made him wonder once again exactly how safe he was among them. *Car'a'carn* he might be, but he was far from popular.

Dani usually was, being the leader of the Accepted that Nynaeve had sent to keep an eye on him, as well as an apprentice to the Aiel Wise Ones, but you wouldn't have known that from the way her fellow Accepted were shouting at her when Nerise led them to the entrance of a cavernous building.

"So what if she does!?" the copper-skinned woman snapped in response to something Rand hadn't heard. Lean and more than pretty, her high and sharp cheekbones gave her a predatory look even when she smiled, and she was definitely not smiling now. Even darker than she, Mayam was standing just behind Dani with her arms crossed defiantly.

Confronting them were the other three Accepted—short Pedra, yellow-haired Ilyena, and Dani's fellow Domani, Theodrin.

It was the latter that spoke. "It is all very well for others to do that, but we are still initiates of the White Tower, are we not? We should hold ourselves to the Tower's standards, even when outside the supervision of our teachers."

"Should we? Are we slaves or something? Can't we think for ourselves?"

"Don't be dramatic. The Aes Sedai are older and more experienced. They know what is best for us," Theodrin said calmly.

A growl issued from Dani's throat. "Know better. I'm a grown woman. I'm past tired of being treated like a child. *Called* a child, even!"

Ilyena nodded firmly. "You *have* been spending too much time with the Aiel. And with him."

"Name the Dark One ... or the Dragon ..." Pedra said quietly. The others grew as quiet as when they noticed him standing in the doorway.

Dani was slow to turn to face him, and when she did her face was as composed as an Aes Sedai's. He took his cue from that, and did not smile to see her. Discretion. Even so, her pillow-friend Ilyena looked back and forth between them suspiciously.

"And what brings you here?" the Volsuni asked. Dark One or Dragon, she showed no fear.

"Nothing dramatic. Simply catching up on shared lessons." If they chose to take that as a reference to the dreamwalking lessons that he and Dani attended, so be it. That she taught Merile how to channel as well was something she was keen to keep the Aes Sedai from learning. Though, one of the women present had to be involved in it, too, since Dani had no Talent for Healing and could not have taught Merile to master her ability in that field. He wondered which. Ilyena and Mayam were the options. Looking into the former's cold blue eyes, he thought Mayam the more likely suspect.

Dani was looking back and forth between him and the Accepted with which she'd been arguing. Her hands were in fists and her shoulders tight. "This isn't a good time. We can talk about *Tel'aran'rhiod* before the next lesson."

He refused to be hurt. "Very well."

"We'll talk," she said again. Her eyes were very dark, yet they shone with hidden emotion.

"Wetlanders talk a lot," Ayla said to Lidya.

"These wetlanders do," the other agreed.

"But I like the way Rand talks," said Renay.

"We saw," Jolien drawled. "He likes the way you talk, too."

There was mockery in their eyes. Rand set his jaw. The Aiel in general were a reserved people, but the Maidens' love of tweaking people's noses often overcame that reserve at the worst of times. Dani looked no less pleased than him, and Ilyena's glare suggested she knew their game well. He needed to get out of there before he made things worse.

"I'll see you later, Merile," he said, before turning on his heel and stalking back out again. It was not only the punishing sun of the Waste that heated his skin as he left. He should have just asked Nerise to show Merile the way. There had been no need for him to go, other than a desire to see Dani.

He was surprised to find that a Domani had followed him out, and even more surprised to find that it was the other one, Theodrin. Tall and willowy, her long legs allowed her to catch up to him easily.

"There is something I've been wishing to speak to you about," she said in response to his raised brow.

"Which is?"

She glanced at the Maidens. "It is perhaps better discussed in private."

His guards exchanged looks of their own, ones of reluctance. But were they reluctant to leave him undefended, or reluctant to gainsay someone they thought was an Aes Sedai? It was an important distinction. Rand himself wasn't concerned for his safety, not in this case. Theodrin was alright, for a woman of the Tower.

There was a dry fountain not far from them, in the centre of a great paved square. He led her towards it, telling the Maidens to give them some space. Theodrin was wearing an airy, light blue dress, and arranged it carefully when she sat on the fountain's edge.

He joined her there. "I hope you aren't going to tell me that I should stop marshalling the Aiel and wait for the Tower to tell me what to do. Moiraine has said all I care to hear on that topic."

"She is a wise woman. That is all I shall say about that. It is something a bit more personal that is on my mind."

"Oh?"

She looked uncomfortable. "I have read about *ta'veren*. How they bend the Pattern around them and make people do things they would not normally have done. It reminded me of a thing from my past."

That sounded ominous. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing accusatory. I just had some thoughts, and I wanted to get yours, given that you have ... so much experience. With being *ta'veren*. And other things."

She was a pretty girl, and the blush in her apple cheeks made her even prettier, but he very much doubted she was here to flirt.

"What's on your mind?"

Theodrin hesitated. "You've been less hostile lately. With Dani, at least."

"Have I?" he asked unwelcomingly.

"I think so, yes. Which is a good thing, since we are supposed to be protecting you for Nynaeve. But that wasn't what got me thinking. Or it was only part of it." She stilled the hands in her lap, which had been drywashing each other, and took a deep breath. "It isn't like Dani. I know we Domani women have a certain reputation, but Dani isn't like that at all. And it got me thinking. *Ta'veren* make people do things they wouldn't normally do." One finger shot up. "Without meaning to, of course."

"The Pattern does that with everyone, everywhere, so far as I can tell. *Ta'veren* just makes it more obvious." Such thoughts were often on his mind. Three thousand years ago a flowery series of prophecies had been written that apparently detailed how his life would go, and how it would end. The idea that they were free beings whose decisions could change the world around them was pleasant—more than pleasant; desirable!—but he could see little evidence of it in the world around him. They were just cogs in a clock, performing the role they'd been assigned; some cogs were bigger than others, but they were all just cogs in the end.

"I can see why you might think that. I don't want to believe that it is so, however." A troubled frown creased her brow. "What would be the point?"

"I'd need to figure out the answer before I could say."

Theodrin was silent for a long moment, staring at him disquietedly. "Perhaps this was a mistake."

He smiled a hard smile. "Worried? Don't be. If I ever decided to give up, it wouldn't be because someone asked me a few questions. Is this what's bothering you? *Ta'veren* twisting chance? It's annoying at times, but you get used to it."

"It ... was more about making people do things. There's a thing that can be done. With the One Power. A very bad thing. Forbidden, in the White Tower. It's called Compulsion. You can use it to control people's minds."

"I know of it," he said grimly. "Liandrin tried to use it on me once."

"She is Black Ajah," Theodrin was quick to point out. Rand snorted softly. Some of the Aes Sedai, like Alanna, were quick to deny the very existence of the Darkfriends in their midst. But when it came to disavowing those Darkfriend's crimes, such reluctance was swiftly abandoned.

He took the shame on her face to come from that but she surprised him. "I've used it, too." When he just stared at her, she went on. "That's why it troubles me so much to see something, uh, disturbingly similar happen."

"What's similar?"

She blushed. "You. And all these women flocking around you. Even ... Well, I won't speculate. It isn't my business."

He frowned. "You're right. It isn't. What are you implying here? That I'm using the Power to control them?" Had she been a man, violence would have been imminent. But women were sacrosanct, even while insulting the very core of who you were.

Not simply a finger this time, both palms came up at once. "Not deliberately. I didn't realise what I was doing, either. I was a wilder, you see, like Nynaeve. I didn't know I could channel at first, only that strange things sometimes happened around me. I had a block, like hers." Theodrin paused a moment, and he knew she was wondering once again how he'd helped Nynaeve break the block that prevented her from channelling at will, but she shook her head quickly, refusing to be distracted. "I'm not proud of what I did. I've worked to distance myself from the girl who did those things."

He couldn't pretend not to be intrigued. "What things did you do?"

She looked away. "I could make people like me. Or want to avoid me, depending on ... well, depending on whether I found their—" She cleared her throat. "—their, the thought of their ... company desirable."

His brows rose. "And were there many whose company seemed ... desirable?"

Her cheeks blazed. "Too many. One would be too many, after I found out why it was happening! Don't you see? I made them do ... I made ... You must see the, the parallels."

He did. "I've never used the Power to make any girl like me. My oath on it."

She took a deep breath, but the heat didn't leave her face. "But the *ta'veren* effect. Isn't it doing the same thing?"

"I don't see why you'd think so. I don't control it. If anything, I'm controlled by it. We all are. You think Mat wants to be here? He'd put the length of the continent between us if he could."

"But that's just what I'm saying! It takes away people's right to choose!"

The whole line of questioning was making him uncomfortable. "What is it you're trying to tell me, Theodrin? That I should stop having intimate relations because no-one I meet will ever choose to be with me? *Can* ever choose?"

She was silent for a moment. "Maybe. I don't know."

He scowled. "Well, I'm not going to. The Pattern may control us all, but we are still alive. There has to be some joy to be found."

"For who?"

"For everyone involved," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Look, I agree that you shouldn't control people's minds, but the idea that I control people's minds simply by existing? No. That's too much, too weird. They are all free to leave if they want."

"I believe you. I don't doubt your intentions. In this. But how many have chosen to leave when they realised how unfaithful you were being? Doesn't that suggest they are being controlled?"

"Does it?" he asked uncertainly. "I'd prefer to think they just liked me—and each other—enough to stay." *Prefer* to think it, yes, but she was probing a sensitive area for him. What if they didn't really want to stay? What woman in her right mind would? And that being the case, could it then be true that they weren't in their right minds? What did it make him if they weren't? He snatched at a defence. "There are others who aren't *ta'veren* who have such relationships. Look at all the Aiel *harem* marriages."

Theodrin nodded. "That's true. It's not completely impossible."

“Which is how being *ta’veren* works!” he interrupted. “It makes unlikely things more likely, but doesn’t make the impossible possible. Only Compulsion can make you do something you would never choose to do at all.” If he was controlling everything around him, Mat wouldn’t be stubbornly refusing to help him with that redstone doorway.

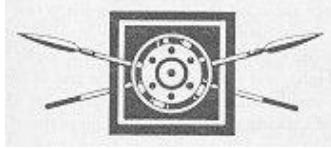
She looked away in shame, though whether it was at his defensive protestations or the memory of her own past, he could not say. “Such things are rightly forbidden.”

“It sounds like you didn’t mean to do it,” he said, his attempt at comfort sounding half-hearted even to his own ears.

“I’d like ... to think so. But I liked ... other things, too. Sometimes the worst lies can be the ones we tell ourselves.”

She fell into a dark silence after that, and Rand sat lingering in it with her.

## CHAPTER 7: Rhuidean Nights



His dark mood remained throughout the day, and he was dour of face when he trudged into the Roof of the Maidens that night. Nerise, who avoided the roof while he was staying there, broke off from the group but the rest followed him inside. It was a struggle to return the smiles and greetings he received, and it must have showed for the warrior women lounging in the anteroom grew concerned.

"What troubles you, Rand al'Thor?"

"Has there been another attack?" Scarred Liah reached for her spears, and looked disappointed when he shook his head.

"Have you eaten?" Enaila asked, with a motherly concern that didn't fit her youth at all.

"Are you ready to?" asked Renay, smiling in a way that wasn't very motherly at all.

Smiles returned to some of the women's faces at that. He liked the way Riallin and Nora were looking at him. The latter was Tomanelle but much friendlier than her chief. He liked them both, and had been wondering if he should extend an invitation to Nora to see if she would like to get to know him in the way Riallin already did. But that had been before Theodrin woke the doubts in his mind.

So he just nodded acknowledgement of them as he let Renay lead him deeper under the roof, past where the front guards stood on alert. They were dressed and armed, but further back it was a different story. Here women lounged in various states of undress, sometimes exercising, sometimes making love in full view of others. Such was the way of it with the Aiel, he had come to find. Though a reserved and stoic people on the outside, behind closed doors they were astoundingly liberal. He had no doubt that the Women's Circle back home would have collapsed from mutual apoplexy if they had seen the kind of things he'd seen. Or even if they heard of the *harem* marriages that Aiel routinely practiced.

There were new faces among the Maidens, as there often were. More and more Aiel were trickling in from the far away septs of those clans that had declared for Rand, or coming to visit their societies here if their clans had not yet chosen a side. He didn't know the handsome woman with the greying hair that looked up from her book when he entered, or the red-haired girl with the big eyes who stared so.

Smiles of greeting followed him as he passed, some much warmer than others. As the only son of a Maiden known to be such, Rand was the only man allowed to stay under their roof. That had led to a certain ... popularity, you might say. He didn't always stay here, for the simple reason that he rarely got a full night's sleep when he did.

Some he was fonder of than others, and dared to think them fond of him as well. Careen grinned to see him, while fierce Beralna and the fiercely strong Amindha waved girlishly when they noticed his return. Others were somewhat more distant, even some of those he'd had sex with.

That part was still strange to Rand, and reminded him a bit too much of times in the past when he'd been obliged to do certain unsavoury jobs in order to make ends meet. Dermin, for example, wasn't at all pretty but he had gone with her willing enough. That she had simply spread her legs and let him go to work on her red-furred pussy hadn't exactly been inspiring, though. The lack of reciprocation annoyed him, so he'd done the job, left, and avoided her gaze ever since. He avoided it now as well. And not only hers. Two days past, Someryn of the Chareen, whose hair was so pale it almost looked white, had taken him by the hand and wordlessly led him to her blankets. She'd remained wordless as she undressed and lay down with her legs spread, staring at him expectantly. He'd pleasured her with his mouth, and when he was done she had rolled over and gone to sleep. He'd gone to Shyala after that, and spent a confused night in the arms of the much more affectionate Shaido woman.

That affection was more valuable to him than looks, he'd found. Renay was a little plain, but he enjoyed her a lot more than he did those like Zoe, who didn't break off her conversation or acknowledge him as he walked by. They had done it several times, but he hardly felt he knew her at all. She had a beautiful face and an attractive body. He'd felt her full breasts press against his chest,

kissed her pretty lips, bent her over and made that sexy ass of hers shake. But he didn't feel anything for her, and he didn't think she felt anything for him, either.

With such thoughts in mind, he took hold of Renay's hand and did not let go of it no matter how many naked women they walked by. Some of the offers he received were more than tempting. Ayla and Lidya made a great team, in all ways. But after the day he'd had, he felt the need for some warmth. The smile Renay gave him was very warm indeed, and lit up her freckled face.

The others had broken off to attend to their own business by the time they reached Renay's room. He kissed her as soon as they were alone, and she immediately began pulling at his clothes.

"Why are you letting me do this?" he asked as he tugged her trousers down her long legs.

She pulled off his shirt, the better to caress his chest. "Letting? What do you mean? Every time you touch me, I feel like I am the luckiest girl in the world."

Her eyes were grey and clear. He searched them for signs of deception, for some hint that she was under a sinister influence, but he could see nothing but desire there. He kissed her, and bore her down onto the pallet. He remained still after she helped free his now-hard cock, and let her guide it inside herself. She didn't hesitate at all; quite the opposite. With legs and hands she pulled him to her, pulled him deeper into her. Rand let his doubts wash away as the pleasure washed over him. He rode Renay at a steady pace, kissing her, caressing her, drawing it out. He kept riding her long after she whimpered in pleasure for the first time, and even after the second. He loved making her feel good.

He loved it, too, when the little gasps that tickled his ear became words. "Come inside me," she whispered. It was not long after that that he did.

They lay together for quite some time after that, cosy under her blankets. Renay mumbled of a desire to sleep but Rand, whose already strong stamina had been enhanced by an unasked for Warder bond, did not feel tired at all. He lay in place, though, and petted her hair as he urged her to get some rest.

She pushed him away gently. "I would not hoard you for myself. That would be selfish. Some of my spearsisters are probably looking for you."

He rolled over onto his side, resting his head on one hand and stared down at her. "Do you really mean that?" She looked confused. "It's just, most people wouldn't be so, um, understanding. Or generous. You don't think there is anything unnatural about this?"

"No. What a strange thing to say. Is this a wetlander thing?"

He grunted softly. She was the wrong person to ask. Aiel doing what Aiel do; there was nothing strange in that. Wetlanders doing what Aiel do; now that was the part where Theodrin's concerns became more credible. "Never mind me. It probably *is* just a wetlander thing." He kissed her on the forehead, and then accepted the kiss she planted on his lips, before rising from the bed and seeking his discarded clothes.

Renay remained behind when Rand left the room. He went to the nearest of the larger rooms, those that had been set aside for communal purposes rather than being claimed by individual Maidens. In the short time they had been here, the Aiel had done much to make the building their own. Comfortable cushions, and colourful tapestries and carpets did much to distract from the cold white stone that the ancient builders of Rhuidean had used. Lamps burned, well away from the precious pitchers of water in their cool corners. White-robed *gai'shain* attended to those, while Maidens in *cadin'sor*, or sometimes only in their skin, lounged around. A proper Theren man would not have eyed those muscular bodies the way he did, but Rand had long since accepted that he was not a proper Theren man.

Some were reading, though the few books that there were must have been read by each woman a dozen times over by then. Most were trying to find other ways to entertain themselves. There wasn't much that people could do in that regard here in the Waste. There wasn't that much even back on the other side of the Dragonwall, for that matter. But people always found a way. Some of those ways were a bit more scandalous than others, such as what Pamela was doing to the younger, smaller Nora when he walked in.

"And here he is," Pamela said. Oddly, it was her words rather than the fingers lodged between the girl's legs that brought a blush to Nora's cheeks.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Rand said politely, knowing he was not.

"Nonsense! You are always welcome in my company, Rand al'Thor!" Branwen proclaimed. She was wearing only her smallclothes, and her energetic beckoning made her large breasts shake. "Stop eating me with your eyes! Come and kiss me, if you so desire!"

He went to her, but slowly, taking in the sights. There were thousands of Maidens of the Spear among the Aiel, hundreds under this roof at any given time, and dozens in the room that he entered that night. He could not claim to know all the Maidens, especially not in that sense, but he knew the names of all those present, and had *known* most of them already. Many of them had known each other as well, with fingers or tongues of those strange imitation cocks some of them owned.

It was no surprise to find Branwen there. The hearty, yellow-haired woman had quickly become one of his favourites. He'd had her so often, and in so many ways, that he sometimes found himself thinking of her in the same way he did Raine or Merile. The welcoming grin she was giving him made him wonder if she felt the same.

Careen was there, chatting with Cami. Whatever she said when she noticed his arrival had the other woman in stitches. Careen was a bit plain, Cami a looker. He was glad of them both.

Chiariid was another regular. He was glad of that, too, for the most part. She was nice and warm and good to look at, but what excited her most did not particularly excite him. "Back again!?" she greeted him with mock surprise. "You naughty boy you. Come give your big sister a hug."

He did, though his smile was more than a little wry. He kissed her cheek, too, and let her pinch his bottom the way she always did. The whole thing was a bit odd, to him, but he supposed there was no harm in it.

There were some others he did not know so well. New arrivals like Rondha and the statuesque Dina. They'd been surprised enough to find that a man was allowed access to the Roof of the Maidens now. He expected they'd be shocked to find out about all the other access' that change had come with. They would find out, though. What went on here was hidden from the outside world, but almost nothing was hidden from the other Maidens.

Curly Estel he'd known longer than those two, but this was the first time she—or any of the other Black Rock Maidens—had been present during a gathering like this, and he was uncertain if she'd stay once things started getting intimate. Jolien he was surer of. She'd visited a few times before, and always with a firm mind for what she wanted. Beralna was much more of a regular, and though thin as a stick, she was as energetic a fuck as he'd ever had.

Red-haired Osana and yellow-haired Alisha were both young and pretty. If they were not quite his friends, then they were at least friendly. Fun. Uncomplicated. The kind of girls Mat liked best. Osana giggled something into Su's ear as he passed. That one was young, too, but a fair bit more serious than the others. Limber and energetic, though. She was another regular.

Her near namesake Susay shared her dark reddish hair but was, if anything, even more solemn. Square-faced and short for an Aiel, he'd known her for a fair while and thought her uninterested until she'd shown up at the door of an encounter last week. Even then, he'd been unsure if he should invite her in until he'd seen how red her cheeks were. The rare smile she'd given him when he took her hand had made her pretty. He was glad she'd returned. He'd enjoyed those blushes, and the feel of her tight young body in his arms.

Said body was hidden from his sight now, but the way she blushed when he winked at her made him suspect he'd get to see it again soon. Heidin's body was already on display, he was happy to see. She was one of the youngest Maidens, a pretty little yellow-haired thing with never a curve to be seen. Some girls in her position would have been self-conscious, and it gladdened him to see she was not.

He'd had her before, as surely as he'd had the older, curvier woman nestled comfortably against her, whose smile now woke the lines in her face. Leslaya's red hair was loose of its tail, and her pink-tipped breasts were loose of her *cadin'sor*. It would seem they had started without him.

His eyes were drawn of their own accord to another woman, as they all too often tended to be. Beyla was more than a decade older than him but still smooth of face. Usually solemn, thin to the point of boniness and with no more chest than a girl of ten, she had surprised him with a proposition a week after they'd arrived in Rhuidean. She'd surprised him even more with how glad she'd made him for saying yes.

Thin Iona, lean Elana, curvaceous Anfia, and plump Riallin. He'd had them all. Becoming *Car'a'carn* of the Aiel had never been something he'd wanted, but there were perks to it, he had to admit.

Amindha was there, too, sharing *oosquai* with Amili, who was nearly as big as her. Both of them had been there that first night, when the Maidens had extended him a much warmer invitation than he'd expected on taking them as his honour guards. He liked Amili well enough but they weren't that close. Amindha was another matter. She'd come to the Theren and helped defend his people from a Trolloc incursion, and then fought for him in the Stone of Tear. That counted. That she was a kinder woman than her muscular bulk might lead one to suspect counted even more.

She and Branwen cleared a space between them now, and drew him down for a hug, then a kiss, and soon a robust fondling.

Adelin and Dhael had been in the Stone, too, but they left once they saw the direction things were going, the taller woman's arm around Dhael's shoulders. Early on, Adelin had made a point of refereeing things, to make sure no-one came to blows, but she'd gotten used to the kind of fun that Rand's admittance had given birth to. And she'd come to trust her spearsisters, and perhaps even him, to ensure that no ill feelings resulted from it.

Not all the Maidens took part in these encounters, of course. Some preferred the company of other women, like Adelin. Others simply weren't interested. He saw Luaine walk by the doorway at one point. She paused briefly, took in the sights, and then went calmly on her way.

Enaila never took part either, and he'd heard her scold the other Maidens for doing so. Somara and Lamelle did much the same. That was a relief. Not that they weren't good-looking women, but those three seemed to have gotten the idea that Rand being the son of a Maiden somehow made them his mothers. And never mind that Enaila, at least, was the same age as him! It was awkward enough dealing with them clothed. The thought of putting up with their antics while naked and under the gaze of so many others was more than a little horrifying.

Cami had taken part in the past but she left early tonight, seemingly not in the mood. That was fine as well.

There was no sign of any of the Shaido girls tonight. That troubled him. Aiel societies still mixed openly with each other, no matter how their clans stood. Even blood feuds were expected to be ignored if you were of the same society. No few Maidens from clans not aligned with Rand were under this roof now, but it was the Shaido ones he watched most closely. There had to be some way they could help him head off the coming conflict. He hoped they hadn't left Rhuidean, or had at least left with good intentions. Tuandha had assured him she'd return, when she left to speak for him with her own clan, the Reyn.

"You are distracted. What a shame for us. We will have to do better."

He blinked himself back to the present, where his hands had gone still on the breasts of Branwen and Amindha. His hasty reassurances were silenced by hot lips; on his own, and on the cock that Amindha freed from his breeches. He looked down to see her, but it was not her face that stretched around his member, but Pamela's. Like Amindha, she was big enough to break most normal women in two. It was exciting having such a specimen sucking on his member like that.

Despite having three muscular, yellow-haired beauties climbing all over him, Rand's eyes roved in search of slender young Nora, she of the mop of red curls. Abandoned by Pamela, the girl sat alone now, cross-legged, watching. He enjoyed the excitement in her eyes, and the way she smiled back at him.

Riallin stole up behind her, a wicked smile on her face. "Much more fun than a finger," he heard her murmur in the girl's ear. They both giggled. With such sights and sounds before him, and Pamela's earnest ministrations, Rand was already fully erect again.

His fingers found Branwen and Amindha's wetness, but since he only had two hands he was glad to see some of the other Maidens starting to entertain themselves. There was only so much a man could do, no matter how much he yearned to do more. Chiarid fell into Leslaya's arms with an easy familiarity, one that displaced young Heidin. The hangdog look did not stay on her face for long, for Su pulled her into a friendly cuddle with her and Iona. A friendly cuddle that featured some gentle, inviting explorations.

There was nothing gentle about the way big Rondha was stretching little Elana's legs, though there was plenty of familiarity in it. Less in the looks she gave him when she was not pressing her

face against the leaner woman's red-haired pussy. Both women were naked, and he could see Rondha's pretty ass wiggle as she forced a moan from Elana. He got the impression she knew he was watching. Knew, and liked it.

Alisha and Osana were getting very close as well, naked now, their hands all over each other's bodies. As he watched, Alisha's hands roved over the kneeling woman's breasts and down towards her wet pussy. She played with her gently for a while and then, when she saw him watching, she slipped a finger inside. Whatever she saw on his face made her smile broadly.

Pamela was sucking hard but he wanted more. And so did she. When he looked down, caught her eye and said, "Show me that big ass of yours," she released him, grinned, and spun around at once.

He went straight in hard, and found her just as wet as he'd expected. He saw some jealous looks from the other women, before Branwen came to straddle her friend. All he could see after that was her pussy. It was all he could taste, too. With a hand on either woman's butt, he fucked and licked his way through the night.

Someone hugged him from behind for a time, stroking his back and bottom. Later Pamela disappeared from him, sated, and another woman took her place. He couldn't see who. Branwen was taking longer than usual to finish, but he kept going, using fingers now as well.

When she finally came, and slid down to lick her juices from his lips, she was flushed and sweaty. It was only when he lifted her down onto the pillows beside him that he realised it was Beralna rocking back against him so energetically.

"Down, girl," Pamela told the girl rocking back and forth on his cock. Beralna paid no more mind to her words than her laughter.

Rand was more interested in the pitcher and cups she was carrying. He knew it wasn't water from the smell but downed it anyway. Fire spread through his chest. Pamela drank some of her own before refilling the cups of *oosquai*.

"You don't need to get me drunk."

"Hah! I know that, you dirty slut!" But she gave him another drink, watched him finish it, and then slapped him on the shoulder.

It was Beralna that he slapped, right on her skinny bottom. "Faster, you."

She looked back and showed him her teeth, though he could not tell if it was pleasure or annoyance. Either way, she started rocking even harder, and growling each time she impaled herself on his member.

He'd already come once that night and didn't think it would happen again so soon, but Beralna brought him close to the brink before her growls became a scream of pleasure. It would have been better to finish in her than start with another woman and finish early, he thought, but Beralna was already crawling away, calling for *oosquai*, and Pamela was there, swaying on her feet and making fun of everyone.

He had only a brief moment to relax on the cushions and wonder what to do before Riallin was cosying up to him.

"Hard day? You looked to be in a bad mood earlier."

Big blue eyes, a pretty round face, full lips, and a warm smile. She was one of his favourites. "I have a lot on my mind," he told her honestly. "Questions of right and wrong. Choices and consequences. The usual, I guess."

She mock-scowled at him. "Right and wrong? Your mind should be weighed down with how sexy my spearsisters and I are."

He laughed and pulled her closer. "You're right about that." He found a full breast through her *cadin'sor*, gave it a familiar squeeze. She did the same with his cock. Riallin's hands were callused from her work with spear and bow and knife, but she had a gentle touch even so.

Gentle, but not without ardour. Her touch and her kiss were threatening, in his excited state. He could not deny her even so.

He pushed up her top and filled his hand with soft breast. She overflowed him, and started rubbing him faster. That wouldn't do. They needed to be rid of the rest of her clothes, and fast, so he pushed her gently onto her back and took a little pink nipple in mouth. His hands caressed her body as he sucked. She was softer than most Maidens, but far from fat. He liked the feel of her in his hands, especially those breasts. He squeezed one as he kissed the other, and felt the rising proof of her arousal on both.

Down her body his mouth and hands went. Riallin raised her hips to help him rid her of the last of her clothes and was soon naked before him. Giggling, she spread her legs to show herself. He kissed her there, too, and thought his crisis averted for a moment, but Riallin had other ideas.

Taking him gently by the hair, she tugged him up again, kissed him briefly, and rolled over onto her belly. Her bottom shook with the motion, and he could see her puckered little asshole. For a moment he was tempted to bugger her, but his nerve gave out. He'd never done that with any of the Maidens. None of them had asked for it, and he kept worrying they'd respond poorly if he asked. Riallin looked so very fuckable on her belly like that, with her legs spread and ankles raised. He had to bite his lip, but it was down lower that he aimed his straining cock.

"Mmmm, yes," she moaned as he entered her. She must have enjoyed what she'd seen earlier, because she got right into it, rolling her hips, stroking his cock, pulling his hand around and planting it on her breast insistently. He obliged her as best he could, but ...

Despite his efforts to still her hips and take it slow and controlled, Riallin's fleshy bum slapped insistently against his hips again and again.

More expressive than most Aiel, especially in private, she wore her frustration openly as she disentangled from him long enough to turn around and climb on top. Straight back inside he went, so she might bounce up and down his length, the folds on her belly coming and going, her breasts flying free. And his come threatening to fly even freer each time she moved.

"Riallin ... I can't ..." he gritted. He doubted she could hear him over the sound of her own sweet gasps. She certainly didn't slow down, and within moments he was biting his lip, grabbing her hips and pulling her heat down onto him so he could fill her womb with his seed.

He heard laughter through the haze of pleasure, and cracked open an eye. Riallin was smiling down at him, but it was not mockery he saw in her eyes. She bent to kiss his lips, then wiggled her hips. "The mighty *Car'a'carn*, defeated by my little ..." That sweet giggle again.

"Sorry. I couldn't hold on. You are too sweet. Too beautiful," he whispered, his arms going around her.

She lay still and accepted his hug. "Do not be sorry. I am glad. Though it makes me wonder why they call you He Who Comes With the Dawn."

Rand was feeling too good to grumble, or to explain. He'd enjoyed seeing, hearing and touching her so much that it was some time before he became aware again of the rest of the room. A wrestling match seemed to have broken out between Amindha and Amili—an actual wrestling match, not the sensual kind that Leslaya, Chiard and now Anfia were indulging in. Pamela was collecting bets and passing out *oosquai*, which was a dangerous combination that several of the younger women did not, alas, have the sense to avoid. He could see Branwen chatting with Dina beyond the pale globes of Riallin's bum. She winked when she caught his eye, but kept on chatting. One was clothed, the other naked, and neither seemed to think there anything strange about this situation at all.

Rand let himself relax, in body as much as in mind. His stiffness faded and Riallin's heat left him, but her warmth remained, a comforting softness beneath his hands. He reached for and found a different softness, uncaring of the mess, and touched it gently. She shivered in his embrace. Her mouth found his. Time faded.

It was not the keening orgasm she deserved, but Riallin did eventually come for him. Though the job, if it could be called that, was done, he did not leave her side. She was cuddly, and liked to cuddle, and he liked to be cuddled by her. Green forests and blue rivers graced the mosaic on the roof of the great room, as they did most here. They might not have been remarkable for anything but their artistry somewhere else, but here in the Waste they brought an otherworldly feeling to the room. Idly looking from them to the many beautiful women all around, some in the throes of pleasure, Rand felt as peaceful as he had in a long time. His eyes drifted closed, but did not stay so for long.

"The Roof of the Maidens is not as I remember it," Nora said.

He found her standing over them, clothed as yet, her face smooth.

"I seem to have a habit of breaking things," he confessed.

"I did not say it was broken, Rand al'Thor, just changed."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'd hate to think you resented me."

"I do not."

"What was that? I couldn't hear you all the way up there. Come closer."

Her small smile said she knew his game, but she folded her lithe form onto a cushion beside him even so. "What did they do to you in the wetlands, to leave you with such bad hearing?" she teased.

Riallin stirred against him but did not open her eyes. "I would like to know that also. What is it like there? Is it as horrible as they say?"

"Horrible?" The Aiel Waste was the harshest place he'd ever seen short of the Blight itself. Punishingly hot during the day, freezing cold at night, with little shelter, less water, and a plethora of poisonous plants and venomous wildlife. Rhuarc and Aviendha had explained in great detail why Rand should not venture out of the camps without a real Aiel there to look out for him, and stressed the likelihood that he would die if he did. He believed them. It was hard to imagine how someone who grew up here could describe the lands west of the Spine of the World as "horrible". But then, Riallin and Nora were still young.

A suspicion stole up on him. "What age are you two, by the way?"

"I have seen eighteen namedays. As has Riallin. Why are you changing the subject? Was it that bad?" Nora said. There was sympathy on her face, and it was wrong to laugh, but he couldn't help it. Still young. They were the same bloody age as him! And here he was getting all paternal. *Burn me.* What was worse was that he wasn't entirely wrong. They were all still young. He was definitely too young to be entrusted with the fate of the bloody Wheel of Time itself, yet here he was. *The Creator must be madder than the Kinslayer was.*

He couldn't leave it like that, of course, not with Nora on the verge of taking offence. So he told them both about his childhood on the farm near Emond's Field, and the Waterwood. How peaceful it had all been, until the Shadow fell on Winternight.

Nora had snuggled up against his side as he spoke, and her head now rested upon his chest, right beside Riallin's. "That is even worse than I heard."

He blinked. "It is?"

"How could you ever learn to live with nothing to threaten you? No wonder Moiraine Sedai says their clans are dying out."

The Aes Sedai had always claimed that was the result of the Dark One being able to touch the Pattern, now that the seal on his prison was weakening. He doubted it had anything to do with a shortage of venomous snakes. But even if he'd found an answer of his own on that topic, he wouldn't have wanted to lecture her just then.

His hand drifted down to her waist. "It's probably due to a shortage of beautiful women like you two."

Nora's smile made apples of her cheeks. "Really?"

He touched her face gently, just to see if she would let him, and when she did he smiled. She and Riallin were both beautiful, no doubt, but there were plenty of beauties on the other side of the mountains, too. Still, not all lies were terrible. "Really," he whispered, as he went in for the kiss. He kissed her softly at first, and she responded in kind. So he kissed her harder to see if she would respond again. She did.

"Rand al'Thor. Are you trying to seduce my spearsister?"

Nora's breathless laughter parted them. He was too used to the Maidens and their antics to take Riallin's glare as anything but playful, so wagged his eyebrows at her.

"She's too lovely not to."

Riallin looked Nora over and nodded solemnly. "That is true."

"You are much prettier," the other girl bubbled.

"Oh, do not be silly. Look at that face."

"Look at those breasts! I am jealous."

He cleared his throat. "You are both beautiful, each in her own unique way."

Riallin smiled a cat's smile, and leaned down to whisper something in Nora's ear that had her giggling. She whispered in Rand's ear, too, but he, of course, did not giggle.

"Be good to her," was what she said.

She got up and left them then. He could partially regret her leaving. On the one hand, she was good company. On the other, he got to watch her cheeks move as she was walking away. She glanced back over her shoulder once, as she was going, saw where his gaze rested, and shot him a parting grin.

"She is nice," Nora said.

He tightened his arm around her. "So are you. It's no wonder you two are friends."

"Friends. This is a near-sister in the wetlands, yes? Then we are, I think. I do not know if we will ever be first-sisters—that is a big commitment—but I would be honoured to consider her my near-sister."

"Close, but not too close. I don't see anything wrong with that." Her curls were nice and clean, and silked through his fingers well.

Her hand rested atop his stomach, tracing the lines there. When she hesitated to go further down, he took matters into his own hand, matters and her pert young breast. Nora was slighter than Riallin in that regard as well. Her soft gasps emboldened him to seek out the skin underneath her clothes and brush his thumb across her taut nipple.

"I want to see you," he whispered.

She shed her top hastily to reveal a fresh young body only lightly touched by the sun. "Gorgeous," he told her, before sliding his hand down over her taught stomach and under the waist of her trousers. The curls he found there silked through his fingers, too, and when he dared to quest deeper he found her folds nice and slick.

"I'm glad you joined us tonight. I've been watching you for a while."

"I watched you also," she managed between gasps. "You are so handsome. And my sisters always seem so happy afterwards. I thought about it. But I did not know how to ... to ..."

Was she a virgin, or just inexperienced? Either way, he resolved to take it slow.

"You're doing everything right," he told her. And then showed her proof. "See?"

Green eyes widened when she saw how hard he had gotten. "Oh. Oh ... all for me."

Rand thought that a good moment to slip a finger inside her, and the way she started tearing at her trousers told him he was right. She could have climbed on top once she was naked, but it was to her back that she went, slim legs spread to let him see her harness, the lips of which were pinkened with arousal.

He explored her with his fingers some more, to make sure, then said, "Are you ready for something more?"

Her blushing nod was all the answer he needed. Taking a handful of red curls, he climbed on top of and in to Nora. His cock entered her slowly but easily. Not a virgin, then, though her shyness told him she hadn't done much. He'd be happy to show her all that that hot body of hers could do. She was not the most active of partners, yet, but she was wet and warm and willing and she made such flattering noises as he stirred her pot.

Her skin was nice and smooth under his hands, too, especially her bottom when he reached around to squeeze it. A small sound of surprise escaped him. "Feels nice and round." She was a slender girl, so hadn't expected there to be so much to grab.

The apples in her cheeks were particularly red this time. "Would you like to see it?"

"Oh, yes."

Giggling, she pushed him off and turned around on the pillows. What she showed him was indeed as nicely rounded as it had felt. She lay on her belly, legs parted, ankles raised, and let him touch her. A little moan was her only response when he squeezed her cheeks together, pushing one against the other and savouring the sight.

"Very nice," he said. He got back on top, and back inside her his mouth near her ear, his voice dropping to a whisper as he went deep. "Very, very nice."

With that lovely cushion under his hips, the temptation to speed up was hard to resist. And when he gave in to temptation, the sounds that Nora made held nothing of complaint. Sweat soon misted them both but he had no intention of stopping.

"Such a sweet girl. Such a sweet pussy."

Lying on her belly, she reached back to feel his ass as he was thrusting into her. "I am not a sweet girl. I am a Maiden of the Spear. Fuck me."

"My Maiden, my sweet, loyal Maiden."

"Yes," she whispered, her pussy clutching at him. "Yes," she moaned, her nails digging in. "YES!" she screamed, as her juices flowed down his length.

He kept moving, but slower now, teasing out the last few waves of her climax. Her hand searched out his; he squeezed it back, and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "That's what I like to hear from my Maidens."

She shone with sweat. And embarrassment. And just in general. “You certainly know how to take care of your warriors,” she said sheepishly.

He rolled his hips. “I’m glad you think so.” Sweet a sheath as she was, that rolling didn’t do much for him. It was too soon after the last time. He was fond of Nora, though, and tempted to stay. Other temptations awaited him once his attention wandered to the rest of the room, however, and other duties. He didn’t want to neglect anyone.

The night was still young, and the party was in full swing by then. Riallin hadn’t left but she had put some clothes on. When she saw Nora looking her way, still lying under Rand with his cock lodged in her overflowing pussy, she made a face and waved energetically. Her friend hid her face beneath her mop of red curls but that was not enough to muffle her laughter.

Rand pulled out of her, gave her bottom a playful slap, and rolled onto his side. “I hope we can do this again some time. Lest there be any doubt left, you have always been and always will be welcome in my company. And in my bed.”

More giggles were all the answer he got, until she pointed at his erection and said, “So I see.”

He rolled his eyes, then left her there, giggling away. As soon as he left, Riallin broke off from the group she was with and made her way towards Nora. She slapped his butt as they passed, calling him a bad boy, and got a slap of her own for her trouble. Her surprised yelp had many of the other Maidens roaring with laughter.

The loudest laughter, fittingly enough, was coming from the bigger girls’ group. Pamela, Amindha, Branwen and the rest were trading tales of their exploits when Rand joined them, naked as his nameday. He wondered, a bit late, if he should have covered himself, or at least his erection. So many others were just wandering about naked that it just hadn’t occurred to him until then. And none of the Maidens gave the scandalized reactions he would have expected back home, so he did nothing more than take a seat nearby.

“Those Crayt girls really like al’Thors,” Amindha said by way of greeting. She smirked towards the other side of the room, where Nora and Riallin were trading words he did not want to hear.

Rand’s smile faded. He grunted sourly and looked away. There was only one other al’Thor in the world, so he had a good idea what she meant. Nora must be from the same sept as Aca, the Maiden his father had taken as a lover. She was rarely seen under this Roof these days, preferring Tam’s. And Tam, in turn, was rarely found in Rand’s company. He didn’t like it. Or her.

The Maidens noticed his mood, and his shrinking member, and left him alone for a while. When Rondha asked what was wrong, Branwen whispered, loudly, that he was brooding. It was, to hear her tell it, his favourite hobby. Rand’s scowl had no effect on her. He worked it over in his mind. Brooding was no hobby, and certainly not his favourite one. The Maidens went out of their way to come up with things to tweak his nose over, was all. The why of it was a thing worth wondering over, so he did, for some time.

The party went on without him, of course. After a while he became aware of voices raised nearby.

When he glanced that way he saw Amindha shaking her head insistently. “Do not be silly, sister. This is great fun, true, but it is not training. You cannot defeat an enemy by fucking them.”

Rand’s thoughts were torn at once to the Forsaken Lanfear. He’d allowed her to think she was seducing him, taking advantage of her obsession with his past self, Lews Therin Telamon. To win her support, he had become her ... lover was not the right word. Plaything? He did not know. What was an enemy that you were fucking and pretending to care for? Were they even still an enemy? Had he defeated Lanfear by taking her to bed? He did not know. But he needed to, for she was still out there, and would return to see him sooner or later. And she would expect ... a lot.

“It is an excellent kind of training,” Amili was insisting. “You must strain your body, control your breath, and focus your mind all at once. It is not combat, but it is close enough. If you can fuck well, then you can fight well.”

“And I am the best at both,” boasted Amindha, hands on hips.

Amili had that competitive glint in her eye again. “Prove it. Rand al’Thor will not mind helping, I am sure. Squats only. No hands allowed. All the way up, all the way down. Highest number wins.”

“Loser stands the watch of the winner for the next week.”

“Deal!”

The two women were already stripping, revealing bodies that would have put the average wetlander man's to shame. Amindha was the bigger, a veritable boulder of a woman, but Amili wasn't far behind and her muscles were more sharply visible than Amindha's. Even while she was bending to take off her *cadin'sor*, no fold of flesh hid the six muscles etched atop her stomach.

Which was all well and good, and he enjoyed looking at them both, but that didn't mean he appreciated the assumption that they could use him as a tool for their competition.

"Excuse you both, but I don't recall agreeing to this."

Red-haired Amili looked down at him in surprise. She gestured at his crotch, where a thick pole was growing upwards despite his irritation. "Not with words, but we know what you are like."

He scowled. She didn't have to say it like that! Those thick thighs enclosed a nice tight fit, it was true. And he was fond of Amindha, whose breasts were bouncing as she shed the last of her clothes. By the time she came to join the other and smile down at him, he was fully erect.

"Hold still, Rand al'Thor. I know how much you like to use your hands, but it would skew the results if you did."

Part of him was tempted to refuse, just on general principle, but the greater part watched excitedly as she stepped over his waist and began to lower herself down. A problem immediately became apparent, since she was not allowed to use her hands.

"Let me," Rondha said, and moved quickly to take hold of Rand's pole. Her grip was strong, and she was plainly more interested in holding him in place than in pleasuring him.

*Blood and ashes! How do I get myself into these things?*

She was quite pretty, though. One of the newer arrivals, he had been surprised that she hadn't left once she realised how her friends intended to spend their evening. Golden-haired, tanned, thirty at most. The other Maidens had greeted her with a respect that suggested she stood highly among them, or had won much *toh*. She intrigued him.

So much so that he didn't notice Amindha's movement until her heat slipped over the head of his cock. He sucked in a breath, and was scolded by Rondha for it.

"Do not distract her."

"I don't intend to," he gritted. She relaxed her grip, a little. Until it barely hurt at all.

Up and down Amindha went, breathing steadily. Her expression was serious, but the red in her cheeks said that he was distracting her even without trying to. That was good. She was distracting him, too. Her soft pussy was spread wide to accommodate him, but hard muscles were what drew his eye. They stood out on her legs and torso as she moved, up and down, up and down. She strained not to sit down upon him, while also straining not to rise so far that he slipped out. From the way she set her teeth, she was finding it harder than expected. From the way her nipples had stiffened, it was not just the exercise that was pushing her limits. But she kept going at that steady pace, up and down, breathing in and out.

"Do not give up, sister!" Careen called, watching. She liked to watch.

Pamela laughed loudly, empty cup still in hand. "Burn that! Smash that cock! You know you want to!"

"I do not..."

"Hah! I am nowhere near drunk enough to think it is Amili's watch that fills your mind."

Pamela clambered to her feet and snagged another cup on her way over. Only a few inches shorter than him, she was big in all ways. Big and loud. And good in bed, too. She'd worn him out the first time he'd been with her, and he'd woken up the next morning half buried under her body.

"Do not distract her," Rondha warned, but Pamela sniffed dismissively.

"Oh, smile for once. If she allows herself to become distracted, that is her *toh*, not mine. I know what you want, Amindha. You want to grind against that thing good and proper. You want him to grab your tits and roll you over and pound you until your legs are stretching for the roof." She kept going up and down, but a girlish little whimper escaped the big woman's lips. Pamela barked a laugh.

None escaped Rand, but the mental image she conjured was pretty appealing. Up and down Amindha went, until suddenly she wasn't, suddenly she was all the way down, grinding fast, her nails scraping his chest. She tensed up all over, and then suddenly relaxed, face going slack.

"She is done," Amili declared. And it was true, in more ways than one. "What was the count?"

"I counted thirty-eight," said Rondha. She had kept her grip on his member even while Amindha was grinding away, and looked far less embarrassed by the situation than the woman so sheepishly clambering off him did.

"You looked good just then," he told her, smiling.

She blushed. "Oh stop. I could have gone longer if you were not so ... you."

"An easy boast to make," Amili said, dusting her hands. "Now watch this."

Amindha had the same view Rand did as she lowered herself down to take his cock. She was wet from watching, and as tight as he'd expected. Tight, and intent on her task. Seeing the focus on her long face, noting the way she avoided anyone's eyes, he had a feeling he knew how this competition would end. She moved faster than Amindha, but not for passion. She just knew the goal she had to reach. Up and down, again and again, hard muscles standing out starkly on pale skin.

He counted silently along with the rest. At twenty she looked completely in control. At thirty she was still breathing steady. At thirty-eight she allowed herself a smirk, and at forty she dropped down and kissed him on the lips.

"To the victor goes the fifth."

"So it does," he agreed, his reluctance to be the spoils long forgotten. While Amindha groaned, Pamela laughed, and the others congratulated, he grabbed Amili's tits and rolled her over. The strong legs that had strained so he took in his hands, both to massage and to spread. He held her like that as he pounded her pussy, winning now the cries that had been completely absent during the competition. She was strong up top, too. He could feel it in the hardness under her softness as he pressed his chest to hers, see it in the arms that clutched at the blankets underneath her.

Rand had a little competition of his own then, albeit only with himself. Despite how good it felt, he was able to keep himself under control until Amili's legs stretched for the roof, just as Pamela had described. Only then did he allow himself to fill the womb of the victor beneath him.

He sat up, mind numbed by pleasure, and smiled dopily at the two women lying flushed and sweaty before him. Some of the Maidens were exchanging coins, he noticed. Bets? What a thing to bet on. Pamela was not one of the gamblers, he was pleased to see, since she hadn't given Amili as much of a hard time as she had Amindha.

"Not bad," Rondha said. He thought she was talking to her spearsisters, but when he glanced her way he saw her smiling not at them but at him.

"Later," he said, presumptuously.

Her smile turned coy. "Perhaps."

But later never came. She left with Dina before he was ready to continue, with neither troubling to say goodbye. Whatever they were discussing looked too serious to involve loveplay. But then, such things were a secondary concern at best to the Maidens.

Instead, it was Osana he ended up riding later, when he noticed another woman stop by. Red-haired Rhuana was one of those who made use of Rand when the mood took her but ignored him otherwise. Which was a pity, since she was quite pretty and had surprisingly large breasts for such a thin woman. Her face was thin, too, which made her blue eyes look even bigger and gave her an almost innocent air. She was anything but. She leant in the doorway now and watched them all at play. Rand had a feeling she'd be joining them, once she was good and ready.

Not liking how distracted he was, Osana pulled him down into her embrace. Her lips moved upon him hungrily, above as below. He let his hands trail down over her sun-touched body, to squeeze her breasts, brush over her hips, and then grab her pert little bottom. She gasped in his ear when he started moving, fast and hard, holding her in place.

It was not long before her gasp became a wail and she was digging her nails into his shoulders. He rode out her orgasm until she went limp beneath him. Only then did he climb off, leaving her to curl up and smile happily.

He did not stay unoccupied for very long at all. Her friend Alisha had liked what she'd seen, and approached while Osana was still catching her breath. Alisha had very kissable lips, and wet them with her tongue before depositing herself in his lap and pressing her mouth to his. Slender, and of an age with him, she was near his match for randiness. She had gotten involved in these affairs on the first night after she arrived from the Imran sept, waiting only long enough to ascertain the situation and watch him fuck the normally stoic Jolien to a screaming orgasm before stripping off her *cadin'sor* and making free with her hands. Perhaps he should have turned those hands away back then, stranger

that she had been, but Alisha was a very pretty girl, with smooth skin and sweet little breasts tipped by a pair of puffy nipples that just cried out to be sucked on.

He brushed his thumbs across them now, remembering how she ridden him that first night, and all the things they had done to each other in the nights since. She had quickly become a regular at these orgies.

“Are we going to have some fun tonight, Rand al’Thor? Good. It has been too long.”

He raised a brow at that, and smiled wryly. It had only been a few days. He could well imagine what people would say about him if he showed his hunger so openly. He went in for the kiss, and let his hands roam lower as he plied her lips, until he could squeeze her soft little bottom. She responded much as he’d come to expect, her hands roaming much as his did.

Rhuana was not the only visitor they had that night. Occasionally women would pass their room, and invariably they would look in on the show. Some lingered to watch, others did not. The book reader he’d seen earlier was drawn by the noises at one point. When she saw what was going on, she blushed hotly and hastened away. It often took the Maidens a while to grow used to Rand’s presence here where no men had been permitted before.

Well, most of the Maidens.

His eye was drawn back to Alisha’s naked form, and soon his hands were drawn there, too. She didn’t object, as he’d known she wouldn’t. She laughed softly and leaned into him as he played with her breasts. When he started playing with her thighs instead, she came up for a kiss and stuck her tongue in his mouth.

He’d been plotting to fuck her, but before he could make his move she dropped to her knees and took his erection in hand. She kissed him there, too, her giggles tickling his member. He knew what she intended and was happy to let it happen.

While he stood there letting her work upon him, he watched the other women at play. Careen was face down and ass up, letting Su finger her energetically. He could tell it was her without needed to see her face, since she’d taken that exact position with him. Careen wasn’t the prettiest of girls, with her weathered skin and big nose, but she’d always been nice to him in Tear, so Rand had been glad to accept her invitation. It had been a pleasant encounter, and though she hadn’t left him with the impression that she wanted anything more she often turned up for these parties, to watch for a while, get herself worked up, and then indulge with someone.

She wasn’t the only Maiden who’d propositioned him in such a way. Once it became apparent that Rand wasn’t going to turn his nose up at the women who were less ... conventionally attractive, he found several girls who were eager to indulge their passions.

He looked for and found Beyla, off chatting with some of her fellow veterans. She had been a surprise to him, in more ways than one. More than a decade older than him, and with an unlined face as expressionless as any Aiel’s, the Shaarad woman had not been shy about questioning this new arrangement once her clan had joined with Rand. She hadn’t been as vocally opposed as someone like Viola, true, but she had engaged Sulin and Adelin and the other high-standing Maidens in lengthy discussions concerning how this situation could be incorporated into *ji’e’toh*.

Rand had not taken part. And he certainly hadn’t expected her to take part in these orgies. Yet, once she had become convinced that his presence was permissible, the stern woman had marched right in one night and disrobed. He’d stared long. And not just in surprise over her arrival. She was almost skeletally thin, Beyla, with no breasts to speak of. But her confidence made her beautiful.

A thin smile had played on her lips as she freed her yellow hair from its tail. Her nipples had stiffened visibly under his gaze, and his cock had stiffened in response.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you,” he’d said. “All of you,” he’d added with a blush, gesturing at her pale nakedness. “But you are more than welcome.”

“Do your actions match your words?” she’d asked, stepping close.

He’d kissed her, of course. He hadn’t resisted when she tugged him down to the blankets, either, and not because it freed him of the need to stoop.

“I meant no insult, son of a Maiden,” she’d explained. “Let me show you that.” Then she’d taken him in hand and guided him to her soft folds. She was wet, and hot, and so very tight. They moved together, first him on top, then her, then him again, and the absence of fleshiness to grab didn’t bother him at all. Forcing a smile to break through her reserve became his delight. It had been early

that night, and she was the first he'd cavorted with, but he came inside her and stayed there for some time afterwards, surprised at how good it had been.

Though he had conscientiously attended to the other Maidens who'd joined the party back then, as he had done tonight, his eyes had drifted to Beyla often. She did not play with any of the other women, as many Maidens did when not playing with him. But she remained, and she watched. He'd had her again at the end of the night, cuddled against her narrow back and thrusting into her as she held one leg aloft. He'd gone to sleep cuddled against her, too.

She'd been gone when he woke up the next morning, but she'd come back in the days since. Never to see the other girls, and never simply to watch. That she was here now meant she was in the mood to fuck. Rand grinned at her eagerly, and got a small, mysterious smile in return. He'd need to make time for her before he exhausted himself completely.

Alisha's clever tongue worked across the head of his cock, teasing him. There was mischief in the grey eyes that stared into his. He imagined how good those lips of hers would feel around him, and wanted to push her head down. He didn't, of course. It was for her to decide, but Light, the hunger. She knew it, too. Those eyes twinkled, and her tongue moved even slower.

There was another familiar face in the crowd, one who hadn't been there earlier. He caught her eye but she did not respond to his wink. She never did. Agirin was a stern and self-controlled woman, when she was not asking you to grab her by the hair and spank her harder. She sat near a wall, naked but alone, watching it all, her square-jawed face a handsome mask as one hand worked between her thighs. She would join in or not, as the mood took her.

His wandering attention hadn't gone unnoticed by Alisha. A sudden wet warmth made him look down to where the girl's mouth was stretched wide around his member. Her hand worked the shaft while her mouth worked the head, and all the while she stared up at him. He brushed the yellow hair that had come loose of its tail aside, the better to expose that pretty face and the way it was straining to accommodate and pleasure him.

"Such a sexy little minx you are," he whispered.

She tried to smile, but it was hard in that position. Instead, she settled for bobbing her head even more energetically upon him.

Rand let his head fall back and embraced the pleasure she brought him. The sensation swamped his mind, but not so much that he did not hear what was being said nearby. "I suppose it is useful having a willing man around," Estel of the golden curls was telling Jolien and Liah, "but I do not see why they get so giggly over it."

Jolien was pretty with hair the same shade as Elayne's, but that was the limit of the similarities. "Not all women have the conviction to remain wedded to the spear, as Sulin has. And I will. Some merely have an affair with it for a few years, before giving it up to seek a husband and children," she said sternly, her disapproval plain. "I suspect those among our sisters who will do this thing are those who coo over Rand al'Thor the most. Renay, for example, is lost to us."

"There are babies in her future. We all know it," Liah agreed. "The fool."

He did not look at them, but their words lingered in his thoughts. He wasn't sure what he felt about it. They were both pretty, and he'd enjoyed being with them. He didn't want to marry them or anything, yet he couldn't deny that he'd have liked it if they were a bit less dismissive about it all. Pride. That was it. His pride was wounded by the idea that they didn't much care if they saw him again. The smile Alisha's ministrations had brought to his face became chagrined. *Rein in your ego, al'Thor. They are a gang of horny women, that's all. It's not like they love you.*

That wet warmth slid up and off his manhood. Smiling, Alisha took him by the hand and let him to a mound of pillows. When she did not go down immediately, he sat on the pillows, his cock jutting up, ready for her.

Sure enough, Alisha straddled his waist, took him in hand and eagerly put him into her pussy. She was sopping wet and bit her lip cutely as she slid all the way down him. He ran his hands over her slender hips, and up to an even thinner waist, savouring the feel and the sight of her. He savoured the way she started bouncing upon him, too. Alisha threw back her head and moaned as she rode his length with mounting lust.

Rhuana had indeed joined in, as he'd thought she would. She was on her back with Anfia's face pressed up against her sex. It was a different face that drew his attention, though, when a smiling Chiarid pressed up against his shoulder.

"You have been very naughty tonight, Rand al'Thor. How many has it been already? Your mother would be shocked." Despite her words, she kissed him on the neck, and gave Alisha's breast a little squeeze. The younger girl grabbed her hand, but to hold it in place, not push it away.

Chiarid chuckled. She was closer to forty than thirty but age lay lightly on her. There was no grey in her yellow hair, and few lines on her face even when she smiled. She was smiling now as she sat down close by. She opened her legs to show him what lay between, pink and glistening.

"You are such a bad boy, Rand al'Thor. Putting out for all those women. A bad, bad boy."

He grunted. "Bad I might be, but it would be for other things I've done, and will do, not for this. This is me at my nicest."

Chiarid reached over to cup his chin. "Oh, I know that ... Or I think I do. Perhaps you could remind me ..."

She was close enough that he wouldn't even have to stop what he was doing, so he didn't, just reached over to cup her sex in his hand and slip a finger inside her. She moaned in his ear as he stroked her insides, all while the bouncing Alisha moaned even louder.

"You naughty, naughty boy. What are you doing to me?"

He ignored Chiarid's words to focus on her body and finding its weakest points. Slender Alisha was tightly wrapped around him and moving fast now. A set of tanned hands slid around her waist from behind, and began flicking at her sex. Golden hair hid the owner's face, but he could tell she was kissing Alisha's neck and that Alisha was enjoying it.

Chiarid's prattle about what a naughty boy he was had died off a while back, to be replaced with heavy breathing and frequent moans. He knew she was close, and knew as well how to push her over. Her wetness welcomed his fingers, curled just so, her mouth welcomed his tongue. It came quick after that. Or she did. Her grip on his hair became painful for a moment, her legs tensed, and then just as suddenly she relaxed completely. She sank to the pillows beside him.

"I think you might be naughtier than I am," he said, giving her sensitive pussy a light slap that had her gasping. Smirking, he left her to recover what she could of her wits.

Alisha saw it all. She was biting her lip cutely. He had to kiss her, and did. Still kissing, he pulled her down with him as he lay back, then started thrusting up into her fast and hard. "Come for me."

Though he'd pulled her away from her helpful friend, she started moaning even louder. It didn't take long before she was coming, her lips leaving his so she could cry her pleasure shamelessly for all her spearsisters to hear.

Rand was glad to hear it, and would have welcomed her staying atop him, but someone took her by the hips and pushed her groaning off. The hands and hair he'd seen belonged to Heidin, it turned out. She eagerly took Alisha's place.

Though pretty and young, Heidin was not the curviest of girls. The bottom he fondled as he kissed her was rather flat, the hips he watched descend upon him as she climbed on top were only rounded a little, and the breasts that bounced in time with her rising and falling did so in only the slightest way. Her usually cold face grew expressive in her pleasure, though, and he took pleasure in seeing it.

Not so much that his attention did not wander, though. Agirin seemed to have finished herself off by then, for she was sauntering from the room. He watched her tanned ass go with a tinge of regret. Beyla was still alone and looking a bit impatient, so he brought his thumb to bear against Heidin's sex, the better to spur her on and win his freedom.

Some of the Maidens were throwing dice in a corner. He suspected he knew why but preferred not to dwell on it. He was only one man—and the only man allowed here; there had to be some way to decide. He reined his thoughts firmly away from where they wanted to go, focusing instead on bringing Heidin to orgasm. Towards that end, he put her on her hands and knees and started pounding her hard.

"Rub your pussy for me, there's a good girl," he said.

"Do not talk to me like that," she insisted, but she rubbed it even so.

He said no more. When she came it was quiet and restrained, a shuddering and a relaxation. He stopped then, slid out of her and left without a word.

Completely naked, slick with sweat and other things, with his hard cock bouncing before him, Rand crossed a room full of women to reach Beyla. She rose from her seat to greet him with a formal, "I see you, Rand al'Thor." She smiled thinly. "All of you."

He took her by the hand. "What are you doing over here all alone, with your clothes on, when you should be in my arms, writhing in pleasure?"

Fine lines appeared on her forehead when she raised her brow. "I have been wondering the same thing."

"Then we must do something about that," he said, and led her over to the wall.

He kissed her there, his hands busy in her hair, or tugging at her clothes. She helped to strip herself, showing him her stiff pink nipples and her lean strength. One more kiss and then she was turning around to show her tight little ass, too.

He parted her ankles with his feet, wrapped his arms around her slight form, and thrust home. Beyla hissed in relief on feeling herself penetrated. Rand sighed in satisfaction, and let his hands roam over her body as he moved inside her.

"You have gentle hands but you can be strong, too. The *Car'a'carn* must be strong."

"I am strong."

"Show me."

He pulled out, spun her around, and picked her up, easily supporting her weight. While he held her by the legs, Beyla reached down between them to find his cock and return it to her wet pussy. He started fucking her in earnest, her gasps almost drowning out the slap of flesh on flesh. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and took all he had to give.

It hadn't been a vain boast, his claim to strength. Years of farmwork had ensured that. Even when she leaned back, her grip tight on his shoulders, he had no difficulty supporting her. It was an awkward position for her, held aloft like that with her legs spread, but Beyla was not passive in their union. She worked her hips against him, whispering prayers to the Light each time he struck her just right. He wasn't sure if it was her or all the stimulation he'd already had, but his struggle became not to hold her but to hold out against her.

In that position, he couldn't use his hands either, so discipline became his shield. And perhaps that, too, was a kind of strength that the *Car'a'carn* would need.

It was a strength he proved to have that night. Both Rand and Beyla were breathing heavily by the time the skinny woman began shaking in his embrace. He felt her heat upon him, heard her pleasure dripping down between them, and did not stop.

"Yes, baby, yes," she moaned. "Come for me."

Rand let himself go, in more ways than one. A few more thrusts was all it took before he was adding a torrent of his own to the mess she had made. There his strength gave out, and he had to stagger to the wall to lean them both against it. Crushed between that cold stone and his warm flesh, Beyla folded her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"What is it about you that draws me so?" he whispered, more to himself than her.

She eased herself to the ground, and eased his softening cock out of her. "I could ask the same of you," she said, and gave him a pat on the cheek.

"You wore him out?" an annoyed voice said.

Beyla looked past him, and smiled a little smile at the younger women gathered there. "Experience, sisters. It goes a long way."

She wasn't wrong. He had to lean back against the wall for support. Three naked Maidens faced him. Susay, Rhuana and Anfia. All three had been among the gamblers. It was getting late by then, and many of the Maidens had retired. Young Iona was leaving with a scowl, but Su just looked stoic. They had been among the gamblers, too. Mature Leslaya yawned as she left. Some few were even dozing on the pillows, with their arms around each other. Pamela was passed out, drunk and snoring. Rand could have happily done any of those things.

"We'll have to continue this another night," he groaned. He waved off their complaints. "Don't worry, I'll make you three the priority. Fair's fair. And I'll even give you an extra hand spanking, Rhuana, to make up for it."

He had no idea why that made her glare so. She'd asked him to do it, after all. Though his head was already swimming, Rand went and got another cup of *oosquai* to drown his thirst. It was hard work sometimes, having the Maidens as his guards. But it was worth it, on nights like this.

Thoroughly exhausted, he found a place among the pillows, not far from where Riallin and Nora were sleeping peacefully in each other's arms, and settled in for what promised to be a long sleep.

## CHAPTER 8: Making Port



The deck had stopped swaying but Nynaeve still scowled at it suspiciously. She took a few cautious steps down the narrow hallway, one hand pressed to her stomach. The others were nowhere to be seen. Elayne had abandoned her a few days after they left the coast of Tanchico behind, to seek the company of women with less tender stomachs. Nynaeve didn't care. The last thing she wanted was company while she was spewing every other hour or so. It had taken an effort to drag herself up onto the deck to oversee the disposal of that male *a'dam* they'd found, but she'd needed to be there. She had to make sure it was gone into the deep, where no-one could find it. At the time she'd hoped the relief of seeing the open sea swallow the black bracelets and collar would have brought her some peace. Light knew she'd earned it. But watching it plop into the water had meant watching the way the sea rolled and surged beneath the ship, and Nynaeve had soon sent her dinner hurling after the *a'dam*.

She reached the end of the hall and carefully climbed the stairs to the deck. Elayne had poked her head into the cabin long enough to announce their arrival, her dainty little nose wrinkling over the smell. Nynaeve's hand strayed towards her braid for a moment, before snapping back to her stomach. It wouldn't be much longer now. Nice, firm land. *Light! I'm never getting on a boat again.*

When she reached the deck, she had to shield her eyes from the noon's brightness. Sounds and smells washed over her. A cacophony of seabirds and sailors, the one group's screeches blending with the other. The smell of salt and fish was heavy in the air. After so many days alone with the smell of her own vomit, the racket and stench was shockingly welcome. Light help her, the deck wasn't even moving too badly. They'd reached port at last.

"Freedom at last, eh Nynaeve?"

Her narrowed eyes found Ronelle, then blinked. The Andoran woman hadn't enjoyed sailing any more than she did, and for much the same reason. It had had a visible effect on her. Though still a big woman, she was noticeably thinner than she'd been. Had she been affected the same way? It gave Nynaeve cause for alarm. Being too thin was unhealthy, and she hadn't been very big to begin with.

"I'll not miss these ships, I'll tell you that much," Ronelle went on.

"It makes me regret being so reasonable all the time," she groused. "If I wasn't I could burn this ship as soon as we're off it. '*The Graceful Maid*'." She snorted. "The Bucking Mule, more like!"

Ronelle was covering her mouth with her hand, the poor thing. Up on the forecastle, Elayne was smiling graciously at the grey-haired captain, no doubt filling the woman's head with lies about how swift and pleasant the trip had been. That girl would try to make friends with thief while his hand was still in her pocket. It was just as well she had Nynaeve to look out for her.

She looked for and found the rest of their party. Ragan's Shienarans were gathered by the gangplank, frowning out at the city beyond as they strapped their ridiculous collection of weapons about themselves. Even Areku, the lone woman among the guards, was hanging half a dozen different tools for killing upon her person. You'd think one would be enough. None would be ideal, but the days when she could avoid such violence seemed a distant memory now. And to the Borderlanders, such days weren't even that. Peace was a prayer to them, a blessing and a fantasy.

Juilin Sandar was leaning against the railing nearby, calling something down to the men on the docks. With his knack for ferreting out secrets, the thiefatcher had done much to make up for his unwitting betrayal back in Tear. Not that she would let him off the hook, of course. Give a man too much slack and he'd end up running wild and making a mess of everything.

Her fellow Accepted would be much more reliable. Emara and Shimoku were so short that they almost disappeared among all the burly sailors rushing to and fro, coiling lines, unfurling sails and unloading cargo. Keestis was taller but somehow managed to be more underfoot than either of the others. Her golden hair was in disarray, and she was gaping out at the city through that strange contraption she'd bought during their brief visit to the Sea Folk islands. The thick lenses arrayed

before her eyes by way of a thin metal frame allowed her to see clearly in a way she had not been able to for years. The woman seemed to find them and all they revealed a perpetual wonder.

Shouldering their burdens, she and Ronelle went to join Keestis and steer her out of the way of the bustling sailors.

“Nynaeve. I’m glad to see you up and about,” the woman said distractedly.

“Must be why you didn’t come visit,” she muttered. She would have bitten the nose off of anyone who’d dared to enter her cabin, naturally, but it would still have been nice if one of them had made the effort.

“Well, it’s over now,” said Ronelle. “And here we are. Ebou Dar. What do you think?”

Gesturing to the city required her to turn a full circle, for Ebou Dar enclosed the mouth of the River Eldar. There were buildings on both its banks, but the ones to the west looked by far the fancier. It was at those that Keestis stared, the pale palaces with their colourful domes and tall spires.

“It’s so pretty,” she claimed.

Nynaeve sniffed. Tar Valon had been prettier, and no less full of corruption for all that. Still, it would be nice to finally be able to rest somewhere where the floor stayed where it was supposed to. The western half of the city was walled. She could see them even at a distance, thick, tall, and white. The other, grimier half didn’t look to be defended by so much as a fence.

“Three guesses where the poor people live.”

Ronelle nodded agreement. “Emara and Elayne will have much to say about that.”

“And all about how different they are from other nobles.” Nynaeve shook her head. Those two were alright, for nobles, but they simply couldn’t see how spoiled they had been. Elayne had probably given that wretched captain twice as much as the voyage had been worth, and all while Nynaeve was too ill to stop her. She’d need to take control of the purse strings again before the girl beggared them.

“We’re definitely not sailing on to Tear, then?” Keestis asked.

“Definitely not!” Rand wasn’t even in Tear. Even if the thought of continuing on by ship hadn’t been so horrifying, there was just no point to it. The Black Ajah wouldn’t be visiting that city any time soon, not after fleeing it only a few months ago. Where they *would* go she couldn’t say, but she had a more pressing task than hunting Darkfriends now. The seal they’d found in the Panarch’s museum rested safely in her pack, cushioned beneath several layers of cloth. It needed to be taken to the White Tower. Nynaeve didn’t much like the Aes Sedai, but there was no safer place for it.

Emara and Shimoku came to join them. The little Illianer exchanged smiles with Ronelle before turning her big grey eyes on Nynaeve.

“Queen Tylin do have an Aes Sedai advisor. She be our best bet to arrange delivery of the package. She will have the means of contacting people in Illian, too. I do want to find out if my letter got through to my mother.”

Ronelle put an arm around her. “I’m sure they made it out.” Nynaeve said nothing. A Forsaken ruled in Illian now. Who knew what a monster like Sammael could or would do? That was another good reason not to press on east.

“Does anyone know the Aes Sedai who advises Tylin?”

“Her name be Cavandra, and she has been here for decades. But that be all I know,” said Emara. The others just shook their heads.

It was not what Nynaeve wanted to hear. The Black Ajah infested the Tower so badly that the Amyrlin couldn’t trust any full Aes Sedai. That was why she had sent a group of Accepted to hunt down the criminals instead of more experienced women. How was she supposed to guess at this Cavandra’s allegiance if she was a complete unknown? It would be a coin toss, and Nynaeve had a healthy scorn of gambling.

“Perhaps we should discuss this at the inn. There are many eyes and ears around us,” Shimoku said quietly.

She sniffed. The woman would go around telling people to do what they were already planning to do. She was nearly as bad as Elayne sometimes.

*Name the Dark One and He will appear.* The Daughter-Heir of Andor strode up to them briskly, her travel bags slung from her shoulders despite the polite offers from their Shienaran guards. Elayne was a beautiful young woman, with fair skin, blue eyes, and a mane of red-gold curls flowing down her back. She had grown up in a palace and seemed to see this whole affair as one grand

adventure. It reminded Nynaeve of another girl, long dead now. She was determined to see that Elayne didn't meet a similar fate.

"Ebou Dar. Built on the ruins of Barashta, capital of one of the Ten Nations. An old and storied city. Alas, modern day Altara is but a shadow of what once was. This city and the nation it claims to rule have a reputation for violence and unlawfulness. We must be cautious, my friends."

Nynaeve rolled her eyes at the girl's speech. "Obviously. Have you only just realised that?" Ignoring the way Elayne's chin rose, she braced her stomach and led the way towards the gangplank. It was getting better. A little.

Sandar gave her a wary look before striding off down to the dock. Though lean, the dark man had a wiry strength and was no coward. She wondered what it was about Ebou Dar that had him looking so spooked. The Shienaran guards that Rand had loaned them split into two groups without the courtesy of waiting for her word. One group followed behind the Accepted, while another hastened to join Sandar in the lead. Obviously Elayne hadn't been working on Ragan during the voyage. She'd have to pick up the slack there, too.

The topknotted soldier didn't notice the scowl she shot back at him once she reached the bottom of the gangplank, for he was too busy helping Shimoku with her balance. As if she couldn't walk down a little bit of wood without help! Annoyingly, the girl wasn't shoving him off the way Nynaeve would have.

She might have given them both the rough side of her tongue, but Elayne had descended by then, to cast her eager eyes about at the bustling dockworkers and the city around and beyond them. "Shall we make ourselves known at the Tarasin Palace? Queen Tylin is a weak ruler, but a ruler still. It would not do to visit her city without presenting ourselves."

"Among all these people, would she even know if we didn't?"

Elayne pursed her lips rather prettily. "My mother would. It would reflect ill on Andor if I scorned the Queen of Altara."

Nynaeve set her jaw. "Only if you are known to scorn her. If our luck holds, we can be out of this city in a few days. Juilin! Find us a nice inn. One where the floor doesn't sway." As she led them off with one hand pressed to her still-upset stomach, she sent up a silent prayer that their visit to Ebou Dar would go as well as their visit to Tanchico had.

## CHAPTER 9: In Their Wake



Nataly Shindula-Maqui rolled over in her luxurious bed in the Meridarch's palace of Tanchico and rubbed at her eyes. She was surprised to see that it was still dark outside. It wasn't like her to wake before dawn. Or until well after it. One did not stun the way she did without copious amounts of beauty sleep. She lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, wondering what had disturbed her rest.

There had been an ... incident, with the traitor Liandrin. That dirty Red. Another woman might have been upset by that. But she was a daughter of ancient Houses, and an Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. She was beyond being upset. She pulled the covers higher, despite the warm southern weather.

But what then could have woken her? She opened herself to *saidar* and allowed the One Power to flow into her, thrilling her and enhancing her senses even as it brought the elements themselves justly under her control.

The palace slept as soundly as any old woman, safe in her familiar home, free of dark memories. Nataly rose from her bed, ears pricked.

Beyond the shutters of her window, the city was cloaked in shadow. She had visited the Borderlands once, where every town and village was lit all through the night as a precaution against Myrddraal. Such habits were not seen in the more southern nations, and certainly not here in peaceful Tarabon. The sea protected them like the mightiest of fortress walls. Her homeland had not seen war since the days of Artur Hawkwing.

That was not to say it had not seen violence. Men were men, and the thought of their neighbour having more than them was ever like to inflame the anger of the dim and the lowborn. Tarabon was rich, but not so rich that it could give endlessly to all those who flocked here hoping for a taste of its peace. That being so, she was not overly alarmed when the sound of steel on steel shivered to her on the night air. It was only when another sense began to tingle that her eyes widened, a sense that only a woman trained in the White Tower possessed.

Someone was channelling in Tanchico.

Could Liandrin and her cronies have returned? It must be so! Who else would be able to channel so much *saidar* that she could sense it from here?

She reached underneath her bed, and came away with the *angreal* in hand. It looked like an old statue of a woman with more hair than clothes, but it was so much more than that. When she released and re-embraced *saidar*, this time through the *angreal*, twice as much of the One Power surged through her. It was almost as thrilling as the first time she'd touched it, almost forty years back.

Running footsteps could be heard in the corridor outside her chambers, voices crying alarm. Nataly did not hasten with them. A woman of her stature did not rush about. She was Andric's advisor, but she was certainly not his servant. Let him come to her and plead for her aid, as he did all too rarely. It would do him good. Instead, she called for her servants.

"Meera! Josepha! Wake, and attend me at once!"

She heard them stir. If they were upset with the early call, no word of complaint reached her ears. They were Andric's, technically—he paid their wages, after all—but neither of them would ever dare to refuse an order from an Aes Sedai. Admiring herself in the stand mirror, Nataly waited for her servants to emerge from their little cubicles. What should she wear? She should look her best when she smote Liandrin. There could be no room for doubt in the Red's mind that Nataly was her better in every way imaginable.

When she finally emerged from her rooms she was clad in a gown of blue silk, trimmed with delicate white lace at the hem, sleeves and bosom. The low neckline left a sizable amount of said bosom on display, which was unfashionable in Tanchico at the moment, but Nataly was no slave to fashion. Perhaps she would inspire a new fashion in those who saw her. More importantly, it would tweak Liandrin's nose. Her breasts were by far the bigger, after all.

The palace was quieter now, with never a guard to be seen. Andric had not come to her, the self-absorbed fool. No matter. She had the patience of mountains. No doubt he would see sense one of these years. She strolled through the palace, her *angreal* in hand. It annoyed her that she had to let herself out, though the sight of people fleeing across the square outside did nothing to ruffle her composure. Cowardly peasants were always rushing somewhere or other. She paid little heed to their panicked babbling about an invading army, too. An army attacking Tarabon! In a thousand years it had never happened. Truly, it was a wonder their ilk even managed to pick fruits. Certainly they were unsuited to any task more challenging.

She allowed none of it to show, but she did feel a moment's unease when she drew closer to the source of the channelling and realised there was more than one woman involved. She squashed that unease firmly, however. It was unworthy of her. Besides, she was an Aes Sedai, trained and shawled. And she had an *angreal*. No-one could hope to resist her.

The bulk of the Meridarch's Circle blocked her view of the private docks here on the Maseta, much less the larger docks just to the west on the Calpene. The third of Tanchico's peninsulas, the Verana, on which the Panarch's palace could be found, stirred to the east. She could not see what was happening, over beyond the water, but she could hear it. And feel it, too. How many had Liandrin brought? Another woman might have retreated. Might have listened to the little voice in their head telling them that the Tower did not rule here and she was free to leave if she wished. Not Nataly, though. Why, she did not even consider such an unworthy course.

Kicking at her skirts, the Aes Sedai marched right into a scene out of nightmares.

The streets of the city were packed with armoured soldiers, steel-veiled Taraboners and strangers whose armour made them look like giant insects. There were so many of them. How had Liandrin—? But when she looked to the source of the channelling it was not the Red she saw, only some stranger in a grey dress, in whose ear whispered another, older woman. Andric's men had tried to halt the strangers' advance, using the narrow streets to their advantage. Several houses had already been demolished to make room for the more-numerous invaders. As she watched, the woman in grey used the One Power to bring another building crashing down, the sound almost swallowed in the ruckus.

She spotted Andric, then lost him again immediately when his horse reared and sent him tumbling to the ground. His remained men—so few!—closed in around him as the strangers advanced. They didn't stand for long. A triple line of spear pressed forward, not in a charge but with slow deliberation. Shields in front, they thrust and stabbed, those in the back finishing off any man who went down under the first attacks as the line marched ever forwards. Crossbowmen swarmed over the rubble to get an angle on the Life Guard, and when their reserves ran to defend the flank a shaft of lightning lanced down to shatter their charge. And their resolve.

How dare they!? Using the One Power without the White Tower's permission. Using it to kill. And to kill her Taraboners! To attack this peaceful place!

"Stand your ground!" she shouted, pointing at the first of the Life Guard to show his back to the enemy. All thought of leaving had evaporated. She had her *angreal*. And they had Tanchico behind them. The Life Guard themselves might be few in number, but the city's populace was huge. Surely they would rally to its defence. And she would lead them!

"The Aes Sedai!" a local shouted.

"*Marath 'damane!*" called one of the invaders. Was that the Old Tongue? One who must be leashed? She must have misheard. There was no time to wonder, for she soon found the One Power being turned against her.

The spun shield was reduced to ribbons by her counter. And the oaths that stayed her hand were negated. Nataly drew herself up and pushed her shoulders back. "You will drive these invaders back into the sea, yes? Now that I am here, you cannot fail!"

Rather annoyingly, the officer she addressed did not meet her eyes. "As you say, mistress," he told her bosom.

Putting the fool out of mind, she turned on the grey-clad woman in righteous fury. Her own attempt at a shielding failed, too, but she soon turned to more lethal attacks, ones that the woman was barely able to deflect. The building behind her caught fire, and lightning cracked the pavement at her side, but her enemy stood fast despite the sweat running down her face. The few attacks the woman manage to throw back at her were all shielding, and all failed just as badly as the first. Why did she

want her taken alive so much? Nataly would not show her the same mercy, not now that she was free of those pesky oaths. Who among her ancestors had ever shown mercy to an uppity peasant and not regretted it?

It ended suddenly. The other woman's weaving did not finish in time, Nataly's bolt of fire won through, and just like that there was another corpse littering Tanchico's once-peaceful streets.

The older woman, who had stood at the other's side throughout, screamed in fury. Dark eyes glared hatred at Nataly, but she was unafraid. What mere woman could ever threaten an Aes Sedai?

The Life Guard cheered her victory, which was surprisingly thrilling. A smile touched her lips. "Press the attack!"

It should have been Andric giving the orders but he was still lying where he had fallen, the useless fool. His men obeyed her readily enough, of course. They knew who and what she was.

Or at least, they tried to obey her. Rather annoyingly, the invaders were undeterred by the loss of their channeler. Men—and women—in plumed helmets shouted orders, and their soldiers moved immediately as directed. The last charge of the Life Guard did not push the foe back. It barely even delayed their advance.

Nataly could only watch in dismay as her cheering men were cut down, the injured finished off with methodical brutality. Even Andric himself was not spared. She wasn't even sure if the man who killed him knew that it was the Meridarch of Tarabon under his spear, or would have cared if he did know.

All she knew was that the thrill of her victory was short-lived. She held enough of the One Power within her to level everything in sight but could do nothing, for she herself had not been threatened. All she could do was stand there and curse them.

She was still informing them of their low birth and the poor taste of their mothers when the second group arrived. To her fury, none of them had attacked her, though there was open hatred on their faces when they looked her way. Hatred and, oddly, contempt. If there was one thing she was not used to seeing, it was that.

"Oh good. Perhaps you will prove less cowardly than these gutter-spawned ruffians," she said. "Come then. Try *this* Taraboner's mettle!" If even one of them attacked she would have her justification. Until they did the oaths held her as surely as chains.

"Who would want to hurt such a good *damane*?" asked a woman whose dress showed lightning bolts akin to the first. This one was not old, however. She was striking, with long hair and a bosom to rival Nataly's, though her skin was the colour of teak and her hair almost black.

"What did you call me?" She hadn't mistaken it that time, despite the strange accent. *Damane*. It meant Leashed One in the Old Tongue.

"I would. I would like to hurt her," said the older woman, who'd been glaring at Nataly from afar.

"Then you should not be the one to hold her leash," the newcomer told her.

Leash! Sure enough, the darker woman walked towards her holding a silvery collar from which trailed a fine rope, the other end of which was attached to a bracelet on her wrist. Nataly was on the verge of telling her what a fool she was but managed to hold her tongue. And the Shadow take the mother who had always claimed she'd never learn how! A leash was not a sword, but if this wretch dared touch her person that would be cause enough. The *angreal* was still in her hands, the One Power was still inside her, and the shields she'd woven around herself in preparation for the fight that hadn't started were still in place. Soon they would learn the price of angering her.

She smiled at the woman when she brushed her hair aside to close the collar about her neck. The fool had signed her own death warrant.

"That's what I like to see. I think you will make an especially good *damane*."

"Oh, on the contrary. You are about to learn what it is to anger an Aes Sedai," Nataly told her coldly. With that, she struck out at last ... or she tried to.

Her jaw dropped. She tried again. It dropped further. Nothing happened. The woman did not go hurtling back to land among the armoured invaders who infested the streets of her city. Instead she just stood there, tutting.

"You have been a very bad *damane*," she told Nataly's bosom. I think I might have to take a special interest in your training.

This was madness. The Power was still in her but she could not use it. It was almost as if ... As if she was linked! She yanked at the collar but it would not budge. Sudden pain bloomed in her stomach, such that she looked for a knifeman but found no-one nearby save the woman on the other end of the leash.

"You mustn't try to remove the *a'dam*. That is one of the first lessons you will have to learn. It will take time, but don't be sad. It always takes time. You will learn, as all the others before you did. And as all the so-called Aes Sedai of these lands one day will."

"You ... who are you?" she asked, too disturbed to keep her voice from trembling.

The woman smiled warmly. "My name is Millay. And I will have charge of your training, unless someone pulls rank. You should be grateful that it's me. Most would treat you harshly. But even if they are only *marath'damane*, that does not mean that the training has to be painful, I always say. There are other ways ..."

\* \* \*

Egeanin led the soldiers through Tanchico's streets with a sure, familiar stride. She was navy, rather than army, and did not rightly command this group, but they followed her nonetheless. The Empire was adaptable, as were those who fought for it. If a ship captain knew the terrain better, a professional like Ulyette would not waste time quibbling over precedence.

The scarred woman kept a close eye out as they marched, and a hand ever on the hilt of her heron-marked blade. Her soldiers were nearly as watchful. The main force of Tanchico's defenders had been routed with ease, but a city in the midst of being conquered was always a dangerous place to be. Random citizens might decide to attack at any moment. They would be throwing their lives away if they did.

With Andric dead, there was only one person who might order the Taraboners to surrender to the Seanchan Empire. As luck would have it, Egeanin knew exactly where to find her.

It was less fortunate that she didn't know where Nynaeve and the others had gone. East, they had said, but the Seanchan did not yet control the Sea of Storms. They could be anywhere on that vast body of water, and the male *a'dam* they'd found could be anywhere beneath it by now. Should she report it to the High Lady Suroth? The Empire would soon mourn the loss of that prize, she feared.

But there was nothing she could do about it now.

The Three Plum Court was much as she remembered it, though the inn buzzed like a kicked beehive. Not even the riots that had so often assailed Tanchico during her stay had caused such an uproar. But then, riots were a common occurrence on this lawless island. An enemy army disembarking on their supposedly safe haven was unprecedented. That was why it had been so easy to secure the city. And why her fellow Seanchan looked on the natives with such contempt when they kicked open the door of the inn.

Chair legs scraped on the floor as men rose to their feet. Some were armed, but none dared bare their weapons against the armoured Seanchan. Not yet. There had been no mercy shown to those who resisted the landing. Those of the Life Guard who survived the fight had been executed as an example to others. She hoped these men took that example to heart. The cold light in Tairise Ulyette's eyes boded ill for them if they did not.

Egeanin spotted Rendra right away, and nodded solemnly. Recognition of her and of the uniform she now wore lit the innkeeper's face with something that was not warmth. So be it. She hadn't come here to thank her for her hospitality.

She stepped forward. "Amathera. We know she is here. Bring her out. You have my word that no harm will come to you if you cooperate."

Rendra's rosebud mouth opened and closed several times before she spoke. Lies bloomed and withered in her mouth, but it was the truth that sprouted in the end. "In the kitchen, she is."

Ulyette showed an inch of steel. "Show me, oathbreaker."

Angry mutters rose. From the way Ulyette was looking at the Taraboners, she would have welcomed an attack. The Empire had suffered a humiliating defeat at Falme, and like most she was determined to wipe the shame of that away with the blood of the Empress' enemies.

Egeanin would have been so, too, once. But it was harder to work up the bloodlust when you had lived among the people you were supposed to be fighting. “We do not intend to kill her. Only to speak to her,” she told Rendra as they passed out of the common room.

“So many, they are dead already, yes. What is one more?”

She had no answer to that.

It might be hoped that Amathera would have the answer, though few would have thought it to see her. The Panarch of Tarabon was a pretty woman, with a figure worthy of a shea dancer, though no dancer would ever be allowed to scowl at a customer as sulkily as she did the Seanchan.

“You are the High Lady of this island?” Ulyette asked dubiously.

“I am the Panarch of Tarabon, whose noble lands you have invaded,” Amathera declared.

Even so, it was only when Egeanin gave the nod that Ulyette continued. Small wonder, for Amathera was clad in a dress more suited to a serving girl than one of the Blood.

“I am Captain Tairise Ulyette of the Ever-Victorious Army. In the name of the Empress—may she live forever!—I demand your surrender. Swear to serve and obey the Crystal Throne, and the High Lady Suroth may allow you to rule these lands in the Empress’ name. Refuse and be destroyed.”

Amathera’s sulk deepened. “Who are you people? How dare you attack us? We are a peaceful nation!”

Tairise’s stern expression didn’t change at all. “You are oathbreakers. We fight in the name of Artur Hawkwing, and for his descendant the Empress—may she live forever! You should have remembered. All these lands belong to her. Surrender, swear, obey, and you may be forgiven your treachery.”

“Hawkwing!? He has been dead for a thousand years!”

“His heirs remain,” Egeanin said. She tried to make herself sound reasonable. “It will be easier on your people if you order them to swear the oaths. They will swear them anyway, the ones who survive and remain free, but there will be more of those if you order them not to resist us. You are what passes for High Blood in this place. Do your duty.”

It would be best if Amathera helped to restore order. With or without her it would be done—Egeanin intended to see that little wretch Ikyu brought to justice herself—but it would be easier with Amathera’s cooperation.

Whether she would give it was another matter. “Your cowardly sneak attack, it might have surprised Andric, but the rest of Tarabon, they will know you are coming. Perhaps it is you who should be surrendering to me, yes?”

But Egeanin shook her head. “I have taken the measure of your forces. You cannot hope to prevail against the Ever-Victorious Army. This island will be ours before the season turns. Submit. Serve and obey, and you will likely be elevated to the Blood. Defy the Crystal Throne and you will only suffer.”

Panarch Amathera had never impressed her. She was a spoiled and weak woman, in Egeanin’s eyes. How unfortunate, then, that she should find her courage at that moment of all moments. “Tarabon will never be yours. We are a free people, an advanced, progressive people. Your brand of tyranny will never take root here.”

There was nothing more Egeanin could do for her. She could only watch as Captain Ulyette strode over to seize the Panarch of Tarabon’s arm and twist it behind her back. A strong woman, she had no difficulty forcing Amathera to her knees. Her soldiers came forward with the chains and just like that the ruler of a nation became property. The people on this side of the ocean never seemed to understand. They always thought just refusing to accept something would prevent it from happening. She hoped the others learned from the mistakes of women like Amathera, or the Empire would soon have more slaves than it knew what to do with.

\* \* \*

The full moon shone down on Tanchico, indifferent to the death of its Meridarch and the rise of his killers to power over that grand old city. Nataly was not indifferent, but there was nothing she could do to stop them. The One Power was denied her somehow.

The invaders hadn't been entirely indifferent, either, when the one called Millay led her into this bedroom by the collar around her neck, but none of them had tried to stop her. They'd shook their heads, sneered even, but none of them had done anything more.

So it was that she found herself shivering naked on the soft bed, staring at the woman who had stripped her down with her own power. Millay took her time about undressing, smiling confidently as she unveiled herself. Her skin was brown from more than the sun, the nipples that tipped her full breasts darker than the rest of her. Long straight hair framed a pretty face. Her eyes were hard to meet. Nataly squirmed away from her on the bed, which only made her smile widen.

The invader pounced. She pressed their breasts together, dark atop light, and ran her tongue up Nataly's neck, touching the soft flesh on either side of the silver collar fastened around her. Millay took her nipple in hand and began squeezing it.

Her squeal made the woman laugh. "How do you feel, little Gnat?"

In truth, she felt good. Far too good. "Is it this collar, Millay? Something's making my head feel fuzzy ..."

Millay stroked her breast with surprising gentleness. "Remember, Gnat, you're not supposed to call me by my name."

The pleasure became pain for a moment, almost cutting through the fog in her mind. "Right ... I'm sorry, m-mistress ..."

Millay laughed lightly. "It's working nicely."

"What are you doing to me?"

A dark hand petted her golden hair. "Nothing you need to know. Rest assured. Instead, focus on the pleasure. I'll be making you feel much better." Another began to pet the hair down below.

Nataly moaned. "Ohh, such gentle fingers ..." She didn't understand it. She'd never felt so hot before in her life. She came almost as soon as the Searchan slid her finger inside.

The woman atop her laughed to see it. "How cute. You see now? All *marath 'damane* were made to be pets. It's not something to be feared."

"This still doesn't feel right ..." Nataly said, through the haze of unnatural lust. "I hate to say that I'm a bit scared ..."

Another finger, and another jolt of sudden pleasure. She stared down at the hand probing her, the silvery bracelet and leash that attached them glinting in the candlelight as Millay fingered her. "I wouldn't worry about all that," she said. "In fact, forget about it. You can do that, can't you, Gnat?"

Her back arched under a particularly hard onslaught and words burst unbidden from her lips. "Yes! As you wish, mistress."

Millay smiled down at her. "Sweet Gnat, what if I said you could feel even better?"

"Better than this? That would be incredible."

Her mistress laughed. "Good girl. This might come as a little surprise, though." She felt *saidar* flow through her into Millay. Strands of Air were woven together to form a thick rod, one that protruded from the other woman's crotch.

Shock cleared some of the haze from her mind. "What in the world is that?"

Millay chuckled richly. "This is about to show you a new world of pleasure."

"This can't be happening to me. I am Aes Sedai."

There was a cold, considering light in the eyes of the woman above her. "What's the matter, Gnat? You aren't thinking of rebelling against your new position, are you?"

"W-well, um, you, I, uh ..."

Her legs were parted by the other woman's knees. As she crouched between them, Millay took that strange object in hand. "Don't you want to give this a try? How do you think it would feel inside you?"

Her skin flushed hot at the mere thought. "W-well ... but ..."

The end of the rod brushed up against her sex, making her cry out. Millay paused there, however, to consider her with that same cold light. "Of course, if you're scared, I won't make you do anything. Take a while to think about it ... You have time. I could pass you over to another *sul'dam*. Most of them prefer a more ... direct approach. I don't think you'd like it, though, not as much as you'd like being one of my pets." Pleasure that approached pain shot through her when the woman pinched her nipple.

"Don't do that! I can't think when you do that!"

The Seanchan only laughed. "How cute."

"How can that feel so good?" She'd touched herself before but it had never come close to this.

"If that's what my fingers do, my toy might make you pass out." She rubbed its tip up and down her slit, making her moan. "I just need to stir it around in there and it could get you off in seconds."

"S-seconds ..."

"I know you're a dirty, filthy pervert, Gnat. You want it, don't you? You can hardly wait." Heat entered her eyes as she spoke. Her breath was hot on Nataly's face as she climbed atop her. "Come now, you can't possibly help yourself by now. Your body is only getting naughtier."

Her kiss silenced whatever objections Nataly might have managed to make, and had her flooding the bed with her juices. She found herself kissing the invader's back, and touching their tongues together as she writhed on the bed. That rod was coming close to her hole. It could slip in so easily. And, to the horror of a distant part of her, she wanted it to.

Millay leaned back. "Now, how about it, Gnat? Beg me. And make it sexy."

"I want you to take me, mistress," she gasped. "Please, fuck me silly!"

She grinned. "Well done. Have your reward."

Nataly screamed as Millay rammed her toy cock into her pussy. She came. Hard. And the pleasure kept surging through her for a long time, completely overwhelming the pain and shame of losing her virtue.

"Why does this feel so good?" she wailed.

"Because, my Gnat, you're a filthy *marath 'damane*. Just accept it. You were born to be a pet, not a woman. My pet."

She couldn't form the words to object. She was drowning in pleasure. The Seanchan moved her curvaceous hips, sliding the cock in and out of Nataly's sopping wet hole, making her moan and whimper. Making her come again. Breaking her.

"I've hardly started, but you already seem to love being my pet."

"Y-yes! I-it's incredible!"

Millay smiled as if the words were exactly what she'd expected to hear. She gave the Aes Sedai a particularly hard thrust. "Don't worry. There's plenty more pleasure to come ... I take good care of my *damane*, whatever the others say." She feasted on the sight of Nataly writhing on the bed before her, her big breasts jiggling madly each time she took what Millay had to give her. The sight seemed to excite her, for she embraced her and rubbed their breasts together, their nipples fencing. Both women moaned, then. "This could even make me feel good."

"M-mistress, that tickles ... ah, please ..." Nataly objected when she felt a little pink tongue lapping wetly at her face. Millay silenced her by slipping that tongue into her mouth instead. She kept grinding against her as they kissed.

"You're learning. For that, I think I'll let you come."

"Mistress ... aah!?" Her question was washed from her mind by a wave of pleasure.

"Now ... drown in the sea of pleasure, and become my mindless pet."

She barely heard the words. Nataly was too busy clamping her legs around the source of the euphoria that dominated her.

"Yes ... Let me hear you're obscene screams. Come for me, you dirty thing."

She couldn't help but do just that. Worse, she couldn't help but want to.

## CHAPTER 10: A Signal



The common room of The Wandering Woman was pleasantly cool despite the southern sun. High ceilings and wide windows saw to that. The screens on the windows fought back much of the sun's glare, too, despite having so many holes in them to let in the breeze. It was a pleasant enough inn, but Nynaeve was eager to be away now that her stomach was feeling better. They had work to do.

She and the rest of the Accepted sat together at a corner table, while Ragan and his Shienarans—and Juilin—had arranged themselves in a screen around them. It was no accident that they'd taken all the nearest tables, even if it meant leaving chairs empty. Nynaeve had not ordered it, and the presumption got on her nerves, but she decided she would let it pass for now. Privacy was a good thing to have, in Ebou Dar. Even a few days in the city had been enough to teach her that. Men fighting duels. Men begging in the streets. Men robbing their neighbours. Good Theren folk would never behave like that!

Black-haired Shimoku, whose family were bankers, was counting their coin. Elayne sat beside her, all outward composure, trying to pretend that she hadn't just been set down for trying to do the job herself. Little Emara and big Ronelle were still complaining about the quotes they'd been given on the horses they'd need to buy for the journey north. Nynaeve understood their annoyance, but still frowned their way. Some women just liked to complain, it seemed to her. Moaning wasn't going to get those horsetraders to drop their prices one copper. At least Keestis was brooding in silence, frowning out at the bustling room through those strange lenses she wore. The confused ramblings of one ship captain were hardly proof of an attack on Tanchico. And even if they had been, there was nothing the six of them could do about it.

There were Sea Folk ships in the harbour now, a surprising amount of them. Nynaeve had no intention of taking ship, however. All the talk among the traders had been of how much of a terror the Mistress of the Ships, this Nesta woman, was at the bargaining table. They shouldn't be wasting their coin on overpriced Sea Folk. Even Elayne had to see that. On land, good stable land—that was the way to travel.

She turned her frown on the spoils arrayed before Shimoku. Besides two small gilded coffers containing Amathera's presents of jewellery, several leather purses bulging with coin lay on the table. The Panarch had been more than generous in her desire to see their backs. The other things looked trifling by comparison; a small dark wooden box, polished but plain and uncarved, and a washleather purse lying flat and showing the impression of a disc inside. The box held two of the *ter'angreal* they had recovered from the Black Ajah, both linked to dreams, and the purse ... That was their prize from Tanchico. One of the seals on the Dark One's prison.

As much as she wanted to find out where Siuan Sanche wanted them to chase the Black Ajah next, the seal was the source of her haste to reach Tar Valon. She avoided touching the flat purse as much as she could; the longer it remained in her possession, the more she wanted to hand it to the Amyrlin and be done with it. Sometimes she thought she could feel the Dark One, trying to break through, when she was near the thing. He would break free sooner or later, and there was nothing she could do to stop that either, or what would come of it.

When she had left the Theren, it had been to protect young people from her village, snatched away in the night by an Aes Sedai. She had gone to the Tower still with the hope that she could somehow shelter them, and the added ambition of bringing down Moiraine for what she had done. The world had changed since then. Or maybe she only saw the world differently. *No, it is not me that's changed. I'm the same; it is everything else that's different.*

Now it was all she could do to protect herself. Rand was what he was, and no turning back, and Mat had learned to think of nothing but women, carousing and gambling. She even found herself sympathizing with Moiraine sometimes, to her disgust. At least Perrin and Anna had gone back home, or so she had heard from Rand; perhaps they were safe.

Hunting the Black Ajah was good and right and satisfying—and also terrifying, though she tried to hide that part; she was a grown woman, not a girl who needed to hide in her mother's apron—yet that was not the main reason she was willing to keep on bashing her head against a wall, keep on trying to learn to use the Power. That reason was the Talent called Healing. As Wisdom of Emond's Field it had been gratifying to bring the Women's Circle around to her way of thinking—especially since most were old enough to be her mother; with not many years on Elayne, she had been the youngest Wisdom ever in the Theren—and even more so to see that the Village Council did what they should, stubborn men that they were. The most satisfaction, though, had always come from finding the right combination of herbs to cure an illness. To Heal with the One Power ... She had done it by accident back then, fumbling, curing what her other skills never could. Now she could do it at will. The joy of it was enough to bring tears. One day she meant to Heal everything. One day she would even Heal that wound in Rand's side. Surely there was nothing that could not be Healed, not if the woman wielding the Power was determined enough.

"Do you think Tanchico really was attacked?"

"Perhaps." Elayne's voice was cool, a pronouncement from the throne. Her eyes were blue ice. She did not look at Nynaeve. "And perhaps reports of what we did got tangled with other rumours. Tarabon could have a new meridarch, and a new panarch, very easily."

Nynaeve kept her temper in check and her hands away from her braid. They clutched her knees instead. *You are trying to put her at ease with you. Watch your tongue.* "Amathera was difficult, but I do not wish her any harm. Do you?"

"A pretty woman," Juilin said, from where he was sitting with one long leg stretched out, his thumb-thick staff of pale ridged wood leaning next to him, and that silly red hat he'd found back in Tarabon tipped forward, "especially in one of those Taraboner serving girl's dresses, with a pretty smile. I thought she—" He saw the Accepted looking at him and quickly pulled his hat down until it sat precariously over his eyes, pretending to sleep. She and Elayne shared a glance, and she knew the other's thought was the same as hers. *Men.*

"Whatever has happened to Amathera, Nynaeve, she is behind us, now." Elayne sounded more normal. "I wish her well, but mainly I hope the Black Ajah is not behind us. Not following, I mean."

Juilin stirred uneasily without raising his head; he was still uncomfortable with the knowledge that Black Aes Sedai were real and not simply a tale in the streets.

*He should be happy he doesn't have our knowledge.* Nynaeve had to admit that the thought was not entirely logical, but if he had known about a Forsaken being after them, even Rand's foolish instruction to *look after* her and Elayne would not have kept him from running. Still, he was useful at times.

"If they were following, they'd have caught up by now." That was surely true, considering the speed of that ship. "With any luck, they still do not know where we are."

Elayne nodded, grim but her old self again. She could be almost as determined as a Theren woman. "Liandrin and most of her cronies surely escaped from Tanchico. And we still don't know who is giving orders for the Black Ajah in the Tower. As Rand would say, we still have it to do, Nynaeve."

Despite herself, Nynaeve winced. True, they had a list of eight names, but once they were back in the Tower, almost any Aes Sedai they spoke to might be Black Ajah. Or any women they encountered on the road. For that matter, anyone they met *might* be a Darkfriend, but that was hardly the same thing, not by a wide degree.

"More than the Black Ajah," Elayne continued, "I worry about Mo—" Nynaeve put a quick hand on her arm and nodded slightly toward Juilin. Elayne coughed and went on as though that was what had stopped her. "About Mother. She has no reason to like you, Nynaeve. Quite the opposite."

"She is far away from here." Nynaeve was glad her voice was steady. They were not talking about Elayne's mother, but the Forsaken she had defeated. Part of her hoped fervently that Moghedien was far away. Very far.

"But if she was not?"

"She is." Nynaeve said firmly, but she still hitched her shoulders uncomfortably. A part of her remembered humiliations suffered at Moghedien's hands and desired nothing more than to face the woman again, to defeat her again, for good this time. Only, what if Moghedien took her by surprise?

The same was true of any of the Forsaken, of course, or of any Black sister for that matter, but after her rout in Tanchico, Moghedien had reason to hate her personally. Not pleasant at all to think that one of the Forsaken knew your name and likely wanted your head. *That is just rank cowardice*, she told herself sharply. *You are not a coward, and you will not be!* That did not stop the itch between her shoulder blades every time Moghedien came to mind, as if the woman was staring at her back.

"I suppose looking over my shoulder for bandits has made me nervous," Elayne said casually. "Why, sometimes when I dream of late, I have the feeling that someone is watching me."

Nynaeve gave a start at what seemed an echo of her own thoughts, but then she realized there had been a slight emphasis on "dream". Not any dreams, but *Tel'aran'rhiad*. Another thing the men did not know about. She had had the same sensation, but then there was often a feel of unseen eyes in the World of Dreams. It could be uncomfortable, but they had discussed the sensation before.

She made her voice light. "Well, your mother is not in our dreams, Elayne, or she would probably snatch us both up by an ear." Moghedien would probably torture them until they begged for death. Or arrange a circle of thirteen Black sisters and thirteen Myrddraal; they could turn you to the Shadow against your will that way, bind you to the Dark One. Maybe Moghedien could even do it by herself ... *Don't be ridiculous, woman! If she could have, she would have. You beat her, remember?*

"I do hope not," the other woman replied soberly.

Keestis had listened in silence but spoke now, her voice flat. "So do I. At least we don't have to worry about Temaile or Eldritch ..."

Nynaeve scowled through those lenses. Which of them had fought a Forsaken and won? Her! But the girl saw fit to complain at her even so. Some women were nearly as bad as men!

"I don't need to listen to this," Nynaeve said irritably. Putting the girls at ease was all very well, but she could do with less talk of Moghedien. The Forsaken had to be somewhere distant; she would not have let them come this far peacefully if she knew where they were. *Light send that that's true!* She pushed her chair back and stalked away from the table, braid in hand.

She heard a sigh behind her and another chair scraping along the floor, but refused to look back. She was a Healer, not a killer. What had Keestis expected her to do, just murder a helpless woman? How would that make her any better than a Forsaken?

"I would have done the same," Elayne said as Nynaeve was stepping out in the Ebou Dari sun. The Daughter-Heir paused in the doorway, adjusting a droopy, broad-brimmed yellow hat. It went well with her light blue dress, and protected her fair skin. "I did do the same. With Temaile. A trial was what was called for, in my judgement, not summary execution."

Nynaeve didn't let go of her braid, but she managed a curt nod. Elayne was a very nice girl usually, when she remembered that she was not in the Royal Palace in Caemlyn. And when she was not acting the fool.

Nynaeve's temper faded as they walked on talking about the foibles of the weaker sex—men, of course—and such simple matters as that. Not completely away, of course. It rarely did. Ebou Dar was a very bright city, the white stone that predominated shining so much it hurt the eyes at times. The people were brightly dressed, too, and annoyingly hotheaded. In this heat, she would have thought they'd prefer to rest more and fight less. In a city dominated by the matriarchy, she'd have fought peace would be more of a priority. But hoping that the world would be more like the Theren was another thing she'd probably have to give up on.

She was still squinting in the glare when they passed into a shopping district, where homes were fronted with wares and signs proclaiming the trade of the owner. Her frown deepened.

Hanging upside down beside the door of a tile-roofed seamstress's shop was a bunch of what looked almost like broomweed, with tiny yellow flowers, the stalks wrapped their whole length in a white ribbon, then tied with a dangling yellow one. It might have been some woman's feeble attempt at a festive decoration. But she was sure it was not.

Stopping beside an empty shop with a carving knife incised on the sign still hanging over the door, she pretended to search for a stone in her shoe while furtively studying the seamstress's shop. The door was open, and colourful bolts of cloth stood in the small-paned windows, but no-one went in or out.

"Can you not find it, Nynaeve? Take off your shoe."

Nynaeve's head jerked; she had almost forgotten that Elayne was there. No-one else was paying any attention to them, and no-one looked close enough to overhear. She still lowered her voice.

"That bunch of broomweed by that shop door. It is a Yellow Ajah signal, an emergency signal from one of the Yellow's eyes-and-ears."

She did not have to tell Elayne not to stare; the girl's eyes barely moved toward the shop.

"Are you certain?" she asked quietly. "And how do you know?"

"Of course I am certain. It's exact; the hanging bit of yellow ribbon is even split in three."

She paused to take a deep breath. Unless she was completely mistaken, that insignificant fistful of weeds held a dire meaning. If she *was* wrong, she was making a fool of herself, and she did hate to do that. "I spent a good deal of time talking with Yellows in the Tower." Healing was the main purpose of the Yellows; they did not care much for her herbs, but you did not need herbs when you could Heal with the Power. "One of them told me. She did not think it too great a transgression, since she was sure I'll choose Yellow. Besides, it has not been used in nearly three hundred years. Elayne, only a few women in each Ajah actually know who the Ajah's eyes-and-ears are, but a bunch of yellow flowers tied and hung like that tells any Yellow sister that here one is, and with a message urgent enough to risk uncovering herself."

"How are we going to find out what it is?"

Nynaeve liked that. Not "What are we going to do?" The girl had backbone.

"Follow my lead," she said, gripping the basket tighter as she straightened. She hoped she remembered everything Shemerin had told her. She hoped Shemerin had told her everything. The plump Yellow could be fluttery for an Aes Sedai.

The interior of the shop was not large, and every scrap of wall was taken up by shelves holding bolts of silk or finely woven wool, spools of piping and binding, and ribbon and lace of every width and description. Dressmaker's dummies stood about the floor wearing garments ranging from half-made to complete, from something suitable for a dance in embroidered green wool to a pearly grey silk gown that could have done very well at court. At first glance the shop had a look of prosperity and activity, but Nynaeve's sharp eye caught a hint of dust in one high neck of frothy Solinde lace, and on a large black velvet bow at the waist of another gown.

There were two dark-haired women in the shop. One, young and thin and trying to wipe her nose surreptitiously with the back of her hand, held a bolt of pale red silk clutched anxiously to her bosom. The other, handsome and in her middle years, was assuredly the seamstress, as proclaimed by the large bristling pincushion fastened to her wrist. Her dress was of good green wool, well cut and well made to show her skill, but only lightly worked with white flowers around the cut-out over her olive bosom, so as not to overshadow her patrons.

When Nynaeve and Elayne walked in, both women gaped as if none had entered in a year. The seamstress recovered first, regarding them with careful dignity as she made a slight curtsy. "May I serve you? I am Ronde Macura. My shop is yours."

"I want a dress embroidered with yellow roses on the bodice," Nynaeve told her. "But no thorns, mind," she added with a laugh. "I don't heal very fast." What she said did not matter, so long as she included "yellow" and "heal" in it. Now, if only that bunch of flowers was not happenstance. If that was the case, she would have to find some reason not to buy a dress with roses. And a way to keep Elayne from recounting the whole miserable experience to the others.

Mistress Macura stared at her for a moment with dark eyes, then turned to the thin girl, pushing her toward the back of the shop. "Go on to the kitchen, Luci, and make a pot of tea for these good ladies. From the blue canister. The water's hot, thank the Light. Go on, girl. Put that down and stop gawking. Quickly, quickly. The blue canister, mind. My best tea," she said, turning back to Nynaeve as the girl vanished through a door at the rear. "I live over the shop, you see, and my kitchen is in the back." She was smoothing her skirts nervously, thumb and forefinger of her right hand forming a circle. For the Great Serpent ring. There would be no need for an excuse about the dress, it seemed.

Nynaeve repeated the sign, and after a moment Elayne did, too. "I am Nynaeve, and this is Elayne. We saw your signal."

The woman fluttered as if she might fly away. "The signal? Ah. Yes. Of course."

"Well?" Nynaeve said. "What is the urgent message?"

"We should not talk about that out here ... uh ... Mistress Nynaeve. Anyone might walk in." Nynaeve doubted that. "I will tell you over a nice cup of tea. My best tea, did I say?"

Nynaeve exchanged looks with Elayne. If Mistress Macura was this reluctant to speak her news it must be appalling indeed.

"If we may just step into the back," Elayne said, "no-one will hear but us." Her regal tone made the seamstress stare. For a moment, Nynaeve thought it might cut through her nervousness, but the next instant the fool woman was babbling again.

"The tea will be ready in a moment. The water's already hot. We get lots of different teas through here. That is why I am here, I suppose. Not the tea, of course. All the trade that comes and all the news that comes with it. They—you are mainly interested in outbreaks of disease, or a new kind of illness, but I find that interesting myself. I dabble a little with—" She coughed and rushed on; if she smoothed her dress any harder, she would wear a hole in it. "Some worry about the Children, of course, but they—you—are not much interested in them, really."

"The kitchen, Mistress Macura," Nynaeve said firmly as soon as the other woman paused for breath. If the woman's news made her this afraid, Nynaeve would brook no more delay in hearing it.

The door at the back opened enough to admit Luci's anxious head. "It's ready, Mistress," she announced breathlessly.

"This way, Mistress Nynaeve," the seamstress said, still rubbing the front of her dress. "Mistress Elayne."

A short hallway led past narrow stairs to a snug, beam-ceilinged kitchen, with a steaming kettle sitting on the hearth and tall cupboards everywhere. Copper pots hung between the back door and a window that looked out into a small yard with a high wooden fence. The small table in the middle of the floor held a brilliant yellow teapot, a green honey jar, three mismatched cups in as many colours, and a squat blue pottery canister with the lid beside it. Mistress Macura snatched the canister, lidded it, and hastily put it into a cupboard that held more in two dozen shades and hues.

"Sit, please," she said, filling the cups. "Please."

Nynaeve took a ladder-back chair next to Elayne, and the seamstress set cups in front of them, flitting to one of the cupboards for pewter spoons.

"The message?" Nynaeve said as the woman sat down across from them. Mistress Macura was too nervous to touch her own teacup, so Nynaeve stirred a little honey into hers and took a sip; it was hot, but had a cool, minty aftertaste. Hot tea might settle the woman's nerves, if she could be made to drink.

"A pleasant taste," Elayne murmured over the edge of her cup. "What sort of tea is it?" *Good girl*, Nynaeve thought.

But the seamstress's hands only fluttered beside her cup. "A Taraboner tea. From the Great Emerald Jungle."

Sighing, Nynaeve took another swallow to settle her own stomach. "The message," she said insistently. "You did not hang that signal to invite us for tea. What is your urgent news?"

"Ah. Yes." Mistress Macura licked her lips, eyed them both, then said slowly, "It came near a month ago, with orders that any sister passing through heard it at all costs." She wet her lips again. "All sisters are welcome to return to the White Tower. The Tower must be whole and strong."

Nynaeve waited for the rest, but the other woman fell silent. *This* was the dire message? She looked at Elayne, but the heat seemed to be catching up to the girl; drooping in her chair, she was staring at her hands on the table. "Is that all of it?" Nynaeve demanded, and surprised herself by yawning. The heat must be reaching her, too.

The seamstress only watched her, intently.

"I said," Nynaeve began, but suddenly her head felt too heavy for her neck. Elayne had slumped onto the table, she realized, eyes closed and arms hanging limply. Nynaeve stared at the cup in her hands with horror. "What did you give us?" she said thickly; that minty taste was still there, but her tongue felt swollen. "Tell me!" Letting the cup fall, she levered herself up against the table, knees wobbling. "The Light burn you, what?"

Mistress Macura scraped back her chair and stepped out of reach, but her earlier nervousness was now a look of quiet satisfaction.

Blackness rolled in on Nynaeve; the last thing she heard was the seamstress's voice. "Catch her, Luci!"

## CHAPTER 11: Figs and Mice



Elayne realized that she was being carried upstairs by her shoulders and ankles. Her eyes opened, she could see, but the rest of her body might as well have belonged to someone else for all the control she had over it. Even blinking was slow. Her brain felt crammed full of feathers.

"She's awake, Mistress!" Luci shrilled, nearly dropping her feet. "She's looking at me!"

"I told you not to worry." Mistress Macura's voice came from above her head. "She cannot channel, or twitch a muscle, not with forkroot tea in her. I discovered that by accident, but it has certainly come in handy."

It was true. Elayne sagged between them like a doll with half the stuffing gone, bumping her bottom along the steps, and she could as well have run as channel. She could sense the True Source, but trying to embrace it was like trying to pick up a needle on a mirror with cold-numbed fingers. Panic welled up, and a tear slid down her cheek.

Perhaps these women were Darkfriends. If so, they were almost certainly serving the Black Ajah right along with the Yellow. She would surely be put in the hands of the Black Ajah unless Nynaeve had escaped. But if she was to escape, she could not count on anyone else. And she could neither move nor channel. Suddenly she realized that she was trying to scream, and producing only a thin, gurgling mewl. Halting it took all the strength she had left.

Nynaeve knew all about herbs, or claimed she did; why had she not recognized whatever that tea was? *Stop this whining!* The small, firm voice in the back of her head sounded remarkably like Lini.

*A shoat squealing under a fence just attracts the fox, when it should be trying to run.*

Desperately, she set herself to the simple task of embracing *saidar*. It had been a simple task, but now she might as well have been attempting to reach *saidin*. She kept on, though; it was the only thing she could do.

Mistress Macura, at least, seemed to have no worry. As soon as they had dropped Elayne onto a narrow bed in a small, close room with one window, she hustled Luci right out again with not even a backward glance. Elayne's head had fallen so she could see another cramped bed, and a highchest with tarnished brass pulls on the drawers. She could move her eyes, but shifting her head was beyond her.

In a few minutes the two women returned, puffing, with Nynaeve slung between them, and heaved her onto the other bed. Her face was slack, and glistening with tears, but her dark eyes ... Fury filled them, and fear, too.

Telling the thin girl to stay there, Mistress Macura hurried out once more, this time coming back with a tray that she placed atop the highchest. It held the yellow teapot, one cup, a funnel and a tall hourglass. "Now Luci, mind you pour a good two ounces into each of them as soon as that hourglass empties. As soon, mind!"

"Why don't we give it to them now, Mistress?" the girl moaned, wringing her hands. "I want them to go back to sleep. I don't like them looking at me."

"They would sleep like the dead, girl, and this way we can let them rouse just enough to walk when we need them to. I will dose them more properly when it's time to send them off. They'll have headaches and stomach cramps to pay for it, but no more than they deserve, I suppose."

"But what if they *can* channel, Mistress? What if they do? They're looking at me."

"Stop blathering, girl," the older woman said briskly. "If they could, don't you think they would have by now? They are helpless as kittens in a sack. And they will stay that way as long you keep a good dose in them. Now, you do as I told you, understand? I must go tell old Avi to send off one of his pigeons, and make a few arrangements, but I will be back as soon as I can. You had better brew another pot of forkroot just in case. I'll go out the back. Close up the shop. Someone might wander in and that would never do."

After Mistress Macura left, Luci stood staring at them for a while, still wringing her hands, the finally scurried out herself. Her sniffling faded down the stairs.

Elayne could see sweat beading on Nynaeve's brow; she hoped it was effort, not the heat. *Try, Nynaeve.* She herself reached for the True Source, fumbling clumsily through the wads of wool that seemed to pack her head, failed, tried again and failed, tried again ... *Oh, Light, try, Nynaeve! Try!*

The hourglass filled her eyes; she could not look at anything else. Sand pouring down, each grain marking another failure on her part. The last grain dropped. And Luci did not come.

Elayne strained harder, for the Source, to move. After a bit the fingers of her left hand twitched. *Yes!* A few minutes more, and she could lift her hand; only a feeble inch before it fell again, but it had lifted. With an effort, she could turn her head.

"Fight it," Nynaeve mumbled thickly, barely intelligible. Her hands were gripping the coverlet under her tightly; she seemed to be trying to sit up. Not even her head lifted, but she was trying.

"I am," Elayne tried to say; it sounded more like a grunt to her ears.

Slowly she managed to raise her hand to where she could see it, and hold it there. A thrill of triumph shot through her. *Stay afraid of us, Luci. Stay down there in the kitchen a little while longer, and ...*

The door banged open, and sobs of frustration racked her as Luci dashed in. She had been so close. The girl took one look at them and with a yelp of pure terror darted for the highchest.

Elayne tried to fight her, but thin as she was, Luci batted her floundering hands away effortlessly, forced the funnel between her teeth just as easily. The girl panted as if running. Cold, bitter tea filled Elayne's mouth. She stared up at the girl in a panic that Luci's face shared. But Luci held Elayne's mouth shut and stroked her throat with a grim if fearful determination until she swallowed. As darkness overwhelmed Elayne, she could hear liquid sounds of protest coming from Nynaeve.

When her eyes opened again, Luci was gone, and the sands trickled through the glass again. Nynaeve's dark eyes were bulging, whether in fear or anger, Elayne could not have said. No, Nynaeve would not give in. That was one of the things she admired in the other woman. Nynaeve's head could have been on the chopping block and she would not give up. *Our heads are on the block!*

It made her ashamed that she was so much weaker than Nynaeve. She was supposed to be Queen of Andor one day, and she wanted to howl with terror. She did not, even in her head—doggedly she went back to trying to force her limbs to move, to trying to touch *saidar*—but she wanted to. How could she ever be a queen, when she was so weak? Again she reached for the Source. Again. Again. Racing the grains of sand. Again.

Once more the glass emptied itself without Luci. Ever so slowly, she reached the point where she could raise her hand again. And then her head! Even if it did flop back immediately. She could hear Nynaeve muttering to herself, and she could actually understand most of the words.

The door crashed open once more. Elayne lifted her head to stare at it despairingly—and gaped. Top-knotted Ragan stood there like the hero of a story, one hand firmly gripping the neck of a Luci near fainting, the other holding a knife. Elayne laughed delightedly, though it came out more like a croak.

"Peace!" he swore. Roughly, he shoved the girl into a corner. "You stay there, or Areku will deal with you!" Grim-faced, the warrior woman stepped in behind him. She spared only a moment to stare at Nynaeve and Elayne before focusing her attention on Luci. The Shienaran men might refuse to do violence to a woman, but Areku had no such qualms. From the way Luci started weeping, she knew it, too.

Ragan's attention was on Nynaeve, though, worry painting his scarred face. "What did you give them, girl?"

"Not her," Nynaeve muttered. "Other one. Went away. Help me up. Have to walk."

Hauling Nynaeve to her feet, he began walking her up and down the few paces the room allowed. She sagged against him limply, shuffling.

"I found her rushing up the stairs, so panicked she did not even hear me break the window," Ragan said. "I am not so glad that another one got away without Juilin seeing her. Is she likely to bring others back?"

Elayne rolled over onto her side. "I do not think so," she mumbled. "She can't let—too many people—know about herself." In another minute she might be able to sit up. She was looking right at Luci; the girl flinched and tried to shrink through the wall.

"Juilin?" Nynaeve said. Her head wavered as she glared up at the armsman. She had no trouble speaking, though. "I didn't tell any of you to come after us."

The triangular scar on Ragan's cheek always looked whiter when he was angry. It was white now. "This city is dangerous. When you didn't come back quickly enough, we split up to search. Do not worry. The ... most of the other women stayed with the item. Keestis insisted on coming along."

Elayne found that she could sit up, barely, pulling herself hand over hand along the coverlet, but an effort to stand nearly put her flat again. *Saidar* was as unobtainable as ever; her head still felt like a goose-down pillow. Nynaeve was beginning to hold herself a little straighter, to lift her feet, but she still hung on Ragan.

Minutes later Juilin and Keestis arrived, pushing Mistress Macura ahead of them. "She came through a gate in the back fence. Thought I was a thief. It seemed best to bring her on in," Juilin said. He had his staff in hand. More importantly, while the *ter'angreal* whip she'd taken from the Black Ajah was still coiled at her waist, Keestis shone with the One Power, a light far brighter than her golden hair. Elayne was even more relieved than she'd been to see Ragan. If the Black Ajah *had* been alerted, they would not have to face them with knives and mumbled curses. She was a little surprised, too, for Keestis had been reluctant to be left alone with a man ever since what had happened in Tear.

"What did they do to you?" Keestis asked. "You aren't shielded ..."

"Something ... in the tea ..." Elayne managed.

The seamstress's face had gone so pale at the sight of them that her eyes seemed darker, and about to come out of her head besides. She licked her lips and smoothed her skirt incessantly, and cast quick little glances at Juilin as if wondering whether it might not be best to run anyway. For the most part, though, she stared at Elayne and Nynaeve; Elayne thought it an even chance whether she would burst into tears or swoon.

"Put her over there," Nynaeve said, nodding to where Luci still shivered in the corner with her arms wrapped around her knees, "and help Elayne. I never heard of forkroot, but walking seems to help the effects pass. You can walk most things off."

Juilin pointed to the corner, and Mistress Macura scurried to it and sat herself down beside Luci, still wetting her lips fearfully. "I—would not have done—what I did—only, I had orders. You must understand that. I had orders."

Gently helping Elayne to her feet, Juilin supported her in walking the few steps available crisscrossing the other pair. She wished it were Keestis. Juilin's arm around her waist was much too familiar. He had a wandering eye, did Juilin, and no love for nobles. She'd caught him looking at her before, and could well imagine how he would like to vent his feelings on the matter.

"Orders from whom?" Nynaeve barked. "Who do you report to in the Tower?" The seamstress looked sick, but she clamped her mouth shut determinedly.

"If you don't talk," Nynaeve told her, scowling, "I'll let Juilin have you. He's a Tairen thief-catcher, and he knows how to bring out a confession as quickly as any Whitecloak Questioner. Don't you, Juilin?"

"Some rope to tie her," he said, grinning a grin so villainous that Elayne almost tried to step away from him, "some rags to gag her until she is ready to talk, some cooking oil and salt ..." His chuckle curdled Elayne's blood. "She will talk." Mistress Macura held herself rigidly against the wall, staring at him, eyes as wide as they would go. Luci looked at him as if he had just turned into a Trolloc, eight feet tall and complete with horns.

"Very well," Nynaeve said after a moment. "You should find everything you need in the kitchen, Juilin." Elayne shifted a startled look from her to the thief-catcher and back. Surely they did not really mean to ...? Not Nynaeve!

"Narenwin Barda," the seamstress gasped suddenly. Words tripped over one another spilling out of her. "I send my reports to Narenwin Barda, at an inn in Tar Valon called The Upriver Run. Avi Shendar keeps pigeons for me. He doesn't know who I send messages to or who I get them from, and he does not care. His wife had the falling sickness, and ..." She trailed off, shuddering and watching Juilin.

Elayne knew Narenwin, or at least had seen her in the Tower. A thin little woman you could forget was there, she was so quiet. And kind, too; one day a week, she let children bring their pets to the Tower grounds for her to Heal. Hardly the sort of woman to be Black Ajah. On the other hand one of the Black Ajah names they knew was Marillin Gemalphin; she liked cats, and went out of her way to look after strays.

"Narenwin Barda," Nynaeve said grimly. "I want more names, inside the Tower or out."

"I—don't have any more," Mistress Macura said faintly.

"We will see about that. How long have you been a Darkfriend? How long have you served the Black Ajah?"

An indignant squall erupted from Luci. "We aren't Darkfriends!" She glanced at Mistress Macura and sidled away from her. "At least, I'm not! I walk in the Light! I do!"

The other woman's reaction was no less strong. If her eyes had bulged before, they popped now. "The Black—! You mean it really exists? But the Tower has always denied—Why, I asked Narenwin, the day she chose me for the Yellow's eyes-and-ears, and it was the next morning before I could stop weeping and crawl out of my bed. I am not—not!—a Darkfriend! *Never!* I serve the Yellow Ajah! The *Yellow*!"

Still hanging on to Juilin's arm, Elayne exchanged puzzled looks with Nynaeve. Any Darkfriend would deny it, of course, but there seemed a ring of truth in the women's voices. Their outrage at the accusation was nearly enough to overcome their fear. From the way Nynaeve hesitated, she heard the same thing.

"If you serve the Yellow," she said slowly, "why did you drug us?"

"It was her," the seamstress replied, nodding at Elayne. "I was sent her description a month since, right down to that way she holds her chin sometimes so she seems to be looking down at you. Narenwin said she might use the name Elayne, and even claim to be of a noble House." Word by word, her anger over being called a Darkfriend seemed to bubble higher. "Maybe you are a Yellow sister, but she's no Aes Sedai, just a runaway Accepted. Narenwin said I was to report her presence, and that of anyone with her. And to delay her, if I could. Or even capture her. And anyone with her. How they expected me to capture an Accepted, I do not know—I don't think even Narenwin knows about my forkroot tea!—but that is what my orders said! They said I should risk exposure even if I had to! You just wait until the Amyrlin puts her hands on you, young woman! On all of you!"

"The Amyrlin!" Elayne exclaimed. "What does she have to do with this?"

"It was on her orders. By order of the Amyrlin Seat, it said. It said the Amyrlin herself said could use any means short of killing you. You will wish you were dead when the Amyrlin gets hold of you!" Her sharp nod was full of furious satisfaction.

"Remember that we are not in anyone's hands yet," Nynaeve said dryly. "You are in ours." Her eyes looked as shocked as Elayne felt, though. "Was any reason given?"

The reminder that she was the captive sapped the brief burst of spirit from the woman. She sagged listlessly against Luci, each keeping the other from falling over. "No. Sometimes Narenwin gives a reason, but not this time."

"Did you intend to just keep us here, drugged, until someone came for us?"

"I was going to send you off by cart, dressed in some old clothes." Not even a shred of resistance remained in the woman's voice. "I sent a pigeon to tell Narenwin you were here, and what I was doing. Therin Lugay owes me a strong favour, and I meant to give him enough forkroot to last all the way to Tar Valon, if Narenwin didn't send sisters to meet you sooner. He thinks you are ill, and the tea is the only thing keeping you alive until an Aes Sedai can Heal you."

Nynaeve made Thom help her closer, where she could stare down at the seamstress. "And the message? The real message? You did not put that signal out in the hope of luring us in?"

"I gave you the real message," the woman said wearily. "I did not think it could do any harm. I don't understand it, and I—please—" Suddenly she was sobbing, clinging to Luci as hard as the younger woman did to her, both of them wailing and babbling. "Please, don't let him use the salt on me! Please! Not the salt! Oh, please!"

"Tie them up," Nynaeve said disgustedly after a moment, "and we will go downstairs where we can talk." Ragan helped her to sit on the edge of the nearest bed, then he and Areku quickly cut strips from the other coverlet.

In short order both women were bound, back to back, the hands of one to the feet of the other, with wadded bits of coverlet tied in for gags. The pair were still weeping when Ragan assisted Nynaeve from the room.

Elayne wished she could walk as well as the other woman, but she still needed Juilin's support not to go tumbling down the stairs.

"Juilin," she asked hesitantly, "what were you going to do with the salt and cooking oil? Not exactly," she added more quickly. "Just a general idea."

He looked at her for a moment. "I do not know. But they did not, either. That is the trick of it; their minds made up worse than I ever could. I have seen a tough man break when I sent for a basket of figs and some mice. You have to be careful, though. Some will confess anything, true or not, just to escape what they imagine. I do not think those two did, though."

She did not either. She could not repress a shiver, however. *What would somebody do with figs and mice?* She hoped she stopped wondering before she gave herself nightmares.

By the time they reached the kitchen, Nynaeve was tottering about without help, poking into the cupboard full of colourful canisters. Elayne needed one of the chairs. The blue canister sat on the table, and a full green teapot, but she tried not to look at them. She still could not channel. She could embrace *saidar*, yet it slipped away as soon as she did. At least she was confident now that the Power would return to her. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate, and she had not let herself until this moment.

"Ragan," Nynaeve said, lifting the lids on various containers and peering in. "Juilin." She paused, took a deep breath, and, still not looking at the two men, said, "Thank you. I begin to see why Aes Sedai have Warders. Thank you very much."

Not all Aes Sedai did. Reds considered all men tainted because of what men who could channel did, and a few never bothered because they did not leave the Tower or simply did not replace a Warder who died. The Greens were the only Ajah to allow bonding with more than one Warder. Elayne wanted to be a Green. Not for that reason, of course, but because the Greens called themselves the Battle Ajah. Where Browns searched for lost knowledge and Blues involved themselves in causes, Green sisters held themselves ready for the Last Battle, when they would go forth, as they had in the Trolloc Wars, to face new Dreadlords.

The two men stared at one another in open amazement. They had surely been ready for the usual rough side of Nynaeve's tongue. Elayne was almost as shocked. Nynaeve liked having to be helped as much as she liked being wrong; either made her as prickly as a briar, though of course she always claimed to be a picture of sweet reason and sense.

"A Wisdom." Nynaeve took a pinch of powder from one of the canisters and sniffed it, touched it to the tip of her tongue. "Or whatever they call it here."

"I never heard of a herb that could suppress a channeler's ability," said Keestis. She looked uncomfortable, and had to clear her throat before going on. "I, ah, I'm sorry for what I said earlier. You wouldn't have gotten in trouble if I'd just kept my mouth shut."

Nynaeve frowned at her. "No-one gets me in trouble except me," she insisted.

Elayne wasn't sure if she was being humble or just didn't realise what she'd said. Self-awareness was not always Nynaeve's strongest trait. And perhaps not her own, either. Abruptly she realized that she had been thinking of anything and everything except what Mistress Macura had said. *Not thinking about a thorn doesn't make it hurt your foot less.* One of Lini's favourites. "Nynaeve, what do you think that message means? All sisters are welcome to return to the Tower? It makes no sense." That was not what she wanted to say, but at least she was closing in on it.

"Very little in the Tower makes sense most of the time," she said sourly.

"Do you believe what she said?" Elayne took a deep breath. "About the Amyrlin saying I was to be brought back by any means."

The brief look Nynaeve gave her was touched with sympathy. "I don't know, Elayne."

"She was telling the truth." Juilin turned one of the chairs around and straddled it, leaning his staff against the back. "I've questioned enough thieves and murderers to know truth when I hear it. Part of the time she was too frightened to lie, and the rest too angry."

The struggle was plain on Nynaeve's face. She did not like being interrupted, or people answering for her. There was quite a list of things Nynaeve did not like. But it was only a moment since she had thanked Juilin; it could not be easy to call down a man who had just saved you from

being hauled off like a cabbage. Taking a deep breath, Nynaeve tossed the scrip onto the table and folded her arms as if to trap her hands away from her braid. “I am afraid Juilin is probably right, Elayne.”

“But the Amyrlin knows what we are doing. She sent us out of the Tower in the first place.”

Nynaeve sniffed loudly. “I can believe anything of Siuan Sanche. I would like to have her for one hour where she could not channel. We would see how tough she is then.”

Elayne did not think that would make any difference. Remembering that commanding blue gaze, she suspected Nynaeve would earn a fine lot of bruises in the unlikely event that she ever got her wish. “But what are we going to do about it? The Ajahs have eyes-and-ears everywhere, it seems. And the Amyrlin herself. We could have women trying to slip things into our food all the way to Tar Valon.”

“Are we still going to Tar Valon?” Keestis asked. “Can we? It doesn’t make sense for the Amyrlin to order us arrested when we’re just doing what she sent us out to do. What if ... what if *they* got to her?”

Elayne shivered. The White Tower in the hands of the Shadow. It was a ... more than horrifying thought. Nynaeve did not shiver, though. She had that stubborn look on her face.

“We have to deliver the seal to Tar Valon. We can deal with the rest after.”

“That is not necessarily so, Nynaeve. Moiraine has several of the seals on her person. We don’t have to go there. And if it is dangerous ... Perhaps we should reconsider.”

The older woman scowled at her almost as hotly as she did Ragan and Juilin. “We can talk about it later,” she said curtly.

“Whatever we do, we will have the Tower’s agents after us,” Keestis fretted.

“Not if we do not look like what they expect.” Lifting a yellow jug out of the cupboard, Nynaeve set it on the table beside the teapot. “This is white henpepper. It will soothe a toothache, but it will also turn your hair black as night.” Elayne put a hand to her red-gold tresses—*her* hair, not Nynaeve’s, she would wager!—but as much as she hated the idea, it was a good one. They’d need another just as good if they hoped to find out what was going on in Tar Valon before there was another attack.

## CHAPTER 12: Temptations



Moiraine was feeling self-satisfied when she entered the great square at the heart of Rhuidean, despite it all. The past and the future walked with her, stalking her much as her Warder did. All around them were Aiel, bitter enemies of the House in which she had been born. None had taken issue with her Damodred name thus far, somewhat to her surprise. Being Aes Sedai counted for a lot more with them. That was as it should be, of course, but she was still surprised that the Aiel would see it so.

It was far from the only surprise this baked land had held for her. She refused to look at the *ter'angreal* the Wise Ones used to test their apprentices. Three grey metal rings standing upright, each joined to the others at the widest point, each large enough for a woman to walk through. The tests to become a Novice and an Accepted had been harder, but the things she had learned. She would not have thought herself capable of ...

No sign of her feelings showed on her ageless face as she glided across the dusty floor stones of the square. She distracted herself by surveying her prizes. Outside of the White Tower and the Great Holding of Tear, this might well be the largest collection of *ter'angreal* in the world. She had expected more of a fight when she announced her intentions to the Wise Ones. That a group of channelers would so easily give up such a hoard was strange indeed. But then, they were Aiel.

She did not know what most of the *ter'angreal* did, of course. Learning that would require careful experimentation once they were all safely back in the White Tower. When she saw who was standing by one of the few items that she did know the use of, her composure shook enough to bring her to a sudden halt.

It was not the Aiel, of course, nor was it the Ogier, for Loial was often found in the vicinity of Avendesora these days. And though the wolfsister and the Tuatha'an wilder, both of whom avoided her eyes, were notable in their own way, it was the man they were hovering around that demanded her attention. Rand had his broad back to her, but she could read the tension in the way his arms were folded, and the bunching of his muscles beneath the white shirt he wore. He knew what that redstone doorway was used for, too, unfortunately. She did not like that he was here, and approached him immediately.

"That artefact will be of particular interest to the Amyrlin Seat, once I have had it shipped to Tar Valon," she said in a coolly composed voice. "I have already spoken to the Wise Ones, and they agree that these items belong to the Aes Sedai. Any usage of them is at our discretion."

He did not spin around guiltily at the sound of her voice, as he once would have. He simply turned his head a little, heard her words, and then went back to studying the *ter'angreal*. It was better that way. The boyishness he'd once had would have doomed them all. She knew it was better, but she still found herself wishing he had maintained just a little of that boyishness, if only with her. Trying to steer him the way he needed to be steered was like trying to ride a wild horse these days.

An image flashed into her mind, unbidden. One of those possibilities. It had been delightful, putting such a large man on his back and keeping him there using only the power of her body. She pushed the memory that was not a memory out of her thoughts at once, only to find that Rand had chosen that moment, of all moments, to turn and face her.

"They don't know you like I do," he said, in a grimly male voice. She was unable to stop her eyes from widening, or prevent her heart from speeding up, but he went on as if he hadn't noticed. "The Aes Sedai. They think they are something they are not."

He looked to another *ter'angreal* then, a series of crystal spires that surrounded the great tree at the heart of the square. She knew what it did. Everyone here did, now.

"You presume to think you know the Aes Sedai, Rand al'Thor? Less than two years out of your village, and you know what kings and queens do not." She sniffed. "Even women who have studied at the White Tower for years in hopes of becoming Aes Sedai cannot truly be said to know them."

A wry smile. "I have noticed that that is so."

And there was another complication. Some of the Accepted who had accompanied her into the Waste were in danger of losing their way. She gave Merile a cool look. Though she still refused to look at her, the girl's cheeks coloured and she started slinking away. Raine went after her, though that one's golden eyes took on a sudden defiant tint and she refused to drop her stare even as she was retreating. Moiraine filed that little detail away, as she always did. But it was Rand who took up most of her focus. As he always did. Again, it was good that he had noticed what was happening with the Accepted. Again, part of her wished he had not. She needed him to need her. To want her by his side ... *No! That is not me. I could never ... Well, I could if I wished, but such tactics are beneath me.* Just as he ... *No!*

"The items will be ready to go when we leave for the west. I have arranged matters with the peddlers." The Aiel did not have wagons, and she would need the use of Kadere's to transport the larger items.

He grimaced slightly. "You can cancel those plans. The items in question belong to the Aiel."

That did not shake her either, presumptuous as it was. "They do not. As the Wise Ones have already accepted. Perhaps you should instruct them on how wrong they are. I should like to see that." He could use the humbling.

"They are not the only ones you should have consulted. I am the *Car'a'carn* now. I'm not about to let assets like this get filched from my pocket and put in my rival's. It's like Tam said. You have to spot the opportunities, and take them before someone else does."

Lan stirred behind her, his hand resting ominously on his swordhilt. "Have a care, sheepherder. It almost sounded as if you were accusing Moiraine of being a thief."

Rand didn't look afraid, but he did consider the older man's words for a moment. He nodded once. "A poor choice of words. Say rather we have conflicting views on what belongs to whom."

The Aiel who were gathered nearby, simply relaxing if you were a fool, did not take their eyes off her Warder until his hand left his swordhilt. Men were such fools. She and Rand could level half this city without even touching a weapon, but it was Lan that they watched so carefully. Someone had already levelled part of Rhuidean, for that matter, and recently, but Rand refused to explain how that had happened or what his role in it was. Madness was a possibility that she dare not overlook. Time. Time was against her, in more ways than one.

"An interesting question, to be sure. I shall be happy to discuss it with you in private this evening." There were far more important things they needed to talk about but this would get her in the door. Which was something that had grown irritatingly hard. She realised that her words could be mistaken for flirtation but if he took it that way all the better. He was a notorious lecher and if he imagined he had a chance it would at least get him to listen.

Rand recoiled slightly, and turned his handsome face away. "I don't think that would be ... Ah, necessary?"

The silence grew long. In it she heard a word, the word she was sure he had been about to say before thinking better of it. Appropriate. It would not be appropriate. He thought she had been flirting with him, and he had turned her down! It took all her training to keep her emotions tamped down and prevent any colour from staining her cheeks. How dare he! Of all the reasons not to resort to such things, she had never imagined that one. Surely all she'd have to do was say he could. Like most women of the Tower, Moiraine had never consorted with a man. Such things were indeed inappropriate, though for her sake, not for his! How would she go about ... *No!*

While her own cheeks remained unblemished, Rand's had coloured. He turned to the redstone doorway again, in a blatant effort to change the subject. "I can put a ward around them, like I did with *Callandor* and the Great Holding."

Perhaps he could at that. And perhaps that ward would be dangerous even to her. "There are many things you and I could do, Rand. And many things I could have chosen to do in the past year but did not. I am not your enemy. You lose nothing by agreeing with the Wise Ones in this, but would lose much by gainsaying them. They are powerful women, politically and otherwise. Only a fool would make an enemy of such."

"Lose nothing? Would I?" he said, his attention fixed on that door in a way she did not like.

"I have warned you of how dangerous they are," she said quietly.

He nodded, but did not take his eyes from the door. She had to get it away from him before he made a terrible mistake. "I, too, can weave protective wards. There will be no need to ward this one; I shall see to it myself."

His eyes stabbed at her like chips of grey ice. He had gotten worse since his father had joined them. Tam's support had rid him of an uncertainty and made him arrogant. "If I order the Aiel to gather them all and store them in one of those buildings, do you think they would refuse?"

Another spike of emotion threatened her composure and her will, and was duly pushed down. It could not be allowed. And it did not distract her. That had been a true question. "Do you?"

Rand said nothing, but she was glad to see the uncertainty in him. Perhaps the arrogance was not too deeply ingrained as yet. She could only work with what she had. How deeply the Aiel's loyalty went was a question that must be much on his mind, between the Wise Ones and the Shaido. Though she had little affection for them herself, there was a distinct possibility that they would refuse to aid him in a conflict with an Aes Sedai. They both knew that. And she had no more desire that he did to force the conflict and find out what they would do. It would not serve the cause to lessen his authority with these people.

"Better here than later, where it might matter more," he said, thoughtfully.

Moiraine refused to sigh, though he made it hard, Light but he did. Why could he not have remained the innocent farmboy, staring wide-eyed at her and doing what she said? Thanking her profusely for saving his father. Though ...

"Do you recall the promise you made me?" she cut in, leaving him standing there with his mouth open, the fateful words unspoken. The cause was all that mattered.

He frowned. "When?"

"When I saved Tam's life. You said you would do anything for me in return."

His frown deepened. "Anything that did not hurt the village, or my friends," he said, recalling reluctantly. "You've never ... Why now?"

That was one of the many things he could not know. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. You will keep your word, I trust."

She didn't think the watching Aiel needed to be there to make him do it, but she was glad of them even so. He might want to weasel out of it, but there would be no way to do so without shaming himself with them. Rand gave the redstone doorway a lingering look, before turning his back on it. "It's yours," he said as he stalked away, frowning down at his feet. She wondered what he had hoped to use the door for, and wondered too at the regret her victory woke in her heart.

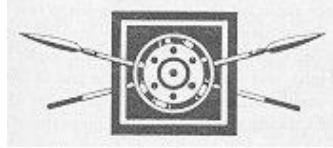
Moiraine shook it off at once. Only the cause. "You will have to speak to Kadere again this evening," she told Lan. "We will have to move quicker."

He stepped close, and leaned down to ensure his words were for her ears alone. "The boy asked a shrewd question. Why now? We have faced greater crisis than this without your invoking that oath. What do you need that door for, Moiraine Sedai?"

They had come so far together, been through so much. She didn't like keeping things from him, but she knew he could not accept what must be done. "This is not a matter you are equipped to understand, my Gaidin. In this, you must have faith. And obey."

Her words brought him no comfort, but he saluted them nonetheless. The Aiel had left with Rand, so she was alone save for Lan when she took his place, staring at the empty doorframe much as he had. Such a simple-looking thing, to hold such importance. It was a relief to have it under her control. She could destroy it any time she wanted. Any time. Instead, the Aes Sedai left it there and returned to her duties.

## CHAPTER 13: Grassless Roots



Defeat tasted bitter in Rand's mouth, though not so bitter as cowardice. Part of him was relieved that Moiraine had taken the redstone doorway off his hands. Mat's refusal to tell him any details about what had happened there only made the risks of going greater. Yet part of him wanted to take the chance even so. Perhaps it was for the best that she'd intervened. Perhaps.

Her interventions hadn't always been a bad thing, after all. And he did owe her, as she'd reminded him. She wasn't that bad, for an Aes Sedai. Maybe he could stand to be a little nicer to her.

"To anger an Aes Sedai is to touch the sun," a booming Ogier voice reminded him from up high at his side. "I did not think you a foolish man, Rand."

His conciliatory feelings evaporated. "Burn the Aes Sedai. I will not walk in fear of them. And people should not think it so normal that they do!"

The Ogier stood taller than a Trolloc in his wide-toed, thigh-high boots, if not so broad as one. His dark green coat, buttoned to the waist, then flaring to his boot tops like a kilt over baggy trousers, no longer looked odd to Rand, but one look was enough to tell this was not an ordinary man. The Ogier's nose was so broad as to seem a snout, and eyebrows like long moustaches dangled beside eyes the size of teacups. Tufted ears poked up through shaggy black hair that hung nearly to his shoulders.

Despite all that, Loial looked more confused than offended. It took a lot to anger the Ogier. It took very little to anger Rand, at times. He stalked off, leaving his friend and the rest of them to catch up. Where had Merile and Raine gone? Moiraine had driven them off, too, burn her. Having them around always made him feel better. Loial was a good friend, but they were more.

*Far Dareis Mai* remained his honour guard, of course, and half a dozen Maidens walked with him now, but the Aiel men who'd invited themselves along that morning didn't seem inclined to leave no matter how the Maidens glared. That was something that had happened a few times already. Aiel society revolved around honour, and somehow the Maidens gained some by guarding their *Car'a'carn*. The other societies were jealous. Maybe that isn't how they would describe it, but they were. That was a problem he should address, no matter how little the Maidens liked it.

Was it coincidence that only six Aiel men accompanied him, to match the six Aiel women? Would that be an acceptable compromise to the other societies? Better than a matching amount from each, since there were eleven societies for men and only the one for women. He wouldn't be able to move for Aiel if they went that route.

He knew the men present, though not so well as he did the women. Mangin and Pearse had both fought for him in Tear. Handsome Giladin was from his blood father's clan and had given him a warm welcome. Roidan was Nakai and in a *harem* marriage with their chief, who had proven a staunch supporter of Rand's so far. Alec was the son of Bael, chief of the Goshien, and nearly as tall, while scar-faced Daroc was respected by the rest for his actions during the Aiel War. All were men a wise Dragon Reborn would want on their side.

He should not let his growing affection for so many of the Maidens cloud his judgement in that. Pretty Nici would complain, no doubt, but Nici seemed to like complaining. Plain Cara probably wouldn't like it either—she rarely missed a chance to remind him of the importance of honour. Nerise was as fiery as her hair but didn't seem particularly jealous; he suspected she was more interested in getting the job done well than in gaining any honour from doing it. She might put up with sharing the role. Jec would have welcomed it, from the way she was smiling at Daroc. She smiled a lot, did Jec, though never at Rand. The unfortunate circumstances of their first meeting had ensured that, his cousin Harilin had explained. She'd been at that meeting, too, but assured him that her own lack of smiles was the result of something else entirely. He would have thought Branwen open to the idea as well, but she'd been the most vocally opposed when the men invited themselves along that morning, half raising her veil before she stopped herself. She'd looked almost as surprised as he was, and had been quiet ever since. When she caught him studying her, she looked away, discomfited.

The last of the six, and one of the newest arrivals, didn't show any jealousy towards the men at all. Tenelca's face remained the same beautiful marble mask it had been since she arrived a few days back. A Miagoma, her clan's lands were far to the east and their leaders had not yet declared their intentions. His efforts to draw some hint out of her as to what those intentions might be had met with calm, cool, precise nothing. Timolan did not share his thoughts with her, and it would not have been right for her to repeat them if he had, she'd told him. Between her looks and the colour of her hair, Tenelca had reminded him of a taller Elayne at first, but the similarities were trivial. He hadn't seen her smile once. And she hadn't even blushed at all when she became aware of what took place between him and many of the Maidens when they were staying under the roof. She was ice but none of the other Maidens seemed to think her a threat, so he refused to.

They were far from the only Aiel around. Rhuidean was drawing more and more in each day. At first it had been only the army that Rand brought, warriors and Wise Ones and *gai'shain*. The others had come more recently, craftspeople and merchants, miners, families. Rand hadn't done anything to make that happen, at least not deliberately. Was it fate at work? Was Rhuidean to become an Aiel city, the first and perhaps the only? The thought did not displease him.

Others were not so happy about it. As he walked the streets, moving past shaded stalls on which wares were displayed for sale just as they would have been in any city west of the mountains, he spotted Aviendha standing alone. The bulky skirts and loose white blouse of a Wise One's apprentice still hung uncomfortably on her. She sought no shade from the sun as she studied the gathering with those blue-green eyes of hers. Her face could have done for a statue, but he knew her displeasure even before she turned it on him.

"Are you satisfied, Rand al'Thor? This was a sacred place once."

"I don't know what I feel about these changes," he said honestly.

"You never seem to know what you feel," she muttered. "I do not know why Elayne tolerates it. Does she tolerate it?"

"I ... guess? She hasn't said much about it." They had had other things on their minds when they last met in *Tel'aran'rhol*. Rhuidean's status had very much not been a priority.

"You guess!? Can you not pay attention to your woman enough to do better than guess? You belong to Elayne, Rand al'Thor. You should attend to her!"

The searing blue sky far beyond Rhuidean's tall roofs held no answers for him. "Don't start this again. I do not belong to her. Or anyone."

"Indeed. Elayne Trakand made no marriage wreath. And who is to say she is worthy of him? She is not Aiel." Branwen said. Rand was glad of the unexpected support but Aviendha's eyes bulged as if the woman had punched her in the gut.

Cara stepped between them, concern on her face. It didn't fade no matter which woman she looked at. Though it became a slight frown when she glanced at Rand. "This is something we must discuss in private."

"Who I belong to is a closed topic. The only thing worth discussing right now is what to do about all this." He gestured at the market that this street was in the process of turning into. "What have the Wise Ones to say about it?"

"Perhaps you should put on a dress and ask them!" Aviendha snapped. She had two fists full of her own skirts, though whether she was wishing she could tear off the hated garments and return to her *cadin'sor*, or she just dreamed of strangling him was hard to say.

"Thanks for all your help," he sighed. He walked away, eyeing the stalls as he went, leaving a muttering Aviendha to stalk his steps.

"And thank you," he said more sincerely, to the woman who marched at his side. "I like Elayne but it gets annoying hearing that all the time."

"Honour demands I say that this behaviour is unlike Aviendha. She was among the most stoic and honourable of my spearsisters once. I do not know what has changed in her." Branwen's stern face softened briefly in a smile, and she lowered her voice to a whisper. "And you are welcome. I must admit, Rand al'Thor, I have come to like you, as a companion. You fight hard and fuck well; you are easy to be with. Not that I would give up the spear for you, of course."

"Of course. I'd never dream of asking it."

Branwen said nothing, and when he glanced her way she wore an odd expression, one that she swiftly hid behind the expressionless mask that almost all Aiel wore in public. She moved away and would not meet his eyes, plainly not wanting to talk, so he turned his attention back to the market.

What was on sale and what was not surprised him. Water was nowhere to be seen. As precious as it was in the Waste, Aiel did not sell it. Would they buy it from non-Aiel? The *algode* they made their shirts from was very comfortable on the skin and didn't retain sweat much at all. That was especially nice here in the Waste, but it would be welcomed elsewhere, too. And there were spices that they used on their food that he'd never encountered before. Though harsh by anyone's standards, this was far from a dead land. With peace came trade, but peace might be made *with* trade as well. Or at least maintained by it, provided it was in everyone's best interests. If he could arrange it so ...

He watched an Aiel woman with arms as muscular as most men's barter aggressively with a yellow-haired fellow whose tanned face was free of any scar. Hers had a thin white one across the nose. Rand didn't recognise her, but new Maidens arrived all the time. Of more interest was the size of the chunk of gold ore she was waving at the merchant and how little the merchant was offering in exchange for it.

"You'd get a lot more for that in, in Shienar." He'd been about to suggest Cairhien, but it would be best to start small.

She looked at him expressionlessly, took in those who followed him, and nodded. "Ah. You are him."

"I am me," he agreed. "I haven't seen you under the Roof of the Maidens. You might want to consider holding on to that gold. Who knows? You might soon have a chance to trade it elsewhere."

Aviendha's grip on his arm almost hurt. "Fool of a wetlander! Why must you shame me like this!?" she hissed in his ear.

He scowled at her. What had he done this time? "I'm just trying to build some bridges," he whispered, before remembering the Aiel didn't build bridges, literally or figuratively. "I'm ... promoting trade, I mean."

"You do not know. A child would know, but you do not."

Some of the Maidens were glaring at him, too, and even Tenelca had cracked a slight expression. The men in his escort were suddenly very fascinated with Rhuidean's architecture, and the would-be trader's tanned cheeks had coloured. What had he said?

Well, there was no point pretending. "I have absolutely no idea what I said that was so offensive. Does one of you want to explain it?"

Honesty, it seemed, was not always the best policy. Aviendha looked ready to explode. She took a deep breath, and he braced for a tirade, but the words he heard, spoken in a voice not hers, were surprisingly amused.

"Adelberta here is a miner, not a Maiden. I can tell from the cut of her *cadin'sor*, though I've yet to meet a wetlander who could. The Maidens are proud. Very, very proud. Being taken for one of them when you are not is considered shameful to some. World is full of people who are too full of themselves, if you ask me."

"No-one did," Aviendha snapped.

Glad to have her ire directed elsewhere, Rand turned to the speaker with a smile on his face, one that turned quizzical when he saw her. So confidently had she spoken that he thought it would be a Wise One who'd interrupted, but this girl was far too young for that. No Maiden either, from her dress. Though, like the miner he'd unwittingly shamed, he would have thought it perfectly understandable if anyone had taken her for a warrior. She wore a full Aiel skirt of brown wool and a loose white blouse of *algode*. *Algode* was softer than even the finest-woven wool; it would do very well for trade, if he ever convinced the Aiel. The light scars scattered across her freckled cheeks were surely the result of spears or arrows, and there was no deference in the way she faced Aviendha's anger or Rand's scrutiny. Red hair, blue eyes, full lips. Very attractive.

"Thanks for clarifying. I'm not from around here, and meant no offense," he said, sharing a sheepish smile between her and the miner.

"I understand," Adelberta said gruffly.

"It's just that, either one of you looks like you could batter pretty much any woman in the wetlands with ease. Makes it hard to tell who qualifies as *algai'd siswai* and who doesn't." That won him a pair of smiles, though definitely not from the Maidens or Aviendha.

“We are Aiel,” the woman in the dress said proudly.

“Truly. Where I am only Aiel by blood.”

“That is why I came. Wanted to meet the notorious wetlander *Car'a'carn*, Rand al’Thor.”

“You have me at a disadvantage.”

She smiled. “Do I? My name is Seris. My father is Tirth, chief of the Crayt sept.”

“Those Crayt girls,” Branwen muttered.

He had met her father, come to think of it. One of Han’s top men. “It’s nice to meet you, Seris. What brings you to Rhuidean?” He didn’t think for a moment it was really to meet him.

“Where else would anyone want to be these days? The world is not being changed back at Grimdar Hold.”

He ran his eyes over the merchant stalls again. “But it is here.”

“Yes.”

“So you’d like to steer that change?”

“I would like to make sure it is a good one, that is for sure.” Well. At least she was being honest about it. Lots of people just tried to manipulate him.

He gestured to the ore. “Are there many mines? Not just gold, I assume.” They’d have to have iron mines to make their steel.

“Many. No clan is short of such,” Adelberta said.

“Shortages come in other forms. Here,” the merchant said, his eyes sharp on Rand.

“Everywhere has its shortages, and its abundances. I met a Sea Folk woman once, who said that knowing where all those shortages and abundances are can make you rich even if you never make anything of your own.” The man nodded thoughtfully.

“Do you want to be rich, Rand al’Thor?” Seris asked. She and Aviendha stood side-by-side, alike for budding disapproval.

“No. I don’t care in the slightest about wealth. But I do care about the things that can be accomplished with it.”

“That is almost wise. I would not bother trying to explain it to the *algai'd'siswai*, however. There is little honour to be found in bartering, to hear them tell it. Honour comes only from punching things, my first-brother once told me.” Aviendha’s glare made her laugh. “The Wise Ones, too, are wise in only some ways.”

“It is not too late to pick up a spear, Tomanelle. I would enjoy teaching you how to use it,” Cara said, her bland tone not hiding the threat. Seris only laughed louder.

“Each serves in their own way. Some ways are more important than others, but none is without honour,” hulking Roidan said. With more grey than yellow in his hair, he was probably the oldest Aiel present. The others nodded agreement with his words, even Seris.

“If you would hear more of such things, *Car'a'carn*, I could introduce you to my fellow traders. We gather sometimes, to discuss such matters.” The merchant bowed. “I am Rin, of the Red Salt sept of the Goshien Aiel.”

“I see you, Rin,” he said, in an attempt at Aiel formality. But when he looked to Aviendha, his supposed tutor in such things, she shook her head at him, mouth downturned. There was just no winning. “And I will take you up on your offer. When can it be arranged?”

“There are not so many of us in Rhuidean as yet, though more come each day. I could gather them at sunset, if it suits you.”

“It does. I will find you here?”

He pointed down the street. “The small hold at the end of this path is where we gather.”

Rand gave him a nod. “Until then.”

Nici looked confused. “Do you mean to take up mining as well?”

Adelberta grinned at that. “You would need to be ready to work hard and get dirty, *Car'a'carn*.”

Cara took her gently by the arm, and did not lower her voice overmuch. “Do not say such things to him. He will misinterpret them.”

“Ah.” Adelberta nodded knowingly, and the Maidens nodded with her, each and every one of them. Rand crossed his arms. He’d known quite rightly what she meant! Alas, none of them were at all moved by his righteous outrage. Not even Seris, who laughed softly.

The merchant and the miner remained behind in the end, but Seris attached herself to Rand's entourage despite Aviendha's efforts to stare her down. As the others fell in wordlessly, Loial rumbled annoyance. A curious glance found the Ogier juggling an inkpot in an effort to avoid spilling more of it. "Were you writing about that?" Rand asked. "Light, Loial. Why would that be worth noting?"

"It all goes into the book, Rand. No-one else will be able to do a first-hand account of the Dragon Reborn's life. It would be a crime to miss any details."

"I hope you aren't noting how often I relieve myself," he scoffed. He halted abruptly. "You aren't ... Are you?" For the love of the Light, was there no privacy to be found!?

The Maidens thought that funny, and thought Loial's stammered reassurances even funnier. Rand left them to it, even if he did feel a little guilty abandoning a friend to their teasing. Flanked by Aviendha and Seris, he made his way to the end of the street, noting the building Rin had mentioned as he passed. It was quiet inside just then, but perhaps there would be things worth learning later.

"You have strange interests," Aviendha said.

"Do I? Maybe. It's like I told Rhuarc when he urged me to put on *cadin'sor*. I can't help how and where I was raised. And I won't pretend to be something I'm not."

She looked so miserable that he grew concerned. "No. What wetlander would? I would not pretend to be one of them. And could not if I tried."

"Ah ... Nor should you. You're fine the way you are." A pain in his backside at times, it was true, but he wouldn't have wanted to change her even so. She was glaring at him. "Um, more than fine, I mean. You're strong and tough and fearless." She glared harder. *Blood and ashes!*

Seris laughed softly. "I see." She got a taste of the glare, too, and he was a little jealous of how easily she shrugged it off. Aviendha was an apprentice Wise One, a channeler, a former Maiden of the Spear, and half a foot taller than she was. But Aiel were Aiel. He'd gotten plenty of evidence of their lack of deference himself, most often from Aviendha herself. Seeing her get a taste of it from a girl that she objectively outranked brought a smirk to his face.

"What is so funny, wetlander!?" Aviendha snapped.

"Life. Mine, at least."

"That is a surprise. A troubling one," Seris said. "Long as I remember, people have said He Who Comes With the Dawn would be the chosen one, the one the Creator speaks to. I believed it once, but now, having met you ..."

"Sorry to disappoint you. The Creator doesn't speak to me ..." He frowned, recalling the voice that he'd nearly been driven mad from hearing, back at the Eye of the World. But no, it couldn't have been. "She doesn't speak to me, and probably wouldn't like what I'd have to say to her if she did." Starting with the absolute lunacy of charging one man with the fate of the whole world.

"I am not disappointed. Only surprised."

"Do you think it strange that I would meet with the merchants?"

"Yes, but in a good way," she said thoughtfully. "Most warriors would not spare much thought for them. Or for women like me. Han is a respected chief, and has spent his life at war, raiding other clans or the people of the east. And while he was away old feuds flared, devouring the clan from the inside. People grew furious, and there was no chief to mediate or resolve quarrels. But then Han would return with loot for a feast, let the *oosquai* flow, and everyone loved him again. It is usually the way of things. Is that the kind of chief that you will be?"

He liked the way she thought, and how steady her eyes were. "I don't want to be. I want peace and prosperity to reign. But that's not how it's going to go. Tarmon Gai'don is coming, the war to end all wars. It's my duty to fight it. It's all our duty."

"Peace and prosperity sounds like a good dream to me."

He sighed. "It is. A dream." They were crossing a busy square, wending through bustling Aiel about who knew what tasks. But it wasn't only Aiel that were there. A head shaven save for a dark topknot would have drawn Rand's eye in any place save for Shienar, and was especially noticeable among all those hooded, fair-haired people.

"Dreams often come true here. Ask the Wise Ones. Who knows what this place will become after you defeat Sightblinder?"

He smiled sadly and said no more. It was nice that at least one Aiel thought peace an option. And nice that she thought he could win against the Dark One. Nice, and he feared all too naive.

"You both know our history, and you speak of peace. What would you have us become?" Aviendha asked.

"Not that," Rand hastened to say.

"Certainly not. There is a difference between not rushing to find an enemy to fight, and lying at your enemy's feet like a beaten dog," Seris said fiercely.

Aviendha gave her a reluctant nod. "It is good that you see it so. Some have gotten strange since Rand al'Thor did what he did at Alcair Dal."

"Cowards, all," the other girl sneered.

Not an *algai'd siswai*, but still very much Aiel. "How do you think we can have peace without becoming weak, then?"

"I do not know," she admitted. "That does not mean I am giving up. I would never do that."

He smiled. "Good. I'm glad I met you. It's nice to be reminded that there are different views among the Aiel."

She smiled back. "I would be happy to remind you of that in the future."

Aviendha eyed them both narrowly. "Relax," he told her. "I've already said many times that I don't believe in the Way of the Leaf."

"I know that," she said calmly.

He recognised the Shienaran now. It was one-armed Geko, and he was talking to Rhuarc's daughters. He hadn't been aware Rhamys had arrived back from Cold Rocks, or expected her to bring her sisters. She'd found her ex Arcaval, too. Or perhaps he'd found her, judging from the stiff way she was ignoring him. Inukai and Izana stood in the shade nearby, sensibly out of the sun. It was Izana who spotted him first, called his name and waved him over.

Rand was happy to take a spot in the shade beside him. "How have you been?"

"Well enough. A bit bored. There isn't much to do here."

Especially since they had been replaced as Rand's guards. But they'd been over that before. "Don't worry. There will be plenty of work for you guys soon. Treasure these lazy days while you can." He had several different ideas about that.

"A smart soldier always does," grizzled Inukai said, from where he sat.

"A true warrior is always looking for an opponent to test himself against," Mangin claimed, looking down on the older Shienaran from his admittedly impressive height.

"So long as those opponents are not allies, I have no objection," said Rand.

Arcaval gave over smirking at Rhamys when he heard that, and came to join them. "You are wrong there, Rand al'Thor. A strong opponent is a strong opponent. Whether they are ally or enemy makes no difference. You will remain weaker than you could be if you refuse to challenge someone just because you are the same clan."

Rand had done many things he regretted in his life, especially when his blood was running hot. Arcaval was difficult company for him to be in, but he refused to let that show. "Weakening the clan by killing a strong member of it and causing a feud with his kin doesn't seem like a good way to promote strength. Or to win the war I need to win."

"You will not win it at all, with that kind of attitude," Arcaval scoffed. Like Mangin, he was taller than Rand. That was a rarity. He had always taken it for granted, not having to look up at someone. He found now that he didn't much like it.

"Best pray you are wrong."

He shrugged. "Why? Life is a dream from which we all must wake before we dream again." Arcaval sounded honestly perplexed by Rand's words. He was a handsome fellow despite the long scar down his face, his hair nearly as fair as Amys' girls'. Even so.

Said girls had quite a bit to say to Geko, for some reason. He couldn't catch it all, what with the men arguing nearby. Something about dreams. Loial was very much against fighting, to no-one's surprise. The Aiel and the Shienarans spoke to him as respectfully as they could while completely ignoring his opinion on the matter. Izana and Giladin surprised each other by agreeing that defence was the best kind of fighting. Mangin laughed, Daroc growled something, and Geko bowed over Shinobha's hand before walking stiffly away from them all.

"Welcome back, Rhamys," Rand called once he saw they were done. "What word from Cold Rocks Hold?"

"Word?" She looked confused. Busty, beautiful and confused.

"He is asking for news. They often speak so strangely," Aviendha explained. They were related, sort of. Aviendha's aunt was married to Rhamys' mother.

"Oh. The news is good. There have been no desertions in the Nine Valleys sept."

"News which is as unsurprising as your confusion," her elder sister said. Rand had never met the girl who spoke but he had no doubt of her parentage. He'd already known Rhamys was the middle child, and the resemblance was unmistakeable. All of Amys' girls seemed to take after her.

"The fault was mine. It is easy to forget that the same words can mean different things to different people," he said. Rhamys was often the butt of other people's jokes, he'd found. It didn't seem fair.

"This must be the famously humble *Car'a'carn*. I am Edesa, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel."

"Well met. What brings you to Rhuidean?"

This Edesa was a tall girl, and pride stretched her even taller. "I am to watch for my sister-mother, and speak for her if events merit it."

"I see." He thought he did, too. Seris met his eyes and nodded understanding. Rand doubted they would be the only two. Ambassadors of a sort. Much was changing, and fast. It was small wonder Aviendha looked so troubled lately. Feeling sorry about that hadn't stopped him from asking Loial if the Ogier would be willing to help fix the damage that Rand and Asmodean had caused. Though reluctant, he'd allowed that the presence of *Avendesora* would likely tempt many to brave the unwelcome environment and accept the building work.

"I am continuously amazed by how hasty humans can be," Loial rumbled now. "Not two months since we emerged from the Portal Stone on that mountain, and Rhuidean has gone from a forbidden city hidden in unnatural mists to this. Though it is still strange seeing a human city surrounded by so much devastation. The new lake helps but I'm not sure even a source of water like that would be enough to make this place bloom."

"We do not want it to, Treebrother," Arcaval objected. "The Three-fold Land was made to test us and forge us, as much as to punish us for our sin."

"Soft lands make soft people," Roidan agreed.

No-one gainsaid him, not even Seris. Loial wilted like a flower under the Waste's sun. Rand felt like doing the same, but there were other, more important concerns. Lots of them. Too many, he feared. And he was foolishly adding more every day. At the very least he should stop his eyes from wandering to every attractive person he met. Keeping one person happy was difficult enough, never mind so many as he had gotten involved with. Merile and Raine had been upset when they'd left. He should probably have gone to check on them. Branwen was out of sorts lately, so he should make time to talk to her. And that was just a few of those he'd become intimate with. Then there were those he had not. He'd sneaked more than a few peeks at Seris already. And Aviendha for that matter. Not to mention Nici, Nerise, Rhamys. Even Tenelca. She rarely spoke and they'd only just met but he still felt drawn to her. Light! For a moment back there he'd even felt as if he knew that miner girl from somewhere. Could it be the madness? It would almost have been a relief, given what the other explanations were.

He barely noticed Izana drawing close until a concerned voice asked if he was alright. All he could do was shake his head. Aviendha and Seris were arguing about Rhuidean. Not whether it should be occupied—they'd both accepted that inevitability—but whether it was a good thing or not. Nerise and Branwen had joined the men in championing Aiel hardiness and the virtues of the Waste over the wetlands. Rhamys was talking with her little sister about men, of all things, and being lectured by her more than the other way around. Kids could be feisty sometimes, but Shinobha couldn't have been more than twelve. Rand would never have taken that kind of talk from a twelve-year-old back home.

He said nothing. Perhaps it wasn't so strange. Egwene had been the youngest in her family but certainly hadn't been shy about telling her sisters what was what. And both of Mat's sisters being younger than him had not spared him their bossiness. Rand had no siblings of his own, so what did he know? Despite that, his sympathy lay completely with Rhamys as she struggled to find words to silence the younger girl.

But what could he offer her other than silent sympathy? What could he offer any of them, or the world that he was supposed to be saving? It was madness. Even his best plans could result in destruction. Aviendha wasn't arguing anymore. She was watching him concernedly.

"Are you sick?" Nici asked, not bothering to lower her voice.

Rand shook himself. He didn't know what had come over him, but he did know that the Aiel did not tolerate weakness. He couldn't afford to show his.

"I'm fine," he said brusquely, only to instantly regret his tone when he saw how hurt she looked. Nici might lack tact, but she'd sounded genuinely concerned. He should be nicer. "It was sweet of you to ask, though. I just have a lot on my mind, that's all."

That didn't comfort anyone. But then, talk of the mental state of a male channeler rarely did.

"If it too much for you, perhaps you should find a wife to think for you. Or a husband," Arcaval laughed.

Mangin veiled on the instant. "You go too far."

Far from being chastened, Arcaval flashed a white smile in the brief moment before his own veil settled in place.

And with that the time for naval-gazing was past. "Enough! Arcaval, gather the reports of those watching for deserters to the west. Mangin, do the same for those in the east. I want to know where those deserters are bound. Deliver the reports within an hour."

Neither man liked it, but neither refused the order once given. They were Aiel, after all, and he was *Car'a'carn*. Mangin left at once, if stiff-backed, but Arcaval made of show of taking his time. That didn't matter, so long as bloodshed had been avoided.

Rhamys watched him out of the corner of her eye as she sidled close to Rand. "Let us hurry and leave, Rand al'Thor," she whispered. "He always has mean things to say after being thwarted. He always says how I am not fit to be a Maiden, or that I'm not womanly enough, or that I'm like a dumb sheep, all manner of hurtful things."

He took her advice and strode off, Rhamys at his side, the rest of the Maidens hurrying after. "I don't know what you saw in him."

"It was stupid. I am the stupidest of my siblings. Edesa says all my brains went into my breasts instead."

The girl in question didn't notice his sour look. She was behind them in the square, uncaring of their departure or of the smile Alec was directing her way, engrossed as she was in a discussion of the future with Aviendha and Seris. *The past is before me, and the future behind.* And beside him? "There are a multitude of reasons that people get involved with someone who's bad for them. You shouldn't just call it stupidity. You aren't stupid."

"That is kind of you to say," Rhamys allowed, but she didn't sound convinced.

Perhaps a confession would help. "Accurate, call it. Please. If it isn't, then I'm in trouble. Just between you and me, I've been involved with a lot more than one person that I really shouldn't have let touch me."

Her eyes were big and blue and earnest. They studied him for a troublingly long time before she nodded. "You do not seem to be a stupid man."

"Thanks ..." Why did he feel as if he'd just been narrowly missed by an arrow? He took a right at the crossroads, for no more reason than it being shadier that way. Best to change the topic. "What were you and Shinobha arguing about?"

"She wants to catch the Shienaran's eye."

His brows rose. "She what?"

"She only started. I was the same when I did. It was stupid, but she will not listen," she said, with no hint of embarrassment.

"I ... see." Rand could hardly judge, for any number of reasons. It was still a surprise, though.

"Family are often troublesome," Nerise put it. "My younger brother Jac throws his heart at the feet of a new girl every month, I sometimes think. I have heard of this Geko, however. He is said to be a man of honour. Perhaps there is no need for concern, spearsister."

"He fought well in the Theren and Tear," Jec confirmed. "It is a pity about his arm. Really limits the possibilities."

Rand didn't think she was talking about combat. That would be one way to build bridges, he supposed, but it carried difficulties of its own. So far as he knew, no Aiel had ever married a non-Aiel. And they had been at odds with Shienar for generations besides. Troubles and complications, all piled one on the other. He really should avoid adding more to the pile.

"Hey."

Nici had taken a place at his other side. She looked uncharacteristically chastened, her mouth downturned. "What's wrong?"

A little shrug. "I did not mean to shame you. Back there. I have *toh*."

That was surprisingly nice of her. "If there was shame it was of my own making. You were just concerned. I can't see how that could be a bad thing. I set all of that up myself, as usual."

"What is wrong with you? Why do you not like yourself?" Nici asked softly.

"It is not very smart," said Rhamys.

Looking back and forth between them, thinking things he shouldn't be thinking rather than following up on all the progress he'd made that day, Rand sighed in despair. "What is wrong with me you ask? What isn't?"

## CHAPTER 14: Hard at Work



He was proud of himself for having dinner with his family that day. To his aunts and cousins, the novelty of a long-lost kinsman who had been raised by wetlanders was sometimes more interesting than that kinsman being the *Car'a'carn*. Rand welcomed that different kind of strangeness. Standing in the doorway of the house his aunt Sunadai had claimed, he watched her tidy up, chatting and smiling with her husband and wife. That was not so shocking as it had been.

"Is the great *Car'a'carn* too proud to help?" his cousin Ricu asked.

He turned back at once. "Of course not."

Her still face became merry. "Just kidding! It is okay."

"I do not think it would be wise," Raya said, pausing with used dishes in hand. "You must make them respect you. People do not respect those who fetch and carry for them."

The two of them were for an age, slender, pretty, fair-haired. But they were complete opposites in attitude. Raya was unfailingly solemn, Ricu boisterous. He'd grown fond of them both.

That didn't mean he always agreed with them. "I'm a shepherd. If there ever comes a day that I don't respect those who work for a living, could one of you please stick a knife in my heart?"

"I do not think I can comply with this request. It would not be honourable."

Ricu rolled her eyes at their cousin. "I will do it! But only if kicking you on the butt repeatedly has no effect."

He grinned. "Thanks."

Her answering smile made her green eyes twinkle. "At least you are still nice. I worried because we do not see you very often."

"I would like to visit more often, but there is so much to do." His eyes slid guiltily towards the evening beyond the doorway. The Maidens were out there, the ones who'd escorted him here. They'd wanted him to go back to the Roof to eat, but he hadn't dared. Something might have happened, and then how would be make any progress? He accounted it a personal victory that he'd come here instead.

"When will you kill Couladin?" Raya's little brother Aliarc asked. He was the youngest present and still trying to match his growing height with muscle, but there was nothing boyish in the way he spoke or the steadiness of his eyes.

Rand felt almost self-conscious about saying it, but he held to his resolve. "I hope to avoid having to. Since the other chiefs confirmed his claim to be false, there is a chance he will see reason and back down." He had no love for the man, but avoiding open warfare between the clans was worth putting up with a lot worse than his company.

"He is Shaido," Aliarc said, as if that was all that needed saying. Rand didn't know what to say to that. Lecturing the Aiel on their own history was worse than presumptuous, but it was hardly fair to tar all the Shaido with the same brush. He could have wished Harilin and Rovan were there. With their absence, he found himself in the awkward position of being the eldest cousin present.

"The reports you wanted are here, Rand al'Thor," a voice said from behind before he could respond. Nici had one of those mouths that always looked sulky, even when she was angry. The Shaido girl wasn't that much older than Aliarc, but she had joined a society while he had not, and was presumably more experienced. The two youngsters locked gazes.

Rand ended it by stepping between them. "Thank you, Nici. I'll be right out."

His soft tone only partially mollified her. He'd never seen a Maiden flounce before, but she left in a distinctly flounce-like manner.

"Our mother would not approve," Raya said, her voice low but firm. "Condemning all the Shaido only makes it harder to end the conflict. You should condemn Couladin alone." Her words warmed him.

But not her brother. "Will you run to tell her? Again?"

Raya's cheeks coloured. "I will not. But you should measure her words more carefully."

“Dana is a wise one,” Rand said.

Even Ricu looked confused. “Yes. We all know this. Did you not?”

He chuckled to himself. “Never mind. Thank you for dinner, but I must go and take care of some business. Til next time.”

“May you always find water and shade,” his aunt called.

His business outside proved easily done. The reports that were brought weren’t even ones he really needed to see, since Rhucard and the chiefs usually handled such things. He played the part of the chief and sent the men on their way before taking himself off in the other direction. The same Maidens who’d been with him when he’d arrived at his aunt’s accompanied him to the meeting with the merchants. He wasn’t sure they’d even taken a break that day. None of them looked any less watchful, however.

“Are families always so strange?”

The glances the women exchanged were not flattering. “Every family is made up of different people, you blockhead,” Nici said. “So they do different things.”

Tenelca gave a single solemn nod. “This is true. My greatmother is kind, my sister-mother cruel. My first-sisters are twins, but one behaves normally and the other laughs at strange things. Yet all are blood kin.”

Rand sighed softly. He’d been about to complain that Nici was taking him too literally, but perhaps she was just taking him as literally as “normal”, here. He suspected the only reason that sister Tenelca spoke of was considered strange was because she laughed at all.

“My family all think I am an idiot,” Rhamys said sadly.

“You *are* an idiot,” said Nici.

“Quit it.” Her teasing smile disappeared at his bark. Surprised, she fell silent and turned her attention back to her watch. Rand didn’t mind her calling him names, but it was different when it was Rhamys.

“Anger flares in you at interesting times, Rand al’Thor,” said Nerise. “I do not think you would find *my* family strange. My father tends the land, as yours did, and he has many women, as you do. I think perhaps you share a taste with him.”

“The Women’s Circle back home would ... disagree about the normalcy of that. Do you have many siblings, then?”

She shook her head. “Two first-brothers only. I am the eldest.” That was not so large a family. Especially for an Aiel *harem* marriage. *The declining birthrate must be hitting the Aiel, too.*

“Mine is much the bigger,” Branwen declared, as if even that was a victory. “A big and merry family. And while I was not the eldest of the lot, I often took on the duties of my mother. It was hard for her to keep her home clean and her children watered and in check, but she was a great woman.”

He heard the was in that. It spoke to him. “You must miss her.”

“I miss them all ...” After a quiet moment, Branwen snorted and tossed her head. “Now I have gone soft and girlish. Lead me to battle, *Car'a'carn*, before I flop on the ground and whine pitifully that I want to go home.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, though battle was the last thing he wanted. And family was the last thing Branwen wanted to talk about, so he had best to steer the conversation elsewhere. “What would you say is the most expensive thing that *Far Dareis Mai* usually gets?”

“The attention of the enemy, when scouting alone,” Tenelca said. Rand squeezed his eyes shut. She and his cousin Raya would get along swimmingly.

“He speaks of things that are traded for,” Nerise told her.

“I knew that,” announced Rhamys. “We get ... a lot of cushions. They are in great demand.”

Rand frowned. “I had thought clothwork more likely to be exported than imported.” The *algode* was at least as good and arguably better than what could be found to the west. Not fancy, perhaps, but he hadn’t anticipated Aiel caring about that. “Do you not prefer your own?”

“We do,” said Branwen, shaking her head.

He looked at Rhamys, waiting for an explanation. Her head dropped, pale hair coming loose to veil her eyes. “I am sorry, I just wanted to look smart; I do not actually know anything.”

The other Maidens politely looked away from her, except for Nici. “I think it is a good idea. You should have seen the way the wetlander holds looked. All those colourful blankets and curtains.

They all dressed ridiculously, of course, like Rand al'Thor—no Aiel would ever try to stalk in clothes like that!—but the blankets would be nice to have.”

“I don’t dress ridiculously. This is the current Andoran fashion,” Rand muttered, but the girls ignored him. In petty revenge, he ignored their chatter about drapes. Drapes! Who cared about those?

Even in the fading light he had no difficulty finding the meeting place. Torches shone from inside, making a vain attempt to keep warm streets that would soon be freezing cold. A man sat cross-legged by the door, uncaring of the temperature. He rose smoothly when he saw Rand and made a bow.

“I see you, Rand al’Thor. Be welcome in this roof.”

“I see you, Rin. *Far Dareis Mai* will accompany me.” He’d already neglected them by dragging them around with him all day. The least he could do was get them in out of the cold.

“Of course, *Car'a'carn*.”

He led the way inside, where a dozen men and women were arranged around a low raise that served them as a table. No *gai'shain* served them, he noticed. Wise Ones, chiefs, *algai'dsiswai*, yes. But not merchants. That was good. The custom already had too many echoes of the Seanchan’s slavery for his taste. Had a *gai'shain*’s year of service been acquirable for coin, it would have left doors open that Rand would have felt obliged to kick shut.

The merchants were a varied bunch, in age and sex and appearance, but all rose and greeted him politely. An avalanche of names, septs and clans soon followed. Rand forgot most of them almost as soon as he heard them, and hoped it would not matter, but there were certain clans he listened out for. No Codarra or Daryne, alas, not even among this group. And no Shaido. But there was a Nakai, at least. That might serve.

He took a seat among them and accepted the water they offered, while noting the lack of diffidence in their manner. Wetlander merchants, on sitting down with a noble, would probably have been all slope shoulders and appeasing voices. These Aiel showed none of that at sitting down with their supposed *Car'a'carn*. It wasn’t offence at that that drove him to test them. He just wanted to see if any would balk at a wetlander exerting authority. Yet when he mentioned that the Maidens hadn’t eaten, not ordering but heavily hinting, no anger flashed in the pale eyes around him. Several of the merchants rose and went to bring them food.

The Nakai woman was not one of them. She studied Rand with hard green eyes that read his intentions all too well. Red hair, pretty and slender, wearing a plethora of bangles and necklaces, as high-status Aielwomen tended to.

“Aya, wasn’t it? You are young. Did you come to Rhuidean in hopes of making your fortune?” He would have guessed her to be about Nynaeve’s age, though Nynaeve would likely have flipped her lid to hear him describe that as young.

“Improving it. My honour is secure.” Sharpness there. *Ji'e'toh* was doubtless part of this aspect of Aiel life, too. How did honour and finances interact? He doubted Aviendha could help. Wealth wasn’t something she spared much thought for. “Our position could be improved here,” Aya went on, “and there is something troublesome brewing. That is why I came. My brother has told me of you. And of your Atha’an Miere woman.”

He blinked. She was way ahead of him. To know Avaleen, her brother would have to have been at the Stone. “Who is your brother?”

“Sansu of the Stone Dogs. Do not doubt that I inherited our parents’ brains.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment.” He remembered Sansu. Taller than him and much heavier, the man had looked like a boulder with legs. The family resemblance was difficult to see.

He took a sip from his cup as he considered her, but the others arrived back before he was sure of how to play his hand. The talk resumed then. Rand steered the conversation more than he contributed. He was very much the learner here, in more ways than one. The merchants were eager enough to clue him in on the goings on in their businesses, if not in the exact details of their trading. More detailed explanations of the workings of *ji'e'toh* were casually delivered as well, without the scandalized shock with which other Aiel tended to greet his ignorance of their ways. Trade was a rare path for an Aiel to choose, so they did not labour under the expectation that everyone would just know their traditions the way an *algai'dsiswai* would. That was a relief to Rand.

The talk went on long into the night, with groups forming and breaking up as people drifted about the room. Rin proved a keen-minded fellow, and open to Rand’s ideas. There was pushback

from fellow Goshien Mandhuin, however, who weighed profits behind honour and tradition. Rand was too busy being charmed by that to see it as a setback. Were there any merchants in the lands west of the Spine of the World who would argue for such things? He'd never met one. With others he examined the detail of trade among the Aiel. The chiefs did not, it turned out, collect any taxes. Instead, *ji'e'toh* obliged the merchants to distribute a portion of their wealth among the rest of their clan. Some likened the competition between them to the raids the warriors routinely launched, with wealth passing between the victors and the losers in much the same way. One white-haired man claimed that buying up all the iron to deny a rival the chance to stockpile it could do more to win a war than ten thousand *Far Aldazar Din*.

Aya was not amused. "What are you talking about, idiot? That is nothing but wasteful!"

"Less profitable in some ways. More in others, girl," the man scoffed. "Come back to me when you have kissed a boy and held a child. Then perhaps we can speak."

Age was another thing that didn't count for much. He hadn't really expected it to, but it was still worth noting. Aya and the oldster went at it with no quarter asked and none given. Rand left them to it, wanting no part of any conflict.

The Maidens didn't take much part in the discussion. He had spent most of his time among the Aiel surrounded by Wise Ones or members of the warrior societies, so hadn't really had a chance to see how they interacted with the rest until now. The sense of superiority that Seris had hinted at was there to see in the way they held themselves apart from the merchants, heads high, eyes proud. It strengthened Rand's resolve.

Some Maidens preened less proudly than others. Nici still looked a bit down, so he slipped up to her during a lull in the discussion. He wouldn't need to know the exact figures anyway, since he meant to fob the job off on someone else.

"How are you?"

"What do you care?" she sulked.

"Enough to ask."

"I suppose."

Not the most welcoming of starts, but he persevered. "I don't think you being Shaido means we have to be enemies, you know. Whatever Aliarc says."

"Well ... that is easy to say now. But much can change. Did you know my first-brother was married to the first-sister of that trader you want to fuck?"

"I don't want to—"

She rolled her eyes at him. "As if! You probably want to do it with me, too. Right?"

Rand didn't know what to say. Aya was pretty, sure, but that was not what he'd come here for, or why he had singled her out. The Nakai lands lay to the south-west, hard against the Spine of the World, as close to Tear as the Waste got. If he was to foster increased trade between Aiel and non-Aiel, that would be a good place to start.

Nici was looking even sulkier than usual. "They are not married anymore," she went on. "He died, you see? His widow and daughter will probably be my enemies soon."

"You are just feeling sorry for yourself," Branwen said sternly.

Nici crossed her arms. "Yes, well if I did not nobody else would!"

"There has to be a way to prevent a conflict," said Rand. "Can you speak to your fellow Shaido and—"

"As if any of them would listen to me! You do not even listen to me!" She stalked off into the night, leaving him there. Had she been anything other than *Far Dareis Mai* he would have thought it a strop. He wasn't entirely convinced it was not. He was half-tempted to go after her. If he'd thought she was going to leave Rhuidean altogether, he would have. But he decided to trust that she just needed some time alone.

Besides, there was the still the matter of why he'd come to this meeting in the first place. *Oosquai* had long replaced water as the drink of choice, and many of those gathered were looking a little dishevelled. The proxy table wasn't looking its tidiest either, though even in their inebriated state not a single drop of liquid had been permitted to spill.

Aya didn't look much impressed by the swaying of her fellows. She herself was still as steady as a rock, so perhaps she did have something in common with Sansu, after all. He watched her throw

an occasional scowl at the others as she rearranged the mess they'd made, lining the empty cups up in a neat little row.

When she noticed him watching, she got a little uncomfortable. ““I hate stuff like that ...” Her hand shot out to make a final few adjustments, then settled in her lap. “I feel better now. Okay, what did you need?”

He decided to be blunt. “To organise a war machine capable of defeating the Shadow. A war machine that will need military, political, bureaucratic and financial divisions. I'll need to able to field the largest army this world has seen in living memory. And I'll need to feed and supply that army. Finding ways to do that, and people who can help me, is why I'm here.”

She was silent for a while. Then she reached for one of the cups on the table. A full one. “You talk big. Are you really so confidant of that?”

Perhaps he should have told her he was, claimed he could guarantee the Shadow's defeat. But he was feeling honest that night. “Not even close. But that doesn't free me of the obligation to try.”

Aya downed the cup in single gulp, hissed at the unfamiliar burn, and reached for a second. “And what role to you see me playing in this?” she asked.

“You're a smart girl. You've figured out that I want to create supply lines between here and the wetlands. Make things efficient. Make sure nothing is going to waste. I already control Tear. The Nakai lands are closest to it. I want you to be the first step. Your contacts, your expertise, they could be a great help to me. And they stand to make you rich, too.”

“I get you are trying to sell it to me ...”

“That doesn't mean there's anything dishonourable in it,” he said with a crooked smile.

She huffed a laugh, the first he'd heard from her. “Obviously I know this. Hmm ... It is fascinating to try and imagine it. I might be interested.”

His smile widened. “I was hoping you'd say that.”

“You were?” Aya swayed where she sat. She frowned at the empty cup in her hand, but when she tried to place it in the row with the others, she couldn't seem to line it up right. Her face reddened.

“Would it be possible to arrange a caravan from here to go there, or would I need to make the Tairens come here?” He could, but it would mean being heavier handed than he wanted to be. The Tairens had had enough tyranny from the High Nobles without his adding more.

“Neither is good. Meet in a neutral place. One of the *stedding* is best. Ogier trade well, and guarantee peace of those who come to them. And it will save us having to host anyone, or travel to a hostile land.”

And Loial had told him there were lots of *stedding* in the Spine of the World. “Yes. I like that.”

Aya's giggle surprised him so much that he almost missed her response. “Simple financial savings like this are found everywhere. People who do not do this are the strange ones, not me.”

“I don't think you are strange.”

“Heh. The way you talk is strange. You do not sound Aiel. Look like one, though. Pretty one.”

“Um, thanks. You look pretty, too,” he said, a bit warily. Was she drunk? She'd only had two cups, and not very long ago.

Aya uncoiled from her seat to stretch her slender legs. Her stockings clung tightly to them, but did not stretch high enough to hide all of her pale, smooth flesh. Rand found himself responding in a way he shouldn't.

“Strange clothes you wear, too. All tight ... They look uncomfortable. Have a ... hard time selling those here. Maybe for *gai'shain* ... Heheh ... But I might know a way ...”

He wasn't sure he believed her, but ... “What way is that?”

In response, she got to her feet, even if it did take a few attempts. “Whew. I was getting stiff from how long that went. Are you getting stiff? Hehe. I will show you my way if you show me yours.”

She tottered off, heading deeper into the building. Most of the other merchants had either left already, passed out drunk, or were talking quietly in corners. Rin was one of those last. He was still clear-eyed, and noticed when Rand rose to leave. Oddly, it was harder not to feel his eyes than it was the Maidens' ... as Rand headed deeper inside.

He found her by sound more than sight, tracing the sound of her breathing further inside. She was in a room by herself, bathed in moonlight. It darkened her hair, and made her skin seem paler save for the dark stains on her cheeks. She was leaning by a window with her skirt bunched up, touching herself. The rush of blood to his crotch made it hard to think.

“Great. This is ... totally different from normal ... All flowing ...”

She was, too. He could hear her. “I ... should leave you in peace ...” he managed.

There was no surprise in her smile. “No. I want ... all ... of ... you ...” She spread her legs to show him how wet she was. Rand couldn’t believe what he was seeing. She was so different from the controlled girl he’d been speaking to all night.

“You ... you really can’t hold your liquor. I should go.” He’d be lying if he said he wanted to, but it would be the right thing to do.

Aya disagreed. “No! Please ... do me, calm me ... I feel so hot ...” She advanced on him as she spoke, undoing her blouse and exposing her breasts. Pale they were, and tipped by a pair of nipples that already looked ready to be sucked on. She squeezed herself when she got close, the soft flesh moving hypnotically. “I cannot take it. It is driving me mad.”

She was much shorter and slimmer than him, but Rand was weak in other ways. When she took his hand and placed it where her own had been, he was lost. They didn’t bother to undress. While he mauled her breasts, she was tearing at his breeches, eager to get at what lay behind them. He didn’t kiss her, but he did clamp his mouth to her breast and suck on her hard right until the moment she freed his erection.

It sprang out to find her clumsy hands waiting for it, and then she was pushing him back and they were falling to the cold floor, and she was on top of him, rubbing her wet pussy lips along his length.

“Do it! Please ... Come on, hurry, hurry.”

He couldn’t think of refusing. He found her hips among the bunched folds of her skirt, and took hold of them, moving her into place, lining her up with his hard cock. When he slid inside, she moaned in relief. That relief grew as he went deeper, but stayed in place afterwards, waiting. Though she knelt atop him, it was Rand who set the pace, thrusting up into her, kneading her breasts with his hands as she urged him on.

“Good! More, do it more!”

He tried, but the position made it awkward. It didn’t take her long to lose patience and start grinding away herself. The rocking of her hips against his brought her tight heat into contact with every inch of his member, and started a rumbling deep inside.

“Ah ... N-no ... Why are you stopping?”

“Just ... trying to pace myself ...” he grunted.

Aya wasn’t for listening. “N-no ... not yet ... do not stop ... I need more ...”

For Rand it became a challenge to hold on as the inebriated girl ground desperately against him. He set his teeth, tensed his body, clenched his buttocks, and heroically held on until she threw back her head and squealed at the dark ceiling. “Ahh ... this is ... Coming ... I am coming!”

Only when he felt her hot juices gush out to soak him did he feel free to relax enough to grab her by the hips and pound into her the way he’d wanted. It didn’t take long before he, too, was coming. Once he had emptied his seed into her, his mind emptied of lust as well, leaving him to wonder at himself. So much for avoiding entanglements and focusing on work.

Aya, however, did not return to herself so quickly. “Ah! I can feel you in me ...” she gasped, staring down at where they were joined. “I am soaking wet. Such a nice mess ...”

Rand pulled her down into his arms. “Somehow I doubt you’ll think that in the morning.”

He was right.

She slept well that night, using him as a mattress. That was nice, in a way, but it left him very stiff the next morning, and not in the good way. At least his coat had provided a little protection from the stone floor. And Aya herself had been as warm and soft a blanket as could be asked for, minus the snoring. There were none of the aggressive flirtations of the night before to be seen when she blinked herself awake under the dawn light and pushed herself up to see what she was lying on.

“Oh. Crap. What did ...?” A small hand probed her temple delicately. “Oh. I remember.”

“Good morning, sweetie.”

She clambered off at once. “Do not call me that. It was the *oosquai*. I really must stay away from the *oosquai*.”

“You ... are a bit of a lightweight, I can’t lie.”

“A ... lightweight ... I would think so. You are a large man. I do not think I could crush you unless the wetlands have done something strange to your body.”

He was on the verge of explaining, but the way she was holding her head filled him with pity.  
“Never mind.”

“I will not. You should not either. I do not want to catch the eye of another man.”

He sat up and fixed himself. In truth, he felt no offense. “I take it I’m not the first man to probe the mysteries of icy Aya and her sultry twin sister. Understandable. They are quite the pair.”

She clutched her head as if it hurt even more. “You say such strange things.”

“Sorry. I hope this won’t have a negative impact on the deal we spoke of earlier.”

“Why would it? Unless you behave strangely.”

He swallowed a comment about his behaviour usually being strange to folk around here. This was not the time, and she was not the girl. “I’d glad. I hope we can work well together in that way as well.”

Aya had hidden her assets underneath her blouse and skirt by then. Save for her red cheeks, no-one would have known what she’d been up to the night before. Save for the two of them. “Yes. We will. In trading only.”

“In trading only,” he agreed. They shared solemn nods, and he really should have left it at that, but a cheeky smile crept its way onto his face. “Don’t worry, when we are negotiating prices I will only try to bend you over figuratively.”

Her red-cheeked glare drew the laughter from his chest.

Those cheeks remained red for some time, and she refused to accompany him out of the room. So he thanked her for an enjoyable evening, wished her well, and sauntered off in a way that would have done Mat proud. His saunter only lasted until he found the Maidens, sleeping in shifts by the entrance to the building. Branwen, Jec and Nici were awake when he entered. The knowing looks on their faces turned his saunter into a slope-shoulder shuffle. He deserved those looks, too. Sleeping with Aya had rather defeated the point of avoiding the Roof of the Maidens yesterday.

“I’m back.”

“So I smell,” Nici said rudely. “Why do you have so many girlfriends?”

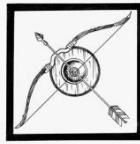
“Because he has a big ... heart,” Jec teased. He shuffled past them with his head bowed. Honestly. He needed to get a hold of himself. Some day. Some year.

It was still early but the streets of Rhuidean were filling up fast with people out on their morning errands. One fellow stood out, since he was not rushing anywhere. Instead, he lingered outside the building as though waiting for someone. Slender and sharp-nosed, he studied Rand suspiciously when he heard the Maidens taunting him about being unable to resist a pretty face. Rand avoided his eye as he shuffled by but the stranger’s expression was friendly enough to inspire Branwen and the others to place themselves between the two men. One of those admirers Aya had hinted at, he suspected. That was the last thing he needed. Today he would hold to his resolve, he vowed.

“You do not look like you slept well. We should go back to the roof to get something to eat,” Branwen suggested.

“No!” Rand shouted, surprising them as much as himself. Shaking himself, he shuffled off down the road, walking the walk of shame.

## CHAPTER 15: *Clan or Society?*



Rand cut the grass himself, using his belt knife. There were no others tool around anymore, and he'd stopped carrying his sword to avoid offending the Aiel. It didn't matter. The time was not wasted. No time spent remembering her could be wasted.

It saddened him to think that Kari's lonely grave would someday be unmarked, but he couldn't see it going any other way. The home they'd had here was gone, burned down by Whitecloaks. Neither Rand nor his father was likely to rebuild, and there were no other al'Thors to take over. The woods were already reclaiming the farm. Soon, Kari's grave would be as buried as her body. Once he and Tam were gone, no-one would even remember where she lay. If her family, the Garrigels, hadn't disowned her, perhaps it would have been different.

But perhaps counted for nothing. After clearing the last of the grass away, he rested his hand on the little wooden marker and whispered his thanks to the woman who had all too briefly been the only mother he'd ever known. Then he stood and breathed deep of the clean, wet air of his true home. It tasted especially sweet after spending all that time in the Waste.

He was reluctant to return but knew he had to. Emond's Field was not so far away that he couldn't have walked it. Perrin and Anna would be there, along with a great many others he'd once called friend. But Rand was not welcome in the village anymore. Now that they knew he was a male channeler, his former neighbours would be as likely to shoot him as wave hello. Some had tried, the last time he'd seen the village.

So he turned away from the overgrown path that meandered east and found an open space in which to plant himself. Closing his eyes, he seized *saidin* and let the liquid fire flow into him, burning the taint that coated it and letting the smoke of that burning seep into his every fibre. Perhaps he should be using it less. Limiting his exposure might prolong the time before he went mad and began rotting. But there were things he needed to do.

He wove the Five Powers just as he'd done before. He hadn't needed Asmodean for that, though an explanation on the details of what he'd managed to fumble his way through had been most welcome. He wove them, tied them together and let the power that drove the Wheel of Time flow through him to open a doorway where no doorway had any business being. Floating in mid air, its frame was a bright white line that he knew would cut through anything unfortunate enough to touch it. On the other side was the gloomy room in Rhuidean that he'd left an hour past. Miles away, yet Rand travelled the distance in a single step. That was what the Aes Sedai called the weave: Travelling. To them it was a lost weave; to Rand it was a new advantage.

No smile touched his face at that thought. Not there. In those circumstances. In that company.

Asmodean was where he had left him, lounging over the remains of a meal with a pronounced look of dissatisfaction on his face. A slender, relatively handsome man of middle years, his dark eyes held a perpetual wariness that belied his status as one of the most evil and feared men in history.

"It worked," Rand said needlessly. He looked at the gateway, held it open for a while longer than he needed to. He almost fancied he could feel his strength draining. Not enough to incapacitate him the way Asmodean had said it would some, but opening two such gateways in quick succession was certainly not easy.

"I warned you not to do that."

He released the weave at once and shot a hard look at the older man. His haste had nothing to do with wanting to impress his teacher. Even with all the restraints that he and Lanfear had placed upon him, Asmodean was not to be trusted for an instant. His strength drained by the practice, Rand stood ready for an attack. If the man thought him exhausted, he would be in for a rude awakening.

But no attack came. A long moment passed in which the two men watched each other carefully. It was Rand who broke the silence.

"Is there any way around the limitations you mentioned? Can you Travel somewhere you've never been before, or ... or tie off the gateway like a ward, to prevent wasting your strength."

“No. Otherwise they wouldn’t be limitations,” the Forsaken said.

Rand’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure? What about *Tel’aran’rhiod*? If I visited somewhere in the World of Dreams, would I be able to Travel to its reflection here in the real world? Did anyone think of that?”

“What a wonderful idea. I can’t imagine why no-one in the history of the Age of Legends ever thought of that, in between building cities on the ocean floor and ships that could sail between the stars.”

“Spare me your mockery!” he snapped. “You are supposed to teach, so teach! Can it be used that way or not?”

Asmodean looked insultingly patient. “Yes. You can scout a location in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, then Travel to it without having been there before in the real world.”

“And the other question? Do you know that answer? You know too few for my taste. I wonder how honest you are being.”

That wariness returned in force. “Wards are weaves but not all weaves are wards. Do you think you could tie off lightning? How would that work? It is the same with Travelling.”

He scowled. “The two don’t seem much alike to me. Why can’t it be tied off?”

Asmodean blew out his breath in exasperation. “It just can’t! I did not make the One Power, or decide how it works. Take it up with the Creator if you want answers. There is a workaround, but since it requires the strength of a Circle to weave it is of little use to most everyone. Especially men like you. Only women can form Circles. Will you hand your power over to that Moiraine girl? Do you think she would ever give it back?”

He didn’t know what Moiraine would do from one moment to the next. That was the problem. “And if I tried to move an army without it ...”

Asmodean’s lips twisted bitterly. “Warn me before you do, so I can slit my wrists before the rest of the Chosen are finished killing you while you lie there helpless and exhausted.”

“Only if they knew where to find me,” he muttered. But he knew the Forsaken was right. Darkfriends were everywhere. Rats. Ravens. The Shadow’s eyes were all but impossible to avoid completely. If he tried it he would be resting everything on a prayer.

He fished around in the pocket of his coat and produced a trio of small silver ornaments. One was engraved with a shield with a woman’s face upon it, and it was it that interested Rand most. Somehow there was a woman locked inside, a woman bound in service to the Forsaken. “How do I open this?”

“You know I cannot tell you that. You heard Lanfear.”

“Lanfear isn’t here,” he said coldly. “I am.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain of where she is and is not, were I you. Regardless, terrifying as you might think yourself, my young Dragon, I knew your past self. Lews Therin was not capable of doing what Lanfear has done. I’d rather be your enemy than hers.”

Rand’s glare had no effect, and why would it? He was hardly going to torture the man, Forsaken or not. Did that make him weak? Angry at he knew not what, he stuffed the three *ter’angreal* back into his pocket. He’d fiddled with them in private, hoping to puzzle their working out, as he had Travelling, but to no avail. He would just have to keep trying.

“Same time tomorrow. Avoid drawing attention to yourself until then,” he said. He waited for Asmodean’s resentful nod before striding from the room.

The corridor outside was empty, as he’d commanded it be kept. He wasn’t sure how much they believed his claim that he didn’t want anyone hearing his terrible singing voice, but the Maidens had followed his orders regardless. He found them farther off, lurking in corners and blind spots, watching for enemies even here in their sacred city.

There were more Maidens than when he’d left, and the three new arrivals were all known to him. All were Shaido. Shyala, Jula and Rolisa. All were grim of face. *This can’t be good.*

“I see you,” he said formally.

“I see you, Rand al’Thor. And I see on your face that you guess the purpose of our coming.”

Jula nodded agreement with Shyala. “It is a matter of *ji’e’toh*. We wanted to say farewell first. To make sure you understood that it was not a slight on your honour.”

Rolisa was sterner. “We must rejoin our clan. Honour demands it.”

That was alarming, especially in light of what was brewing with the Shaido. “I would rather you stay,” he began, but knew not to continue even before their faces hardened, “but the demands of *ji'e'toh* must come first.”

“They must,” Shyala agreed. There was a sadness in her green eyes that stirred his own. He liked all three women, but Shyala was a favourite. “There is always something in the way.”

That felt truer than he could explain. “You’ve got the power to make a difference, Shyala. Not everyone does.”

“How do you mean?”

How indeed? “I don’t want a war with the Shaido. You know that. Don’t you? Once you are back among them, you can make sure they know there is another path. There has to be a way we can prevent this conflict.”

“You are right. You are not my enemy and neither are they. I cannot let any of you down. I will not. I will keep doing what I can, Rand al’Thor. Maybe some time when I am not trying to reason with my people and you are not doing what you do ...”

He smiled wanly. “I hope so. May you always find water and shade.”

They turned and left without another word. Rand’s eyes were drawn to the cased bows on their backs, and the bundles of spears thrust through the harness. They were not simply leaving him for another; they were marching to war. The thought that he might have to face them in battle someday, and what might come of that, was more terrifying than a Myrddraal’s gaze. *I couldn’t. Not even if it meant my life.*

He supposed Nici was leaving, too. That was a pity. He’d miss her. It was some time before he became aware of how quiet everything was. Usually, when he spent too long ... pondering things grimly, the Maidens would start making fun of him. They were silent now, however, each woman lost in her own dark thoughts.

“Honour is a bit like *saidin*,” he found himself whispering. “Wonderful when it works for you, but terribly destructive at times.”

Branwen was the only one close enough to hear, and did not take his words well. “Honour is ... everything. Would you prefer that they abandon theirs? Would you ask similar of me? I ... The goal and challenge of every battle is personal betterment, and thus honourable demeanour is as important to the warrior as the milk of their mother is to the newborn babe.”

“Is honour truly everything to you?” It was so with most of the Aiel. Disturbingly so.

“Of course!” she said, before a troubled frown knotted her brows. “As it should be, though ... I will confess that recently my mind sometimes softens and wanders to the thoughts of hearth and family instead of my spear and bow. Disturbingly so. My lust for battle has diminished. I feel softer and gentler by the day.”

“Is that so bad?”

She stared at him. “It is worse than bad. And talking to you only makes it worse.” She turned from him then, to join the others in their grim ponderings.

It was well after sunrise when he turned his feet for the Roof of the Maidens that night. The dreamwalker Wise Ones hadn’t been able to make him any promises. They had already spoken to the Shaido Wise Ones, and done what could be done there. His urging of them to do more had only won him sharp rebukes, even from Seana and Dana. When he’d asked Rhuarc what the chances of a peaceful solution were, his chief had simply shrugged. The Shaido were Shaido, and Couladin was Couladin.

His dark mood and the night’s chill air quashed any inclination he had towards fun, so he strode silently past the guards at the bronze doors. Marindha greeted him with a glower but there was nothing to be read into that, or so he hoped. She greeted the world with a glower, which made it easy to overlook how cute she looked otherwise. She’d greeted his describing her so with a glower, too, the one time he’d dared extend an invitation.

There were few Maidens still awake at that hour, which suited him fine. Perhaps sensing his mood, none of them propositioned him as he strode down the wide, white-tiled corridors towards the curving staircase.

It was cold even in his private room, several floors up, but he undressed even so. Sleeping in his clothes no longer felt acceptable. Besides, his body’s heat would soon warm the blankets.

Rand's sleep was troubled that night. Dead women haunted his dreams, those who were truly gone and those he feared would soon join them. He was running through the Waterwood, pushing aside branches, rooting among clumps of grass, desperately trying to find the place that he'd left Min. She was nowhere to be found, though. Buried, lost, dead, forgotten.

He woke with a start, sweating despite the night's chill. Just a dream. It had to be. The blankets were indeed warm, and heavy. When he sighed out his fear, they grumbled in response.

Alarmed, he sat up. The lamp near his pallet still gave off a gentle circle of light, though everything beyond it was cast in shadow. The wards Asmodean had taught him—the ones he claimed would prevent a Myrddraal from moving through the shadows the way they did—he did not yet trust. He wanted to find a way to test them first, before he trusted anyone's safety to them.

"Nici," he said, when he saw the face that had been resting on his chest. "What are you doing here?"

She pulled the blanket to her chin, and curled up on the pallet. "What is your problem!? I was cold, okay? Is that so bad?"

"Cold?" Maybe. But she was a bit old to be sneaking into someone else's bed just because she was cold. Rand didn't want to presume, but ... "I'm a bit surprised. I thought you were all leaving. Especially you. I ... thought you didn't much like me."

She wouldn't meet his eyes. "You are not so bad. For a fool boy, I mean. It does not mean I like you or anything. You do not much want me around anyway. Right? I probably *should* go, but then who would tell you how things are? You need me."

"Did I give you that impression? That I don't like you? It's not true. The worst I could say of you is that you are exasperating at times. Believe me, I can put up with a lot worse than exasperating."

"Oh thanks!" she said sarcastically.

He laughed softly, lay back down and put his arm around her. "You're fun. I'd have been sad if you'd left."

"Huh. So ... you like me?"

She kept her red hair cut short. It made it easy to comb his fingers through the little hairs at the top of her neck. "I do."

"That is nice ..." she whispered.

"You're nice. And very pretty ..." he whispered back.

Nici wriggled in closer. "You are nice, too."

"If I was nice I wouldn't start conflicts everywhere I go, and end up breaking so many things. And people." *The trumpets of war will sound at his footsteps ...*

"You run yourself down, why do you do that?"

He had to think about it for a moment. "Because I deserve it."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "That is not true."

"I'm glad you think so." She was surprisingly sweet, and she gave good cuddles.

"You know, just now I really felt how much you like me."

He shifted on the pallet. "Really?"

Her soft laughter warmed his chest. "I felt it on my leg."

"Well ... like I said, you're a very pretty girl ..."

Nici's eyes were uncommonly dark for an Aiel, more like a Theren woman's. They shone with emotion when she looked at him. "Do you really think so?"

Rand wasn't about to miss a chance like that. He slipped down on the bed, and took her face between his hands. "I do," he breathed, as he touched his lips to hers.

She was pliant at first, but soon her mouth was moving against his in sweet exploration. He had to move carefully to prevent her from banging her teeth against his. Rand conceived a suspicion then and decided to take things slow. He let his hands roam over Nici's body, gently squeezing her thighs and bottom through her *cadin'sor*, enjoying the way her kisses grew more heated.

"I feel all ... shivery ..." she whispered.

"It gets better."

"Of course! I know all about these things," she boasted.

His smile was wry. "Naturally. A worldly woman, you."

A worldly woman whose retort disappeared in a gasp of air when he took her breasts in hand and gave them a thorough kneading. She let him do as he pleased with her at first, but after a while

she started clawing at his flesh, touching his chest and stomach and shoulders. She hesitated to go however, however, even when his nakedness pressed against her.

"I want to see you."

Nici looked away. "You have seen a lot of girls. Why would you want to see one more?"

"I don't. I want to see you."

"Well, fine. I suppose if you really want to ..." He pretended not to notice the way her hands trembled as she removed the top of her *cadin'sor*, or that wary, hopeful look in her eyes.

It was a silly thing to be wary of. The breasts she revealed to him were full and round, tipped by pale pink nipples. He pressed his branded palm to one, barely noticing the way the metallic tattoo on his forearm glittered. His eyes were full of her. "Gorgeous."

Nici giggled. "You think so?"

"I know so," he said as he went in for the kiss. She was active in his arms this time, her hands clutching at his back and bottom as their chests pressed together, her softness against his hardness.

Another hardness was demanded attention but Rand did his best to ignore it. Instead, he focused on her. She let him put his hands down the back of her trousers to squeeze her bum, and kicked free of those trousers by herself. When he touched her knee, her fingers tangled in his hair. As he went slowly higher, gently kneading her thigh and discovering the slick wetness there, her kisses grew hungrier and hungrier.

And when at last he silked his fingers across her sex, she broke their kiss with a loud moan and grabbed hold of his arm, not to push it away but to pull him against her.

Rand smiled as he watched her writhe on his bed, cheeks flushed, her pouty mouth opened to moan, perfect for kissing, or other things. She was such a pretty girl. His experienced fingers stimulated her outer folds and by the time he brought a finger to her entrance she was so sopping wet that it slid in with ease.

It was fun getting her all stirred up. She gasped so loudly as he did so that he decided to kiss her cheek instead of her mouth. When his kisses trailed down her neck he felt her pulse racing against his lips. Her breasts were soft, her nipple hard. She gasped even louder when he sucked on it. Though a slender girl, there was still a lean strength in the stomach he kissed his way down. And for all her pretence of indifference, her legs spread at once when he went lower still.

With tongue and fingers both he played Nici's body, targeting her most sensitive spots within and without. She pressed her womanhood against him in her passion, and he was the opposite of offended. He licked her up and down, and slipped two fingers into her so he could touch both sides at once. The noises she was making were getting higher and higher.

It wasn't just the heat and wetness that told him when Nici came. She grabbed him by the hair and held him in place, her eyes squeezed shut and face contorted as she lost herself completely to her climax. He kissed and sucked on her nub as her legs trembled, feeling well pleased with himself.

His erection lay unattended against the pallet, but that was fine. He was content to kiss his way back up Nici's now sweaty body, touch those breasts again, and claim a taste of that so kissable mouth of hers. If she was embarrassed to taste her own juices on his lips, he saw no sign of it. But then, she wasn't showing much sign of thought at all just then.

He held her close and let her come back to herself. He knew she had when she hugged him tight and sighed in satisfaction.

"Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?"

"Because you're letting me."

She bit her lip. "I would have let you before. I ... would let you do a lot of things ..."

He pushed the blankets aside and took himself in hand. Even that touch was a relief, as excited as he was, but there was something else he craved. "Good. Because I want to put this inside you."

Nici laughed nervously. "Come on. I do not want to see it!"

"Can you think of anywhere it could be hidden, then?"

She was laughing too hard to form words, but her quick nod was answer enough. He climbed on top of her and found her hole with his tip. Though she was sopping wet, he still entered her nice and slow. Her heat slipped over him, tight as a glove. As he went deeper she winced, but her hands were on his back not his chest, pulling not pushing.

Nici's eyes were big and black and steady on his as he took her virginity. The pain he knew she'd be feeling did not show on her face. Shaido Aiel was still Aiel. When he was seated inside her tight womanhood, he settled atop her, brushed his fingers against her cheek and kissed her tenderly.

He laid still for a time, letting her adjust to the change. Her wet heat felt good upon him, her soft lips, the way she caressed his bottom. It felt even better when he at last moved again, sliding his length down her. Her blood was on his member, her no longer virgin pussy stretched to accommodate him. When he pushed back in, she whimpered in pleasure rather than pain.

"That's what I like to hear."

"I ... I was not saying ... anything ..." He ignored her useless denials as he began to ride her. Her body was hot beneath his. Her nipples tickled his chest, and the little noises she made tickled his ears. But the tight wet heat of her pussy threatened to drive awareness of all that from his mind. It was a struggle to keep it slow, one at which he didn't always succeed. She didn't stop him then, so he kept that pace. And when he failed at that, she once again did not stop him. After an unknowable time, he found himself riding her in earnest while her nails dug into his buttcheeks.

"You feel so good around me. I think I'm going to come," he gritted.

She made no response, save to wrap her legs around his hips. Her back was smooth under his hands as he embraced her, holding her by the shoulders and hips, keeping her steady for those last few strokes before he could fill her with his seed.

Sweet release. Rand's mind went blank as his come mixed with her blood and juices. He managed to maintain enough awareness to roll over onto his back rather than collapse atop her. Nici rolled with him, joined as they were, his arms around her. He hadn't let her go, and did not want to.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked after a moment.

It was a struggle even to blink. "I have to. I'm only human ..."

"But I was about to ... Like before ..."

Was that a whine? He'd never heard an Aiel whine before. Her grip upon him was tight, and she was very easy on the eyes, especially when she was all flushed like that.

"I might be able to hold on a little longer," he said. "You've ... played with yourself before, haven't you? Sit up, and show me how you did it."

Her mouth hung open. "That is embarrassing. I am not doing that."

"If you're close, it wouldn't take long. But you'll need to hurry ..."

Nici sat up. The way her breast jiggled helped him to fight against the softening. Her hips rocked upon his intruding member while her hand went between her thighs, to rub at the sensitive flesh there. Her cheeks were as red as her hair. That was beautiful. He weighed one breast in his hand, and watched the other shake. That was beautiful, too. *She* was beautiful.

"Come for me, Nici."

After a minute's more furious rubbing, she did. He smiled when she cried out, and his smile broadened as he watched her writhe upon him, her pussy greedily sucking up what he'd given her.

"That's what I like to see. And hear."

She fell into his embrace. "You really think you are funny. You are just lucky I am so nice."

He ran his hand down her back, to rest on her hips. His softening cock still rested inside her. "I'm definitely lucky, that much is true."

"Hey! I am so nice!" Nici raised her head to pout down at him. "You better treat me good after this. And not say anything bad about my being Shaido. The others do. Some of them think it is funny. Some of them."

"I won't," he promised.

She settled down again. "And do not expect me to join in now. When you are fucking every woman in the building." She spoke right over his objection that it wasn't every woman. "I do not want them seeing me. They would probably say stuff about that, too."

He hadn't realised she was so sensitive. It woke a tenderness in him, so he kissed the top of her head and said, "Don't worry. I won't try to draw you into that. When we are together, it will just be the two of us."

She'd seemed plenty relaxed, with the way she was sprawled atop him, but she proved able to relax even more. "That is a relief. Not that I was worried you would not want to do it again, or anything. I am just glad you respect my wishes."

"I'm going to want to respect your wishes some more in the morning," he said sleepily.

She giggled. "And how will you do that?"

"Well, most of the Maidens are really limber ... but you are so young and inexperienced. I doubt you could do it ..." he teased.

"I can so! I can do anything those others can. I can kick far above my head. I could kick you in the face without even needing to jump. Is it the way Su bounced on you while doing the splits? I can do that, easy. And Elana is not the only girl who can put her feet behind her head."

Rand laughed, in surprise and delight. "Nici ... have you been watching me?"

"No ..." she said after a long moment. "I just walked past the room once or twice. That does not mean anything ..."

He gave her bottom a light slap. "I think you might be a naughty girl. And one I should keep close."

Instead of getting offended, she snuggled in. "Well, you are half right. You should be grateful I am willing to put up with you. You need me."

"Maybe I do," he said, as he pulled the blankets of their bed up in a vain effort to ward off the chill of the coming night.

## CHAPTER 16: *The Devoted*



“The desertions grow more numerous. Even *Far Dareis Mai* begins to abandon you. You know this was a mistake, Rand. The Amyrlin Seat is respected by all. She can unite the nations behind you. You cannot even unite the Aiel with each other, much less with those on whom they so recently warred. Do not let pride damn you, or you risk damning us all.”

Rand bore her words stoically. And stubbornly refused to be moved by them, despite the hints of truth they held. They were outside the Roof of the Maidens under a noonday sun. He’d been late to his training on account of a certain Shaido’s desire to make good on her boasts—which she had, to be fair. She hadn’t come with him to see Lan and wasn’t among his guards now or she might well have had words for Moiraine, Aes Sedai or not. The other Maidens were not pleased either.

Lan didn’t usually accompany him after they were done, but he had this time. Rand was no longer so naive as to think that wasn’t why Moiraine had been waiting right on this spot, impeccably coifed and coolly composed, standing by the dry fountain as if painted there by a master artist. The sun of the Waste had darkened her skin to a light amber but it could not lower her proud head.

“A fine speech. I will bear it in mind,” he said, with polite indifference.

Moiraine was far too dignified to glare at him, but those dark eyes glittered. “I would hope so. Unless there is something more important you think you should be doing with your time.”

Aiel did not blush. Not in public, at least, but the Maidens certainly stiffened when Moiraine’s gaze passed over them. She’d been quiet assiduous about avoiding entering the roof, but Moiraine had ways of finding things out. Any one of them could be reporting to her. Or the *gai’shain*, perhaps—they went freely, even here where men were usually forbidden.

Rand did blush, unfortunately, but his blushing did nothing to diminish his stubbornness. “I’d best go think about it right now, in fact,” he said, before turning around and climbing the stairs. He did not look back until he was past the bronze doors, and would not have even if the angry words that followed him had been Moiraine’s instead of the Maidens’. He’d be burned before he let her push him around. Unless ... could this be what she wanted him to do? Telling him to do one thing while expecting him to do the opposite to spite her would be very Aes Sedai. He was tempted to turn back, but didn’t want to look a fool.

That trail of angry words followed him through the corridors, with many Maidens joining the procession in order to learn what was wrong. The higher-standing ones demanded answers, and were quick to get them.

Chief among those was Sulin, the wiry white-haired leader of *Far Dareis Mai*. Her leathery skin had more than its fair share of scars, and her clear blue eyes were still as sharp as daggers. When he’d first met her, he’d thought she looked like the deadliest granny in the word. He still thought that, though she’d proven to be quite friendly. Not friendly in *that* way—she showed no interest in that sort of thing—but good company nonetheless.

She neither looked nor sounded friendly when Su related to her what Moiraine had said.

“Desertions, she says!? The Aes Sedai does not know our ways. She does not follow *ji’e’toh*, and we accept this. But she should not think to judge it, either.”

While the others nodded or muttered angry agreement, Rand watched out of the corner of his eye. The Maidens had never refused an order from an Aes Sedai that he had witnessed. That had always troubled him. It was good to see hints that their deference was not absolute. And yet it was worth being reminded that the Aiel’s *ji’e’toh* was very much not in keeping with the standards of behaviour that he had grown up with. A friend leaving to join the enemy army was fine. Calling that leaving desertion was not. He should not let himself become too comfortable. These were still the same people who had warred their way across Valgarda to punish a woman for cutting down a tree. Who could know what they would do, except another Aiel?

He saw Nici coming the other way but her eyes kissed his only briefly. When she heard what was being discussed, she ducked her head and hurried past. She'd said she didn't want the others to know about them, so he kept his face still.

Talk of desertions renewed Sulin's insistence that he spend all his nights beneath the Roof of the Maidens. He was better defended here. Rand had to refuse, though. He had an appointment with the Wise Ones, he pointed out. Only to himself did he add that he'd been neglecting Merile and Raine quite badly this week, and needed to make time for them. Still, he appreciated her not trying to pretend he wasn't in danger. Not all Aiel would be content to simply abandon their clans in protest over his ascension.

Perhaps even not all Maidens.

He said nothing, remained blank of face, but he found himself studying the women gathered under the roof as he made his way deeper inside.

"The Maidens will not betray you. And any Maiden who does will not survive dishonouring us," Su said quietly.

He winced. So much for hiding it from them. The coldness in her blue eyes was not, he thought, and hoped, directed at him. Leanly fit, with dark red hair, she was the prototypical Aiel to his eyes, deadly serious and unflinching.

Though older, taller and fairer, Dina was a match for her in attitude. "I will make it my *toh* to ensure it."

"No-one will ever harm you. I will never allow it," Branwen said passionately.

Jolien frowned at her. "Calm yourself. You sound like Renay."

Branwen stared at her, face still but eyes wide in shock.

"Aiel follow *ji'e'toh*, even with wetlanders. Those traitors have *toh* to meet," Viola growled. Pale of hair and skin and eye, she was a very pretty girl. And very much disinterested in him. "Do not think that means I have to like you, wetlander," she added, as if reading his thoughts.

Now that they were in a safe location, some of his escort split off—Viola first among them—while some of those they passed got up and joined. Questions were asked, explanations given, and those who overheard both got up and joined the procession, adding questions of their own.

The group soon grew big. Too big, and too serious. Rand wanted to be alone, but when he made for the stairs that led to room that had been given him, Su caught him by the sleeve.

"Do not turn your back on us."

"I wasn't going to," he said uncomfortably. He couldn't even if he'd wanted to.

"Then come. We should be together."

His cheeks coloured slightly, as he wondered what she meant by that. It was to a familiar room that she led him. That didn't mean anything. It was not as if it was the official orgy room, it was just where they most often happened lately.

Sulin seemed to think otherwise since she left immediately, muttering about better things to do. He hoped she meant herself but it was likely aimed at him, and not unfairly. Linsay left as well. Leanly pretty and yellow-haired, with a hawkish nose, she had always been nice and encouraging towards him. So much so that he'd been eager to proposition her, and saddened when she graciously turned him down. He had accepted that at once, of course, and did not take her swift departure as a slight. She was just too decent to tease him with what he could not have. Adelin, Enaila, Jec, some others, they made themselves scarce.

But more Maidens lingered, even some who never took part in the orgies, since the talk still centred on Moiraine's probably unwitting slight on their honour. Carolyn, a rough looking red-haired woman who usually expressed herself towards him with little more than a dark stare, sounded off about she'd like to see Moiraine put in her place. Few of the other Aiel were willing to go that far, not where an Aes Sedai was concerned, but no-one shouted her down either. The only real support her suggestion got was from Celesta, a pale splinter of a woman whose fiery hair did not at all reflect her attitude.

Su was more concerned with something else. "You must not doubt our loyalty," she said, holding his hand between her own. "You gave your honour to *Far Dareis Mai* to carry. We would never drop it. We would never betray you."

It all honesty, Rand wasn't sure what he'd given them when he said that. It had been one of those times when words just spilled out of him, feeling right. *Ta'veren* at work, he suspected. He'd

told Theodrin the truth about that. But even if he didn't understand it, it had plainly meant a lot to them. "I ... am sure that you will carry it well ..." he managed.

"Let me show you." While the others talked, Su led him to one of the raised platforms. What the original builders had intended those solid stone daises for he did not know, but they rose to table height and that suited their purpose now.

Su swiftly shed her *cadin'sor*. Only a few years older than him, she had the body typical of an Aiel woman, lean and fit, womanly without being voluptuous. She was already up on the table, lying on her back, while he still struggled with his breeches.

The others had noticed what was going on by then. Neither exasperated complaints nor loud whistles slowed Rand's efforts to free himself. He was vaguely aware of some women starting to leave now that they knew what was coming, Vanda among them.

But when he positioned himself between Su's legs, she reached down to stop him. Knees high against her chest, she pushed his cock away from her cute little cleft and down towards her puckered asshole.

Rand was surprised. None of the Maidens had ever let him do that before. He wasn't sure what they thought of the matter, and was wary of running afoul of *ji'e'toh*, so he hadn't asked. Even then, as excited as he was, he still hesitated.

"Are you sure?"

"I am your Maiden. There is nothing within the bounds of *ji'e'toh* that I will not do for you. Let me prove it." With that, she moved him to her back passage and then urged him on with her eyes.

He stared at her for a moment, just to take in her beauty. And then a moment longer, for reasons only he could know. Seizing *saidin* and fighting through the taint to reach its dazzling power only made him more aware of their shared nakedness and the others in the room. It was almost completely Water that he wove, with just a single thread of Fire, tied together in a way that he'd learned from Asmodean. He hadn't explained to the Forsaken why he wanted to know how to do such a thing, but his amusement had been so unmistakable that he'd surely guessed. He didn't feel the threads of *saidin* as he wove them around himself, but he felt the warm slickness that their resulting weave coated his cock with. It was brave of Su to offer to go raw, but he didn't want to hurt her.

Even slickened so, her brows rose and she gritted her teeth when she felt him push inside her butt. Not for a moment did she move to stop him, though, no matter how deeply he pushed. He had both hands on the dais beside her head by the time his balls pressed up against her soft cheeks. And still she did not complain.

"That's my girl," he said, leaning over her.

"Not your girl. Your Maiden."

It pleased him to think that. It pleased him to fuck her while thinking it even more. Her ass clutched him so tightly that he could feel his whole shaft being caressed each time he moved. The dew that coated the red hairs of her sex shone in the light that sparkled through the coloured glass of the windows. It shouted to him of her secret pleasure, even before he started playing with her soft folds.

They gathered quite the audience as they were doing it, which made Su blush furiously. Rand's own cheeks remained relatively pale—he'd gotten rather used to having an audience lately. This audience was whispering rather more furiously than usual.

Even Vanda had stuck around, a smile softening her somewhat mannish face. "Interesting ..." he heard her say.

One of the Maidens, Cami, took to prowling around them, taking the display in from every angle. She was half-naked already, having shed her bottoms, and he found himself watching her walk. Wide hips. Nice bum. Legs that looked like they could run for days. Or crush a man's head between them. He could think of worse ways to go.

He was still watching her when the girl he was currently ploughing began to shudder before him. Su clutched her own breasts as she came. He smiled as he watched her in her pleasure.

But once she was done he didn't continue fucking her. There was a look in Cami's blue eyes that he liked. Sure enough, when he held his hand out to her, she smiled and took hold of it.

They kissed for a moment while fondling each other's asses, but it wasn't romance that either hungered for just then.

"Take me as well. Just like that," she said, turning around. She took hold of and parted her own fleshy cheeks, to reveal the tight hole between.

Rand seized *saidin* briefly, slickened himself, and took hold of the Maiden's hips. Her spearsisters remained gathered around them, watching as he thrust into her, listening to the moans she let out as he began to fuck her tight ass.

"I am yours!" she cried as she took it. Taking her at her word, he held her by hip and by her yellow tail of hair as he had his way with her. When her mighty legs gave out and she went to her knees, he followed her there.

"Such loyalty..."

"And devotion..."

"I will prove mine as well."

"Jolien!"

The woman in question ignored Estel's shock, and did not try to stop her friend from backing away. Jolien was the first to shed her *cadin'sor*, but far from the only one. Some looked nervous, some excited, a few troubled, others simply determined. Riallin's breasts bounced as she was taking off her trousers; she giggled when she noticed him watching. Pamela was reassuring Nora that it wasn't so bad. Renay was already down to her skin, and was stretching her long legs, while Dina stood fully clothed, a thoughtful look on her lovely face. And all the while Rand knelt among them, making Cami squeal.

His roving eyes were called back to his mount when she went to one elbow, the better to shove a hand between her legs and rub desperately at what she found there.

"We are too many, even for one as young and lusty as him," he heard Beyla say.

"We are spearsisters. All can make their demonstration, if none place themselves before their sisters," Branwen said. For some reason, she sounded very upset.

Beyla wasn't wrong. There were ... a lot of women around him. And most were either undressed or undressing. It was enough to make a man anxious. Riallin's smile, Amindha's wink and Pamela's ribald joke were only able to soothe his nerves so much. So many expectations. It was not as bad as being asked to fight the Dark One, but it was still pretty intimidating.

Carolyn went angry from the room when she saw how things were going. She was not the only one to leave. Dark-haired Liah with the scars on her cheeks had been happy enough to fuck him the normal way—and a fierce fuck she had been!—but what was being proposed here plainly did not sit well with her. The way Rondha tossed her proud head as she marched out made him suspect why. Amili and Chiarid also departed, exchanging scandalised whispers as they went. Rand was a little surprised by that. Both had been regulars ever since he started sleeping under *Far Dareis Mai*'s roof.

Cami was face to the floor and ass to the air by then, relaxed all over. He slipped out of her and stood up, his knees trembling slightly. It was hard to believe what was happening.

It was a shock to see Luaine taking off her clothes, too. She'd never shown any interest before, and looked more thoughtful than excited now. Her fair cheeks coloured when she met his eye. A slender and attractive young woman, he couldn't help but respond to the sight of her nudity.

That didn't mean he was without questions when she came to stand before him. "Why now? I didn't think you were interested."

"That is not what this is about. There is something I would prove this day."

So saying, she turned around and bent over. Pretty as her bottom was, he still leant close to whisper, "You don't have to do this," in her ear.

"I know." She reached back and pulled her cheeks apart. And though she blushed hotly, her eyes were steady.

"Blood and ashes. I can't say no to that," Rand hissed. His slickened cock pushed against her and had to keep pushing for a while before he won entrance into her tight hole. "Burn me. Luaine."

"I am not your woman. But I am your Maiden," she said as she let him take her ass.

His mind awash with too many sensations and emotions, Rand could only rut within her like a beast.

Someone took hold of his hips. Though their grip was only enough to slow them, their words brought him to a halt. "There are others who would show their devotion, *Car'a'carn*," Leslaya said.

"Luaine hasn't come," he objected.

"It is good that you are so considerate, but there is no need today. Today, we will take care of you."

Riallin grinned. "You should sample all of us."

Luaine nodded when he looked to her. She stood as soon as he slid out of her stretched hole, wincing slightly. "I will not fail you."

One by one, at first, but then in a group, the Maidens bent over to offer him their asses. Any lingering doubts he had about keeping them as his guards evaporated in that moment. He found himself surrounded by a ring of naked female bottoms, pressed together cheek to cheek, all directed his way. So excited was he by the plethora of flesh on display that Rand didn't even know whose tight little hole it was he slipped into first until he heard Susay cry out in familiar pleasure. He could only afford to take a dozen or so strokes of her, but he savoured every one. He couldn't even tell who the next one he entered was. And only knew the third when Jolien stood up afterwards to make room for Renay. Her skinny little bottom he would have recognised right away, just as he did Leslaya's when he took hold of it and eased inside. Age had thickened that bottom as it had her thighs, but there was no grey in the red hair that tossed as she let him take her.

There was grey in Mia's yellow hair, a fact she showed no concern for when she came naked to take Susay's place. He barely knew anything about her beyond that she was of the More Water Goshien and liked to read, yet there she was, offering him the use of her ass.

He heard Riallin giggle. "*Cor Darei* have failed their watch. My back entry is in danger."

"Thinking of your back entry is probably why they failed their watch?" Nora called.

In the midst of their laughter, a lone Maiden cried out in mingled pain and pleasure as Rand took what she was offering. He worked his way around the circle towards them, going from ass to ass, snatching at *saidin* every once in a while to renew the slickening. And if there were any messes made, the One Power soon got rid of those, too. He split Heidin's flat bottom and Amindha's thick one. Taking a woman as muscular as her in such a fashion was so thrilling that only an iron self-control made him stop without riding her all the way to orgasm. Rhuana had plainly done it this way before and enjoyed it, bending just so and moving her hips in time with his. She brought him close. Nora had just as plainly not done it, but her blushing, apple-cheeked smile was excited rather than nervous. Though her ass was round and pretty and her puckered hole delightfully tight, the pleasure he felt at fucking it was soured when he realised her exclamations were more pained than pleased. She stood afterwards, clutching her poor bottom, smile gone. It cooled his ardour a fair bit.

"Thank you for doing that for me," he said apologetically.

"Another time, perhaps. Someday. Maybe," she said, plainly meaning never.

Renay was next. He took her slower, wary of hurting her, too. There was no need for concern. Narrow as she was, she took him all the way in, and smiled back over her shoulder at him while doing it. "I am yours," she whispered. Her, too, he was reluctant to part from. But part he did.

Part Sefela did as well. Tanned, strong and hard-faced, she let him touch her for the first and perhaps only time. And when she straightened afterwards, her yellow-haired head remained proud.

He knew Osana by the way she spread her legs to smile up at him from below the holes she offered. That and the way she giggled when he accepted. He knew Alisha only because the friend whose ass he had just vacated kept teasing her as she was silently accepted the same treatment. He was losing track by then, and realised he'd reached Mia only after she stood up with a sore bottom and a sardonic smile on her face.

Riallin could not be mistaken so. Like Renay, she smiled over her shoulder as she offered herself. Her bottom stood out like Renay's, too, if for its fleshiness rather than its lack thereof. He renewed his slickness for her, and let his hands roam over her body for a moment in anticipation. It was her who took his over-excited manhood and aimed it between her cheeks. He looked her in the eye, and kept looking into her soul as he moved into her body. He saw the devotion there, and loved it.

It was too much. To his shame, he only managed two strokes of Riallin's tightness before he felt the storm breaking within him. Tensing his body and gritted his teeth at the mosaic on the roof was not enough to stop it. He came inside Riallin's ass in an explosive torrent. His knees gave way and he slid to the ground, pulling her with him by his hard grip on her hips.

The pleasure made it hard to think, or even to savour the sight of so many feminine bottoms pressed so close, but he eventually became aware of Riallin moving. Instead of being annoyed at his failure, she was shaking her hips up and down, using her sweet ass to draw out the last drops of his come.

"You like that, do you not?" she said when she saw him blink himself back to awareness.

"Oh, Light yes ..." he gasped.

Not everyone was as moved as him. A hard hand slapped down on Riallin's generous bottom.

"Bad girl! What dishonour, to finish him while there are still so many waiting for a go."

Despite her words, Pamela was grinning. And Riallin grinned back at her. "You are just jealous that your bottom was not equal to the challenge."

"Mine has not been tested yet! I bet I could finish him in a single stroke!"

That ridiculous boast set the rest of the Maidens off, especially the ones who had already given up their asses for Rand's pleasure. Threats and challenges were exchanged, and no few insults. Once, Rand would have feared an offer to dance the spears was imminent, but he was used to the Maidens by then. They might bicker, but it was rare that they ever fought amongst themselves. And when they did it was always at an arranged place and time, with supervision from neutral veterans among the society.

As he tried to catch his breath, he saw Iona attempting to stretch under Elana's direction. Despite being so much smaller than most Maidens, the latter had taken him to the hilt with ease, while the former's already pinched face was squeezed up even more by her lingering discomfort. He felt a little bad about that, as he did about the way Nora had gone to the far side of the room to sit, in case he thought to try and have another go at her. But most of all he felt a euphoric sense of relaxation. It was very different from the clear-headedness that often came after sex; this just left him wanting more. As he watched the women walk around, their soft cheeks moving so hypnotically with each step, Rand tried to will his cock back to stiffness.

He had help in that regard, for Riallin remained cuddled against him, in no haste to clean her come-filled butt. Renay was hugging him from behind, too, while Su was making it her business to try and massage his member back into shape.

"Tickle his balls," Pamela said helpfully as she stood over them, smirking. Big and busty, with a thick thatch of golden hair atop her sex, she was utterly without shame. He had no doubt that if—when!—he split that big butt of hers, she'd make a joke of the whole thing.

Her advice was good, though. And for all their strength, Su's hands did not lack for gentleness. He felt himself begin to stir anew. The sights on display throughout the room certainly helped. Women were stripping all around him, some fond and familiar sights, others strange and new. Rhuana had brought a large jar of ointment and was offering it to her spearsisters. Rand knew its purpose, and knew it unneeded with him now, but refrained from saying so. Few would be comfortable with talk of the male half of the One Power. Watching all those women rubbing that ointment on their own butts, readying themselves for him, soon had his cock inching upwards once more. He gently disentangled himself from the others, and got to his feet.

Some of those who were preparing were women he'd never even been with before. Beautiful Dina was as confident naked as she was clothed. She reassured Maira and Estel—who was the only Black Rock Maiden present—that it was not required even while bending to allow a frowning Branwen to smear the oil upon her. Vanda's face showed her pleasure as she thoroughly fingered her own butt. Tenelca remained unsmiling, but she had the jar in one hand and the other down the back of her trousers, too. Their presences were shocking to him, but it was another woman who had *Far Dareis Mai* staring.

Celesta's lean and naked form was pleasing to look at, but that wasn't why she drew so much attention. She didn't speak much but the other Maidens always seemed a bit deferential towards her. Their questions brought no rose to the cheeks of her long face, nor did the way Rand loomed over her, naked and erect, when she came to stand close. She made a point of looking him in the eyes for a long time. Hers were bluish grey and very steady. Only when she had satisfied wherever needed satisfying did she turn around and show him her narrow bottom.

Celesta bent smoothly. She was smooth all over, in fact. He went in smoothly, too, but after that the smoothness ended. Her butt was so tight it hurt. When she moved her hips he almost feared she'd tear his cock off. After half a dozen hard strokes, he was wincing. She had to be squeezing deliberately. He craned his head around for a look and saw a smile on her face for the first time since he'd met her. She was doing it deliberately!

Not about to be outdone, Rand grabbed hold of her soft cheeks and tried to rail her hard, but she was such a tight fit that it proved impossible. When Renay tapped his shoulder and pointed out that there were others waiting, it was almost a relief.

Celesta's smile was gone by the time she straightened up. "Another time perhaps. If you dare."

She sauntered away. Rand was still staring after her when Renay went up on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "She is one of those who try to force answers from those captured in battle. Please be careful. I would not like to see you hurt."

"Thanks for the warning," he managed to grate out, but his eyes did not easily leave Celesta's form. She did not rush to cover her nakedness, but went to lean against the wall and watch. He couldn't help but notice how her attention lingered on those who were least at ease with what had happened. He noticed, too, that the Maidens weren't playing with each other the way they usually did on occasions like this. Instead, women stood around, watching and waiting.

His examination ended when Agirin suddenly stepped in front of him, demanding his attention. Her eyes were as steady as Celesta's had been but a lot warmer. "Give me what you were giving her," she said, before taking him by the hand and pulling him down onto the cushions. She wasted no time with kisses, just went to all fours and put his hands on her hips.

He wasn't that surprised. She'd always liked it rough. And, for good or ill, he was a people pleaser. The hard fucking he gave her ass, and the grip he kept on her golden curls while he was doing it, certainly pleased Agirin. Never loud or expressive, she struggled to contain her voice this time. He took a perverse delight in adding a random slap or two to the abuse he gave her bottom, timed so as to overwhelm her discipline and bring out those gasps. He took an even greater delight in the way she tightened up and started shaking in orgasm while impaled on his manhood.

While she was still in the midst of her climax, he leaned down to plant a kiss on her tanned cheek. "Always a pleasure."

Her response was a low groan, one made louder by the way he slowly slid himself out of her. Thoroughly renewed, Rand went to work on stretching as many *Far Dareis Mai* asses as he could. Pamela did indeed make a joke of it, loudly proclaiming for all to hear that she had always thought him a little shit. He wished he could have said his cheeks did not blaze up at that, but the truth hurt sometimes. The raucous laughter, and the way Leslaya took to slapping his ass as he was standing behind the other Maiden certainly didn't help.

Vanda proved rather into it. Surprisingly so, considering how she had avoided the other orgies. He'd thought her a bit mannish looking when he'd first met her, but her smile made her pretty. And the little butt she wiggled at him proved soft to the touch. She went to hands and knees, and thrust herself back at him as soon as she felt the head of his cock slip past her tight ring. Her eagerness sparked his own, which would have been a good thing in most cases, but in this it led to his lingering too long.

That annoyed Beralna, who had been waiting nearby. The bare foot she pushed against the other woman's hip was not intended to hurt, but the rudeness of it woke Vanda's anger. That was a first for Rand, finding himself stuck inside the butt of an angry and frustrated woman who was trying to get up and hit her rival.

"It is my turn!" Beralna insisted. She was much the skinnier of the two, but there was nothing of fear in the way she bared her teeth. Rand was reminded of a fight he'd once seen between two dogs back in Emond's Field. He'd been sure the big sheepdog would win back then, but Mistress al'Caar's little pet had proven shockingly vicious. Beralna had that same air about her. Skinny as she was, he wouldn't have wanted any of the trouble she was offering.

Vanda was braver than him in that. "Says who?" she demanded, after finally disentangling herself from Rand.

"Says me!"

"And who are you, other than a dog-robber that *may* get a turn when I am done?"

He gaped at them, and gaped inwardly at himself while he did so. Why did it excite him so to see two naked women ready to fight over who got to fuck him?

It was Dina who broke it up. "Enough!" she cried, stepping between the two and pushing them apart. "Vanda. It has been agreed that there is not enough time for everyone. You will accept what your spearsisters have accepted. Beralna. You will wait. You may not demand that another step aside for you. Rand al'Thor will decide who goes next."

All eyes turned his way, even those of the two she'd stood down. He thought he saw a flash of hope in Beralna's. But while he'd happily have sated her lust at any other time, he knew that he couldn't pick her in those circumstances. Strange to say, but he felt more exposed right then than he had while buggering a woman in front of several dozen others. "Ah ... Alright. Um, you."

Dina did not blush when he pointed at her. The most reaction it inspired was a pair of half-lidded blue eyes. "I pity the wife whose eye you try to catch, if that is the best you can do," she said. Then she pointed to the pillows. "Lie there."

It was the first time he'd seen her naked up close, and he found himself studying her more closely. Flaring hips, a narrow waist, full breasts. He didn't need to say it; he could tell from her face she was very aware of it. Not smug, but very confident. As little as he liked following orders, he went to those pillows with alacrity. The slit she revealed to him when she stood over his waist was only lightly furred, the hair darker than that on her head. He found himself wishing she would bring it down onto his face. But they both knew that was not the game. Instead, Dina crouched down, reached back to position his cock, and then eased herself down onto him.

He hissed out a curse as he felt her taking hold of his whole length. She didn't smile at that, her face remained a beautiful, tanned mask. Nor did she lose her balance when she started rocking her hips back and forth. A dozen blessed strokes was all she gave him, before balancing herself against his chest and easing off his cock.

"Perhaps we could finish this another time," he blurted.

She did smile then, but it was a small thing, and amused rather than enticed. "Do not flatter yourself, youngling. You could not handle me. If I ever give up the spear, I know exactly who it will be for."

"Lucky man," he muttered as he watched her walk over to stand among the Maidens, hands on hips, utterly unashamed by what they had just watched her do.

"That is how it is done, sisters," she declared. "There will be no fighting."

Even Beralna nodded acceptance, thought that didn't stop her from scowling at the older woman. It became a bit more orderly after that. Careen came to offer him a wry smile before kneeling over the dais and offering him her ass. Zoe gave a little shrug and went to join her. Others lined up with them, facing inward, some exchanging nervous smiles, until there was no longer any room on the dais. Staring at the display they made, all those disparate women, big or thin, tan or pale, all offering him something they rarely offered, Rand couldn't believe his luck. He sucked in a deep breath, and went to work.

Zoe thought the whole thing worthy of a giggle, when he took hold of her pretty hips and probed her back passage. Jamelia, pale-haired and weathered by the sun, took it stoically. The blocky Nakai, Dagendra, looked to be competing with her clan's men for muscle. She was as tough as them, too, and took his length in silence. Such was typical of the Aiel he mounted on that dais, even the ones whose names he did not yet know. Malindare didn't look much like an Aiel at all, being brown of hair and almost chubby, but she took what he had to give with the unflinching solemnity of one, and never mind how his hips made her fleshy bottom shake.

While he was moving between women, he saw Linsay passing by the door. She paused to stare, and he wondered for a moment if she would be tempted by this as she hadn't been before, but she kept walking, a troubled look on her face.

So on he went, probing for answers, and for other reasons. Pleasing as the sights and sensations were, there was little intimacy to be found in that group. Nor was he finished once he'd worked his way around the dais completely, for another Maiden approached.

Isan, too, was one of those who seemed to be making a statement rather than indulging a passion. She hadn't even cracked an expression while in his company before, but she smiled nervously when she came to kneel before him. A slender girl with dark yellow hair, he'd thought her striking both for her strong cheekbones and for her complete lack of sentiment, but that smile changed her somehow, and made her cute. That in turn made him want to please her, and regret that he could not. All he could do was caress her pale skin as he pulled her back into his lap, give her little breasts a squeeze and then tease open the ass that he was soon pulling down onto himself. It was Isan who moved, up and down in what had become the traditional dozen strokes.

"Thank you for this," he said when she pulled herself off.

"There is no need to thank me." For a moment it looked like she would say more but then she shook her head, that expressionless Aiel mask came back into place, and she walked away.

It was a more familiar face that approached him then, and a more familiar pair of lips that met his. He surprised himself with the hunger of his response. Unlocking their lips, Lidya trailed her fingers through his hair as she joined him on the pillows. They were matched for colouring, she and

him. Not very long ago that would have been unheard of for Rand, who had grown up in a place where everyone save him was brown of hair and eye. He'd known her longer than most Aiel as well. Somehow, all that made him feel connected to her.

"I am sworn to carry your burdens," she whispered as she offered herself to him. Rand wrapped his arms around her, enjoying her hard strength as much as he did the soft bottom his hips moved against as he slipped into her, completing the connection.

"Lidya!" Ayla gasped, scandalized. She was prowling the edges of the room, fully clothed, watching them.

But he only noticed that briefly. Lidya's ass felt so good that he could not think of anything else. His eyes drifted shut as he eased his way further inside and began to ride her slowly. Once again, he would have more than happy to ride her all the way to completion; and once again, he was frustrated. This time it was Lidya herself who stopped it.

"The next Maiden awaits," she told him, reached back to still his hips. He was lying atop her, his face close to hers. She surprised him with a kiss on the cheek. "But we must continue this another time, my *Car'a'carn*. I want to feel you coming in my ass."

"Light!" It took all he had not to ravage her right there and then. But somehow he was able to make himself get up, and slide trembling from that tight sheathe.

Lidya's smile faded when she saw how Ayla was glaring at them both. "I will speak with her," she said when she saw the confusion on Rand's face. The three of them had shared a bed before. He couldn't see why Ayla would get all jealous now.

His own smile came back in force when Branwen proved to be next. His confusion returned in even greater force when she did not return it, or his greeting. No loving hand caressed his body. No friendly, playful words passed her lips. She knelt on hands and knees and offered him her loyalty. And that was what it felt like when he entered her. Loyalty. She looked as good as ever, and it certainly felt good to penetrate her so, but somehow it left him feeling dissatisfied. What was wrong?

When Branwen got up and left and Beyla took her place, Rand was feeling wary. Sometimes kind, often solemn, he was prepared for more of the same. It was a relief, then, when she smiled prettily and told him she had been tempted to do this on past encounters but was unsure how he would respond. He grinned, and assured her that his response would have been eager and ardent. As ever, Beyla was unashamed of her curveless body. And rightly so. The sight of her inflamed him, and drew his hands, to touch and caress and stiffen her pink nipples yet further. She lay on her back and drew her knees up to show him her holes. He sampled her pussy first, to get himself nice and wet, but they both knew where he was going to truly lodge himself. As soon as he slid out she raised her hips to offer him entry to her back passage. In he went, holding her skinny little ass in his hands as he slid deep inside her. She let him do whatever he wanted with her, and though she was quieter than most as he was fucking her tight hole, he knew she was enjoying it from the way she sat forward to wrap her arms around his shoulders and pull his mouth to hers.

That was nice, and she didn't weigh much, so he picked her up, his cock still lodged inside her, and held her before him as he fucked her harder.

"You can put me down now," she told him after some time had passed. He paused mid stroke, and she must have seen the confusion in his eyes, because she smiled in a way that made her look younger. "I have reached my climax. And my spearsisters look impatient for their turn." She kissed his lips. "I can understand why."

He was a little surprised, since she had given no sign of her pleasure, but he took her at her word. "Flatterer. But, loathe as I am to leave such a nice cave ..." He lifted her up off himself, and lowered her to the cushions. "As the lady wishes."

"We are not ladies," Riallin scoffed. "Just because we do as wetlander ladies do does not make us like them."

He had to laugh. "That ... is something you'll have to take up with those wetlander ladies you speak of. I am not touching that topic." He didn't much fancy having any vases broken over his head, after all.

The impatient spearsister Beyla had spoken of soon made herself known. Beralna's pale eyes were almost as fiery as her hair when she slipped close. "Me now!" she hissed, shooting a narrow look at Dina, who was busy talking to Su and Amindha. Somehow she noticed the look anyway. Beralna hid behind Rand to avoid her glance.

That was surprisingly cute. "I wish it could have been you all day," he whispered. "I bet you use your ass as well as you do your pussy."

She smiled her feral smile. "You want to fuck my ass? Do it. Fuck me. Fuck me now. Fuck me hard."

*Blood and ashes.* Pushing her roughly to her knees didn't really have the same effect when she immediately reached back to pull her own cheeks apart. He was half inside her before he realised he was moving. The eager and energetic way the skinny woman rubbed her astonishing tight backside along his member had Rand feeling the imminence of an orgasm. He had to fight against himself to push it back.

Beralna spread her legs wide and moaned wantonly as he was fucking her ass. Devoid of shame, she rubbed at her little tits and hairy pussy both. Knowing she would bring herself to swift completion, he stayed in her longer than most. And enjoyed doing her so much that he was reluctant to stop without first filling her butt with come. So he held on only until Beralna had moaned her last, before allowing himself to relax and let it flow.

He was sweaty and short of breath by the time he finishing coming. And there were only a few Maidens left in the room whose bottoms were still virgin to his cock. Waving off the propositions of several women, he staggered over to the nearest pitcher to get a drink of water. Or three. He did not drink alone. While Amindha massaged his slackening cock, Riallin pressed herself against his side and whispered encouragement. Su came, too, to urge him to stand strong. As he took in the sight of their bodies, he started to do just that.

"He is ready again!" Amindha called once her massaging had done its job. She grinned as she and the others made space.

Turning at a tap on his shoulder brought Rand face to top of head with a very young looking Maiden he hadn't spoken to before. She had dark reddish hair, a wide mouth and nervous blue eyes.

"Hello. Or, I see you, even. I don't think we've been introduced ..."

"I am Sendara, of the Iron Mountain sept of the Taardad Aiel."

Ah, a girl from his hometown. Or what would have been his hometown, had he been raised Aiel. "Well met." Her youth made him lower his voice and smile kindly. "You don't have to do this. It's just a game we're playing. It won't say anything bad about you if you choose not to."

Her cheeks coloured, and she kept her voice as low as his. "The others were all able to do it. I can, too. It is just ... can you swear that you will not tell Ricu?"

"Ah. Friend of hers, are you?" he chuckled. He didn't need her embarrassed nod. "I swear, she will not learn of what happens here from me," he said solemnly.

She smiled. "Good." And with that she started to strip. Rand waited patiently, enjoying the sights. She revealed to them all a pale, skinny body with a pair of breasts that were larger than he would have expected. When she lowered her trousers he saw that her pussy was still hairless, the puffy red lips calling out for his fingers. Her breath hitched when he answered that call.

Sendara had the legs of a young filly. They shook a bit as she went to lean against a dais and show him her little bottom. Wondering how experienced she was with such things, he decided to take a different approach.

"Come with me," he said. She didn't resist his hold on her hand. To a fresh set of pillows he led her, and down into his lap once they got there. "I'll try to make sure you enjoy this," he promised.

"You are the *Car'a'carn*," she said.

"He is," Renay agreed, watching from afar. She wasn't the only watcher, and realising that made Sendara's face turn red. She still didn't stop him when he spread her legs and lifted her hips. Making sure to renew his slickening weave before placing the girl's tight backside against the tip of his member.

"Just relax. I'll take care of everything. All you have to do is trust, and try to have fun."

She swallowed audibly, but nodded acceptance. Her body accepted him, too, allowing entry where there was usually none. He went slow, holding her by the hips as she steadily took one inch after another. It took longer to enter her than he'd spent fucking most of the other Maidens that night, but Rand remained resolute in his choice. And not even Dina tried to change it.

By the time he was all the way inside Sendara's little butt, her pussy was glistening with arousal. Freeing one hand, he started rubbing her. Her sweet gasp was exactly what he'd hoped it would be. He started rubbing her, gently at first, then firmer, faster. And all the while he kept his hold

on her hip, slowly moving her sensitive butt up and down his cock. Her moans were uncontrollable, and only became louder when he slid a finger inside her pussy.

“Why does she get the proper treatment?” he heard Vanda ask sulkily.

“You know why,” Amindha growled. But she was touching herself as she said it, eyes and cheeks both heated.

Sendara’s skinny legs were moving constantly, confusedly. Her arms were splayed behind her to support her weight, and her nipples had gotten visibly stiffer. He slid a second finger inside, and beckoned her towards womanhood.

He’d only thought her legs active. Suddenly, she was kicked at no-one knew what, least of all her. She didn’t seem to know anything in fact; she was too busy screaming wordlessly. Her arms gave out and she fell backwards, his cock still deep inside her no longer virgin ass. Her juices glistened on her spread thighs for all to see.

“Do not think I say that this is all that matters,” he heard Su say quietly. “But this, too, is part of what makes a man worth following.”

“He is a worthy chief,” Cami agreed.

It was Nora and Renay who came to claim Sendara, who didn’t seem willing or able to get up herself. Between them they were able to get her back on her feet and lead her tottering away. That was nice. They were nice girls.

Pamela, almost inevitably, decided to make it less nice. “Will you be giving up the spear already, then, now that you are obsessed with cock?”

“Could you be a little more sensitive?” Renay asked. Her glare only made the other Maiden laugh harder. Sendara herself held her stunned silence.

Rand was quite pleased to bask in the admiring looks he was getting from his Maidens, who were content to wait more patiently now, there being few present who had not made an offering of their body already. One of those admiring faces was also unfamiliar to him. The woman in question approached him confidently when he met her eye.

“I see you,” she said, blue eyes flickering down to his stiff cock. “All of you. I am Elindha, of the Red Wall sept of the Codarra Aiel. When I came here to see this man who claims to be *Car'a'carn*, I did not think I would be introducing myself in this way.” Her eyes lingered on the Dragons twined around his forearms longer than they had on his cock.

For Rand’s part, he was glad to meet a representative of the Codarra. Like her, however, he found the circumstances a little awkward, what with both of them being naked and all. This Elindha was a fine looking woman, with clean yellow hair and the leanly fit yet still womanly figure he’d come to associate with *Far Dareis Mai*. Broad shoulders, that was what stood out most. That and her air of confidence.

“Would it be terribly undiplomatic to greet my first Codarra Maiden by telling her I want to fuck her in the bum?” he said with a wry grin.

He was glad that she laughed. “It would. Though I am not the first you have met. Rhian had much to say of you, and of the wetlands. That is part of why I am here.”

“Rhian. I remember her.” She’d been the first Aiel he’d met. And she’d tried to kill him. He chuckled to himself. Well, her and two others, one of whom had turned out to be his cousin. The Pattern was all sorts of crazy.

Elindha was still smiling. “Would you think it shameful if I told you that I would not mind being, as you say, ‘fucked in the bum’, by such an interesting man.”

“I would not.” *For more reasons than you know.*

She was not young, this Elindha. Perhaps thirty or so, it was hard to tell. And the bottom she showed him, when she came to touch his face and take his hand, was not very curvaceous. None of that mattered to Rand. There was something intriguing about her, beyond the chance to make a connection with the Codarra, and maybe get a hint as to what they were planning. He sat up, to run his hands over her body and feel its silky strength.

After easing herself down onto the cushions, she spread her legs wide, showing her slit and the tight little hole above it. Rand touched those two, his hands gentle. Elindha did not moan, but smiled a pleased little smile.

Reaching behind herself, she took hold of his cock and positioned him at her back entrance. “Shall we introduce ourselves properly?”

"Yes ..." He pushed in, felt her part to admit him, felt her tight ring slide down his length. "Now that's a nice way to say hello," he sighed, before reaching around to play with her pussy.

As he rode the stranger, Rand spotted a more familiar Maiden among the watching crowd, who for some reason was still fully clothed and looking a bit hesitant. Only when he smiled at her did Anfia start to doff her *cadin'sor*.

She was a big girl, only half a head shorter than him, but she blushed girlishly as she undressed in full view of the others. Fresh-faced and pretty, her golden curls drew his eye even before she revealed her full breasts. Despite her red face, when she had finished stripping she was able to meet his eye and ask of him a silent question.

Rand nodded. He wanted her, alright. Though he had the means to do it himself, those blushes woke something inside him. He pointed to the jar of ointment that Rhuana had gone to fetch. "Rub it on yourself. I want you to get yourself nice and ready for me," he told Anfia, who blushed hotter.

Elindha thought he was talking to her, and raised an eyebrow when she realised he was talking to another woman while still riding her. "How perverse."

He couldn't deny that, though perhaps he should have at least hidden it from the newcomer until she'd gotten to know him. "I am certainly that," he sighed.

"That can be good or bad, depended on how it is directed," she allowed maturely. "I have seen far worse than what took place here today." Her knowing gaze slid towards Anfia. "Or the teasing of a naughty girl."

Anfia went even redder, but she took the jar from Rhuana and smeared some of the oil on her fingers. He did not look away. Instead, he watched carefully as she lay down on the pillows and spread her legs, the better to access her back passage. He watched her rub it on herself, and made sure she knew he was watching.

"That's it. Slip a finger in that naughty little butt of yours. Make sure you get it nice and slippy." Face blazing, Anfia did as she was bid.

"Don't stop. Get it nice and stretched. You'll be glad you did," still rocking his hips against Elindha's.

She did that, too, but she did not wait for further instructions. As he watched her ready herself, and saw how much she was enjoying it, Rand's thrusts sped up. Elindha was moving against him by then, her breath coming faster. No-one else was coming to demand a turn, so he was quite happy to keep fucking her. Her juices coated the fingers that remained busy against her sex.

Even more joined them when she suddenly stiffened in his arms. No loud cries escaped that woman's lips, but the tale was told in other ways. "A very good way to, as you put it, 'say hello,'" she allowed after a while.

He kissed her shoulder. "I certainly thought so."

But there was something, or someone, else that he needed to do. The cock that popped out of Elindha was immediately pointed at Anfia. He walked towards her with naked intent, literally. When she realised the effect she had had on him, Anfia quickly rolled over onto her hands and knees, to present her slickened bottom towards him. Rand could not turn down that offer. He took the big girl by the hips, positioned his cock against her asshole, and pushed slow forward.

He knew from the sounds she made how much she enjoyed it, and knew from the heat of her cheeks how little she liked having it known. It all just made him want to fuck her harder.

The sweet cries she let out as his hips slapped against hers excited her fellow Maidens almost as much as they did him. Many of them had gathered around to watch Anfia take it up the ass, and many of those were touching themselves while they did. That just made Rand even more excited. He stretched her ass wide and went all the way in, until his balls were pressing up against her wet pussy.

He'd had vague thoughts of going slow, but found himself unable to. Instead, he ravaged the ass of the big Maiden kneeling before him. She took it all, curls flying, breasts swaying, unable to contain her voice. It was only when he bottomed out inside her again and unleashed his flood that she looked back at him. He liked the look in her eyes, and leant down to plant a kiss on her red cheek.

That wasn't all he intended to kiss, though. With his seed still hot inside her, he flipped Anfia over onto her back. She stared up at him, and he noticed her nipples had gotten very big. "There's something else I want you to do for me," he said.

"What is it?"

"I want you to come for me. Can you do that?" He let his fingers trail down her stomach towards her crotch, and watched for her wordless nod. Within seconds of her giving it, he was on her, mouth pressed firmly against her sopping wet pussy, fingers probing her. Strong thighs closed around his head as Anfia cried out in pleasure.

He didn't expect it to take long, given how aroused she looked, and he was right. In less than a minute her legs stopped clutching him and started shaking violently. When he looked up he found her dead to the world, her eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling as she gasped for breath. Rand brushed his slick fingers against her red cheek and then left her there, covered in their juices.

"Is it over? I never got to ... do anything."

He looked around in surprise to find Rhamys squatting nearby. She was still fully clothed but there was a nakedness to her face. "I thought, if even Celesta is doing it, I could, too. I am not as bad as her. Am I?" Their attention flicked to the torturer, and she was visibly relieved to note that she was out of earshot.

Rand had other things on his mind, though. "You ... you wanted to ... do that?" His mouth was dry, and no amount of swallowing would fix it.

She lowered her eyes. "It is true. I am a huge pervert."

"Have I not been shamed enough?" Anfia groaned.

"That was not my intention," Rhamys said glumly. "I have *toh*."

*Toh* meant obligation, but the only obligation Rand felt was to raise her chin. "That doesn't make you a pervert," he said firmly. "I'm just ... Well, I didn't realise you liked me..." Then again, liking him wasn't a requirement for this. "Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say."

Rhamys grabbed him by the arm. "You must not say that. You are not stupid. And ... and I do like you. I like you a lot ..."

He had come twice in swift succession, and there were limits to what the body could do, but Rand sent up a silent prayer right then. *Cock, don't fail me now.*

"I wish I could show what I thought of you," he said, his gaze flicking down to the bust that even the loose top of her *cadin'sor* couldn't hide. "Perhaps if I could see those gorgeous breasts of yours, it might help ..."

She looked down at her own chest, seeming oddly surprised. "You like them? But they look so comical. And they get in the way when I am fighting, and bounce annoyingly when we run. Renay has much better breasts. I wish I had those."

Renay heard her and smiled broadly. "Few would say something so sweet to me."

He eyed the cute little bumps on her chest, and pursed his lips admiringly. "Variety is the spice of life. I think those are gorgeous, too."

Narrow hips swayed closer, and she bent to kiss his cheek. "I would use my mouth to get you ready for her," she whispered. "We are all friends here. But ..."

He grinned. "But butt. I understand completely."

Her giggle was charming. "I think you will find inspiration elsewhere, however ..."

When he followed her gaze, he found Rhamys discarding her top. Her breasts were huge and round, almost the size of her head, and tipped by pale nipples. He had thought she was being self-effacing about them once, but he saw now that she was genuinely embarrassed. He went and put his arm around her, while weighing one of those breasts in his hand.

"They really are gorgeous, you know." The filled his hands, the flesh spilling between his fingers. "Are they sensitive?"

"Yes ... that feels ... good ..."

"I want to suck on them."

Her eyes widened. "Suck them? Hrm, at your age, that is a silly thing to ask for. But ... very well. If you want to, do as you wish ..."

Bending down was awkward so he put her on her back, the better to kiss and fondle those prodigious paps. They were so warm and soft under his hands, and made such a nice pillow for the cheek he rubbed against them. He could hear her heart. When he sucked on her nipple, he felt her stiffen in his mouth. He filled his mouth with her softness, too, and bit down slightly.

The noise made him look up, to make sure he hadn't really hurt her. She read the question in his eyes. "My boobs are yours. I want you to suck them ... and bite them."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I do not mind ... Come at me how your feelings tell you to. Besides ... Um, it feels good for me, too." Smiling briefly, he resumed his explorations with gusto. "G-good, that is it, haah, you can bite harder, aaah, more ... Mmm!? Ah, mm, good ..."

She wasn't the only one mingling pain and pleasure just then. Rand's cock was inflating again. He welcomed that, even if its tortured protestations did make him wince against her. Liking his chances of continuing now, Rand slipped his hand down the front of Rhamys' trousers. He found her as wet as he'd hoped, and was flattered by the alacrity with which she began wriggling out of the last of her clothes. The hair on her crotch was as pale as that on her head. He only got a brief glimpse of it, though, for soon she was holding his head to her breast and rocking against his palm, wantonly fucking the finger he slipped inside her heat.

"It feels good," she whispered. "Even just this, mmm, is making me throb inside ... Ah, ah ... I almost feel like I could lose myself and drown in pleasure."

"Blood and ashes," he cursed, his breath hot against her tit and his cock hard against her thigh.

"Oh. It is not over, then? Good. Then I can do as the others did."

She pushed him off, got up, and with no further ado went to her hands and knees on the pillows. Posing on all fours like that made it hard not to notice exactly how curvaceous Rhamys was. Rand didn't know what to do with himself. Those hips. That ass. The heavy breasts that hung beneath her. He wanted to touch them all. But there was a theme to this encounter, and they both knew it.

Her fleshy butt parted beneath his hands, and her tight little hole parted before his probing cock. It was a little odd, being with her for the first time in this way. Rhamys had been present at such orgies before but had never approached him. And, as undeniably attractive as she was, Rand had always hesitated to approach her as well. Partially because he wasn't sure if she wanted him to, and partially because she was Rhuarc and Amys' daughter, and he didn't want to risk causing a diplomatic incident. But with her offering herself to him like that ... He just couldn't refuse. Slickened by the power, his cock slid inside easily, forcing a little whimper from her.

"That's cute. You're cute," he sighed as he went deeper.

"Y-you are calling me cute!? You like me?" She sounded shocked.

He didn't understand it. He leaned close so he could whisper in her ear as his hips moved. "Of course I do. Who wouldn't? If I didn't have to meet with the Wise Ones tonight, I'd take you aside and show you how much. Perhaps another time?"

She rocked her hips back against him. "I think I would like that. As well."

He wrapped his arms around so he could grab those breasts as he was fucking her ass. She was very into it, which got him into it, too. Even so, he retained enough presence of mind to realise he would need to be on top form in *Tel'aran'rhiad* tonight, to avoid showing her mother anything embarrassing. Mental discipline was the key there. And it would be well for him to practice it here.

She didn't make that very easy for him. Rhamys, it turned out, liked to talk. "Mm, haah ... Yes, I am a depraved woman ... Your rod is making my crotch drool so much ... Nnah, ah ... And making me moan so disgracefully, ah, ahaah!"

To test the truth of that claim, Rand fingered Rhamys' pussy as he was riding her. Her hot wetness did indeed flow over his hand, and her cries became even more wanton. Arcaval might be a bit of a dog-robber but he hadn't been wrong about how pervy she was.

"You really like that, huh? Good. So do I."

"Yeess ... Feeling the warmth of another inside you ... Mmm ... So good ... Ah, more ... Just a little more ..." In a surprisingly short amount of time, Rhamys let out a loud cry and collapsed onto her belly, legs shaking emphatically as she ground her pussy against his hand.

He went with her, grinning to himself. She really was cute. And a nice tight fit, too. He kept moving his hips, wondering how many such cries he could win from her before he reached his limit.

Renay interrupted his wondering. "Have you forgotten that there are others waiting, Rand al'Thor?"

He'd been enjoying himself so much that he'd almost forgotten they were not alone, never mind that he had duties to attend to. But they weren't, and he did, so he leaned around to kiss Rhamys' cheek and whisper, "You are an absolute sweetie, and should never let anyone tell you otherwise," before pulling slowly out.

Wide-eyed and silent, she watched him go.

Others had watched him take her, and not all had enjoyed the show. The full-clothed Cara was obviously not happy, with him or Rhamys or most anyone else in the room. She was whispering something fiercely to Dina, but the only word he caught was "Aviendha". But thought of that was driven from his mind when he came face to face with his cousin Harilin.

She was very tall for a woman, just as he was tall for a man, and they shared a colouring as well, but Rand didn't think they had much in common beyond that. He didn't particularly like her, and didn't think she particularly liked him either. Her presence here was a surprise.

Her words even more so. "Despite how we met, and what words have passed between us, I acknowledge that you are He Who Comes With the Dawn. I would prove that, if you allow it."

Her face was red, and the other Aiel looked on in suspicion and disapproval. Rand himself had no qualms about fucking a cousin. In truth, he didn't have any qualms about anything. A fact which had often seemed to disturb people who learned it, for some reason.

"If you are willing, so am I," he choked.

"Have you no honour?" Cara hissed. It was not just Harilin she asked it of.

Rand's cousin rounded on her. "Have your veil raised, when next you ask me that." Her eyes did not soften when she looked to him. "Do not think to enter me the proper way. I will not risk creating some deformed weakling child. The other way carries no such risk."

"This is so. *Ji'e'toh* does not forbid that," Dina ruled.

Cara stalked off, muttering something about bridal wreaths. Harilin ignored her. She untied and lowered her trousers, sneaking a peek at Rand's hard manhood as she did so. The way she swallowed stirred his lust. The skinny ass she showed him when she turned around enticed his eye. And the fact that what they were doing was near forbidden among the Aiel inflamed his perverse heart.

He grabbed his cousin by the hips, positioned his hard cock at her entrance, and shoved roughly inside. Harilin tried to take it in silence but even with her mouth clenched so tightly some little noises escaped her. His thick cock stretched her skinny ass wide, and he sent it all the way in before sliding almost all the way back out again.

"Jec told me she enjoyed such things," Branwen was saying to Jolien. "When they were playing M—"

A wordless but heartfelt plea from Harilin silenced the woman. Rand bit his lip as he gave that ass a long, hard fucking. Perhaps they had more in common than he'd thought. He was getting into it, and she was, too, but before long Harilin's nails dug into the back of his hand.

"Enough. What point needed making has been made," she hissed.

Confused, he leaned close. "But you seem to be enjoying it. Don't you want me to finish you?"

Her face was very red, but the cutting look she usual wore was gone from her eyes. "I will finish myself in private," she whispered. "Please. Do not shame me before them."

Rand eased out of her and let her fix herself up. It was strange. Though he had not come in her or made her come, stopping left him feeling closer to her than he ever had before. Perhaps closer than finishing would have, even.

"May you find shade this day," he said quietly, while hoping it *was* still day. He had lessons.

Harilin nodded a bit stiffly, and marched from the room even more stiffly. After watching her go, Rand cast his gaze about. So many naked women, of all shapes and sizes. Small breasts and big ones alike showed nipples stiffened by what had been seen and done. Many were naked, all were flushed. Some were nursing bare bottoms abused by his rampage. Others had surreptitiously slipped a hand, and a finger, behind themselves as they watched. He was still hard. He had one more orgasm in him, but who would be willing to take it? He didn't think there was anyone left that had not either taken part in the display Su had begun, or made plain that they would not.

He didn't, until his gaze came to Tenelca.

Rand blinked. Hadn't she been using the oil earlier? Yet there she stood, fully clothed, a beautiful statue of a woman with hair like a sunset and eyes of grey stone. Her hands were folded at the small of her back, and she gave a single solemn nod when their eyes met.

"Uh ... changed your mind, did you? That's okay."

"I have not. I have seen the markings on your arms. Chiefs and Wise Ones of proven honour have acknowledged you as He Who Comes With the Dawn. This is a fact. I will follow you as I must."

"I'm glad to hear it ..." he said. And that was true, though it had not been what he was asking.

Tenelca seemed to understand. "And if it is my turn to be mounted now, I will take the position," she said, in that same matter-of-fact voice.

His feeble efforts to say she didn't have to die half-formed. Tenelca was removing her *cadin'sor*, swiftly and efficiently. It was very much a warrior's body she revealed to him, strong and fit. But feminine, too, with curves in all the right places. A thick orange bush covered her sex. An even tan lay upon her skin—a rarity for one of their colouring. The legs that kicked free of her boots were long and muscular. His throat felt dry.

She herself gave no reaction to being watched as she stripped. Her pretty face remained unstained by blushes, her eyes were steady, and her limbs did not tremble at all as she got down on all fours. He marvelled at the flow of her muscles. It was the kind of thing you usually only saw on a man, so the way it merged with her feminine form was fascinating to him. His hands followed his eyes across her shoulders and down her back, to the curve of her waist and down to grasp her hips.

Tenelca remained still throughout. Even when he touched the tip of his slickened manhood against her bottom she did not move.

"Are you ready?"

"I am prepared," she said calmly.

Her back passage stretched slowly before his advance. He sighed in satisfaction when her ring eventually popped around him and he slid into her tight sheath. No similar moan escaped Tenelca. She took it in silence, kneeling there and looking so gorgeous. No matter how deeply he pushed into her, that cool discipline did not waver. Tenelca, it turned out, did not like to make noise at all.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked.

"I am experiencing no discomfort," she reported matter-of-factly.

That was reassuring, but it left him feeling a bit frustrated, too. He rather liked inspiring those little noises from women. Eyes narrowed at the back of her proud head, he couldn't help but feel that a challenge had somehow been made.

From hips to belly Rand's hands roamed, then up and down, to caress her most sensitive parts. He moved his hips as well. Yet still no sound escaped the young Maiden. Her breast was soft in his hand, and her nipple was growing stiff. But whether he circled it gently or pinched it roughly, she still did not react. Her pussy was softer, and moist to the touch, but sliding his fingers up and down her slit won him no cute denials. She did not bite her lip or moan or shiver even when he found her sensitive little nub and began playing with it.

Rand wasn't about to accept that.

To her hair he went, combing his fingers through it as he slowly fucked her in the ass. He could feel the pulse in her neck when he took hold of it and began to speed up. She felt excited there, though no sign escaped her otherwise. To her breasts again, where two now very stiff nipples pressed against the branded palms that kneaded her silky soft flesh.

He repositioned himself, shifting his weight from his knees to his feet, so he could fuck her more easily. His cock remained lodged inside her as moved, but even being hooked in such a sensitive place did not break that *Far Dareis Mai* discipline. Nor did the sound his hips made when they slapped against her soft cheeks trigger that Aiel preoccupation with shame.

She offered up her sweet little ass, and accepted the pounding he gave it, but Rand wanted more. He reached around to find her sex—gratifyingly wet now—and started playing with it once more. Lips and nub were not enough, but the hot hole that he slipped his finger inside was sensitive enough to force her breathing to speed up.

Satisfied at last, he held his position, balanced on strong legs, hips swaying, his free hand tangled in her hair. The cheek she showed him, when he gently turned her head to peek, carried just the faintest hint of a blush. He fingered her harder, saw her bite her lip, and grinned in satisfaction.

Though she knelt there surrounded by her sisters while having her ass railed and her pussy groped, no moans escaped Tenelca until the very end. It was cute enough to make up for the rest, in Rand's view. A single, high-pitched squeak escaped her clenched teeth right before he felt her hot juices press against his hand. He moved it away, to let her flow freely as he turned his attention to pursing his own pleasure. In that rush of satisfaction, with her tight grip upon him and her beautiful body before him, he did not think it would take long.

Grabbing her by the hips, Rand rode the orgasmic girl hard, letting her tight ass milk him until, breathing hard, his body shining with a sheen of sweat, he felt the storm build inside him. He threw

back his head and feverishly took a few more shallow strokes, before his come surged down his length and deep into her bowels.

"I should have waited until later," he heard Vanda say, a bit sulkily.

Lidya and Renay weren't the only ones to murmur agreement. Rand's shaking legs deposited him on the pillows, and his still-hard cock pulled Tenelca over into his embrace.

"That felt great," he gasped.

"It was quite stimulating," she agreed.

He pushed himself up as best she could. Her face remained unsmiling, her eyes steady, her voice deadpan. The only sign of what they'd done he could see on her was a faint redness in her cheeks. The girl was unshakable. He kissed her on the lips.

That got a reaction. A whole three blinks. "I do not understand."

He lay back down. "There's one thing we have in common."

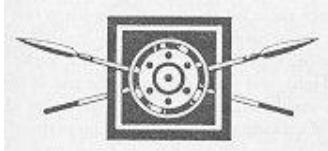
"I suspect Tenelca and I have much in common ..." Lidya claimed suggestively. She was still naked, still beautiful. They all were. Rand tried to hide himself behind Tenelca but she was rising from the pillows with the same complacence with which she'd knelt on them. He'd enjoyed them all. Liked them all. But they couldn't possibly expect him to keep going. He was utterly drained. He saw Cami leave out of the doorway, unashamed in her nakedness, to explain to some passing Maidens what was going on. Someryn was once such, and spared the room only a single cold glance before walking on, but others were listening to Cami a bit too carefully. There were thousands of Maidens. Not all under the roof, and not all of those in or near this room, true, but still. So many.

Rand crawled towards and grabbed his shirt. "I think the Wise Ones are expecting me." It might be true. He had no idea how long he'd been in there. And even if it wasn't, he had to get out. It was a struggle to get back on his feet.

"The Wise Ones should be listened to," big Amindha agreed, a bit reluctantly. He thought he could probably have resisted her if she tried to stop him, even as weak as he was. Probably. He'd need to. At this rate, he wasn't sure he'd be able to survive the Maidens' loyalty, much less any betrayals.

"Yes. Very important to meet and listen to them. I should go do that," Rand said, as he tottered for the door with his clothes clutched before him.

## CHAPTER 17: Two Worlds



The burning coals added to the already punishing heat of the Aiel Waste, turning the close confines of the tent into an oven. It should have been torture, but once you got used to it it was actually quite relaxing. The forced sweating was a good substitute for bathing, here in a land where water could not be wasted on such things. A lot of what took place here wasn't so bad when you got used to it, in fact. For a good Domani girl like Daniele Rulonir, an Accepted of the White Tower, the thought of getting too used to living among the Aiel was more than a little disturbing.

Her skin looked even redder than normal, flushed as it was by that heat. A sheen of sweat brought a shine to the legs that were tucked under her where she sat well back from the fire. Those legs had gotten visibly stronger in the time she had been here. Lean muscle showed, there and elsewhere. *She* had gotten stronger. She was no Maiden, but she'd learned where and how to hit in order to knock out a man much larger than her, and she could kick a target well above her own head now. The Aes Sedai would have thought it foolish to bother learning such things. What use were they to one who could channel the One Power? And maybe they were right. But Dani enjoyed training with the Maidens. And she took pride in knowing what she could do with her body.

Her hair—long and straight and black as night—was sticking to her back again. She shifted uncomfortably, pushing it aside and leaning so as to keep it clear of her naked body. Letting it become a blanket was less than pleasant in here.

The motion brought her the attention of some of the women who packed the tent—almost all Aiel. Some of those looks were frankly admiring.

Aviendha did not look. She never seemed to. Even so, she liked to think they were becoming friends. They had become apprentices to the Wise Ones at the same time, neither being exactly eager to take on that role. Dani liked to think they had a lot in common. She liked her. It was hard to tell whether Aviendha felt the same. She was a woman of singular determination. All she had ever wanted was to be *Far Dareis Mai*, as she said on numerous occasions. Now that that was impossible for her, she did not know what to do with herself.

She sat nearby now, cross-legged, straight-backed and serene, her eyes and mouth closed. A beautiful woman by anyone's standards, her muscular physique did nothing to hide the curvaceousness of her body. Dani's treacherous eyes tracked a bead of sweat as it trickled over one full breast and crested each of the hills of her stomach in turn before disappearing down between her even stronger legs. She made herself look away. What was wrong with her lately? It was bad enough that she'd cheated on Ilyena with two others; she shouldn't be allowing herself to think of Aviendha like that. It was all well and good for Aiel to have multiple partners, but Dani was not Aiel.

Not that Aviendha seemed much interested in finding any partner, male or female. When obliquely asked, she'd said that such things had nothing to do with being a Maiden. Then she'd gotten angry, so Dani had asked no more. Even today, when she was no longer a Maiden, the sight of Adelin and Dhael in a tryst hadn't inflamed her in the slightest. She'd barely even glanced at it. Meanwhile, Dani had been forced to take a keen interest in the ground. She risked another glance now. They were lying skin to skin, uncaring of the added heat that must bring. The bigger Adelin was half on top of Dhael, her hand languidly stroking the other woman's sex as they kissed.

Dani was glad she was so flushed with the heat, since it meant no blush could betray her. Few of the other Aiel seemed to care. Such things happened sometimes in the sweat tents. The only rule seemed to be that you never spoke of it outside. Dani didn't like that rule. She wanted to confess. But she feared the result. Aviendha was bigger than her ... *Stop. That. Right now!*

"Have you been meditating like they showed us?" she asked Raine, to try and distract herself.

She knew it was a mistake even before the wolfsister looked up. Though as red of hair as Aviendha and many other Aiel, her golden eyes were not the only things that marked Raine apart. The sheer misery on her face as she struggled to endure the heat was something no Aiel woman would ever have shown, even if she'd felt it. Only the embarrassment that came of an extended time without

a bath had forced Raine in here. She'd never gotten used to it. But that naked misery on the naked girl, short and skinny as she was, just made Dani want to take her in her arms and hug her. The last time she'd done that, she'd ended up kissing her. Everywhere ...

"Yes. Did it. Not hard while awake. Just like what, what my other friends do," Raine said between exaggeratedly deep breaths.

"You're doing better than me, then," she admitted. Pride was good, but should not rule you. She couldn't make herself not feel a little resentment that the dreamwalkers who came to the talent naturally were mastering that skill faster than she who needed a *ter'angreal*, but she could force herself not to let that resentment lessen her.

"No. Not. You're tougher," Raine whined. "You don't tuck your tail."

Dani's unvoiced question was answered just as wordlessly, when Raine quickly crawled for the flaps that let out onto an enclosed area, one that would allow women to dress or undress in privacy while still preventing too much of the steam from getting out. Raine's pretty little bum disappeared through those flaps, leaving Dani smiling after her.

Maybe she was adapting better than she'd realised. Her smile faltered. Maybe she was adapting too well. She'd come to like it here.

The final "wetlander" present was dealing with the heat better than Raine. Dani wasn't sure if Merile realised exactly how much the Wise Ones disliked her presence, here among them or especially so close to Rand. She was not a stupid girl, and had proven a quick learner in regards to the One Power, but she maintained a happy-go-lucky attitude that often masked her true thoughts and feelings. She'd practically skipped her way here, and lay now staring at the roof, seemingly uncaring of the sharp look beautiful Melaine was giving her or the even sharper one she was getting from wrinkly Sorilea. She was ignoring Sil, too, despite the *gai'shain*'s gentle efforts to tease out the similarities between their role and the Way of the Leaf. That was doubtless what had sharpened the Wise Ones' eyes. Merile was wise not to answer.

Wisdom was something Dani would not have credited her with once. She'd seemed an air-headed child. But she was not so innocent or clueless as she seemed. Certainly not innocent enough not to realise what a display she was making of herself, lying spread-eagled like that as she basked in the heat. Short and slim, with dark hair and pale skin, she was very pretty despite her oversized ears.

Dani rubbed her own forehead with a sweaty hand. *I need to get out of here, or I'm going to end up as bad as Mayam.* She was unable to stifle her groan when she remembered that tonight was their weekly meeting in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. Rand would be there. Strong and handsome and tortured, with the memory of all he could do to her body hovering between them.

After that first time she had tried to avoid temptation, but it was hard when your training required you to fall asleep in the same tent and wake up together. The Wise Ones didn't always deign to wait around and see that their students woke safely, either. After their last training session, she'd blinked herself back to reality to find Rand and Raine lying on either side of her.

She had tried to escape. She had! Well, she'd made a token effort to, at least. And somehow she had ended up on her back with Rand inside her, his thick, hot shaft going deep, driving her pussy wild and making it hard to think. Having Raine at her side, kissing her neck and stroking her thigh and Rand's ass to urge them both on hadn't helped. Well, it had helped bring her to orgasm, sure, but it hadn't helped her rediscover her virtue.

He hadn't even come in her. Once she'd finished muffling her screams against his muscular shoulder, he'd pulled out of her and reached for another. He'd fucked her sweet Raine from behind right beside her, and Dani had lain there, her mind dulled by pleasure, unable to think of anything except how beautiful they looked when they were joined like that. She'd watched the way the muscles moved under Rand's marble skin, admired how they powered each thrust and how those thrusts brought such cute expressions to Raine's face. She'd liked the way the near-permanent frown that Rand wore disappeared when he climaxed, too. The peaceful, happy look on his face made him seem younger. It was only afterwards, when they'd separated and she was walking back to the tent she shared with Ilyena, that the guilt and the doubts set in.

"What troubles you, Daniele Rulonir?" Aviendha asked.

Those blue-green eyes of hers were free of temptation. Dani envied them. "Everything troubles me lately. It didn't used to. Only a few months ago I was not a tenth as much of a worrywart as this."

"There you speak for every woman present," Melaine put in. "And the fault lies with Rand al'Thor. He troubles all our thoughts."

"Can we not speak of men here? The sweat tents are one of the few places free of them," complained Jay, a rather pretty woman whose golden hair had been turned into a dark blanket.

Dani was happy to oblige since she didn't trust her voice not to give her away. It was highly unlikely that Rand was troubling them in the same way he was troubling her. Aviendha was certainly free of such troubles. And Rand's aunt Sunadai definitely was!

"There is no malice in him," said aunt claimed from where she lounged on one elbow. Her huge breasts were still jiggling from the speed with which she'd gotten up at hearing his name, wide dark nipples almost demanding to be stared at. The pussy she'd looked up from glistened wetly. Her shorter, slimmer wife Shisunai didn't stop licking for a moment. They were both Wise Ones, but Shisunai had been Sunadai's apprentice before she was her wife, and was utterly devoted to her. "But he is focused on defeating Sightblinder. Everything else will come second to that."

Sentimentality for her brother's son no more touched her voice than did embarrassment at discussing such weighty matters while being eaten out by another woman. She and Jay could both channel, and strongly, but they argued openly now in front of women from all walks of life. Aiel were so strange! Fascinatingly so. Aviendha didn't look happy, but Dani didn't dare ask why. She returned her gaze to her legs. It didn't help, since that just left her alone with her thoughts again.

Raine had praised her for her toughness. That was the only reason she waited until Melaine rose to walk hunched over from the tent before getting up as well. Melaine was a dreamwalker, and it was time for their meeting.

She passed a few of the Maidens on her way. They had been talking quietly but broke off when the other women passed near. All she heard was Cara saying something about it not being fair to Aviendha. Even if she was no longer a Maiden, a lot of them still thought of her as their spearsister.

They towelled themselves dry before dressing, the *algode* soaking up the moisture as greedily as anything else native to this place. Melaine's blouse was *algode* as well, as plain as her skirt, if white where the latter was brown. Dani dressed in a high-necked blue dress cut in the Tairen style. The heavy embroidering and richer material did not make her feel superior. If anything, it felt almost embarrassingly gaudy to wear now.

Most of the Wise Ones kept their tents outside the city, beyond the invisible line where once a wall of fog had shrouded Rhuidean in mystery. That cluster of tents had grown large since Rand made the once-forbidden city his base. Wise Ones from all the clans that had aligned with him were here now, and perhaps even a few from the rest. New women were arriving all the time so some of those they passed she recognised, while others she did not.

Of those standing outside the meeting tent, she knew greying Aeron and her solemn apprentice Estair, but not the beautiful golden-haired woman addressing them. There were half a dozen Maidens of the Spear with her, so she was plainly a Wise One, but what really stood out was the Maidens themselves. All six looked exactly alike, from their pale yellow hair to their sternly pretty faces.

Melaine smiled to see them. "Yusana. It is good to see you again."

"And you. I only wish it was in better circumstances. It is disturbing to see Rhuidean like this," she answered, her calm voice belying her words.

"The Prophecy of Rhuidean promises destruction. It has begun already, as it must. All we can do is limit the damage." Despite her grim words, Melaine spoke as calmly as Yusana. Dani wondered how many on the other side of the Dragonwall would speak as calmly when they learned what Rand was. She didn't think there would be many, but what the Aiel spoke of applied to the rest of Valgarda, too. She could see that.

"To do that we must know the mind of He Who Comes With the Dawn," said Aeron. "By anticipating what he will do we can smooth the path. Bruan tells me that the Shaido Couladin forced his hand at Alcair Dal, that he revealed what should not have been revealed to silence Couladin's lies."

Melaine's lips tightened. "I have it from Amys that Rhuarc urged Rand al'Thor and Couladin, to go aside with the chiefs to speak of those things where no others could hear. Rand al'Thor ignored him and tossed our past on the wind, and our future with it."

"These are good things to know, if we are to do as you said, Melaine," said Yusana.

"Rhuarc is no fool, but it is difficult to say the same of Rand al'Thor," the fiery Melaine said.

Dani knew she should stay out of it, but there was something that none of the Wise Ones had mentioned in all the times she'd heard them talk about what happened back then. "Rand can channel. And everyone knows it. How many would have claimed he used the One Power to influence Rhuarc and the others if they *had* gone aside?" People were always blaming Aes Sedai for things they didn't do back home, oftentimes things that were completely impossible for even a channeler. Trying to explain how wrong they were rarely had any effect. "It's easy to claim he controlled a few men, but harder to claim he's controlling everyone who had ever been to Rhuidean before and lived, especially those he's never even met."

A brief smile dawned on Aeron's tanned face. "Daniele Sedai speaks wisdom to the wise."

The six Maidens at Yusana's back—who looked a bit like her, she realised—wore matching looks of admiration, but Yusana's brows rose sceptically. "Sedai? This ... young woman is Aes Sedai?"

While Melaine made the introductions, Dani ground her teeth. It wasn't the unspoken slight that upset her most, it was the reminder that she was living a lie. The Aiel thought her and the rest of the Accepted who'd accompanied her to be full Aes Sedai. That Moiraine had let their deception stand should have been comfort enough for her, but lying to people as obsessed with honour as the Aiel had come to feel especially shameful.

She was spared the need to repeat her lies by the arrival of another dreamwalker, Rand's other aunt, Dana. Leaner than Sunadai, her already pale hair was going paler with age but her green eyes were still clear.

Melaine nodded to her. "Here is one who has already made progress. That he is her father-son is not the closest of relations, but it is helping to make him know his blood."

For Rand's sake, Dani hoped that cynical summary wasn't all there was to their relationship. He'd been charmingly moved at finding his long lost relatives. It was sad to think they were just using their kinship to influence him.

"Have you brought him?" Melaine continued once Dana drew close.

"He comes. He stopped to speak to Ilyena Volnicoliev on the way here." Dana shook her head. "Even for a young man, he is easily distracted."

Dani's heart hammered against her chest. She knew her eyes were wide and was beyond caring. Rand and Ilyena could not be allowed to speak! "I'll hurry him along. He's holding the lesson up," she choked out as she hurried past Dana, to dart between scattered tents.

She soon found them. Rand was frowning at Ilyena, who was scowling past him at Raine. Both girls looked small walking at his sides. None of them looked happy. All of them had shared Dani's blankets. *Oh, Light help me!*

"That's private," Raine sulked.

"Indeed. And you are just a great lover of ... private things, aren't you?" said Ilyena, her eyes narrowed to slits. *Does she know?*

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" Ilyena turned her bitter gaze to the scorched earth across which they trod. "I can't even say I'm surprised. Everything is falling apart. Why not that? Despite it all. Even that. You are very good at breaking things, aren't you, al'Thor?"

Ilyena hadn't been the same since their torment in the dungeons of the Black Ajah. Seeing her so hurt and bitter smote Dani's heart. But it made her angry, too, to see her taking out her pains on Rand. She'd been travelling with him long enough to know how little he loved his destiny, and how much it hurt him to be the reincarnation of the man who'd broken the world.

Sure enough, he flinched in a way he wouldn't have if she'd just punched him. "I wish I could say you were wrong about that."

"I wish you'd do less to earn the description!" Ilyena snapped. She'd always hated weakness. It was something she and Dani had fought over a lot when they'd first met.

"You leave him be!" Raine growled, her lips peeled back from her teeth.

"Don't tempt me, puppy," Ilyena growled right back. "I've put down bitches who were worth twenty of you."

"I once killed a Forsaken for threatening my friends," Rand said in a deceptively mild voice, just as Dani came rushing up to them.

She'd intended to break things up before one of her beloved girls did something terrible to the other, but Ilyena had already recoiled at his words, a sudden wariness widening her eyes. They were

very big and very blue; and made her look more innocent than she was. Dani had always loved that about her. It was ... stimulating.

"Dani! We were just talking about you," said Raine, her anger giving way at once to a smile. She even wiggled a little, like a puppy. That was cute, too.

"It's a relief you showed up when you did," Rand added, quiet and serious. "You are needed." A wry smile tugged at the corner of his lips, giving character to that handsome mask. She knew that last was not something he liked saying to someone trained in the White Tower. Yet he said it to her. She couldn't help but be moved. She couldn't help a lot of things.

"Needed to do what?" Ilyena asked sharply. "Manage the Volsuni? Smooth her tongue? Tell her she is imagining things?"

Dani hadn't felt this nervous since the first time she'd put on Novice white. "We shouldn't be talking like this in public."

"Oh, how very Aiel! But what happens in private is a different matter, as we both know." Ilyena's words made Rand flush. They both knew he suspected they'd peeked that time. Dani avoided his eyes. "You are spending a lot of time with them lately, Dani. I half expect you to start mentioning your honour every second sentence."

"What's so bad about honour?"

"Nothing! Except ... nothing." It was Ilyena's turn to look away. "I just thought there were some things more important."

"There are. You are," she said, right in front of Raine and Rand. That should not have embarrassed her, but it did. Oddly, neither the girl nor the boy looked jealous at hearing it.

"Dani is really nice. You should appreciate her more," Raine said.

Dani winced. She was trying to help patch things up between her and her pillow friend. A selfless act. Sweet as sugar. And utterly doomed.

Sure enough, Ilyena turned a fierce glare on her. "Should I!? Years together and everything seemed fine. But a few months acquaintance and here you come to give out instructions on what we should have been doing!"

"I doubt Raine meant that," Dani said. "And she'd be mistaken if she had. I've no complaints."

Ilyena mellowed slightly, while Rand nodded, a thoughtful look on his face.

"There's no single rule for such things," he said. "No-one is qualified to give out instructions. Variety is, as they say, the spice of life, and people should be free to choose how they want to live, and love."

"Freedom for everyone? So are we all free to kill who we please in this brave new world of yours?" Ilyena snarked.

Rand didn't rise to it. "Obviously such things end when you start hurting others." He raised a brow. "I hope you aren't going to follow up by claiming that hurt feelings are the same as getting stabbed."

"Of course they aren't," she reluctantly admitted.

By then they'd arrived back at the meeting tent. They made a solemn enough group that they almost matched the Aiel one that awaited them. For that matter, Ilyena and Rand would have passed for Aiel easily enough if they were dressed differently. And Raine would only have stood out due to her unnatural eyes and her lack of height. It was only really Dani who stuck out.

And yet, it was her that Melaine greeted first. "I see you have rounded up our lost sheep. Perhaps now we can begin. Enough of our time has been wasted already this evening."

"We had much to talk about," she said curtly. They still did.

The Wise Ones were where she'd left them, as were Yusana's six guards.

"I see you, Melaine," said Rand. Perhaps he thought he was hiding his lack of fuzzy feelings towards her, but Dani could hear it in his flat voice, see it in the set of his eyes. She did not doubt that Melaine saw it, too. He studied the others, greying Dana and Aeron, pretty Carelle, beautiful Yusana. Estair stood with her hands clasped and eyes lowered, while the six sisters faced him proudly. "Well met, all of you."

"So this is the famous Rand al'Thor," Yusana mused. "They said you were of an age with my daughters. You look younger."

He pushed back his hair, where it got a little wavy around his ears. She'd noticed he did that when he was a bit embarrassed. "I would never comment on a woman's age, but they look pretty fresh to me. As do you."

"She can channel," Dani whispered. For all they knew, Yusana could be a hundred years old. She could have fifty children besides these ones.

The sisters exchanged silent looks. A speaker was chosen by some mystical means. "We have raided and repelled raids. We are experienced fighters and will be protecting you from now on."

"He has already thought of that, Briana," her mother said. Her eyes on Rand were not friendly. "He is ... famous, after all."

"Infamous," said Ilyena.

Rand cleared his throat and hurried past the Wise Ones, Raine at his heels. He touched Estair's shoulder to urge her aside when she didn't move fast enough, murmuring, "Excuse me." Tall and slender, she hopped out of the way, her face going as red as her hair.

"Very young. And very wetlander. This is not good," Yusana sighed.

"We must work with what we have," said Melaine, though she sounded no more happy about it. She and Dana, both dreamwalkers, followed Rand into the tent.

Dani knew she should do the same, but she lingered with Ilyena. "We'll talk soon. In private. I love you." The nearby Aiel all looked away, politely pretending not to have heard her "shame herself", as they saw if. Dani didn't care. Only Ilyena's opinion mattered.

And of that, she got only a hinted sigh. "Later."

Heartsick, she stared at her for a long moment, before Melaine's raised voice called her into the tent. Amys, Bair and Seana had already been waiting, and the other dreamwalkers had now gathered around them, lounging on cushions in a circle. Dani fished her *ter'angreal*—a small amber plaque with a sleeping woman carved inside—out of her pouch with more reluctance than usual.

It was Amys who spoke. "You have not yet mastered entering the dream while not fully asleep. Further practice is needed there for some. The others need not wait, especially since the next lesson links to it like a string to a bow."

Seana nodded. Grey and lined, she smiled at Rand before speaking. "To remain on the edge of the dream but never giving in to the urge is a lesson some struggle with. Each of us carry our own shame and honour within. Contacting those who remain in that state of near-waking is what we will teach you tonight."

"Before or after our meeting with the others?" he asked, darting a look at her and Raine for some reason.

"Before would be best," said Bair in her reedy voice. "Once those who are contacted awake are pulled into the dream, then you can go to your meeting."

"You don't need to wait on my account," Dani said testily. All that polite talk of them not mastering that trick was directed at her alone.

"We do not need to do any of this," Amys pointed out sternly. "For this lesson to work you will have to go apart. Return to your own blankets—your own blankets!" she said, shooting a hard look at all three of them. Dani stiffened under those knowing eyes, but Rand smiled a wry smile and Raine just looked confused. "Within the hour you must have meditated yourself into the state of half-sleep. We will look for you then, and call the first of you into the dream. Then we will show them how to call the next. Bair will remain awake, to be contacted by the final student."

"Understood." Rand stood up at once. "I need to explain to the Maidens where I'll be staying."

Dani already knew why that was. And Amys' smile made plain she did as well. Rand crabbed his way to the tent's exit and made a hasty departure. Dani and Raine followed more slowly.

Raine waited until they'd passed the Aiel still lingering outside before speaking. "You'll get the hang of it soon, Dani. I know it."

"Well, look at you being all sweet and considerate."

She blushed. "I was a good girl, you know. Before the wolves. Everyone always said so."

"I don't doubt it. And you are still a good girl."

"Oh, I've done things that good girls don't do. As you know!"

She laughed. "I think everyone knows. It's why Amys was insisting you stay away from Rand." The Light send it was only Rand she'd been speaking of.

Raine smiled broadly. "Oh, I could never do that. Not for long, at least."

Strange. Should she not feel jealous about that? She didn't. "Do you love him?" Did she?

Raine walked along, lost in thought for a while, considering her answer. "I think so. It's hard to know, since he is ... important to the wolves," she said as they were leaving the Wise Ones' cluster of tents behind. "It's hard to separate my mind from theirs sometimes. Rand knows. He insisted I should, too. I think I love him for that. Just me, not the wolves. I need him too, in a way. A way that ... it hurts ... when I'm not with him. But I know it makes him nervous, so I've been trying to keep it to myself. It's not easy, sometimes I just want to ... well ... It's not proper, these things I'm feeling. That's all. Love isn't easy to ... What's the word? Quantify."

Dani sighed quietly. "You've got that right."

"I love you."

Those simple words, delivered after that weighty self-examination, left her speechless. She didn't realise she'd stopped until she saw Raine looking back at her, the setting sun shining through Rhuidean's tall buildings behind her, those luminous eyes lighting up in the growing darkness.

For all her doubts and confusions, her response came surprisingly easy. "I love you, too."

Raine grinned. "Good! Now if only the rest was as simple and good. But now I have to go, before I start kissing you and end up being scolded for being late. See you soon!"

She took off at a run, leaving Dani to make her own, slower way into the city. She would have happily chased after her, if she'd been wearing a dress as short as Raine's. Running in this Tairen thing would have been a very bad idea, however. If she'd been wearing some of that cadin'sor, she'd be a lot more comfortable. There were a lot of things here that would have made her more comfortable, in fact; and more at home.

## CHAPTER 18: Discoverings



She got some cold looks from some of the Aiel she passed on her way to the building she and her fellow Accepted had appropriated. Not everyone was welcoming of outsiders, even those thought to be Aes Sedai, and especially when those outsiders were living in the Aiel's sacred city. One woman scowled openly at her as she stepped under the "roof" they'd borrowed, and spoke loudly of thieves to her neighbour.

That didn't bother Dani. Those who didn't know better thought Domani women debauched, but there was a world of difference between using seduction to cloud someone's mind and actually sleeping with them. The Bloodborn—their noble class—kept extensive records of who had bred with whom over the centuries, and what fraction of their blood was "pure" Domani. Anything less than half resulted in their being stripped of their titles. No, for the most part her people discouraged marrying outside the nation and were actually very strict when it came to immigration.

Perhaps that was why, despite all she had done lately, she gasped in shock when she saw a strange Aiel man emerge from the room that Mayam had made her own. The brawny, yellow-haired man was fully dressed, but his hair was tousled and there was sweat glistening on his tanned face. Their eyes met for a second, before both looked away in discomfort. *I can hardly judge.*

Her own room was further down the corridor, so she kept her head down and pressed on. Or tried to. Her steps faltered when a second man, this one young and slender and red of hair, came out of the same room. She had to steady herself against the stone wall when another two followed behind. Face hot, staring straight ahead, she hastened past the door.

"We will have to do this again sometime," she heard Mayam say.

"Nothing short of taking a blood enemy as *gai'shain* would be better," a deep voice answered. From inside the room. *Light have mercy. Five? Five. There were five of them!* Suddenly her own struggles didn't seem quite so scandalous.

When she reached her room, she pulled the curtain that served for a door firmly closed behind her. She wasn't sure how she was going to face Mayam tomorrow. Had the woman noticed her going past? Blood and ashes. Pedra would have a heart attack if she found out. Moiraine might well raise her voice a fraction! And Theodrin ... well, the Light alone knew what Theodrin would do.

There was no sign of Ilyena, though they shared a room. She hoped there was no message in that. She was probably just busy with something else. Probably.

With so much on her mind, she had a hard time embracing *saidar*. And even once she'd allowed its glory to infuse her, and channelled into the *ter'angreal*, she still struggled to find the combination of calmness and focus that the Wise Ones had described.

*Dani. Can you hear me?*

She almost lost it. She so very nearly allowed herself to open her eyes, to start awake. It felt so unnatural, to hold there, knowing she was dozing but keeping her mind in that state. But she managed it this time.

*I can hear you, Rand. What is the message?* That was what this was supposed to be used for. Communicating while on the march.

There wasn't really a message, of course. They were just practicing. *The message is that you look beautiful. But that you drool in your sleep.*

*Bloody goat kisser! Are you trying to make this harder?* she sent, while trying not to smile. *And I know that I don't. Ilyena would have mentioned it.* That one had a tongue like a razor at times.

So strange, to hear someone chuckle silently in your head. It was a while before he spoke again. *The Wise Ones say you've passed. Congratulations. You can come the rest of the way into the dreamworld now.*

It was a relief to do just that, like finally putting down something she'd been holding aloft. She felt her mental muscles relax as sleep, full sleep, took over her.

She soon found herself in another place, in more ways than one. The Heart of the Stone in *Tel'aran'rhiod* was much like the Heart of the Stone in the real world, all the way back in Tear, save for a strangeness about the lighting, an odd combination of too much emptiness and the feel of too many hidden eyes. She was used to that by now, though.

Rand was there, wearing that long red coat he favoured, but looking less handsome than he was in real life. Perception could rule reality, here in the World of Dreams. She wondered what she looked like. The Wise Ones, all strong-willed and experienced women, looked exactly as normal. Someone was missing, though.

“Where’s Raine?”

“She has no yet readied herself to hear us,” Amys said.

Dani frowned. That was strange. Raine had mastered that skill even before Rand. What could have delayed her? “I should wake up and go check on her.”

Amys frowned right back at her. “No. You should seek her mind in the dream, and tell her to join us. Rand al’Thor has already proven he can do so. He can attend your weekly meeting with Elayne Trakand or Nynaeve al’Meara while you are busy.”

She set her jaw. “What if there is something preventing her from dreaming?”

Rand broke off the quiet talk he’d been having with Seana and came to join them. “You think there is some danger to her? In Rhuidean?”

*Ilyena.* But no. No, she wouldn’t. Dani found herself shaking her head. She had to trust Ilyena. “I’ll find her.”

“Let me know when you do,” Rand said. He looked concerned.

Under Amys’ guidance she sat down and crossed her legs. The ground was hard and cold, so she made herself hover just above it. That was much more comfortable, and she found herself smiling. If only such things could be done in the real world.

“Focus on Raine Cinclare,” Amys said sharply.

Dani ground her teeth. She liked to think herself a strong-willed woman—her teachers in Tar Valon had certainly complained of her stubbornness often enough!—but lately she’d been finding herself getting bossed around a lot. Nynaeve had been put in charge of their group by the Amyrlin, so she’d had to put up with her and her tongue. Then she’d agreed to play the student with the Wise Ones in exchange for learning how to dreamwalk. So here she was. Putting up with Amys’ rebukes.

Still, annoying as it was, the woman wasn’t wrong. She’d been letting her focus drift. Raine.

Her search was entirely mental. She and Amys remained where they were. Dani had to block out the sound of a familiar voice from somewhere nearby. Nynaeve talking about Ebou Dar. They hadn’t left yet and Dani was curious to know why, but she pushed that curiosity and their words away. Raine. Will and desire were powerful in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. And Dani was full of both.

After a lengthy search she suddenly felt a familiar presence, far away yet close by. Will and desire brought her to a place where Raine was and yet was not. In a darkness between worlds she perceived thousands upon thousands of flickering lights. She could not see her, but somehow she knew that Amys was there with her, watching. One of those lights was dimmer than the others, muted and barely detectable. There was something familiar about it. Dani stretched her hand out across an impossible distance and touched that which could not be touched.

*Raine? Is that you?*

*Oh! Hey, Dani. You found me! Well done!*

*Are you well? We were worried when you didn't show.*

With their minds touching like that, she could actually feel a bit of the other girl’s embarrassment. It was very strange, but also welcome and right. *I ... started a bit later than the rest of you.*

*Why?*

*Oh, no reason ...*

She didn’t seem at all hurt. That was good, for several reasons. But it left the question unanswered. *Raine ... Are you letting me win?*

She heard a giggle in her brain. *Maaaybe. Or maybe I just wanted you to chase me down.*

Dani sighed internally. She should be outraged. But Raine was too cute to be mad at. It was galling how difficult it was to just be herself lately, almost as if herself was changing into something

else entirely. *Well, job done I guess. You can come into the World of Dreams now. I know how hard it is to wait like that.*

*It is? I mean, yes, of course.*

*Don't push it, furrball.*

When she opened her eyes, she was back in the Heart of the Stone. Other than Dana, it was just her and Amys left, however, to her surprise. "How long were we gone?"

"Time moves differently here, as we have taught you," Dana said.

They were not alone for long. A form at once familiar yet wildly alien appeared out of thin air. She was covered in brown fur, with long dark claws on the fingers and toes of her oddly shaped appendages. Her face was not quite human, either, being a strange mixture of wolf and woman. Perception ruled reality here, and Raine's perception of herself was far stranger than even Rand's.

"And so the test is finished. You have gained honour, all three of you," Amys allowed.

Dani's annoyance with the woman faded fast. That was another difference between the Aiel and the Aes Sedai. The sisters who had taught her back in the Tower had been misers with their praise, no matter how well a student did in her lessons. They never wanted you to forget that they were Aes Sedai, and you a mere Accepted, or a merest Novice. But if Amys and the other Wise Ones thought a thing had been done well, they did not scruple to say so, no more than they scrupled to call a failure a failure. Dani preferred the Aiel way.

"Three? Where is Rand?" Raine asked, her voice deeper than normal now.

"Nynaeve al'Meara wished to show him Ebou Dar," Dana said. "Wetlander cities hold no interest for me, but he seemed keen to explore."

"Too many people," Raine growled. "The wolves stay away. But the wolves stay away."

The two Wise Ones exchanged looks. Dani hardly understood it herself. It was Amys who spoke. "We are done here. Return to your bodies and rest. This is no true sleep."

She nodded her understanding. Some things that happened to you in *Tel'aran'rhiod* could have an effect on your body in the real world, but not everything. If you stayed in it all night, you would wake in the morning feeling as if you hadn't slept a wink. As she could personally testify.

She didn't rush to leave, however. Nor did Raine. When the Wise Ones left them alone, the two girls turned to each other and smiled. "Let's go exploring," Dani said.

"I like exploring." Raine took her by the hand. She could feel the pad on the bottom, and the fur all over. It was beyond strange but her smile did not waver. "Where to?"

"Well, you've seen my hometown. Let's visit yours."

"Rospool? There's nothing to see there. It's just a little village. And ... and the people there ... they, they weren't very understanding of, of all this." She gestured to herself. The way she was hunching over almost made her seem to be cringing. "I-it was just like what happened with Rand, when the Emond's Fielders found out he could channel."

Dani was annoyed at herself for hesitating on account of Raine's assumed appearance. She pushed her discomfort aside and put an arm around the girl's hairy shoulders. "I'm sorry about that. I suppose it's something the two of you have in common. You'd probably like my friend Min, too. She got in trouble with the people of her home town for, ah, stuff I'm not supposed to speak of. Point is, you're not alone."

Raine cuddled in against her. "Not while you're here." The side of her face was pressed against Dani's breast. A hand rested on her hip.

There was an unspoken question in the air. Could she? They'd never done it here, not while Raine was the way she was. She wasn't sure she could bring herself to. All that hair! If she tried to use her tongue on her, she'd probably end up choking on it all. She'd changed a lot. Done things that her teachers in the White Tower would never have approved of. But her mind wasn't quite *that* open.

However, she knew someone whose mind, for better or worse, *was* that open.

"Well, Ebou Dar is a grand city and well worth exploring. Let's catch up to Rand and Nynaeve and get a look at it," she said, hiding her discomfort behind a bright smile.

Finding Rand was easy for them, thanks to the Wise Ones' training. A mere act of will was enough to instantly take them out of Tear and to his location. That would be true for him as well, unless one of them was making a concerted effort to hide themselves.

Rand was not. And neither was Nynaeve.

They were in a hot city of pale stone but Dani barely noticed it. She was too busy staring at the hot people whose pale bodies were on display as they embraced passionately up against a marble statue of a beautiful woman.

They were in a square of some kind. She still had hold of Raine's hand. Heart racing, she ducked into the nearest shop and crouched down by the window.

Raine went with her but didn't look as surprised or embarrassed as Dani felt. It wasn't seeing Rand naked, not anymore. The sight of his cute butt clenching and unclenching as he thrust away was a welcome and familiar sight. But Nynaeve! She never would have expected it of her. But there she was, slender legs wrapped around his hips, hands caressing his muscular back, naked pleasure granting a cuteness to that often-stern face of hers. Her eyes were squeezed shut, and her brown braid lashed like a cat's tail as she tried to deny what she was feeling.

"You didn't know that she was part of the pack?" Raine asked. She was hiding, too.

"You did!?" Dani hissed.

A little shrug. "Smelled her on him. Back in Tear."

"Even then ..."

Nynaeve al'Meara. The strongest channeler in the Tower's records, with a will to match. One of the sternest, most opinionated, most aggressively proper women Dani had ever met. Yet there she was, moaning as one of her self-appointed charges ploughed her furrow in the middle of a public square. That she knew as well as Dani did that no-one would simply happen by them didn't make it any less exciting. There was a hand between her legs. It was not her own.

"I smell you, too," Raine growled in her ear.

"Light! Don't just say stuff like that." But she didn't push the hand away. It was harder than usual; rough against her sex.

Across the square, another woman was saying things even more scandalous. "Don't stop! I don't want you to stop fucking me!"

Rand gasped out something she couldn't hear. He glanced at the hard paving stones, upon which a soft pallet suddenly appeared. A sudden image of that bossy woman on her hands and knees getting ravaged by Dani's own boyfriend popped into her mind. Far from being jealous, she found herself whispering encouragement. "Do it. Take her."

As if he could read her mind, Rand did exactly as she'd fantasized. He dropped Nynaeve onto the thick pallet and loomed over her with his big thick cock on display, his gaze intent, blue eyes looking nearly as fiery as his hair now. By the hips he grabbed her with hands trailing those spectacularly glittering tattoos, and onto her hands and knees he moved her. Nynaeve went willingly. And how not? His cock parted the lips of her pussy to explore her depths. His firm grip stilled the thrashing of her braid as he pounded her hard. Dani could see Nynaeve's breasts jiggling each time Rand fucked her.

She saw, too, the look on her face when she came. Her lips quirked, and she filed the memory away with great care. It would serve her well the next time Nynaeve started throwing her weight around.

"She is a good bitch," Raine opined.

She snorted a laugh. Ordinarily she would have objected to Raine's inappropriate ways of describing people, but this once she would let it stand. Rand certainly seemed to think her a good bitch. He had shut his eyes and was moving fast, the strong muscles on his stomach driving him into her. Nynaeve knelt there and let him do as he pleased, even when that meant letting him fill her up with his hot seed.

Though all she'd done was hide there and watch, Dani almost fancied she shared in their relief. Rand sat down on the pallet, still naked. Nynaeve quickly willed some clothes onto herself now that she'd had her fun. Those good Theren woollens she as always going on about. She had that bossy look back on her face now, and nevermind what she'd just done. Dani couldn't hear what they were saying, but Rand was smiling with knowing fondness.

He kept smiling even when Nynaeve stood over him with her hands on her hips. Whatever he said made her blush, but didn't stop her from wagging a finger at him one more time before taking her leave. He lingered, leaning back against the beautiful statue and smiling in remembrance of the beautiful woman, his softening cock cradled upon one thick thigh.

"I want what she got."

Raine's voice echoed Dani's own treacherous thoughts. The thing was, they could have it, too. If they left their hiding place before Rand woke up. The reaching for it was hard, though, when part of her knew it was wrong.

"I'm going," Raine said decisively. The hand that had been rubbing at her, and whose ministrations she had not, she belatedly realised, given due reciprocation, left her as the wolfsister stood up. She actually wagged her tail as she left the shop to prowl across the square towards Rand.

Dani hesitated but knew each step Raine took alone would only make it harder for her do the same. Dare she? She dared.

She caught up to her just as Rand was noticing their presence. He started, and made a very futile effort to hide himself. "Oh! Ah, hey. I was just ... um ... the sun feels nice on your skin sometimes."

"It was the sun that felt nice, was it?" Her knowing look made his eyes go even wider.

"Ah ... when did ...? Never mind. I don't gossip, so don't ask me. If you have questions, you'll need to direct them at ... someone else."

"I may do that," she drawled.

"Don't want questions," Raine growled. "Want you."

After a few blinks, he huffed delightedly. "I could never refuse you," he said, his smile not one bit reluctant as the hairy wolf-girl advanced on him. That was strangely impressive, to her. "And since this is *Tel'aran 'rhiod* ..." he added in a mutter, just before his recently exhausted manhood sprang back to its full size.

Raine was on him in a flash. Though her mouth was not quite a muzzle, it was not quite natural either. Rand kissed her without hesitation. He silked her long ears through his fingers as she climbed on top. It was her who found her opening among all that hair, and slipped his manhood inside with a happy yelp. It was him who found the breast hidden under the hair on her chest, and set her to yelping even louder.

Dani found herself wishing she could be that open minded. Raine's tail wagged as she bounced on Rand's cock. Just as she was starting to feel left out, Rand turned his eyes her way.

"Why don't you join us? I mean, it's fine if you just want to watch, but I like being with you, too."

Raine's golden gaze was more knowing. "You don't have to. There's plenty of time. We can do it later."

Her cheeks coloured in a way that the sight of all those naked bodies entwined had not managed to cause. The wolfsister had noticed. Setting her jaw, Dani shucked out of that restrictive Tairen dress. "Don't have to. But I want to."

They both smiled when she showed them her body. Two hands reached out to her, the girl's hairier than the boy's, madly. Smiling back, she took them both, and let them pull her into their entanglement.

Dani hadn't been sure what to do, so when Raine pressed her muzzle against her sex and began lapping at her with a long hard tongue, she just stood there and gasped. The rocking of the girl's hips didn't stop her from hitting all the right places. It only stopped when Rand took her by the leg and urged her to stand over them, citing better access. When Dani did it, Raine went right back to eating her out with a gusto. She found her hands upon those canine ears, silking them just as he had. Golden eyes stared up at her adoringly.

So lost in pleasure was she that she could only spare a moment's embarrassed thought for what Rand must be seeing, sat there. Strong hands kneaded her soft bottom, parting her cheeks as they did so and making her blush even hotter.

She gasped in shock when she felt another wet tongue touch her sensitive flesh, this one coming from behind. And pressed against her buttock.

"Light! Rand, you, you don't have to—Uh!"

"I want to ... You're such an impressive woman ..." She felt his hot breath against her, just before his wet tongue went to work upon her forbidden place.

Attacked from both sides, Dani was lost. The tension she'd felt evaporated quickly, both that from when Raine touched her in that form, and from when Rand touched her in the place the Black Ajah had delighted in abusing. There had been only pain back then, but there was no pain in this, only

a swiftly mounting pleasure. She put her hands on both their heads, urging them on as she stood over them, knees trembling.

Up and down her slit went Raine's tongue, and around and around her hole went Rand's.

When she came, she came hard. Her screams echoed around that empty square and her knees gave out completely as sweet relief washed over her. Down into their embrace she collapsed, only to find herself being cuddled by them both. Raine's fur was surprisingly soft, and felt good against her skin. She didn't mind that she leaned past her, to kiss Rand. She just rested her head on a strong shoulder, and felt the way Raine was grinding still.

Boldly she sought the wolfsister's concealed breasts. Their softness was still there, under it all. She could even feel her taught little nipples, and tweak them until she yipped and began bouncing faster. Clawed hands grabbed at Dani's back but brought no pain. That energetic bouncing had an effect on Rand, though, who fell away with a groan.

That left Dani to finish the job. Her hesitancy behind her, she combed her fingers through the fur on Raine's belly and down between her thighs. What she found hidden there was as womanly as normal, and responded just as she would have expected to her skilled fingers.

Raine's howl of pleasure was even louder than Dani's had been. It didn't alarm her. She just hugged her while she rode out the last shudders of her orgasm. They stayed in each other's arms for a while after that, giggling wordlessly, until Rand's complaint that he was not a benth sent them red-faced from his person. When they looked back they found him smiling, though.

"Of all the things I imagined happening when I left the Tower with Nynaeve, this would have to be the last."

"Nynaeve has a way of defying imagination," he mused.

"I can't deny that," she said dryly. "It must be a common trait, in the Theren."

His delighted grin warmed her more than she would have expected. But then, so much of what had happened since meeting him had been beyond expectations. In a good way.

"I wasn't expecting you to ... I'm glad," Raine said shyly. That near echo of her own thoughts was heart-warming, too. It was all too heart-warming, in fact. How was a girl supposed to maintain proper White Tower standards with all this on offer?

With Raine looking at her like a little puppy, she couldn't not pet her head. So she did, and hugged her back when the shorter girl pressed her face against her still bare breasts.

Rand cleared his throat. "As much as I've enjoyed this, and as much as I'd like to continue, we aren't getting any actual sleep, dreaming like this. And I really should be getting some rest. I'll leave you two to it."

Dani pushed Raine away gently. "No. You're right. We all have duties to attend to, and need our rest."

Raine managed to sulk girlishly, despite her lupine appearance. "That is proper for the pack leaders," she allowed.

Dani brushed a finger down her hairy cheek by way of apology. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The last thing she saw before she left that dream was Raine smiling toothily.

The first thing she saw when she woke in her own blankets, was Ilyena looking down at her. Rubbing at her eyes didn't make her go away, nor banish the angry set of her face or the knowing look in her eyes. She was in her woollen nightdress but was wide awake, sitting up in the bed they shared.

"Awake at last, are you? I guess we both are, then."

"Wha—? How long—?"

"Long enough to hear the names you've been moaning," Ilyena said angrily.

Dani's face flushed even as her blood ran cold. "Ilyena, I ... I don't know what to say."

"What is there *to* say? What was the point of any of it?" her pillow-friend asked bitterly.

"Everything has gotten so complicated, but we can fix this," Dani insisted. "I still love you."

"Complicated. That's one word for it." Ilyena looked away. "It's more complicated than you know. And who am I to judge anyone?"

"What do you mean?"

Ilyena got up from their bed in an angry rush. "What do you think? Two others, and one a boy? *That* boy, of all boys! How are we supposed to come back from that?"

*The Aiel way*, Dani thought at once. She wondered at how quickly the solution came to her. But as intriguing as it was, she hadn't the nerve to suggest it aloud. She could only watch in stricken silence as Ilyena stalked out of their room to seek somewhere else to sleep.

## CHAPTER 19: Strangers Still



Rand woke alone and well rested in the rooms he'd claimed for himself in the same building that Asmodean was housed, rather than under the Roof of the Maidens for once. But that didn't mean he was able to get out into the sunlight until well after dawn. Lidya had been part of the night's watch, it turned out, and was eager to resume their earlier encounter. He wasn't about to refuse her, so he spent half an hour standing behind her while she leant against a wall with the trousers of her *cadin'sor* around her ankles, her tight ass being spread by his cock. By the time he unloaded inside her, she was loose, relaxed and very satisfied.

He kissed her cheek, complimented her on how well she relieved his burdens, and sent her off with a smile after the replacement guards arrived, but there was a distraction among them, too. Rhamys was shy and uncertain in her greeting. He couldn't allow that. So a private meeting was in order. She blushed when he kissed her, but it wasn't long before she asked him to do it again. That would have been enough for Rand.

Rhamys wanted more. He soon found himself sharing with her the breakfast she'd insisted on fetching, chatting away while she sat in his lap sipping tea from a small cup.

She rejected his description of her as her mother's daughter. "I look a bit like her, but the similarities end there. She was a greater Maiden. And as a person, she is the far greater woman."

"I'd say it would be wiser not to compare ourselves to others. If I spent all day worrying I won't live up to Tam's standards, I'd never get anything done. We can be their children without having to be them."

She frowned. "Tam al'Thor? Why would you compare yourself to him? He rarely does anything. You have won far more honour."

Tam rarely did anything because he didn't want to mess things up for Rand. Not because he didn't know how to handle these matters far better than his son would. At least, that was the reason Rand chose to hold to. Those other worries he buried deep.

He didn't see how he could convince Rhamys of that, though. "Lan, then. I'll never be him, but that doesn't make me worthless."

Now she nodded. "*Aan'allein* has much honour, it is true."

"And so do you," he said, tightening his arm around her as he reached for the last of the bread.

"I never thought of it like that. You are much smarter than me," Rhamys said solemnly. He sighed slightly. Propping her up was getting to be a lot of work. "My mother has done everything. As a Maiden, as a Wise One, as the wife of a chief, and as a mother. It is natural to want to be like her. And you could say I wanted to be a Maiden because of my mother, too. Her tireless fighting on the front lines gave me the deepest respect for her."

"I expect there will be other girls who will say the same of you someday."

"You are kind to say so," she said, smiling shyly and setting aside her cup. "Come, this is no time to sit around and drink tea."

"Oh, there's nothing you want me to prove?" That wasn't what he'd been expecting, and her general cuddliness had renewed him.

Rhamys looked confused. "As a Maiden, I can vouch for your strength. And as a woman, I can vouch for your virility. What is there to prove?"

He touched his lips, brushed his fingers through her hair. "My regard..."

He felt her swallow. "Oh. You wish to... Yes, that was quite enjoyable. Alright then. I will have you prove it."

So it was that they spent the lion's share of the morning undressing each other, touching each other, and fucking each other. Rhamys proved rather sweet when they were alone, and got into it quickly. She moaned and writhed and complained of her inability to control herself as he lay atop her, his chest cushioned against her prodigious bosom. Such insincere complaints were never to be heard later on, however, when that same bosom was bouncing so hypnotically while she rode him. It was

the sight of her wild eagerness that drove him over the edge. And it was only when they were lying together and catching their breaths afterwards that it occurred to him that it was a bad idea to come in the pussy of Rhuarc and Amys' daughter. He would just have to trust to Rhamys' intentions. For a wonder, he found that easy to do.

It was going to be harder to explain to Lan and the others why he was so late, though.

They dressed in a hurry and left the room together, leaving the remains of breakfast for the *gai'shain* to clean up. Rhamys interlocked her arm with his as they walked through the too-big hallways, but released him when they came close to the stairs, down which the rest of the Maidens would be waiting. Rand greeted them perfunctorily, noted how shyly Sendara avoided his eye, and hurried outside.

At first, when Branwen came to walk alongside him, moving fast to keep up, he'd been wary. He really couldn't afford to go a third round. There were only so many hours in the day! His wariness only increased when she demanded distance from the other Maidens with a forbidding look.

As it turned out, however, it was not romance on her mind. "This cannot continue."

"What can't?" he asked.

"I have told you of the malady that afflicts my thoughts. Have you forgotten already?"

He honestly wasn't sure what she meant. "Something about mellowing too much?"

"That is part of it. My thoughts turned to our current path, and I found it barren and unsatisfying. Not your path, surely. Your destiny is bright and promising. It was my failures I was repulsed with, for I neglected my duties greatly. I no longer revel in battle, and neither do I seek to win honour by defeating my enemies. Instead, I have spent hours awake stroking your hair and dreading the moment you stir. I am tempted by thoughts of things *Far Dareis Mai* cannot have. This cannot continue."

It was hard to be offended by that flattery, despite the grim way with which it was delivered. "I'm touched. I like you, too. But what is so bad about that?"

She sighed softly, but not in the way he'd hoped. "A true Aiel would understand. A true Aiel—a true Maiden!—should embrace conflict, not shrink from the challenge; harness the battle and be made stronger for it, not tremble in fear for herself and her lover. My thoughts shame me. It is time alone I need, to purge my doubts and settle my thoughts. I must run with the rest of the spears, instead of at your side. And I will sleep by myself whenever you are beneath the roof."

"So you're breaking up with me. Essentially."

"Is that a wetlander term? I know the words but they do not make sense. Such is often the way with you. And that is also part of why we must part."

He felt a bit sad. Branwen was good company, in and out of bed, and a trustworthy woman to have at your back. He would miss her. But if it was what she felt she needed, he was not about to stand in her way. "You will always be welcome in my company, should you feel you can stand it."

"I do not seek to find fault with you. This is simply how it must be."

He bowed his head. "I understand."

There was no more to say, so she took her leave, not only of his immediate company but of the group that was guarding him that morning. None of her spearsisters seemed to find that particularly surprising. Though he was not, as she'd implied, a true Aiel, Rand knew better than to press them for answers.

Lan and the others weren't happy with him either, on account of how late he was. That was good, though, since it meant they pressed him harder. You didn't get better if you didn't push yourself, or get pushed by others. It pleased Rand to think he was getting better, despite the bruises he earned and the mess he made of himself.

It was back to his own rooms he went after that, to change into something less dirty. The building wasn't empty when he returned, and one of the occupants was an Aes Sedai in training. That did not please him, since it was not Dani. The girl in question certainly wasn't smiling. Ilyena Volnicoliev rarely did, from what he'd seen. Pale hair, paler skin, cold blue eyes, she was as icy as her northern homeland was reported to be. Still beautiful, despite that. But then, so was Lanfear.

She was leaning against a wall near his rooms, arms crossed beneath her breasts, a challenging look on her face when he approached. The Maidens tensed, but none moved to confront her, Aes Sedai that they thought her to be.

"And here he is. The famous ... hero. Destroyer of worlds, and of wives."

Rand did not flinch this time. She hardly needed to remind him; just hearing her name was enough. "The Dragon Reborn, yes. I'm surprised it took you this long to realise it. I stopped hiding it a long time ago."

Her eyes narrowed. "There are other things you hide, though."

"From some. Excuse me." He walked past her.

She followed. "You don't hide much from Dani, it would seem."

Dani had spoken of her often, so he knew how close they were. There was jealousy in her voice. *Blood and ashes*. "Less than from some, more than from others," he said honestly. "She's not so bad, for a woman of the White Tower."

"So romantic!"

"Me? You'd be the first to call me that, if you weren't being sarcastic."

"And yet they flock to you."

"I don't understand it myself," he said, thinking of Theodrin and all she'd said. *Ta'veren*.

Ilyena's laugh had a hint of madness in it. "Who can understand any of this?"

Rand wasn't sure what to say. Discretion prevented him from confessing to what she accused him of—that was for Dani to reveal or not, as she wished. But Ilyena obviously more than suspected what had happened. And he did kind of owe her an explanation. "Look, whatever may or may not have happened, I have no desire to pull you two apart. Your relationship, I mean. Or the other. I'm not crazy."

"Yet," she told the Dragon Reborn, with not a hint of fear.

That was almost impressive. Annoying, but impressive. "Or ever. If I die fast enough," he growled. "What I'm trying to say is that there's no need for conflict. Dani is free to do whatever she pleases."

"Or whoever she pleases!" she hissed.

"That's a freedom I can get behind."

"Oh, I bet!" They stopped outside his room. The conversation wasn't done, and he could hardly lead her in there. There was pain behind her spite. It smote him to see it and know he was partially responsible. "If she was just using you, I could ... But there's more to it. She's changing. She's taking this whole thing far too seriously. With the Aiel."

Rand looked away, a sudden hope suddenly dashed. "With the Aiel. Yes."

Some Maidens had gone ahead, to check the room. Ilyena scowled at them as they emerged again. They walked right by her, unmoved, and went to join the others who'd taken up positions at the end of the corridor. "Their ways appeal to her. I feel like I'm losing her."

He was surprised by that, though no less than she was to admit it. Her eyes went wide with shock. *Ta'veren* for sure that time. He made his voice soft. "I don't think you are. She always speaks well of you." When a set jaw and a dark look was his only response, he went on. "You have a lot of history together, I've gathered that much. You've been through a lot even in the time I've known you. That won't change. You're beautiful and strong-willed. She's not going to just stop loving you."

She shook her head slowly. "Do you often say such things to your rivals? It seems kind of foolish."

"I don't really have rivals," he said. It was true as well. He'd never been one for jealousy, even before becoming what he'd become.

"A bold fool, then. You don't know me, fool. You don't know what I'm capable of."

"Nor you me!" he snapped, before taking a deep breath. He couldn't afford to lose his temper so easily. Moiraine never lost hers. "I know you killed one of the Black Ajah."

"Don't talk about that," Ilyena hissed. Her hand went to a throat, but it was her own rather than his. "I did what I had to ...."

Rand could never have done it, of course. But if it was a woman killing another woman, he supposed it didn't count.

"So do I."

"Do you?" He turned away. That wasn't something he was going to talk about. "You do plenty that you don't have to as well."

"That's life. When will people stop accusing me of living?" he said, as he pushed the curtain aside and left her there. It was true. People were always telling him to stop messing around and get on

with his work. And maybe he should. Even if that meant turning down the chance to be intimate with interesting people. He didn't like it, but what about being the Dragon Reborn was meant to be liked?

Rand shucked his stained coat and pulled his shirt over his head. There was no wardrobe in the room, or much furniture at all. Wood was not a thing to be wasted so, here. It was *Duadhe Maidhin*'s responsibility to recover every arrow or spear in the aftermath of a fight, that they might be reused or the materials repurposed for something else. Instead, his spare clothes were bundled in the saddlebags strewn in a corner.

He was halfway there when a voice made him halt.

"I can think of something else you have to do. You have to even the score." When he spun around he found Ilyena in his room. Her dress was on the ground right next to his coat. She was wearing only her stockings and underwear. Pink nipples tipped a pair of pretty breasts. The face above remained cold, but the eyes were heated.

"What are—?"

"Aren't you Aiel all about paying debts? Balancing out honour and obligation and all that. Well, you and I have debts."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, trying not to stare at her chest. "Because of Dani? Not that ... I never admitted to doing anything there."

Her cheeks flared. "You fucked her!"

All he could do was rub at the back of his head and smile sheepishly.

She advanced on him angrily. "You did! And she fucked you, too, burn her. So now ... Now we have to fuck, too." And she reached up to pull his head down for a kiss.

Rand wasn't sure what to do. She was a good-looking woman, true, but they weren't exactly close. She hadn't had much to say to him in the past months, nor he to her. Why was she doing this? Not for love of him, that was for sure. Revenge? Her kiss was angry, his own tepid.

That didn't please her. "What Dani sees in a gutless worm like you is beyond me."

"Is that how you measure courage?" he snorted. "Who you're willing to fuck? I can think of a Forsaken you should meet."

She slapped him.

Shock bled slowly into an anger that even the hurt on her face couldn't quell. When she swung again, he caught her wrist and spun her around. "Don't do that again." Neither his growl nor the arms in which he bound her prevented her from struggling. Those struggles pushed her back up against his manhood, which had already responded to the sight of her. Her breasts, too, were soft against the tattooed arms that he perforce wrapped around her chest.

"You want to punish me, don't you?" she asked, glaring up at him. "Then do it. Use that big thing on me. Hurt me like you hurt her."

"I never hurt her." What was she talking about? Dani would have set him straight at once if he ever had.

"What would you know, fool?"

"You're very rude, you know." Yet he realised then his hips had been grinding against her of their own accord. He didn't want to stop them.

"Yes. What are you going to do about it?"

What he did was push her down onto his bed, grab hold of her loose underwear and yank them down her legs. She had a pretty little butt, and he thought it cute that she reached back to hide it from his view at first; but that wasn't why she reached back. Lying on her belly, Ilyena parted her cheeks to show him the puckered hole between.

"Fuck my ass. Punish me."

As it happened, Rand rather enjoyed fucking people in the bum, but not really as punishment. He wet his fingers with his tongue before touching what she asked him to touch. "Why would anyone want to hurt such a cute little butt? Why do you think you need punishing?"

"Stop talking! Unless you really are gutless."

Annoyed, he stuck a finger in her sooner than he usually would. She gripped him tightly, hissing at the intrusion yet still hungering for more. He wasn't about to let her keep calling him names, so he snatched at *saidin* long enough to slicken his member, climbed on top of her and pressed his tip against that tight opening.

"Who's gutless now?" he asked as he pushed in.

Ilyena took a white-knuckled grip of his blankets as she felt herself penetrated. An occasional groan escaped her gritted teeth as he went deep into her ass. Only when she felt his balls pressed up against her did she relax, knowing the worst of it was over. He knew she'd done this before, and wondered, but wasn't about to ask. She was a strange girl. At least she was quiet now. Strangely so.

"No more insults? I'm flattered. Though I like to think that's not all that Dani likes about me."

"Shut up, burn you. Just do whatever you want with me. I deserve it."

The temptation was certainly in him to just grab her by the hips and pound that naughty ass of hers until he was ready to come, but something about the whole situation left him feeling weird. Like they were connected in a way beyond the physical. It wasn't her name. At least, he hoped not. The stories of Birgitte and Gaidal Cain often had them using the same name in different lives. That didn't mean that everyone who had the same name was the same person, of course. He seriously doubted that this girl had any connection to the Ilyena that Lews Therin Telamon had so famously murdered.

No, it was something else that tickled his imagination. He found himself remembering a time when he'd wanted to die. A time that he'd let himself be punished in ways that were no doubt strange to most. He found himself wrapping his arms around Ilyena and holding her again, but gently this time. His cock moved inside her, not in the rough way she'd asked, but slowly.

"What are you doing? Fuck me properly," she said after a while.

He did not comply. "You said I could do what I want. I thought you Borderlanders were peoples of your words. So you just lie there and take it."

She looked back and showed him her teeth, white and sharp, this strange girl who bade him mount her. Rand kept his slow pace, rocking against and inside her sensitive bum. His hands moved, too, seeking out other sensitive places. Her nipples were stiffer when his hands left her breasts than they'd been when he started kneading them. The slit his fingers trailed along was getting wet. He spent a few minutes toying with the bud above it, and when he returned found it wetter still. A moan of pleasure escaped Ilyena when he slid his finger inside her.

Rand did indeed do whatever he wanted with Ilyena. But despite her harsh words, what he wanted was to make her feel better.

"This isn't ... this isn't what I asked for," she moaned.

He found the side of her neck through her long yellow hair and kissed her. "Too bad. This is the only punishment you deserve." His hands remained busy upon her, as his cock remained busy inside.

"You don't know me," she repeated.

"Nor you me. Or you wouldn't have expected me to hurt someone Dani cares about." He put his mouth to her ear, and continued in a whisper. "Whatever it is, you're going to be okay."

She didn't respond, and he couldn't see her properly while lying on top, so he rolled them over onto their sides. Ilyena's eyes were very big and very blue. There were unshed tears in them. She turned her face away, hiding them from him, so he opened her legs instead, lifting one high so he had better access to both her holes. With fingers and cock, he made good use of the opportunity.

As she got into it, so did he. With each little moan that escaped her, the struggle to keep his pace slow intensified. He found he really did want to pound that sweet little ass now. But he didn't. Instead he kept going, kept pleasuring her until at last Ilyena bit her lip and started rolling her hips against him, rubbing her tight hole all over his cock. It wasn't out of a desire to pleasure him, though. He would have known that even if clear fluid hadn't sudden fountained from her crotch to soak her thighs and his blankets.

"That's it; come for me," he whispered. "It doesn't have to hurt."

Ilyena pulled her legs up and hugged them to her chest, still with his cock inside one hole, still gushing from the other. Rand found it surprisingly cute. Her hair—usually so straight and neatly brushed—had gotten matted while they were doing it. He brushed it out of the way and leaned down to kiss her reddened cheek.

"Why would you want to hurt yourself, cute girl like you?"

For a moment he thought she was going to answer, but then she shook her head and looked away. "This is what you did to Dani." Well, not exactly. Dani had never let him anywhere near her bum. Not with his cock, at least. "I could never be part of it," she went on, so quietly it was hard to hear. "But I suppose I can understand."

That made one of them, at least. "Understand what?"

"This doesn't mean I'm going to forgive you for fucking my girl. Or her for fucking you like this," she said instead of explaining.

"Not like this," Rand murmured. His hand found her now thoroughly soaked pussy. His hips, and the now inflamed cock inside her, started moving again.

She smiled wickedly. "You want to fuck me there, too, don't you? I bet Dani loved it."

Breathing heavy, he pulled out, shoved her legs open and climbed between them. Pale yellow hair surrounded the pink lips of the sex that now parted to welcome him inside. "You complain, but I bet if you could see her pussy stretching to take me, like yours is, you'd have a hand between your legs."

Ilyena's nails dug into his arms. "Burn you. How dare you?" But despite her protestations, her hips moved against his.

"Or maybe you'd rather it was her watching," he went on, emboldened. "Maybe you'd like to see her standing there, playing with herself while this sweet little pussy of yours gets fucked."

And get fucked it did. Slowness was a thing of the past now. Rand was riding her hard, enjoying her body as much as he did the reactions he provoked in her with his words.

"She'd be able to see it all, like I do. She could see you blush and writhe, watch you fail to control your face. Hear those sweet little cries you let out. She'd know what a naughty girl you are." And, recalling the things they had done together with Raine, another thought occurred. Rand lay atop Ilyena and hugged her to his chest. "And I bet she'd like it," he finished.

"Light forgive me," he thought he heard her whisper, in the moment before he gave in to his desire and started fucking her frantically.

Her legs and arms wrapped around him, but no less tightly than her sex. Soft breasts and hard nipples alike pressed against his chest. Somehow her hair was in his hands and he was pulling it. She was biting his ear. He didn't like it, so he claimed her mouth with his, felt their tongues touch, felt his orgasm building.

Pleasure drove thought from his mind. When she felt him coming inside her, Ilyena took to slapping Rand's ass. She kept doing so until the last drops had been spurted into her womb and he lay supine atop her.

"You great brute. Get off of me," she said after an indeterminate time. Through the haze of his pleasure, Rand retained enough awareness to haul himself up and roll onto his back. His softening cock came free of her now even more thoroughly watered sex.

As he drifted in blissful lassitude, Ilyena stared solemnly at the distant roof. "Burn me. What am I supposed to do now?" she whispered.

He didn't think she was really asking, but he answered anyway. "Forgive everyone. Yourself included. Rein in the craziness. Craziness is my job, I'll have you know. I'll not put up with some Volsuni chit muscling in on my territory, no matter how pretty she is."

The laugh she gave was begrudging, but all the more heartfelt for that. He smiled back at her.

"You really don't know the trouble you're in," she said. "Dani would pity you. But I don't pity anyone. You brought this all on yourself. Remember that."

"Ooo, scary," he laughed. "You're a fearsome girl, Ilyena. Truly. I mean, you look kind of cute when you're biting your lip and moaning in pleasure, but I'm sure that was just an act. A fearsome, terrible woman, you are!"

A fearsome, terrible woman who was too wrung out to do more than swat at him feebly. "Make fun all you want. Just don't whine too loudly when you end up regretting it," she said, as she rolled over on their bed.

Rand kept smiling, completely unfazed. He'd been dealing with rough-tongued women all his life. Ilyena really didn't seem as bad as she thought herself, to him. He turned his own gaze to the roof she'd been studying, and wondered how this would affect things with Dani. The blank stone had no answers written on it.

## CHAPTER 20: Above it All



The new day had dawned much like the old one, as they tended to here in the Waste, and his work had continued as normal—or as normal as he got—until the time of the meeting came. So it was that, high in the city of Rhuidean, Rand al’Thor looked out from a tall window; whatever glass might have once been in it was long since gone. The shadows below slanted sharply east. Sweat evaporated from his face almost as soon as it appeared; his red silk coat, damp between the shoulders, hung open in a fruitless bid for air, and his shirt was unlaced half down his chest. Night in the Aiel Waste would bring freezing cold, but during daylight even a breeze was never cool.

With his hands above his head on the smooth stone window frame, his coatsleeves fell down to reveal the front part of the figure wrapped around each forearm: a golden-maned, serpentine creature with eyes like the sun, scaled in scarlet and gold, each foot tipped with five golden claws. Part of his skin, they were, not tattoos; they glittered like precious metals and polished gems, seemed almost alive in the late-afternoon sunlight.

Those marked him, to the people on this side of the mountain range variously called the Dragonwall or the Spine of the World, as He Who Comes With the Dawn. And like the heron branded into his palms, they marked him for those beyond the Dragonwall, too, according to the Prophecies, as the Dragon Reborn. In both cases prophesied to unite, save—and destroy.

They were names he would have avoided if he could, but that time was long past if it had ever existed, and he no longer thought of it. Or if he did, on rare occasion, it was with the faint regret of a man recalling a foolish dream of his boyhood. As if he were not close enough to boyhood to remember every minute. Instead, he tried to think only of what he had to do. Fate and duty held him on the path like a rider’s reins, but he had often been called stubborn. The end of the road must be reached, but if it could be attained by a different way, maybe it need not be the end. Small chance. No chance, almost certainly. The Prophecies demanded his blood.

Rhuidean stretched below him, seared by a sun still pitiless as it sank toward craggy mountains, bleak, with barely a sign of vegetation. This rugged, broken land, where men had killed or died over a pool of water they could step across, was the last place on earth anyone would think to find a great city. Its long-ago builders had never finished their work. Impossibly tall buildings dotted the city, stepped and slab-sided palaces that sometimes ended after eight or even ten stories, not with a roof but with the ragged masonry of another half-built floor. The towers soared higher yet, but stopped in jagged abruptness as often as not. Now a good quarter of the great structures, with their massive columns and immense windows of coloured glass, lay strewn as rubble across wide avenues with broad strips of bare dirt down their centres, dirt that had never held the trees they were planned for. The marvellous fountains stood dry as they had for hundreds upon hundreds of years. All that futile labour, the builders finally dying with their work undone; yet at times Rand thought that maybe the city had only been begun so he could find it.

*Too proud, he thought. A man would have to be half-mad at least to be so proud.* He could not help chuckling dryly. There had been Aes Sedai with the men and women who had come here so long ago, and they had known *The Karaethon Cycle*, the Prophecies of the Dragon. Or perhaps they had written the Prophecies. *Too proud by tenfold.*

Directly below him lay a vast plaza, half-covered in stretching shadow, littered with a jumble of statues and crystal chairs, oddities and peculiar shapes of metal or glass or stone, things he could put no name to, scattered about in tangled heaps as if deposited by a storm. Even the shadows were cool only by comparison. Rough-clothed men—not Aiel—sweated to load wagons with items chosen by a short, slender woman in pristine blue silk, straight-backed and gliding from place to place as though the heat did not press down on her as hard as on the others. Still, she wore a damp white cloth tied around her temples; she just did not let herself show the effects of the sun. Rand would have wagered she did not even perspire.

The workmen's leader was a dark, bulky man named Hadnan Kadere, a supposed merchant dressed all in cream-coloured silk that was sweat-sodden today. He mopped his face continually with a large handkerchief, shouting curses at the men—his wagon drivers and guards—but he leaped as quickly as they to haul at whatever the slim woman pointed out, big or small. Aes Sedai had no need of size to impose their will, but Rand thought Moiraine would have done as well if she had never been near the White Tower.

Two of the men were trying to move what appeared to be an oddly twisted redstone doorframe; the corners did not meet properly, and the eye did not want to follow the straight pieces. It stayed upright, turning freely but refusing to tip over however they manhandled it. Then one slipped and fell through the doorway up to his waist. Rand tensed. For a moment, the fellow seemed not to exist above the waist; his legs kicked wildly in panic. Until Lan, a tall man in drab shades of green, strode over and hauled him out again by his belt. Lan was Moiraine's Warder, bonded to her in some way Rand did not understand, and a hard man who moved like the Aiel, like a hunting wolf; the sword at his hip did not seem part of him, it *was* part of him. He dropped the workman on the paving stones on the seat of his breeches and left him there; the fellow's terrified cries rose thinly to Rand, and his companion looked ready to run. Several of Kadere's men who had been close enough to see were looking at one another and at the mountains around the city, plainly assessing their chances.

Moiraine appeared among them so quickly it seemed by the Power, moving smoothly from man to man. Her manner made Rand almost hear the cool, imperious instructions coming from her lips, so full of certainty that they would be obeyed that not obeying would seem foolish. In short order she overrode resistance, stamped firmly on objections, chivvied them every one back to work. The pair with the doorframe were soon dragging and shoving as hard as ever, if with frequent looks at Moiraine when they thought she would not see. In her own way, she was even harder than Lan.

As far as Rand knew, all of those things down there were *angreal* or *sa'angreal* or *ter'angreal*, made before the Breaking of the World to magnify the One Power or use it in various ways. Made with the Power certainly, though not even Aes Sedai knew how to construct such things now. He more than suspected the use of the twisted doorframe—a doorway to another world—but for the rest, he had no idea. No-one did. That was why Moiraine worked so hard, to have as many as she could carted to the Tower for study. It was possible that even the Tower did not contain as many objects of the Power as lay about this square, though supposedly the Tower held the largest collection in the world. Even there, the Tower only knew the uses of some.

What was in the wagons or tossed about on the pavement would not have interested Rand once; he had already taken what he needed from down there. Had already taken more than he wanted, in some ways. But his father's advice to seize any opportunity that presented itself and deny those opportunities to potential rivals weighed on his mind. It was only due to the oath he'd sworn her, in gratitude for her having saved Tam's life, that he allowed her to loot Rhuidean's collection so freely.

In the centre of the plaza, near the burned remains of a great tree a hundred feet high, stood a small forest of tall glass columns, each nearly as tall as the tree and so slender it seemed the first stormwind must bring them all crashing down. Even with an edge of shadow touching them, the columns caught and refracted the sunlight in glitters and sparkles. For countless years Aielmen had entered that array and returned marked as Rand was, but on only one arm, marked as clan chiefs. They came out marked or did not come out. Aielwomen had come to this city as well, on the path toward becoming Wise Ones. No-one else, not and live. *A man may go to Rhuidean once, a woman twice; more means death.* That was what the Wise Ones had said, and it had been truth, then. Now anyone could enter Rhuidean.

Hundreds of Aiel walked the streets, and increasing numbers actually dwelled in the buildings; each day more of the dirt strips down the streets showed beans or squash or *zemai*, arduously watered from clay pots hauled from the huge new lake that filled the south end of the valley, the only such body of water in the entire land. Thousands made their camps in the surrounding mountains, even on Chaendaer itself, where before they had come only with ceremony, to send a single man or woman at a time into Rhuidean.

Wherever he went, Rand brought change and destruction. This time, he hoped against hope that the change was for the good. It might yet be so. The burned tree mocked him. *Avendesora*, the legendary Tree of Life; the stories never said where it was, and it had been a surprise to find it here.

Moiraine said it still lived, that it would put out shoots again, and Loial had confirmed her words, but so far he saw only blackened bark and bare branches.

"Who took the cutting that became *Avendoraldera*?" he asked without turning from the window. "Are there any who know how to tend to the tree now?"

"A Wise One from long ago. Dead for generations. There are none now living who are familiar with it, but our people are experienced at making crops live where they should not. They pride themselves on it. *Avendesora* will live."

It was Rhuarc who spoke. He had been the first of the chiefs to arrive for their scheduled meeting. He had been the first of many things. Rand believed his words. A proven man, confident in his experience, he was not one for idle boasts.

"Good. Good." He caused too much destruction. It was easy not to notice how widespread the damage he and Asmodean had inflicted on the city was, when you were down on those streets with the tall buildings blocking your view. From up here, the scale of his crime was plain to see.

"You have never told me what caused so many buildings to fall," Rhuarc said, closer now. A moment's alarm shivered Rand's skin. The window was wide and open, the drop severe. And who could say he did not deserve it?

He did not turn, though. He trusted Rhuarc.

Though not enough to tell him the truth. "I have not. Though I won't deny I played my part in it."

"You know how important Rhuidean is to us."

He lowered his head, closed his eyes. "I do what I must."

A hand came to rest upon his shoulder. It could have been an act of comfort. It could have been a preparation to push. Still, Rand did not turn.

"Sometimes this is so. And sometimes you do things you do not have to."

That was not exactly something he could deny. "The things I want to do aren't quite as bad as the things I have to do. At least, I don't think so. Others might disagree, of course."

Rhuarc's hand moved down his back, to rest lightly on his hip. "Oh? And what is it you want to do that is so dishonourable?"

The answer came to him quickly enough, but it was embarrassing to admit. "To love and be loved by everyone."

Rhuarc sighed. "A childish desire. It can never be so."

"I know. So I'll settle for what I can get," he said, as he shifted his weight, quite deliberately brushing his buttock against Rhuarc's crotch.

"The others should not be here for a while. *Should* not," Rhuarc said.

There was a warning in that, but not one Rand was smart enough to heed. "It would be embarrassing if they were to walk in on us. But if you were quick ..."

That hand on his hip grew firmer. "I remember how tight you are. And how sweet. I can be quick."

Rand bit his lip. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Experienced hands undid his belt and pushed down his breeches. They rid him of his smallclothes, too, to reveal a cock already half hard. It got harder when Rhuarc's callused fist closed around it and began to pump.

That felt good, and the feeling only got better when Rand seized *saidin* and spun a familiar slickening weave. This time it was not around his member that he spun it, but within and around his exposed butthole. He couldn't help but sigh when he released the One Power. Giving up that thrill and all that came with it was never easy, even for one who channelled the tainted male half.

"I suspect you will like this even more," Rhuarc said.

He was wrong in his assumption, but right in his prediction. Rand spread his legs as wide as his arms, as he leant against that window. Rhuarc lifted the tails of his red coat as though they were a girl's skirts, bringing to mind something he'd glimpsed in the Lines of If, where other versions of him lived other lives. His female counterpart, Raye, had once stood at a window just like this one, her heavy breasts swinging feely while someone named Avram had his way with her.

Rand was given no time to think on that intrusive memory, however. There was only a brief rustling before he felt something hard and alive with heat press against his bottom. Despite everything, especially how conscious he was of the sheer drop before him, he found himself able to relax.

He did not moan as he felt Rhuarc penetrate him, but it felt good. That thick cock stretched him wide and delved deep into his ass. His own cock, unattended now, swung free in the air before them as Rhuarc began to ride him hard.

They were high up. It was unlikely anyone would think to look so far above themselves, or could see any details if they had, but Rand still flushed in a way that the heat had not been able to make him. His heart raced in time with the fierce thrusts that stimulated his sensitive bottom. Hands on his hips held him firmly in place so Rhuarc could do as he pleased. Rand was happy to let him. It was a struggle to keep his own hands steady, to balance against Rhuarc's weight at his back and prevent himself from falling out.

*Or being pushed*, a traitorous part of him warned. What a way to go that would be! He hadn't seen any of his other selves die in such a manner, but it would almost have been fitting, for him. *Too slutty to live, by tenfold.*

Rhuarc seemed to be enjoying himself too much for any pushing, though. Looking back, he saw a broad-shouldered man with heavy streaks of grey in his dark red hair. There was a thrilled light in the older man's blue eyes, though his handsomely lined face remained composed even in those circumstances. It was Rand who smiled, and his smiling served to urge the chief on. A few light moans did escape him then, as Rhuarc gave him everything he had to give.

Or so Rand thought.

"Rhamys is fond of you."

His heart stopped beating for a moment, then tried to make up for it in a sudden rush. How much did he know? That drop suddenly seemed longer still.

"So tight ..." Rhuarc grunted.

Only then did he realise how tense he had gotten. He could not make himself relax, though. "She is a nice girl," he managed to choke out. An odd girl. Silly at times. A great fuck. None of the rest were things he could say to her father, of course. Especially not at a time like this!

"She had potential, though she is weak of will," Rhuarc said frankly. "Her heart is too soft for these lands. It may be you are alike."

Rhuidean spread out before him, there in the setting sun. Rand's legs remained spread, as he let the chief bugger him much as he had buggered the chief's daughter. Hands came to rest upon his shoulders, bending him forward until his head was hanging out the window. He could see so much of what was before him. And feel so much as well. He felt an orgasm building, and prayed there was no-one wandering by directly below when his time came.

"She spoke well of you to her mother," Rhuarc said calmly. A few final thrusts and he bottomed out and began spurting inside Rand. "But I knew she would."

*He knows!*

A hand closed again around his cock, to rub insistently. It was an insistence Rand was disinclined to refuse. He bit his lip once more as he felt the proof of his pleasure surge down his shaft and spray out into the hot air. That pleasure sapped the strength from his limbs, leaving him at Rhuarc's mercy.

Rhuarc pulled him back inside.

That was a heady experience, that proof of trust well placed. It left Rand feeling even limper than the rest had. He leaned back into the man's embrace as he tried to gather himself.

Rhuarc remained enviably unruffled. "Unlike hers, your oddness might damn us all, however. Or it might save us, I cannot say. I will say only that *ji'e'toh* is not the only thing that calls me to you."

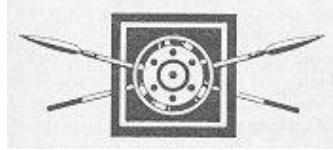
"I'm glad to have you. In more ways than one," Rand said, with a growing smirk.

It was wiped clean away by the sound of distant voices. Rhuarc had already slipped out, now he pulled Rand's breeches up for him and then pushed him away. "Tidy yourself."

The chiefs were coming from the east. There was another door. "Tell them I went to fetch the gleeman," he told Rhuarc as he hastened to do just that.

"I will," he said as he tucked himself away. There was little indication of what he'd been doing a moment ago, though Rand was sure he looked a complete mess. As he slipped out of the room he was heartlessly glad that he'd spent himself out the window. At least there was no mess to rouse the other chiefs' suspicions. That would rest upon the head of whatever poor soul had been walking by below!

## CHAPTER 21: Meetings in Rhuidean



The city beyond the window was just as he remembered when Rand returned to the room. No commotion could be seen below. A bard-harp played softly in the room behind him now, however, and they were no longer alone.

With a sigh, he turned from the window into a big room, though not the biggest in Rhuidean, with tall windows on two sides, its domed ceiling worked in a fanciful mosaic of winged people and animals. Most of the furniture left in the city had long since rotted away even in the dryness, and much of the little that remained was riddled with beetles and worms. But on the far side of the room stood one high-backed chair, solid, and its gilding largely intact, but mismatched with its table, a wide thing with legs and edges thickly carved in flowers. Someone had polished the wood with beeswax till it shone dully despite its age. The Aiel had found them for him, though they shook their heads at such things; there were few trees in the Waste that could have produced wood straight and long enough to make that chair, and none to make the table.

That was all the furniture, as he thought of it. A fine silk Illianer carpet in blue and gold, booty in some long-ago battle, covered the middle of the dark red floor tiles. Cushions lay scattered about, in bright silks, and tasselled. Those were what Aiel used instead of chairs, when they did not merely sit on their heels, as comfortable as he would be in a padded chair.

Six men reclined against cushions on the carpet. Six clan chiefs, representing the clans that had so far come to follow Rand. Or rather, to follow He Who Comes With the Dawn. Not always eagerly. He knew Rhuarc had some friendship for him, but not the rest. Only six of the twelve.

Ignoring the chair, Rand sat down cross-legged, facing the Aiel. Outside of Rhuidean, the only chairs in the Waste were chief's chairs, used only by the chief and only for three reasons: to be acclaimed as clan chief, to accept the submission of an enemy with honour, or to pass judgment. Taking the chair with these men now would imply that he meant to do one of those.

They wore the *cadin'sor*, coats and breeches in shades of brown and grey that would fade into the ground, and soft boots that laced to the knee. Even here, meeting with the man they had proclaimed the *Car'a'carn*, the chief of chiefs, each had a heavy-bladed knife at his belt and the grey-brown *shoufa* draped like a wide scarf around his neck; if any man covered his face with the black veil that was part of the *shoufa*, he would be ready to kill. It was not beyond possibility. These men had fought one another in a never-ending cycle of clan raids and battles and feuds. They watched him, waited for him, but an Aiel's waiting always spoke of a readiness to move, suddenly and violently.

Bael, the tallest man Rand had ever seen, and Jheran, blade-slender and whip-quick, lay as far from one another as they could manage and still be on the carpet. There was blood feud between Bael's Goshien and Jheran's Shaarad, suppressed for He Who Comes With the Dawn but not forgotten. And perhaps the Peace of Rhuidean still held, despite all that had happened. Still, the tranquil sounds of the harp made a sharp contrast with the hard refusal of Bael and Jheran to look at one another. Six sets of eyes, blue or green or grey, in sun-dark faces; Aiel could make hawks look tame.

"What must I do to bring the Reyn to me?" he said. "You were sure they would come, Rhuarc."

The chief of the Taardad looked at him calmly; his face could have been carved stone for all its expression. "Wait. Only that. Dhearie will bring them. Eventually."

White-haired Han, lying next to Rhuarc, twisted his mouth as if about to spit. His leathery face wore a sour look, as usual. "Dhearie has seen too many men and Maidens sit staring for days, then throw down their spears. Throw them down!"

"And run away," Bael added quietly. "I have seen them myself, among the Goshien, even from my own sept, running. And you, Han, among the Tomanelle. We all have. I do not think they know where they are running to, only what they are running from."

"Cowardly snakes," Jheran barked. Grey streaked his light brown hair; there were no young men among Aiel clan chiefs. "Stinkadders, wriggling away from their own shadows." A slight shift of his blue eyes toward the far side of the carpet made it clear he meant it for a description of the Goshien, not just those who had thrown down their spears.

Bael made as if to rise, his face hardening further, if that was possible, but the man next to him put a quieting hand on his arm. Bruan, of the Nakai, was big enough and strong enough for two blacksmiths, but he had a placid nature that seemed odd for an Aiel. "All of us have seen men and Maidens run." He sounded almost lazy, and his grey eyes looked so, yet Rand knew otherwise; even Rhuarc considered Bruan a deadly fighter and a devious tactician. Luckily, not even Rhuarc was stronger for Rand than Bruan. But he had come to follow He Who Comes With the Dawn; he did not know Rand al'Thor. "As you have, Jheran. You know how hard it was to face what they face. If you cannot name coward those who died because they could not face it, can you name coward those who run for the same reason?"

"They should never have learned," Han muttered, kneading his red-tasselled blue cushion like an enemy's throat. "It was for those who could enter Rhuidean and live."

He spoke the words to no-one in particular, but they had to be for Rand's ears. It was Rand who had revealed to everyone what a man learned amid the glass columns in the plaza, revealed enough that the chiefs and Wise Ones could not turn aside when asked the rest. If there was an Aiel in the Waste who did not know the truth now, he had not spoken to anyone in a month.

Far from the glorious heritage of battle most believed in, the Aiel had begun as helpless refugees from the Breaking of the World. Everyone who survived had been refugees then, of course, but the Aiel had never seen themselves as helpless. Worse, they had been followers of the Way of the Leaf, refusing to do violence even in defence of their lives. Aiel meant "dedicated" in the Old Tongue, and it had been to peace that they were dedicated. Those who called themselves Aiel today were the descendants of those who had broken a pledge of untold generations. Only one remnant of that belief remained: an Aiel would die before taking up a sword. They had always believed it a part of their pride, of their separateness from those who lived outside the Waste.

He had heard Aiel say that they had committed some sin to be placed in the desolate Waste. Now they knew what it was. The men and women who had built Rhuidean and died here—those called the Jenn Aiel, the Clan That Was Not, on the few occasions they were spoken of—had been the ones who kept faith with the Aes Sedai of the time before the Breaking. It was hard to face the knowledge that what you had always believed was a lie.

"It had to be told," Rand said. *They had a right to know. A man shouldn't have to live a lie. Their own prophecy said I would break them. And I couldn't have done differently.* The past was past and done; he should be worrying about the future. *Some of these men dislike me, and some hate me for not being born among them, but they follow. I need them all.* "What of the Miagoma?"

Erim, lying between Rhuarc and Han, shook his head. His once bright red hair was half white but his green eyes were as strong as any younger man's. His big hands, wide and long and hard, said his arms were as strong, too. "Timolan does not let his feet know which way he will jump until after he has leaped."

"When Timolan was young as a chief," Jheran said, "he tried to unite the clans and failed. It will not sit well with him that at last one has come to succeed where he failed."

"He will come," Rhuarc said. "Timolan never believed himself He Who Comes With the Dawn. And Janwin will bring the Shiande. But they will wait. They must settle matters in their own mind first."

"They must settle He Who Comes With the Dawn being a wetlander," Han barked. "I mean no offense, *Car'a'carn.*" There was no obsequiousness in his voice; a chief was not a king, and neither was the chief of chiefs. At best he was first among equals.

"The Daryne and the Codarra will come eventually, as well, I think," Bruan said calmly. And quickly, lest silence should grow to a reason for dancing the spears. First among equals at best. "They have lost more than any other clan to the bleakness." That was what the Aiel had taken to calling the long period of staring before someone tried to run away from being Aiel. "For the moment, Mandelain and Indirian are concerned with holding their clans together, and both will want to see the Dragons on your arms for themselves, but they will come."

That left only one clan to be discussed, the one none of the chiefs wanted to mention. “What news of Couladin and the Shaido?” Rand asked.

Silence answered him, broken only by the softly serene sounds of the harp in the background, each man waiting for another to speak, all coming as close as Aiel could to showing discomfort. Jheran frowned at his thumbnail, and Bruan toyed with one of the silvery tassels on his green cushion. Even Rhuarc studied the carpet.

Graceful, white-robed men and women moved into the hush, pouring worked silver goblets of wine to set beside each man, bringing small silver plates with olives, rare in the Waste, and white ewe’s-milk cheese, and the pale, wrinkled nuts the Aiel called *pecara*. The Aiel faces looking out of those pale cowls had downcast eyes and an unfamiliar meekness on their features.

Whether captured in battle or on a raid, the *gai’shain* were sworn to serve obediently for one year and a day, touching no weapon, doing no violence, at the end returning to their own clan and sept as if nothing had happened. A strange echo of the Way of the Leaf. *Ji’e’toh*, honour and obligation, required it, and breaking *ji’e’toh* was nearly the worst thing an Aiel could do. Perhaps *the* worst. It was possible that some of these men and women were serving their own clan chief, but neither would acknowledge it by the blink of an eye so long as the period of *gai’shain* held, not even for a son or daughter.

It struck Rand suddenly that this was the real reason that some Aiel took what he had revealed so hard. To those, it must seem that their ancestors had sworn *gai’shain*, not only for themselves but for all succeeding generations. And those generations—all, down to the present day—had broken *ji’e’toh* by taking up the spear. Had the men in front of him ever worried along those lines? *Ji’e’toh* was very serious business to an Aiel.

The *gai’shain* departed on soft slippers feet, barely making a sound. None of the clan chiefs touched their wine, or the food.

“Is there any hope that Couladin will meet with me?” Rand knew there was not; he had stopped sending requests for a meeting once he learned Couladin was having the messengers skinned alive. But it was a way to start the others talking.

Han snorted. “The only word we have had from him is that he means to flay you when next he sees you. Does that sound as if he will talk?”

“Can I break the Shaido away from him?”

“They follow him,” Rhuarc said. “He is not a chief at all, but they believe he is.” Couladin had never entered those glass columns; he might even still believe as he claimed, that everything Rand had said was a lie. “He says that he is the *Car’a’carn*, and they believe that as well. The Shaido Maidens who came, came for their society, and that because *Far Dareis Mai* carried your honour. None else will.”

“We send scouts to watch them,” Bruan said, “and the Shaido kill them when they can—Couladin builds the makings of half a dozen feuds—but so far he shows no signs of attacking us here. I have heard that he claims we have defiled Rhuidean, and that attacking us here would only deepen the desecration.”

Erim grunted and shifted on his cushion. “He means there are enough spears here to kill every Shaido twice over and to spare.” He popped a piece of white cheese into his mouth, growling around it. “The Shaido were ever cowards and thieves.”

“Honourless dogs,” Bael and Jheran said together, then stared at one another as though each thought the other had tricked him into something.

“Honourless or not,” Bruan said quietly, “Couladin’s numbers are growing.” Calm as he sounded, he still took a deep drink from his goblet before going on. “You all know what I am speaking of. Some of those who run, after the bleakness, do not throw away their spears. Instead they join with their societies among the Shaido.”

“No Tomanelle has ever broken clan,” Han barked.

Bruan looked past Rhuarc and Erim at the Tomanelle chief and said deliberately, “It has happened in every clan.” Without waiting for another challenge to his word, he settled back on his cushion. “It cannot be called breaking clan. They join their societies. Like the Shaido Maidens who have come to their Roof here.”

There were a few mutters, but no-one disputed him this time. The rules governing Aiel warrior societies were complex, and in some ways their members felt as closely bound to society as to

clan. For instance, members of the same society would not fight each other even if their clans were in blood feud. Some men would not marry a woman too closely related to a member of their own society, just as if that made her their own close blood kin. The ways of *Far Dareis Mai*, the Maidens of the Spear, Rand did not even want to think about.

"I need to know what Couladin intends," he told them. Couladin was a bull with a bee in his ear; he might charge in any direction. Rand hesitated. "Would it violate honour to send people to join their societies among the Shaido?" He did not need to describe what he meant any further. To a man, they stiffened where they lay, even Rhuarc, eyes cold enough to banish the heat from the room.

"To spy in that manner"—Erim twisted his mouth around "spy" as if the word tasted foul—"would be like spying on your own sept. No-one of honour would do such a thing."

Rand refrained from asking whether they might find someone with a slightly less prickly honour. The Aiel sense of humour was a strange thing, often cruel, but about some matters they had none at all.

To change the subject, he asked, "Is there any word from across the Dragonwall?" He knew the answer; that sort of news spread quickly even among as many Aiel as were gathered around Rhuidean.

"None worth the telling," Rhuarc replied. "With the troubles among the treekillers, few peddlers come into the Three-fold Land." That was the Aiel name for the Waste; a punishment for their sin, a testing ground for their courage, an anvil to shape them. "Treekillers" was what they called Cairhienin. "The Dragon banner still flies over the Stone of Tear. Tairens have moved north into Cairhien as you ordered, to distribute food among the treekillers. Nothing more."

"You should have let the treekillers starve," Bael muttered, and Jheran closed his mouth with a snap. Rand suspected he had been about to say much the same.

"Treekillers are fit for nothing except to be killed or sold as animals in Kigali," Erim said grimly. Those were two of the things Aiel did to those who came into the Waste uninvited; only gleeman, peddlers, and Tinkers had safe passage, though Aiel avoided the Tinkers as if they carried fever. Kigali was the name of the lands beyond the Waste; not even the Aiel knew much about them.

From the corner of his eye, Rand saw three women standing expectantly just inside the tall, arched doorway. Someone had hung strings of coloured beads there, red and blue, to replace the missing doors. One of the women was Moiraine. For a moment he considered making them wait. Moiraine had that irritatingly commanding look on her face, clearly expecting them to break off everything for her. Only, there was really nothing left to discuss, and he could tell from the men's eyes that they did not want to make conversation. Not so soon after speaking of the bleakness, and the Shaido.

Sighing, he stood, and the clan chiefs imitated him. All except Han were as tall as he or taller. Where Rand had grown up, Han would have been considered of average height or better; among Aiel he was accounted short. "You know what must be done. Bring in the rest of the clans, and keep an eye on the Shaido." He paused a moment, then added, "It will end well. As well for the Aiel as I can manage."

"The prophecy said you would break us," Han said sourly, "and you have made a good beginning. But we will follow you. Till shade is gone," he recited, "till water is gone, into the Shadow with teeth bared, screaming defiance with the last breath, to spit in Sightblinder's eye on the Last Day." Sightblinder was one of the Aiel names for the Dark One.

There was nothing for Rand except to make the proper response. Once he had not known it. "By my honour and the Light, my life will be a dagger for Sightblinder's heart."

"Until the Last Day," the Aiel finished, "to Shayol Ghul itself." The harper played on pacifically.

The chiefs filed out past the three women, eyeing Moiraine respectfully. There was nothing of fear in them. Rand wished he could be as sure of himself. Moiraine had too many plans for him, too many ways of pulling strings he did not know she had tied to him.

The three women came in as soon as the chiefs were gone, Moiraine as cool and elegant as ever. A small, pretty woman, with or without those Aes Sedai features he could never put an age to, she had abandoned the damp, cooling cloth for her temples. In its place, a small blue stone hung suspended on her forehead from a fine golden chain in her dark hair. It would not have mattered if she

had kept it; nothing could diminish her queenly carriage. She usually seemed to own a foot more height than she actually had, and her eyes were all confidence and command.

One of the other women was taller and both were young, not ageless. They were of the Accepted, on the way to becoming Aes Sedai. And passing themselves off, here and in Tear at least, as full Aes Sedai already. Sometimes he teased them about that. The taller one, Dani, got embarrassed when he did. The other, Pedra, did not take his japes very well, though.

"The wagons will be ready to leave for Tar Valon soon," Moiraine said. Her voice was musical, crystalline.

"Send a strong guard," Rand said, "or Kadere may not take them where you want." He turned for the windows again, wanting to look out and think, about Kadere. "You've not needed me to hold your hand or give you permission before."

Abruptly something seemed to strike him across the shoulders, for all the world like a thick hickory stick; only the slight feel of goose bumps on his skin, not likely in this heat, told him that one of the women had channelled.

Spinning back to face them, he reached out to *saidin*, filled himself with the One Power. The Power felt like life itself swelling inside him, as if he were ten times, a hundred times as alive; the Dark One's taint filled him, too, death and corruption, like maggots crawling in his mouth. It was a torrent that threatened to sweep him away, a raging flood he had to fight every moment. He was almost used to it now, and at the same time he would never be used to it. He wanted to hold on to the sweetness of *saidin* forever, and he wanted to vomit. And all the while the deluge tried to scour him to the bone and burn his bones to ash.

The taint would drive him mad eventually, if the Power did not kill him first; it was a race between the two. Madness had been the fate of every man who had channelled since the Breaking of the World began, since that day when Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, and his Hundred Companions had sealed up the Dark One's prison at Shayol Ghul. The last backblast from that sealing had tainted the male half of the True Source, and men who could channel, madmen who could channel, had torn the world apart.

He filled himself with the Power ... And he could not tell which woman had done it. They all looked at him as if butter would not melt in their mouths, each with an eyebrow arched almost identically in slightly amused questioning. Any of them could be embracing the female half of the Source right that instant, and he would never know.

Of course, a stick across the shoulders was not Moiraine's way; she found other means of chastising, more subtle, usually more painful in the end. Dani could be a lot more direct, even with those she liked, and Pedra was no friend of his. *Proof.* Thought slid along the outside of the void; he floated within, in emptiness, thought and emotion, even his anger, distant. *I will do nothing without proof. I will not be goaded, this time.*

He concentrated on Moiraine. Sometimes he wished he were rid of Moiraine. *Only sometimes?* "What do you want of me?" His voice sounded flat and cold to his own ears. The Power stormed inside him. Elayne had told him that for a woman, touching *saidar*, the female half of the Source, was an embrace; for a man, always, it was a war without mercy. "And don't mention wagons again, little sister. I usually find out what you mean to do long after it is done." The Aes Sedai frowned at him, and no wonder. She was surely not used to being addressed so, not by any man, even the Dragon Reborn. He had no idea himself where "little sister" had come from; sometimes of late words seemed to pop into his head. A touch of madness, perhaps. Some nights he lay awake till the small hours, worrying about that. Inside the void, it seemed someone else's worry.

"We should speak alone." She gave the harper a cool glance.

Jasin Natael, as he called himself here, lay half-sprawled on cushions against one of the windowless walls, softly playing the harp perched on his knee, its upper arm carved and gilded to resemble the creatures on Rand's forearms. Dragons, the Aiel called them. Rand had only suspicions where Natael had gotten the thing. He was a dark-haired man, who would have been accounted taller than most elsewhere than the Aiel Waste, in his middle years. His coat and breeches were dark blue silk suitable for a royal court, elaborately embroidered with thread-of-gold on collar and cuffs, everything buttoned up or laced despite the heat. The fine clothes were at odds with his gleeman's cloak spread out beside him. A perfectly sound cloak, but covered completely with hundreds of patches in nearly as many colours, all sewn so as to flutter at the slightest breeze, it signified a country

entertainer, a juggler and tumbler, musician and storyteller who wandered from village to village. Certainly not a man to wear silk. The man had his conceits. He appeared completely immersed in his music.

"You can say what you wish in front of Natael," Rand said. "He is gleeman to the Dragon Reborn, after all." If keeping the matter secret was important enough, she would press it, and he would send Natael away, though he did not like the man to be out of his sight.

Pedra sniffed loudly and shifted her shawl on her shoulders. "Your head is swelled up like an overripe melon." She said it flatly, as a statement of fact.

Anger bubbled outside the void. A short girl with a brown ponytail, she reminded him suddenly of the girls back home. Of Egwene, always trying to take him down a rung, usually whether he deserved it or not.

Face hard, he spoke more roughly than he intended. "Tell me what you want, Moiraine. Tell me here and now, or let it wait until I can find time for you. I'm very busy." That was an outright lie. Most of his time was spent practicing the sword with Lan, or the spears with Rhuarc, or learning to fight with hands and feet from both. His eyes slid to Dani, before he could pull them back to Moiraine. How much had Ilyena told her? Well, perhaps it was not a complete lie. He was very busy in some ways. Regardless, if there was any bullying to be done here today, *he* would do it. Natael could hear anything. Almost anything. So long as Rand knew where he was at all times.

Moiraine and the rest frowned, but the real Aes Sedai at least seemed to see he would not be budged this time. She glanced at Natael, her mouth tightening—the man still seemed deep in his music—then took a thick wad of grey silk from her pouch.

Unfolding it, she laid what it had contained on the table, a disc the size of a man's hand, half dead black, half purest white, the two colours meeting in a sinuous line to form two joined teardrops.

That had been the symbol of Aes Sedai, before the Breaking, but this disc was more. Only seven like it had ever been made, the seals on the Dark One's prison. Or rather, each was a focus for one of those seals. Drawing her belt knife, its hilt wrapped in silver wire, Moiraine scraped delicately at the edge of the disc. And a tiny flake of solid black fell away.

Even encased in the void, Rand gasped. The emptiness itself quivered, and for an instant the Power threatened to overwhelm him. "Is this a copy? A fake?"

"I found this in the square below," Moiraine said. "It is real, though. The one I brought with me from Tear is the same." She could have been saying she wanted pea soup for the midday meal. Pedra on the other hand, clutched her shawl around her as if cold.

Rand felt the stirrings of fright himself, oozing across the surface of the void. It was an effort to let go of *saidin*, but he forced himself. If he lost concentration, the Power could destroy him where he stood, and he wanted all his attention on the matter at hand. Even so, even with the taint, it was a loss.

That flake lying on the table was impossible. Those discs were made of *cuendillar*, heartstone, and nothing made of *cuendillar* could be broken, not even by the One Power. Whatever force was used against it only made it stronger. The making of heartstone had been lost in the Breaking of the World, but whatever had been made of it during the Age of Legends still existed, even the most fragile vase, even if the Breaking had sunk it to the bottom of the ocean or buried it beneath a mountain. Of course, one of the seven discs was broken already, but it had taken a good deal more than a knife.

Come to think of it, though, he did not know how that seal, found within the Eye of the World, really had been broken. If no force short of the Creator could break heartstone, then that should be that.

"How?" he asked, surprised that his voice was still as steady as when the void had surrounded him.

"I do not know," Moiraine replied, just as calm outwardly. "But you do see the problem? A fall from the table could break this. If the others, wherever they may be, are like this, a few men with hammers could break open that hole in the Dark One's prison again. Who can even say how effective one is, in this condition?"

Rand saw. *I'm not ready yet.* He was not sure he ever would be ready, but he surely was not yet. Dani looked as though she were staring into her own open grave.

Rewrapping the disc, Moiraine replaced it in her pouch. "Perhaps I will think of a possibility before I carry this to Tar Valon. If we know why, perhaps something can be done about it."

He was caught by the image of the Dark One reaching out from Shayol Ghul once more, eventually breaking free completely; fires and darkness covered the world in his mind, flames that consumed and gave no light, blackness solid as stone squeezing the air. With that filling his head, what Moiraine had just said took a moment to penetrate. "You intend to go yourself?" He had thought she meant to stick to him like moss to a rock. *Isn't this what you want?*

"Eventually," Moiraine replied quietly. "Eventually I will—have to leave you, after all. What will be, must be." Rand thought she shivered, but it was so quick it could have been his imagination, and the next instant she was all composure and self-control once more. "You must be ready." The reminder of his doubts came unpleasantly. "We should discuss your plans. You cannot sit here much longer. Even if the Forsaken are not planning to come after you, they are out there, spreading their power. Gathering the Aiel will do no good if you find that everything beyond the Spine of the World is in their hands."

Chuckling, Rand leaned back against the table. So this was just another ploy; if he was anxious about her leaving, perhaps he would be more willing to listen, more amenable to being guided. She could not lie, of course, not right out. One of the vaunted Three Oaths took care of that: to speak no word that was not true. He had learned that it left a barn-width of wriggle room. She would leave him alone eventually. After he was dead, no doubt.

"You want to discuss my plans," he said dryly. Pulling a short-stemmed pipe and a leather tabac pouch from his coat pocket, he thumbed the bowl full and briefly touched *saidin* to channel a flame dancing above the tabac. "Why? They are *my* plans." Puffing slowly, he waited, ignoring Pedra's glower.

The Aes Sedai's face never changed, but her large, dark eyes seemed to blaze. "What have you done when you refused to be guided by me?" Her voice was as cool as her features, yet the words still seemed to come like whip-cracks. "Wherever you have gone, you have left death, destruction and war behind you."

"Not in Tear," he said, too quickly. And too defensively. He must not let her put him off balance. Determinedly, he took spaced, deliberate puffs at his pipe.

"No," she agreed, "not in Tear. For once you had a nation behind you, a people, and what did you do with it? Bringing justice to Tear was commendable. Establishing order in Cairhien, feeding the hungry, is laudable. Another time I would praise you for it." She herself was Cairhienin. "But it does not help you toward the day you face Tarmon Gai'don." A single-minded woman, and cold when it came to anything else, even her own land. But should he not be just as single-minded?

"What would you have me do? Hunt down the Forsaken one by one?" Again he forced himself to draw more slowly on the pipe; it was an effort. "Do you even know where they are? Oh, Sammael is in Illian—you know that—but the rest? What if I go after Sammael as you wish, and find two or three or four of them?"

"You could have faced three or four," she said icily, "had you not left *Callandor* in Tear. The truth is, you are running. You do not really have a plan, not a plan to ready you for the Last Battle. You run from place to place, hoping that in some way everything will come out for the best. Hoping, because you do not know what else to do. If you would take my advice, at least you—" He cut her off, gesturing sharply with his pipe, with never a care for the glares the two Accepted gave him.

"I do have a plan." If they wanted to know, let them know, and he would be burned if he changed a word. "First, I mean to put an end to the wars and killing, whether I started them or not. If men have to kill, let them kill Trollocs, not each other. In the Aiel War, four clans crossed the Dragonwall, and had their way for better than two years. They looted and burned Cairhien, defeated every army sent against them. They could have taken Tar Valon, had they wanted. The Tower couldn't have stopped them, because of your Three Oaths." Not to use the Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn or Darkfriends, or in defence of their own lives, that was another of the Oaths, and the Aiel had not threatened the Tower itself. Anger had him in its grip now. Running and hoping, was he? "Four clans did that. What will happen when I lead eleven across the Spine of the World?" It would have to be eleven; small hope of bringing in the Shaido. "By the time the nations even think of uniting, it will be too late. They'll accept my peace, or I'll be buried in the Can Breat." A discordant

plunk rose from the harp, and Natael bent over the instrument, shaking his head. In a moment the soothing sounds came again.

"A melon couldn't be swollen enough for your head," Pedra muttered, folding her arms beneath her modest breasts. "And a stone couldn't be as stubborn! Moiraine knows best. Why won't you see that?"

"Because if she could do my job, she would have done it herself by now," he snapped. She really was annoying. "But if the two of you want to ride off to Shayol Ghul and fight the Dark One without me, feel free."

She wouldn't, of course. They never did, the people who demanded he do it their way. They wanted the power, but not the responsibility. While the Accepted glared, the Aes Sedai smoothed her silk skirts, though they did not need it. "Taking the Aiel across the Dragonwall might be the worst thing you could possibly do." There was an edge to Moiraine's voice, anger or frustration. At least he was getting across to her that he was no puppet. "By this time, the Amyrlin Seat will be approaching the rulers of every nation that still has a ruler, laying the proofs before them that you are the Dragon Reborn. They know the Prophecies; they know what you were born to do. Once they are convinced of who and what you are, they will accept you because they must. The Last Battle is coming, and you are their only hope, humankind's only hope."

Rand laughed out loud. It was a bitter laugh. Sticking his pipe between his teeth, he hoisted himself to sit cross-legged atop the table, staring at them. "So you and Siuan Sanche still think you know everything there is to know." The Light willing, they did not know near everything about him, and would never find out. "You're both fools."

"Show some respect!" Pedra growled, but Rand went on over her words.

"The Tairen High Nobles know the Prophecies, too, and they knew me, once they saw the Sword That Cannot Be Touched clutched in my fist. Half of them expect me to bring them power or glory or both. The other half would as soon slip a knife in my back and try to forget the Dragon Reborn was ever in Tear. That is how the nations will greet the Dragon Reborn. Unless I quell them first, the same way I did the Tairens. Do you know why I left *Callandor* in Tear? To remind them of me. Every day they know it is there, driven into the Heart of the Stone, and they know I'll come back for it. That is what holds them to me." That was one reason he had left the Sword That Is Not a Sword behind. He did not like even to think of the other.

"Be very careful," Moiraine said after a moment. Just that, in a voice all frozen calm. He heard stark warning in the words. Once he had heard her say in much the same tone that she would see him dead before letting the Shadow have him. A hard woman.

For a long moment she gazed at him, her eyes dark pools that threatened to swallow him. Then she made a perfect curtsey. "By your leave, my Lord Dragon, I will see to letting Master Kadere know where I expect him to work tomorrow."

No-one could have seen or heard the faintest mockery in action or words, but Rand felt it. Anything that might put him off balance, make him more biddable by guilt or shame or uncertainty or whatever, she would try. He stared after her until the clicking beads in the doorway obscured her.

"There is no need you scowling like that." Pedra's voice was low, her eyes irate; she held on to her shawl as if she wanted to strangle him with it. "Lord Dragon, indeed! Whatever you are, you're a rude, ill-mannered lout. You deserve more than you got. It would not kill you to be civil!"

"So it was you," he snapped, but to his surprise she half-shook her head and looked to the beaded curtain before catching herself. It had been Moiraine after all. If the Aes Sedai was showing that much temper, something must be wearing at her terribly. Him, no doubt. Perhaps he should apologize. *I suppose it wouldn't hurt to be civil.* Though he could not see why he was supposed to be mannerly to the Aes Sedai while she tried to lead him on a leash.

But if he was thinking of trying to be polite, Pedra was not. If glowing coals were dark brown they would have been exactly like her eyes. "You are even stupider and more arrogant than the other men. And not good enough to be making these decisions yourself, or getting all the attention you get. You aren't good enough for a weasel! Bring your nose down. Isn't it enough that you broke the world once? You should do what Moiraine tells you!"

He gaped at her as the tirade went on, with her more furious than at any time he'd seen before. Then it hit him. That little near shake of her head that she had not meant to give, letting him know it had been Moiraine who struck him with the Power. Pedra was one of those women who worked very

hard at doing what she was about in proper fashion. Aes Sedai usually kept a rein on their tempers, but they never ever gave anything away that they wanted to hide.

*Ilyena never flashed her temper at me when she was angry with herself. When she gave me the rough side of her tongue, it was because she ...* His mind froze for an instant. It was not Ilyena's cold, pale-haired visage that swam before his eyes, but another woman's; a pretty face, skin like cream, red-gold hair exactly the shade of Elayne's. This had to be the madness. Remembering an imaginary woman. Perhaps one day he would find himself having conversations with people who were not there.

A concerned Dani spoke over Pedra's harangue. "Are you all right, Rand? Is something wrong? Should I fetch Moiraine back to—"

"No!" he said, and just as quickly softened his own tone. "She can't Heal ... Ilyena ..." Even an Aes Sedai could not Heal madness; none of them could Heal any of what ailed him.

Dani's concern grew. "What about her?"

*Her? Yes. Her. I ...* They were both staring at him as though he was crazy. He gathered himself as best he could. "Nothing. I don't need Healing from her either, is what I mean."

Pedra had gone silent, lips pinched together as she shared her glare between him and her fellow Accepted now. Neither paid her much heed.

"You haven't spoken, then. Good," Dani muttered before firming her face. "I had best go, too. You are tired." Frowning slightly, she said, "Rand, what does it mean to be buried in the Can Breast?"

He started to ask what under the Light she was talking about. Then he remembered using that phrase. "Just something I heard once," he lied. He had no more idea what it meant than where it had come from.

"You rest, Rand," she said. "Promise me you will. You need it." He nodded. She studied his face for a moment as though searching for the truth, then started for the door with Pedra on her heels.

Rand's silver goblet of wine floated up from the carpet and drifted to him. He hastily snatched it out of the air just as they were leaving, the beads clicking together behind them, and stared after them until they were well away and he could be certain they had not seen.

Then he leapt from the table, and hurled the goblet away, splashing wine across the floor tiles as he rounded on Jasin Natael in a fury.

Seizing *saidin*, Rand channelled, wove flows of Air that snatched Natael up from the cushions; the gilded harp tumbled to the dark red tiles as the man was pinned against the wall, immobile from neck to ankles and his feet half a pace above the floor. "I've warned you! Never channel when anyone else is around. Never!"

Natael tilted his head in that peculiar way he had, as if trying to look at Rand sideways, or watch without being noticed. "If they had seen, they would have thought it was you." There was no apology in his voice, no diffidence, but no challenge either; he seemed to think he was offering a reasonable explanation. "Besides, you looked thirsty. A court-bard should look after his lord's needs." That was one of the small conceits he surrounded himself with; if Rand was the Lord Dragon, then he himself must be a court-bard, not a simple gleeman.

Feeling disgusted with himself as much as angry at the man, Rand unravelled the weave and let him drop. Manhandling him was like picking a fight with a boy of ten. He could not see the shield that constricted the other man's access to *saidin*—it was female work—but he knew it was there. Moving a goblet was about the extent of Natael's ability, now. Luckily the shield had been hidden from female eyes, too. Natael called the trick "inverting"; he did not seem able to explain it, though. "And if she'd seen my face and was suspicious? I was as startled as if that goblet had flown at me by itself!" He stuck his pipe back between his teeth and sent up furious streams of smoke.

"She still wouldn't suspect." Settling back onto the cushions, the other man took up the harp again, strumming a line of music that had a devious sound. "How could anyone suspect? I do not entirely believe the situation myself." If there was even a touch of bitterness in his voice, Rand could not detect it.

He was not entirely sure he believed it either, though he had worked hard enough for it. The man in front of him, Jasin Natael, had another name. Asmodean.

Idly playing the harp, Asmodean did not look like one of the dreaded Forsaken. He was even moderately handsome. It often seemed strange that evil had left no outward mark. He was one of the

Forsaken, and far from trying to kill him, Rand hid what he was from Moiraine and everyone else. He needed a teacher.

If what was true for the women Aes Sedai called "wilders" also held for men, he had only one chance in four of surviving the attempt to learn to use the Power on his own. That was discounting the madness. His teacher had to be a man; Moiraine and others had told him often enough that a bird could not teach a fish to fly, nor a fish a bird to swim. And his teacher had to be someone experienced, someone who already knew all the things he needed to learn. With Aes Sedai gentling men who could channel as soon as they were found—and fewer were found every year—that left small choices. A man who had simply discovered he could channel would know no more than he did. A false Dragon who could channel—if Rand could find one not already caught and gentled—would not be likely to give up his own dreams of glory for another claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. What remained, what Rand had lured to him, was one of the Forsaken.

Asmodean plucked random chords as Rand took a seat on a cushion facing him. It was well to remember that the man had not changed, not inside, from the day so long ago when he had pledged his soul to the Shadow. What he did now, he did under duress; he had not come to the Light. "Do you ever think of turning back, Natael?" He was always careful of the name; one breath of "Asmodean," and Moiraine would be sure he had gone over to the Shadow. Moiraine and maybe others. Neither he nor Asmodean might survive that.

The man's hands froze on the strings, his face utterly blank. "Turn back? Demanded, Rahvin, any of them would kill me on sight, now. If I was lucky. Except Lanfear perhaps, and you will understand if I don't want to put her to the test. Semirhage could make a boulder beg for mercy and thank her for death. And as for the Great Lord—"

"The Dark One," Rand broke in sharply around his pipestem. The Great Lord of the Dark was what Darkfriends called the Dark One. Darkfriends and the Forsaken.

Asmodean bowed his head briefly in acquiescence. "When the Dark One breaks free ..." If his face had been expressionless before, now it was bleak in every line. "Suffice it to say that I will find Semirhage and give myself to her before I'll face the—the Dark One's punishment for betrayal."

"As well you are here to teach me, then."

Mournful music began to flow from the harp, speaking of loss and tears. "'The March of Death,'" Asmodean said over the music, "the final movement of The Grand Passions Cycle, composed some three hundred years before the War of Power by—"

Rand cut him off. "You are not teaching me very well."

"As well as may be expected, under the circumstances. You can grasp *saidin* every time you try, now, and tell one flow from another. You can shield yourself, and the Power does what you want it to." He stopped playing and frowned, not looking at Rand. "Do you think Lanfear really intended me to teach you everything? If she had wanted that, she would have contrived to stay close so she could link us. She wants you to live, Lews Therin; but this time she means to be stronger than you."

"Don't call me that!" Rand snapped, but Asmodean did not seem to hear.

"If you planned this between you—trapping me—" Rand sensed a surge in Asmodean, as if the Forsaken were testing the shield Lanfear had woven around him; women who could channel saw a glow surrounding another woman who had embraced *saidar* and felt her channelling clearly, but he never saw anything around Asmodean and felt little. "If you worked it out together, then you let her outfox you on more levels than one. I've told you I am not a very good teacher, especially without a link. You did plan it between you, didn't you?" He did look at Rand then, sidelong but still intent. "How much do you remember? Of being Lews Therin, I mean. She said you recalled nothing at all but she could lie to the Gr—the Dark One himself."

"This time she spoke the truth." Seating himself on one of the cushions, Rand channelled one of the clan chiefs' untouched silver goblets to him. Even such a brief touch of *saidin* was exhilarating—and fouling. And hard to release. He did not want to talk about Lews Therin; he was tired of people thinking he was Lews Therin. The bowl of his pipe had grown hot with all the puffing, so he held it by the stem and gestured with it. "If linking will help you teach me, why don't we link?"

Asmodean looked at him as if he had asked why they did not eat rocks, then shook his head. "I continually forget how much you don't know. You and I cannot. Not without a woman to join us. You could ask Moiraine, I suppose, or one of the girls. One of them might be able to reason out the method. So long as you don't mind them finding out who I am."

"Don't lie to me, Natael," Rand growled. Well before meeting Natael he had learned that a man's channelling and a woman's were as different as men and women themselves, but he took little the man said on trust. "I've heard Elayne and others talk about Aes Sedai linking their powers. If they can do it, why not you and I?"

"Because we can't." Exasperation filled Asmodean's tone. "Ask a philosopher if you want to know why. Why can't dogs fly? Perhaps in the grand scheme of the Pattern, it's a balance for men being stronger. We cannot link without them, but they can without us. Up to thirteen of them can, anyway, a small mercy; after that, they need men to make the circle larger."

Rand was sure he had caught a lie, this time. Moiraine said that in the Age of Legends men and women had been equally strong in the Power, and she could not lie. He said as much, adding, "The Five Powers are equal."

"Earth, Fire, Air, Water, and Spirit." Natael strummed a chord for each. "They are equal, true, and it is also true that what a man can do with one, a woman can also. In kind, at least. But that has nothing to do with men being stronger. What Moiraine believes to be truth, she tells as truth whether or not it is; one of a thousand weaknesses in those fool Oaths." He played a bit of something that did indeed sound foolish. "Some women have stronger arms than some men, but in general it is the other way around. The same holds with strength in the Power, and in about the same proportion."

Rand nodded slowly. It did make a kind of sense. Elayne was considered one of the strongest women to train in the Tower for a thousand years or more, but he had tested himself against her once, and later Elayne had confessed that she felt like a kitten seized by a mastiff.

Asmodean was not finished. "If two women link, they do not double their strength—linking is not as simple as adding together the power of each—but if they are strong enough, they can match a man. And when they take the circle to thirteen, then you must be wary. Thirteen women who can barely channel could overpower most men, linked. The thirteen weakest women in the Tower could overpower you or any man, and barely breathe hard. I came across a saying in Arad Doman. 'The more women there are about, the softer a wise man steps'. It would not be bad to remember it."

Rand shivered, thinking of a time when he had been among many more than thirteen Aes Sedai. Of course, most of them had not known who he was. If they had ... *If Moiraine and Pedra linked ...*

Swallowing half his wine did not completely wash the thought away. "What more can you tell me about the Forsaken?" It was a question he was sure he had asked a hundred times, but he always hoped there was a scrap more to dig out. Better than thinking about Moiraine and Pedra linking to ...

"I have told everything I know." Asmodean sighed heavily. "We were hardly close friends at the best. Do you believe I am holding back something? I don't know where the others are, if that is what you want. Except Sammael, and you knew he'd taken Illian for his kingdom before I told you. Graendal was in Arad Doman for a time, but I expect she has gone now; she likes her comforts too well. I suspect Moghedien is or was in the west somewhere as well, but no-one ever finds the Spider unless she wants to be found. Rahvin has a queen for one of his pets, but your guess is as good as mine as to what country she rules for him. He had spoken of Andor when last I saw him, while Hessalam eyed Valreis, Asha'bellanar Altara and Ketvarcade Amadicia. I have no idea if any of them followed through on their plans. The Chosen are not exactly honest with each other. Ideallein guards Ishamael in the hopes that he will someday recover from the injuries you dealt him. They are in the Blight with Aginor. And that is all I know that might help locate them."

Rand had heard all that before; it seemed he had heard all Asmodean had to say of the Forsaken fifty times already. So often that at moments it seemed he had always known what the man was telling him. Some of it he almost wished he had never learned—what Semirhage found amusing, for instance—and some made no sense. Demandred had gone over to the Shadow because he envied Lews Therin Telamon? Rand could not imagine envying someone enough to do anything because of it, and surely not that. Asmodean claimed it had been the thought of immortality, of endless Ages of music, that had seduced him; he claimed to have been a noted composer of music, before. Senseless. Yet in that mass of often blood-chilling knowledge might lie keys to surviving Tarmon Gai'don. Whatever he told Moiraine, he knew he would have to face them then, if not before. Emptying the goblet, he set it on the floor tiles. Wine would not wash out facts.

The bead curtain rattled, and he looked over his shoulder as *gai'shain* entered, white-robed and silent. While some began gathering up the food and drink that had been laid out for him and the

chiefs, another, a man, carried a large silver tray to the table. On it were covered dishes, a silver cup, and two large, green-striped pottery pitchers. One would hold wine, the other water. A *gai'shain* woman brought in a gilded lamp, already lit, and set it beside the tray. Through the windows, the sky was beginning to take on the yellow-red of sunset; in the brief time between baking and freezing, the air actually felt comfortable.

Rand stood as the *gai'shain* departed, but did not follow immediately. "What do you think of my chances when the Last Battle comes, Natael?"

Asmodean hesitated in pulling red-and-blue-striped wool blankets from behind his cushions and looked up at him, head tilted in that sideways manner of his. "You found ... something ... in the square the day we met here."

"Forget that," Rand said harshly. There had been two, not one. "I destroyed it, in any case." He thought Asmodean's shoulders slumped a trifle.

"Then the—Dark One—will consume you alive. As for me, I intend to open my veins the hour I know he is free. If I get the chance. A quick death is better than what I'll find elsewhere." He tossed the blankets aside and sat staring glumly at nothing. "Better than going mad, certainly. I'm as subject to that as you, now. You broke the bonds that protected me." There was no bitterness in his voice, only hopelessness.

"What if there was another way to shield against the taint?" Rand demanded. "What if it could be removed somehow? Would you still kill yourself then?"

Asmodean's barked laugh was utterly acid. "The Shadow take me, you must be beginning to think you really are the bloody Creator! We are dead. Both of us. Dead! Are you too blind with pride to see it? Or just too thick-witted, you hopeless shepherd?"

Rand refused to be drawn. "Then why not go ahead and end it?" he asked in a tight voice. *I wasn't too blind to see what you and Lanfear were up to. I wasn't too thick-witted to fool her and trap you.* "If there's no hope, no chance, not the smallest shred ... then why are you still alive?"

Still not looking at him, Asmodean rubbed the side of his nose. "I once saw a man hanging from a cliff," he said slowly. "The brink was crumbling under his fingers, and the only thing near enough to grasp was a tuft of grass, a few long blades with roots barely clinging to the rock. The only chance he had of climbing back up on the cliff. So he grabbed it." His abrupt chuckle held no mirth. "He had to know it would pull free."

"Did you save him?" Rand asked, but Asmodean did not answer.

As Rand started for the doorway, the sounds of "The March of Death" began again behind him. The strings of beads fell together behind him, and the five Maidens who had been waiting in the wide, empty hall flowed easily to their feet from where they had been squatting on the pale blue tiles.

They were all but one tall for women, though not for Aielwomen. Their leader, Adelin, lacked little more than a hand of being able to look him in the eyes. The exception, a fiery redhead named Enaila, was extremely touchy about being so short.

He acknowledged them with a small bow, which made them smile; it was not an Aiel custom, at least not the way he had been taught to do it. "I see you, Adelin," he said. "Where is Joinde? I thought she was with you earlier. Has she taken ill?"

"I see you, Rand al'Thor," she replied. Her pale yellow hair seemed paler framing her sun-dark face, which had a fine white scar across one cheek. "In a way she has. She had been talking to herself all day, and not an hour ago, she went off to lay a bridal wreath at the feet of Garan, of the Jhirad Goshien." Some of the others shook their heads; marrying meant giving up the spear. "Tomorrow is his last day as her *gai'shain*. Joinde is Black Rock Shaarad," she added significantly. It was significant; marriages came frequently with men or women taken *gai'shain*, but very seldom between clans with blood feud, even blood feud in abeyance.

"It is an illness that spreads," Enaila said heatedly. Her voice was usually as hot as her hair. "One or two Maidens make their bridal wreaths every day since we came to Rhuidean."

Rand nodded with what he hoped they took for sympathy. It was his fault. If he told them, he wondered how many would still risk staying near him. All, probably; honour would hold them, and they had no more fear than the clan chiefs. At least it was only marriages, so far; even Maidens would think marrying better than what some had experienced. Maybe they would. "I will be ready to go in a moment," he told them.

“We will wait with patience,” Adelin said. It hardly seemed patience; standing there, they all appeared poised on the edge of sudden movement.

It really did take him only a moment to do what he wanted, weave flows of Spirit and Fire into a box around the room and tie them so the weave held on its own. Anyone could go in or out—except a man who could channel. For himself—or Asmodean—walking through that doorway would be like walking through a wall of solid flame. He had discovered the weave—and that Asmodean, blocked, was too weak to channel through it—by accident. No-one was likely to question the doings of a gleeman, but if someone did, Jasin Natael had simply chosen to sleep as far from Aiel as he could manage in Rhuidean. That was a choice that Hadnan Kadere’s drivers and guards, at least, could sympathize with. And this way Rand knew exactly where the man was of a night. The Maidens asked him no questions.

He turned away. The Maidens followed him, spread out and wary as if they expected an attack right there. Asmodean was still playing the lament.

## CHAPTER 22: Pale Shadows



Arms outstretched to either side, Mat Cauthon walked the wide white coping of the dry fountain singing to the men who watched him in the fading light.

“*We'll drink the wine till the cup is dry,  
and kiss the girls so they'll not cry,  
and toss the dice until we fly  
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows.*”

The air felt cool after the day's heat, and he thought briefly of buttoning up his fine green silk coat with the golden embroidery, but the drink the Aiel called *oosquai* had put a buzz in his head like giant flies, and the thought fluttered away. The white stone figures of three women stood on a platform in the dusty basin, twenty feet tall and unclothed. Each had been made with one hand upraised, the other holding a huge stone jar tilted over her shoulder for water to pour from, but one was missing her head and upraised hand, and on another the jar was a shattered ruin.

“*We'll dance all night while the moon runs free,  
and dandle the lasses upon our knee,  
and then you'll ride along with me,  
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows.*”

“A fine song to be singing about death,” one of the wagon drivers shouted in a heavy Murandian accent. Kadere's men kept themselves in a tight knot apart from the Aielmen around the fountain; they were all tough, hard-faced men, but every one was sure any Aiel would slit his throat for a wrong glance. They were not far wrong. “I heard my old grandmother talk about Jak o' the Shadows,” the big-eared Murandian went on. “ ‘Tisn't right to sing about death that way.”

Mat muzzily considered the song he had been singing and grimaced. No-one had heard “Dance with Jak o' the Shadows” since Aldeshar fell; in his head, he could still hear the defiant song rising as the Golden Lions launched their last, futile charge at Artur Hawkwing's encircling army. At least he had not been babbling it in the Old Tongue. He was not as juicy as he looked by half, but there had indeed been too many cups of *oosquai*. The stuff looked and tasted like brown water, but it hit your head like a mule's kick. *Moiraine will pack me off to the Tower yet, if I'm not careful. At least it would get me out of the Waste and away from Rand.* Maybe he was drunker than he thought, if he considered that a fair trade. He shifted to “Tinker in the Kitchen.”

“*Tinker in the kitchen, with a job of work to do.  
Mistress up above, slipping on a robe of blue.  
She dances down the staircase, her fancy all so free,  
crying, Tinker, oh, dear Tinker, won't you mend a pot for me?*”

Some of Kadere's men joined in the song as he danced back to where he had begun. The Aiel did not; among them, men did not sing except for battle chants or laments for the slain, and neither did Maidens, except among themselves.

Two Aielmen were squatting on the coping, showing none of the effects of the *oosquai* they had consumed, unless their eyes were the faintest bit glassy. He would be glad to get back where light-coloured eyes were a rarity; growing up, he had not seen anything but brown or black except on Rand.

A few pieces of wood—wormholed arms and legs from chairs—lay on the broad paving stones, in the area left open by the watchers. An empty red pottery crock lay beside the coping, as did

another that still held *oosquai*, and a silver cup. The game was to take a drink, then try to hit a target thrown into the air with a knife. None of Kadere's men and few of the Aiel would dice with him, not when he won as often as he did, and they did not play at cards. Knife throwing was supposed to be different, especially with *oosquai* added in. He had not won as often as he did with dice, but half a dozen worked gold cups and two bowls lay inside the basin beneath him, along with bracelets and necklaces set with rubies or moonstones or sapphires, and a scattering of coins as well. His flat-crowned hat and an odd spear with a black haft rested beside his winnings. Some of it was even Aiel made. They were more likely to pay for something with a piece of loot than with a coin.

Corman, one of the Aiel on the coping, looked up at him as he cut off singing. A white scar slanted across his nose. "You are nearly as good with knives as you are with dice, Matrim Cauthon. Shall we call it an end? The light is failing."

"There's plenty of light." Mat squinted at the sky; pale shadows covered everything here in the valley of Rhuidean, but the sky was still light enough to see against, at least. "My grandmother could make the throw in this. I could make it blindfolded."

Jenric, the other squatting Aiel, peered around the onlookers. "Are there women here?" Built like a bear, he considered himself a wit. "The only time a man talks like that is when there are women to impress." The Maidens scattered through the crowd laughed as hard as anyone else, and maybe harder.

"You think I can't?" Mat muttered, ripping off the dark scarf he wore around his neck to hide the scar where he had once been hung. "Just you shout 'now' when you throw it up, Corman." Hastily he tied the scarf around his eyes and drew one of his knives from his sleeve. The loudest sound was the watchers breathing. *Not drunk? I'm juicier than a fiddler's whelp.* And yet, he suddenly felt his luck, felt that surge the way he did when he knew which spots would show before the dice stopped tumbling. It seemed to clear his head a little. "Throw it," he murmured calmly.

"Now," Corman called, and Mat's arm whipped back, then forward.

In the stillness, the *thunk* of steel stabbing wood was as loud as the clatter of the target on the pavement.

No-one said a word as he pulled the scarf back down around his neck. A piece of a chair arm no bigger than his hand lay in the open space, his blade stuck firmly in the middle. Corman had tried to shave the odds, it appeared. Well, he had never specified the target. He suddenly realized he had not even made a wager.

Finally one of Kadere's men half-shouted, "The Dark One's own luck, that!"

"Luck is a horse to ride like any other," Mat said to himself. No matter where it came from. Not that he knew where his luck came from; he only tried to ride it as best he could.

As quietly as he had spoken, Jenric frowned up at him. "What was that you said, Matrim Cauthon?"

Mat opened his mouth to repeat himself, then closed it again as the words came clear in his mind. *Sene sovy a caba 'donde ain doviemya.* The Old Tongue. "Nothing," he muttered. "Just talking to myself." The onlookers were beginning to drift away. "I guess the light really is fading too much to go on."

Corman put a foot on the piece of wood to wrench Mat's knife free and brought it back to him. "Some time again maybe, Matrim Cauthon, some day." That was the Aiel way of saying "never" when they did not want to say it right out.

Mat nodded as he slipped the blade back into one of the sheaths inside his sleeve; it was the same as the time he had rolled six sixes twenty-three times in a row. He could hardly blame them. Being lucky was not all it was made out. He noted with a bit of envy that neither Aiel staggered in the slightest as they joined the departing crowd.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair, Mat sat down heavily on the coping. The memories that had once cluttered his head like raisins in a cake now blended with his own. In one part of his mind he knew he had been born in the Theren eight-teen years before, but he could remember clearly leading the flanking attack that turned the Trollocs at Maighande, and dancing in the court of Tarmandewin, and a hundred other things, a thousand. Mostly battles. He remembered dying more times than he wanted to think of. No seams between lives anymore; he could not tell his memories from the others unless he concentrated.

Reaching behind him, he set his wide-brimmed hat on his head and fished the odd spear across his knees. Instead of an ordinary spearhead, it had what looked like a two-foot sword blade, marked with a pair of ravens. Lan said that that blade had been made with the One Power during the War of the Shadow, the War of the Power; the Warder claimed it would never need sharpening and never break. Mat thought he would not trust that unless he had to. It might have lasted three thousand years, but he had little trust of the Power. Cursive script ran along the black haft, punctuated at either end with another raven, inlaid in some metal even darker than the wood. In the Old Tongue, but he could read it now, of course.

*Thus is our treaty written; thus is agreement made.  
Thought is the arrow of time; memory never fades.  
What was asked is given. The price is paid.*

One way down the wide street, half a mile off, was a square that would have been called large in most cities. The Aiel traders were gone for the night, but their pavilions still stood, made of the same greyish brown wool used for Aiel tents. Hundreds of traders had come to Rhuidean from every part of the Waste, for the biggest fair the Aiel had ever seen, and more arrived every day. The traders had been among the first to actually start living in the city.

Mat did not really want to look the other way, toward the great plaza. He could make out the shapes of Kadere's wagons, awaiting more loading tomorrow. What appeared to be a twisted redstone doorframe had been heaved into one that afternoon; Moiraine had taken particular care to see it lashed firmly in place just as she wanted.

He did not know what she knew of it—and he was not about to ask; better if she forgot he was alive, though small chance of that—but whatever she knew, he was sure he knew more. He had stepped through it, a fool looking for answers. What he had gotten instead was a head full of other men's memories. That, and dead. He tucked the scarf closer around his neck. And two other things. A silver foxhead medallion that he wore under his shirt, and the weapon across his knees. Small recompense. He ran his fingers lightly down the script. *Memory never fades*. They had a sense of humour fit for Aiel, those folk on the other side of that doorway.

"Can you do that every time?"

He jerked his head around to stare at the Maiden who had just sat down beside him. Tall even for an Aiel, maybe taller than he was, she had hair like spun gold and eyes the colour of a clear morning sky. She was older than he, maybe by ten years, but that had never put him off. Then again, she was *Far Dareis Mai*.

"I am Melindhra," she went on, "of the Jumai sept. Can you do that every time?"

She meant the knife throwing, he realized. She gave her sept, but no clan. Aiel never did that. Unless ... She had to be one of the Shaido Maidens who had come to join Rand. He did not really understand all this about societies, but as for Shaido, he remembered them trying to stick spears in him too well. Couladin did not like anyone associated with Rand, and what Couladin hated, the Shaido hated. On the other hand, Melindhra had come here to Rhuidean. A Maiden. But she wore a small smile; her gaze held an inviting light.

"Most of the time," he said truthfully. Even when he did not feel it, his luck was good; when he did, it was perfect. She chuckled, her smile widening, as if she thought he was boasting. Women seemed to make up their minds whether you were lying without looking at the evidence. On the other hand, if they liked you, they either did not care or else decided even the most outrageous lie was true.

Maidens could be dangerous, whatever their clan—any woman could; he had learned that on his own—but Melindhra's eyes were definitely not just looking at him.

Dipping into his winnings, he pulled up a necklace of gold spirals, each centred on a deep blue sapphire, the largest as big as the joint of his thumb. He could remember a time—his own memory—when the smallest of those stones would have made him sweat.

"They'll look pretty with your eyes," he said, laying the heavy strand in her hands. He had never seen a Maiden wear baubles of any sort, but in his experience, every woman liked jewellery. Strangely, they liked flowers nearly as well. He did not understand it, but then, he was willing to admit that he understood women less than he did his luck, or what had happened on the other side of that twisted doorway.

“Very fine work,” she said, holding it up. “I accept your offer.” The necklace disappeared into her belt pouch, and she leaned over to push his hat back on his head. “Your eyes are pretty. Like dark polished catseye.” She twisted around to pull her feet up onto the coping and sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, studying him intently. “My spear sisters have told me about you.”

Mat pulled his hat back into place and watched her warily from under the brim. What had they told her? And what “offer”? It was only a necklace. The invitation was gone from her eyes; she looked like a cat studying a mouse. That was the trouble with Maidens of the Spear. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether they wanted to dance with you, kiss you, or kill you; it was part of why he’d stopped chasing that Rhamys, no matter how massive her mammarys. That and he’d started to think she might take it a bit too seriously.

The street was emptying, the shadows deepening, but he recognized Rand slanting across down the way, pipe clenched between his teeth. He was the only man in Rhuidean likely to be walking with a fistful of *Far Dareis Mai*. *They’re always around him*, Mat thought. *Guarding him like a pack of she-wolves, leaping to do whatever he says*. Some men might have envied him that much, at least. Not Mat. Not most of the time. If it had been a pack of girls like Isendre, now ... He wouldn’t have half minded if she’d show him the same devotion the Maidens did Rand, but her interest had plummeted after seeing how indifferently Rand took the news of their tryst. Fun as it had been, Mat didn’t much like being used to make another man jealous.

“Excuse me for a moment,” he told Melindhra hurriedly. Leaning his spear against the low wall around the fountain, he leaped up already running. His head still buzzed, but not so loudly as before, and he did not stagger. He had no worries about his winnings. The Aiel had very definite views of what was allowed: taking in a raid was one thing, theft another. Kadere’s men had learned to keep their hands in their pockets after one of them had been caught stealing. After a beating that left him striped from shoulders to heels, he had been sent away. The one water bag he had been allowed would not have been nearly enough for him to reach the Dragonwall, even if he had had any clothes on. Now Kadere’s men would not pick up a copper they found lying in the street.

“Rand?” The other man walked on with his encircling escort. “Rand?” Rand was not even ten paces away, but he did not waver. Some of the Maidens looked back, but not Rand. Mat felt cold suddenly, and it had nothing to do with the onset of night. He wet his lips and spoke again, not a shout. “Lews Therin.” And Rand turned around. Mat almost wished he had not.

For a time they only looked at one another in the twilight. Mat hesitated about going closer. He tried telling himself it was because of the Maidens. Harilin had been one of those who taught him a so-called game, Maidens’ Kiss, that he was never likely to forget; or play again, if he had any say in it. And he could feel Enaila’s gaze like an auger boring into his skull. Who would have expected a woman to go up like oil thrown on a fire just because you told her she was the prettiest little flower you had ever seen?

Rand, now. He and Rand had grown up together. They and Perrin, the blacksmith’s apprentice back in Emond’s Field, had hunted together, fished together, tramped through the Sand Hills to the edge of the Mountains of Mist, camped under the stars; shared a bed. Rand was his friend. A special friend. Only now he was the kind of friend who might bash your head in without meaning to.

He made himself walk to arm’s reach of the other man. Rand was nearly a head taller, and in the early-evening gloom he seemed taller yet. Colder than he had been. “I’ve been thinking, Rand.” Mat wished he did not sound hoarse. He hoped Rand would answer to his right name this time. “I’ve been away from home a long time.”

“Home,” Rand said softly. Suddenly he gave a laugh, not loud, but almost like the old Rand. “Are you beginning to miss milking your father’s cows?”

Mat scratched his ear, grinning a bit. “Not that, exactly.” If he never saw the inside of another barn it would be too soon. “But I was thinking that when Kadere’s wagons go, I might go with them.”

Rand was silent. When he spoke again, the brief flash of mirth was gone. “All the way to Tar Valon?”

It was Mat’s turn to hesitate. *He wouldn’t give me away to Moiraine. Would he?* “Maybe,” he said casually. “I don’t know. That’s where Moiraine will want me. Maybe I’ll find a chance to get back to the Theren. See if everything’s alright at home.” *See how my sisters are, and Mother and Da.*

“We all have to do what we must, Mat. Not what we want to, very often. What we must.”

It sounded like an excuse, to Mat, as if Rand was asking him to understand. Only, he had done what he had to himself a few times. *I can't blame it on him, not by himself. Nobody bloody forced me to follow after Rand like some bloody heelhound!* Only that was not true, either. He had been forced. Just not by Rand. "You won't—stop me leaving?"

"I don't try to tell you to come or go, Mat," Rand said wearily. "The Wheel weaves the Pattern not me, and the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills." For all the world like a bloody Aes Sedai! Half turning to go, Rand added, "Don't trust Kadere, Mat. In some ways he's about as dangerous a man as you ever met. Don't trust him an inch, or you might get your throat slit, and you and I wouldn't be the only ones to regret that." Then he was gone, down the street in the deepening dusk, with the Maidens around him like slinking wolves.

Mat stared after him. Trust the merchant? *I wouldn't trust Kadere if he was tied in a sack.* So Rand did not weave the Pattern? He came close! Before ever any of them learned that the Prophecies had anything to do with them, they had learned that Rand was *ta'veren*, one of those rare individuals who, instead of being woven willy-nilly into the Pattern, instead forced the Pattern to shape itself around them. Mat knew about being *ta'veren*; he was one himself, though not as strong as Rand. Sometimes Rand could affect people's lives, change the course of them, just by being in the same town. Perrin was *ta'veren* as well. Moiraine had thought it was significant, finding three young men who grew up in the same village, all destined to be *ta'veren*. She meant to fit them all into her plans, whatever they were.

It was supposed to be a grand thing; all the *ta'veren* Mat had been able to learn about had been men like Artur Hawkwing, or women like Mabriam en Shereed, who stories said had founded the Compact of the Ten Nations after the Breaking. But none of the stories told what happened when one *ta'veren* was close to another as strong as Rand. It was like being a leaf in a whirlpool.

Melindhra stopped beside him and handed him his spear and a heavy, coarse-woven sack that clinked. "I put your winnings in this for you." She was taller than he was, by a good two inches. She glanced after Rand. "I had heard you were near-brother to Rand al'Thor."

"In a manner of speaking," he said dryly.

"It does not matter," she said dismissively, and concentrated her gaze on him, fists on her hips. After Isendre, that simple statement meant more than she knew. "You attracted my interest, Mat Cauthon, before you gave me a regard-gift. Not that I will give up the spear for you, of course, but I have had my eye on you for days. You have a smile like a boy about to do mischief. I like that. And those eyes." In the failing light her grin was slow and wide. And warm. "I do like your eyes."

Mat tugged his hat straight, though it had not been crooked. From pursuer to pursued, in the blink of an eye. It could happen like that, with Aiel women. Especially Maidens. "Does 'Daughter of the Nine Moons' mean anything to you?" It was a question he asked women sometimes. The wrong answer would send him out of Rhuidean tonight if he had to try walking out of the Waste.

"Nothing," she said. "But there are things I like to do by moonlight." Putting an arm around his shoulder, she took off his hat and began to whisper in his ear. In no time at all he was grinning even more widely than she.

He didn't try to kiss her there in the street. He knew enough about Aiel to know how that would have been received. But thoughts of the things she liked to do gave haste to his steps as they made their way to the once-empty building he'd made a campsite of. A single lamp burned still, to ward off the darkness, and the Shadow.

It wasn't much of a place to live, which was good since Mat had no intention of staying there any longer than he had to. It had a nice big pile of blankets and pillows for a bed, though, and that was all he wanted just then.

Melindhra wanted the same it seemed, for she put her arms around him as soon as they entered the room. She knew what she was doing, that was for sure. Her tongue in his mouth, her hand on his crotch—they were experienced at this sort of thing. Mat grabbed her and kissed her harder.

After a moment, she moved her mouth away. "Eager. That is good. So long as you are not too eager..."

He kissed the side of her neck, then up to her ear to murmur, "Oh, I've never had any complaints in that regard."

"So my spearsisters claimed," she chuckled before she started pulling at his clothes.

Turn about was fair play, so he did the same to her. As she was pulling off his shirt, he tugged down her loose trousers to reveal a pair of strong but slender legs. No sooner was she free of them than she pushed him to the bed, giggling a little as she climbed on top. Kissing and petting, they stripped each other. His hands found her soft little bottom and he gave it a light smack.

Far from being offended, Melindhra threw her leg over his waist and knelt atop him. The way she ground against his growing erection made promises Mat was eager to see fulfilled. And when he pulled off her top, the stiff little nipples that poked out at him said she was feeling eager as well. No sound escaped her when he kissed them, but when he slid his fingers into her pussy she moaned in pleasure. Her hand found his cock and she began stroking it to readiness.

That would have been enough for Mat, but Melindhra went even further. Down she shimmied, until she was close enough to kiss his member. Her wet tongue sent shivers through his body. Her hot mouth made him groan aloud when it closed around the purple head. Up and down him, her mouth moved, even as she swirled her head around. *Light. She's good.* Her hand massaged the parts of him her mouth wasn't touching, when she was running her tongue up his side, or sucking hard on the head alone. He could have easily come in her mouth, but such a performance deserved reciprocation.

Mat sat up on the bed, and Melindhra broke off her ministrations, alive to his intentions. She had gotten even wetter he found, when his fingers returned to her snatch. And she was more than willing to lie on the bed and spread her legs. The little noises she made when he licked her slit were sweet but he didn't stay there long. He wanted something even sweeter. She did, too, for she took hold of him and guided him wordlessly to her sex when he climbed on top.

The way she wrapped her legs around him, and the sounds she made spurred him on as began to ride her. Her tanned body was tightly muscled, and she was tight down below, too. It felt good, and Mat pursued that pleasure with gusto.

It felt good for her as well. He knew it since she told him so, with a refreshing lack of coyness.

He was so into it that he forgot to pace himself, and ended up gasping for breath atop her. Melindhra pushed him off, leaving him to sprawl on the bed and huff out a curse. She wasn't cursing him, though. She went right back to pleasuring him with her mouth.

Mat offered up a prayer to the Light, but it was something else Melindhra wanted him to offer up. After a brief reminder of what she could do, she crawled up to kneel atop him, her feet resting on his thighs so she could ride him all the better. And ride she did, her hips moving with a speed and agility that most women could not have managed. Her stomach was as flat and hard as his own, and was strangely fascinating to watch move. So furiously did she fuck that Mat felt a pressing need to bring his hands to bear against her, squeezing her breasts and pinching her nipples, reaching down to rub at the juncture where they joined. If he didn't, he feared she would make a liar of him.

She didn't, thank the Light. With his skilled fingers he was able to make her cry out atop him. While she was still doing so his eagerness made him roll them over so he could pound her some more, and before long he, too, was coming, relief and pleasure stilling all words.

They lay there for some time afterwards, with only the sound of their heavy breathing to fill the room.

"Blood and ashes," he gasped at last. "Can we do that again?"

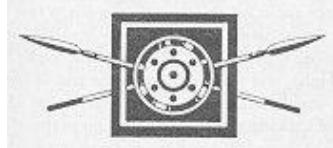
"Right now? You are more impressive than I had thought."

He laughed sheepishly. "I am! But perhaps not *right* now. Later, though, for sure."

Melindhra cuddled up against his side. "I will like that."

That statement left Mat grinning like a fool for quite some time.

## CHAPTER 23: Twilight



With his *Far Dareis Mai* escort, Rand approached the Rhuidean Roof of the Maidens. He tapped his pipe out on his bootheel and stuffed it into his coat pocket before starting up the steps.

The two Maidens standing guard at the tall bronze doors flashed Maiden handtalk at one another, cutting their eyes in his direction as he came through the columns, then shared a small grin. He wished he knew what they had said. Even in as dry a land as the Waste, bronze would tarnish with enough time, but *gai'shain* had polished these doors until they looked new-made. They stood wide open, and the pair of guards made no move to hinder him as he walked through, Adelin and the others on his heels.

They left him to join their friends once he was safely inside, but he was hardly alone as he strode down the corridors and climbed higher in the building, along curving flights of wide white stairs. He had to answer the same questions at practically every step. No, he was not hungry. Yes, he knew he was not used to the heat yet, and no, he had not spent too much time in the sun. No, he was not feeling lonely, thank you. He bore it all patiently, but he did heave a sigh of relief when he reached the second story above the huge window. Here there were no Maidens and no *gai'shain* in the broad hallways or on the stairs that led on upward. The bare walls and empty chambers emphasized the absence of people, but after traversing the floors below, he found solitude a blessing.

His bedroom was a windowless chamber near the centre of the building, one of the few that was not huge, though its ceiling still reached high enough to make height the room's longest dimension. What it had been meant for originally, he had no idea; a mosaic of vines around the small fireplace was the only ornamentation. A servant's room, he would have said, but servants' rooms did not have a door sheathed in bronze, however plain, that he pushed most of the way shut. *Gai'shain* had polished the metal to a dull gleam. A few tasselled cushions lay scattered on the blue floor tiles for sitting, and a thick pallet, atop bright layered rugs, for sleeping. A simple blue-glazed pitcher of water and a dark green cup sat on the floor near the "bed." That was it, except for two three-pronged stand-lamps, already lit, and a pace-high pile of books in one corner. With a tired sigh, he lay down on the pallet still in his coat and boots; no matter how he shifted it was not much softer than sleeping on the bare floor.

The night's chill was already seeping into the room, but he did not bother to light the dried cow dung on the hearth; he was readier to face the cold than the smell. Asmodean had tried to show him a simple way to keep the room warm; simple, but something the man did not have enough strength to do himself. The one time Rand had tried it, he had awakened in the middle of the night, gasping for breath while the edges of the rugs smouldered from the heat of the floor. He had not made another attempt.

He had chosen this building for his quarters first because it was whole and near to the plaza; its great high ceilings gave a semblance of coolness even to the hottest part of the day, and its thick walls kept out the worst of the cold at night. It had not been the Roof of the Maidens then, of course. One morning he simply awakened to find it so, Maidens in every room on the first two floors and their guards on the doors. It had taken him a while to realize that they intended the building for their society's Roof in Rhuidean, yet expected him to continue to stay in it. In fact, they were ready to move the Roof wherever he went. That was why he had to meet the clan chiefs elsewhere, in the building where he stored Asmodean and his own private quarters. His real quarters, as he saw it. Not that he would ever tell the Maidens that. The best he had been able to manage here, by way of privacy, was to make the Maidens agree to stay below the floor where he slept; that had amused them all no end. *Even the Car'a'carn is not a king*, he reminded himself wryly. Admittedly, sleeping downstairs among them was far from the most unpleasant thing he'd ever done. But sometimes a man just wanted some solitude and privacy. Twice already he had moved upward as the numbers of Maidens increased. Idly he tried to calculate how many more could come in before he was sleeping on the roof.

That was better than remembering how he had let Moiraine get under his skin. He had not meant her to learn his plans until the day the Aiel moved. She knew exactly how to manipulate his emotions, how to make him so angry that he said more than he wanted to. *I never used to get so angry. Why is it so hard to hold on to my temper?* Well, there was nothing she could do to stop him. He did not think there was. He had to remember to be careful around her. His increasing abilities occasionally made him careless toward her, but if he was far stronger, she still knew more than he, even with Asmodean's teaching.

In a way, letting Asmodean know his plans was less important than revealing his intentions to the Aes Sedai. *To Moiraine I'm still just a shepherd she can use for the Tower's ends, but to Asmodean I'm the only branch he can hold on to in a flood.* Strange to think he could probably trust one of the Forsaken more than he could Moiraine. Not that he could trust either very far. Asmodean. If his bonds to the Dark One had shielded him from the taint on *saidin*, there had to be another way to do it. Or to cleanse it.

The trouble was that before they went over to the Shadow, the Forsaken had been among the most powerful Aes Sedai in the Age of Legends, when things the White Tower never dreamed of were commonplace. If Asmodean did not know a way, it probably did not exist. *It has to. There has to be something. I'm not going to just sit until I go mad and die.*

That was plain foolish. Prophecy had made a rendezvous for him at Shayol Ghul. When, he did not know; but afterward, he would not have to worry about going mad any longer. He shivered and thought about unfolding his blankets.

The faint sound of soft-soled footsteps in the hall snapped him upright. *I told them! If they can't ...!* The woman who pushed open the door, her arms full of thick wool blankets, was not anyone he expected.

Aviendha paused just inside the room to regard him with cool, blue-green eyes. A more than pretty woman, of an age with him, she had been a Maiden until she gave up the spear to become a Wise One, not very long ago. Her dark reddish hair still came well short of her shoulders and hardly needed the folded brown scarf to keep it out of her face. She seemed a bit awkward with her brown shawl, a bit impatient with her full grey skirts.

He felt a stab of jealousy at the silver necklace she wore, an elaborate string of intricately worked discs, each different. *Who gave her that?* She would not have chosen it herself; she did not seem to like jewellery. The only other piece she wore was a wide ivory bracelet, carved in finely detailed roses. He had given her that, and he was not sure she had forgiven him for it yet. It was foolish of him to be jealous in any case.

"I haven't seen you in a while," he said. "I thought the Wise Ones would have tied you to my arm once they found out I'd blocked them out of my dreams." Asmodean had been amused at the first thing he'd wanted to learn, and then frustrated at how long Rand took to learn it.

"I have my training to do, Rand al'Thor." She would be one of the few Wise Ones who could channel; that was part of what she was being taught. "I am not one of your wetlander women, to stand about so you can look at me whenever you wish." Despite knowing Dani, and Elayne for that matter, she had an oddly wrongheaded view of what she called wetlander women, and of wetlanders in general. "They are not pleased at what you have done." She meant the Wise One dreamwalkers who were teaching her, and trying to watch him. Aviendha shook her head ruefully. "They were especially not pleased that I had let you know they were walking your dreams."

He stared at her. "You told them? But you didn't really say anything. I figured it out myself, and I would have eventually even if you hadn't let a hint slip out. Aviendha, they told me they could speak to people in their dreams, even without having to meet them in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. It was only a step from that."

"Would you have had me dishonour myself further?" Her voice was level enough, but her eyes could have started the fire laid on the hearth. "I will not dishonour myself for you or any man! I gave you the trail to follow, and I will not deny my shame. I should have let you freeze." She threw the blankets right on top of his head.

He pulled them off and laid them beside him on the pallet while trying to think of what to say. It was *ji'e'toh* again. The woman was as prickly as a thornbush. Supposedly she had been given the task of teaching him Aiel customs, but he knew her true job, to spy on him for the Wise Ones. Whatever dishonour was attached to spying among Aiel, apparently it did not extend to the Wise Ones.

They knew he knew, but for some reason it did not seem to concern them, and as long as they were willing to let matters remain as they were, so was he. For one thing, Aviendha was not a very good spy; she almost never tried to find anything out, and her own temper got in the way of making him angry or guilty the way Moiraine did. For another, she was actually pleasant company sometimes, when she forgot to keep her thorns out. At least he knew who it was that Amys and the others had set to watch him; if it was not she, it would be someone else, and he would be constantly wondering who. Besides, she was never wary around him.

Mat, and even Moiraine sometimes looked at him with eyes that saw the Dragon Reborn, or at least the danger of a man who could channel. The clan chiefs and the Wise Ones saw He Who Comes With the Dawn, the man prophesied to break the Aiel like dried twigs; if they did not fear him, they still sometimes treated him like a red adder they had to live with. Whatever Aviendha saw, it never stopped her being scathing whenever she chose, which was most of the time.

An odd sort of comfort, but compared to the rest, it was a comfort nonetheless. He had missed her. He had even picked flowers from some of the spiny plants around Rhuidean—bloodying his fingers until he realized he could use the Power—and sent them to her; the Maidens had carried the blossoms themselves, instead of sending *gai'shain*. She had never acknowledged them, of course.

“Thank you,” he said finally, touching the blankets. They seemed a safe enough subject. “I suppose you can’t have too many in the nights here.”

“Enaila asked me to bring them to you when she found out I was here to see you.” Her lips twitched in the beginnings of an amused smile. “A number of the spear-sisters were worried that you might not be warm enough. I am to see that you light your fire tonight; you didn’t last night.”

Rand felt his cheeks colouring. She knew. *Well, she would, wouldn’t she? The bloody Maidens may not tell her everything anymore, but they don’t bother to keep anything from her, either.* “Why did you want to see me?”

To his surprise, she folded her arms beneath her breasts and paced the short length of the room twice before stopping to glare at him. “This was not a regard-gift,” she said accusingly, shaking the bracelet at him. “You admitted as much.” True, though he thought she might have put a knife in his ribs had he not conceded it. “It was simply a fool gift from a man who did not know or care what my—what the spear-sisters might think. Well, this has no meaning either.” She pulled something from her pouch and tossed it onto the pallet beside him. “It cancels debt between us.”

Rand picked up what she had thrown and turned it over in his hands. A belt buckle in the shape of a dragon, ornately made in good steel and inlaid with gold. “Thank you. It’s beautiful. Aviendha, there is no debt to cancel.”

“If you will not take it against my debt,” she said firmly, “then throw it away. I will find something else to repay you. It is only a trinket.”

“Hardly a trinket. You must have had this made.”

“Do not think that means anything, Rand al’Thor. When I ... gave up the spear, my spears, my knife”—unconsciously her hand brushed her belt, where that long-bladed knife used to hang—“even the points of my arrows were taken from me and handed to a smith to make simple things to give away. Most I gave to friends, but the Wise Ones had me name the three men and three women I most hate, and I was told to give each of them a gift made from my weapons, with my own hands. Bair says it teaches humility.” Straight-backed and glaring, biting off each word, she looked and sounded anything but humble. “So you will not think that means anything.”

“It means nothing,” he said, nodding sadly. Not that he wanted it to mean anything, really, but it would have been pleasing to think she might be beginning to see him as a friend. It was plain foolish to feel jealousy over her. *I wonder who gave it to her?* “Aviendha? Was I one of those you hate so much?”

“Yes, Rand al’Thor.” She suddenly sounded hoarse. For a moment she turned her face away, eyes shut and quivering. “I hate you with all of my heart. I do. And I always will.”

He did not bother to ask why. Once he had asked her why she disliked him and practically had his nose snapped off. She had not told him, though. But this was more than a dislike she sometimes seemed to forget. “If you really hate me,” he said reluctantly, “I will ask the Wise Ones to send someone else to teach me.”

“No!”

“But if you—”

“No!” If anything, her denial was even more fierce this time. She planted her fists on her hips and lectured as if she meant to drive every word home in his heart. “Even if the Wise Ones allowed me to stop, I have *toh*, obligation and duty, to my near-sister Elayne, to watch you for her. You belong to her, Rand al’Thor. To her and no other woman. Remember that.”

He felt like throwing up his hands. At least this time she was not describing to him how Elayne looked without any clothes; some Aiel customs took even more getting used to than others. He sometimes wondered if she and Elayne had agreed on this “watching” between them. He could not believe it, but then again, even women who were not Aiel were odd as often as not. More than that, he wondered who Aviendha was supposed to be protecting him from. Except for the Maidens and the Wise Ones, Aiel women seemed to look at him half as prophecy made flesh, and thus not really flesh at all, and half as a blood snake loose among children. The Wise Ones were nearly as bad as Moiraine when it came to trying to make him do what they wanted, and the Maidens he did not want to think about. The whole thing made him furious.

“Now, you listen to me. I kissed Elayne a few times and in a few places, and I think she enjoyed it as much as I did but I am not promised to anyone.” Elayne couldn’t have put her up to it. She knew about the other women he was seeing. How many there were. Too many. He had duties. “I don’t have time to think about women anyway. The only thing on my mind is uniting the Aiel, even the Shaido if I can. I—” He cut off with a groan as the very last woman he could have hoped for swayed into the room in a clatter of jewellery, carrying a silver tray with a blown-glass flagon of wine and two silver cups.

A diaphanous red silk scarf wrapped around Isendre’s head did nothing to hide her palely beautiful, heart-shaped face. Her long dark hair and dark eyes never belonged to any Aiel. Her full, pouting lips were curved enticingly—until she saw Aviendha. Then the smile faded to a sickly thing. Aside from the scarf she had on a dozen or more necklaces of gold and ivory, some set with pearls or polished gems. As many bracelets weighted each wrist, and even more bunched around her ankles. That was it; she wore not another thing. He made himself keep his eyes strictly on her face, but even so his cheeks felt hot.

Aviendha looked like a thunderhead about to spit lightning, Isendre like a woman who had just learned she was to be boiled alive. Rand wished he were in the Pit of Doom, or anywhere but there. Still, he got to his feet; he would have more authority looking down on them than the other way around. “Aviendha,” he began, but she ignored him.

“Did someone send you with that?” she asked coldly.

Isendre opened her mouth, the intended lie plain on her face, then gulped and whispered, “No.”

“You have been warned about this, *sorda*.” A *sorda* was a kind of rat, especially sly according to the Aiel, and good for absolutely nothing; its flesh was so rank that even cats seldom ate the ones they killed. “Adelin thought the last time would have taught you.”

Isendre flinched, and swayed as if about to faint.

Rand gathered himself. “Aviendha, whether she was sent or not doesn’t matter. I am a little thirsty, and if she was kind enough to bring me wine, she should be thanked for it.” Aviendha glanced coolly at the two cups and raised her eyebrows. He took a deep breath. “She should not be punished just for bringing me something to drink.” He was careful not to look at the tray himself. “Half the Maidens under the Roof must have asked if I—”

“She was taken by the Maidens for theft from Maidens, Rand al’Thor.” Aviendha’s voice was even colder than it had been for the other woman. “You have meddled too much already in the business of *Far Dareis Mai*, more than you should have been allowed. Not even the *Car'a'carn* can thwart justice; this is no concern of yours.”

He grimaced—and let it go. Whatever the Maidens did to her, Isendre certainly had coming. Just not for this. She had entered the Waste with Hadnan Kadere, but Kadere had not cracked his teeth when the Maidens took her for stealing the jewellery that was now all they let her wear. It had been all Rand could do to keep her from being sent off to Kigali tethered like a goat, or else dispatched naked toward the Dragonwall with one water bag; watching her plead for mercy once she realized what the Maidens intended, he had not been able to make himself stay out of it. He did not think he would ever be able to kill a woman, even with his life in the balance. A foolish thing, with female Forsaken likely seeking his blood or worse, but there it was. And if he could not kill a woman, how could he stand by and let a woman die? Even if she deserved it?

That was the rub. In any land west of the Dragonwall, Isendre would face the gallows or the headsman's block for what he knew about her. About her, and Kadere, and probably most of the merchant's men if not all. They were Darkfriends. And he could not expose them. Not even they were aware that he knew.

If any one of them was revealed as a Darkfriend ... Isendre endured as best she could, because even being a servant and kept naked was better than being tied hand and foot and left for the sun, but none would keep silent once Moiraine had her hands on them. Aes Sedai had no more mercy for Darkfriends than for anyone else; she would loosen their tongues in short order. And Asmodean had come into the Waste with the merchant's wagons, too, just another Darkfriend so far as Kadere and the others knew, though one with authority. No doubt they thought he had taken service with the Dragon Reborn on orders from some still higher power. To keep his teacher, to keep Moiraine from trying to kill both of them very probably, Rand had to keep their secret.

Luckily, no-one questioned why the Aiel kept such a close watch on the merchant and his men. Moiraine thought it was the usual Aiel suspicion of outsiders in the Waste, magnified by them being in Rhuidean; she had had to use all of her persuasion to make the Aiel let Kadere and his wagons into the city. The suspicion was there; Rhuarc and the other chiefs likely would have set guards even if Rand had not asked. And Kadere just seemed happy he did not have a spear through his ribs.

Rand had no idea how he was going to resolve the situation. Or if he could. It was a fine mess. In gleemen's stories, only villains got caught in a cleft stick like this.

Once she was sure that he was not going to try to interfere further, Aviendha turned her attention back to the other woman. "You may leave the wine."

Isendre half-knelt gracefully to set the tray beside his pallet, a peculiar grimace on her face. It took Rand a moment to recognize an attempt to smile at him without letting the Aiel woman see.

"And now you will run to the first Maiden you can find," Aviendha went on, "and tell her what you have done. Run, *sorda!*" Moaning and wringing her hands, Isendre ran in a great rattle of jewellery. As soon as she was out of the room, Aviendha rounded on him. "You belong to Elayne! You have no right to try luring any woman, but especially not that one!"

"Her?" Rand gasped. "You think I—? Believe me, Aviendha, if she were the last woman on earth, I'd still stay as far from her as I could run."

"So you say." She sniffed. "She has been switched seven times—seven!—for trying to sneak to your bed. She would not persist like that without some encouragement. She faces *Far Dareis Mai* justice, and she is no concern of even the *Car'a'carn*. Take that as your lesson for today on our customs. And remember that you belong to my near-sister!" Without letting him get a word in, she stalked out wearing such a look that he thought Isendre might not survive if Aviendha caught up to her.

Letting out a long breath, he got up long enough to put the tray and its wine in a corner of the room. He was not about to drink anything Isendre brought him.

*Seven times she's tried to reach me?* She must have learned that he interceded for her; no doubt to her way of thinking, if he was willing to do that for a smoky look and a smile, what might he do for more? He shivered at the thought as much as the increasing cold. He would rather have a scorpion in his bed. If the Maidens failed to convince her, he might tell her what he knew about her; that should put an end to any schemes.

Snuffing all but one of the lamps, he crawled onto his pallet in the near-dark, still booted and fully dressed, and fumbled around until he had pulled all of the blankets over him. Without the fire, he suspected he really would be grateful to Aviendha before morning. Setting the wards of Spirit that shielded his dreams from intrusion was almost automatic to him now, but even as he did it, he chuckled to himself. He could have gotten into bed and then put out the lamps, with the Power. It was the simple things that he never thought of doing with the Power.

For a time he lay waiting for his body's heat to warm the inside of the blankets. How the same place could be so hot by day and so cold by night was beyond him. Sticking one hand under his coat, he fingered the half-healed scar on his side. That wound, the one that Moiraine could never completely Heal, was what would kill him, eventually. He was sure of it. His blood on the rocks of Shayol Ghul. That was what the Prophecies said.

*Not tonight. I won't think of that tonight. I have a little time yet. But if the seals can be shaved with a knife, now, do they still hold as strongly ...? No. Not tonight.*

The inside of the blankets was becoming a little warmer, and he shifted around, trying and failing to find a comfortable way to lie. *I should have washed*, he thought drowsily. Just because he was sleeping alone was no excuse to be lazy.

His eyes snapped open at the creaking of the door. Surely Isendre wouldn't ... but no, it was not Isendre who slunk in, but Nici of the Shaido. On another night he would have been glad to see her, but he'd had been very up-front about how tired he was.

Not that Nici paid any more attention to his downturned mouth than she had his earlier words. She looked wary but it was not over him. Him she approached with ease. It was whatever was on the other side of the closed door at which she directed her wariness. "I have never seen Aviendha that emotional before. You have been stealing more hearts, I see. And here I was thinking I was something special."

Rand sighed. How was he supposed to chivvy her out when she said things like that? "Trust me. I'm the last person in the world Aviendha is likely to develop feelings for. Besides, why would you ever be jealous? I've heard some of the other Maidens calling you Nici the Twister."

Her cheeks coloured. "That is because I can wriggle into little places! Not because of ... that!"

He'd already known that, but it was fun to tease her. Usually it was. Nici didn't seem to be enjoying it tonight. "Are you sure there is nothing going on with you and her?" she asked. "Cara has been talking ..."

"Of course not!"

"That is good. I do not think she likes me."

"Maybe she was just tired," he said, yawning.

Nici ignored his very unsubtle hint and plopped herself down on the pallet. "Aviendha? That would be a first. She was pretty much the perfect Maiden. Totally dedicated to her training, caring for nothing beyond that. I do not think she gets tired."

"Not like me. I'm all worn out."

That hint she got, though it only made her pout. "What about me? Where do I sleep? You know, there is room for two in there if they were cosy."

"Ordinarily I'd love to, but I really am tired ..."

"Well, what about me? What about the way that I feel? Did you ever stop to consider that? Huh? What, did you think I was just some slut plaything you could do what you want with and then throw me away afterwards?"

That unexpected tirade drove the cobwebs from his brain.

"I don't think anything of the sort." For all her scowls, she did not resist when he took her hand. "You're welcome to stay, of course. Just don't expect too much of me."

"As if I ever would! You are lucky I put up with you at all," she said as she pulled the blankets aside and climbed in still as clothed as he was. Completely ignoring his many hints, she kissed him and let her hand roam down his chest.

Rand put up with it in silence. After a moment, he pulled her snug against his side and let himself relax again. Soon his breath was coming slow and deep.

"I do not think Aviendha would know how to treat a man anyway," Nici said abruptly.

*She would at least let me sleep, though. Light!* Rand very much did not say.

"Not like me ..." she went on, as her hand roamed even lower.

As much as he longed for sleep, Rand's body responded to her touch more than he had expected it to. Nici read more into that than he'd intended and soon had her hand inside his breeches, stroking away at his growing member. He didn't reciprocate but he didn't push her away, either.

After a while he felt her wiggling under the blankets. When she climbed on top of him, his hands found her naked from the waist down. Her skin was silky to the touch but he still did no more than brush against her.

Nici did a lot more than that. She was wetter than he'd expected, given his lack of effort. He slid easily inside when she knelt above him. She wasted no time in living up to his earlier teasing. The wild rolling of her hips made him think that, despite it all, he might actually finish that night.

"You definitely know how to treat a man. In bed," he was forced to say.

Nici grinned. "That is why you need me. One of the reasons," she said, ignoring the last bit.

She was plainly enjoying having him inside her, from the sweet sounds that tickled his ear. Her heat was welcome in more ways than one but it was not enough to dispel his weariness. He cupped and caressed her bottom to spur her on but hopes of a swift resolution were in vain. It was quite some time before a long shuddering and a sudden limpness signalled her end.

Sleep beckoned then. He would have gladly dosed off with her warm weight atop him but Nici was of a mind to be considerate. For good or ill. Down she wiggled, to lick her own juices off his cock and then take it in her mouth. The touch of her full lips to his sensitive flesh felt very good, and it was nice of her to want to finish him. Even so, the greater relief was not the moment when he gave her some hot come to swallow but the time not long after when she finally settled down beside him for the night.

“I’d never want to throw you away,” he sighed as he pulled her against him.

“Sleep well and wake,” he thought she might have said.

He was already gone, however. Sleep had finally come, and with it, safely protected dreams, safe from the Wise Ones or anyone else. Not protected from his own thoughts, though. Women invaded them continually, just as Nici had invaded his reality. Many women. Not Isendre, except in a brief nightmare that nearly woke him. By turns he dreamed of Elayne, and Min and Aviendha, of Nynaeve and Anna, Merile and Raine. Saeri. Berelain. Dani and Ilyena. Others. By turns and together. Aside from the nightmare, they were all pleasant dreams.

## CHAPTER 24: Among the Wise Ones



The air was stifling with smoke but Dani and Ilyena still huddled close to the fire that burned in its centre. There was no fireplace and the windows did not open so it had probably been a terrible idea to light it in the first place but it was so *cold!* It was still probably better than being out in the tents, where the Wise Ones would have her if not for her fellow Accepted. She might have promised to obey them, but Ilyena and the others hadn't. And they could hardly forbid her from visiting her friends here in the city. She would have loved to do more than visit, to huddle under the blankets with Ilyena, for warmth and other reasons, but the look on her old friend's face matched the night in temperature.

No grimace crossed her face as she fed another lump of dried dung to the fire, for Dani had grown up on a farm and was no stranger to unpleasant tasks and foul smells. Ilyena was a farmgirl, too, but her lips twisted in distaste. There was a time Dani would have known it was for the smell. Now she wondered if it was her that inspired that look.

*Enough.* "Alright. Out with it. What has been bothering you so much?"

"You say that like it's an easy question to answer," Ilyena said, staring into the fire. "What wouldn't bother someone, about all of this? Tarmon Gai'don is upon us. The Forsaken are loose. Everything is ending ..."

"Only if we let it. And I don't just mean the Last Battle."

"Us."

"Yes."

Ilyena sighed sadly. "It wasn't meant to be this way. How did it come to this? Everything was so simple once. Then ... I don't know anymore. I've ... done things."

"Everyone does things," Dani said with a shrug that she hoped hid her nervousness. Ilyena was silent, so after a while Dani pressed on. "What kind of things do you mean?"

Blue eyes hot with emotion rose to hers. "You've been making a lot of new friends lately. Getting close to a lot of people. Raine. Merile. That Aviendha. Rand ... Which of them is it that you want?"

*All of them*, was the answer that sprung to mind. But how could she possibly admit that? Dani had to turn away from the knowing look in those eyes. Ilyena was no archer but she'd struck her dead centre with that arrow.

Her eyes were drawn to two large white blossoms, resting in a shallow bowl, curl partway closed. They came from a plant called a *segade*, a fat, leafless, leathery thing that bristled with spines. She had come on Aviendha looking at them in her hands that morning; the Aiel woman had given a start when she saw her, then pushed them into Dani's hands, saying she had picked them for her. It could be that there was enough of the Maiden left in Aviendha that she did not want to admit liking flowers. Though come to think of it, she had seen the occasional Maiden wearing a blossom in her hair or on her coat. It could also be, then, that she really had picked them for Dani ... Which might mean ...

"I want you. I always have and always will," she said, trying to shake off her wild thoughts.

"That doesn't answer my question. Do you want to do it Aiel style? All of us together?" Ilyena asked with a mocking smile.

It was shocking to her that her first thought was how wonderful that would be. "Just because it's different from what we're used to doesn't mean it's wrong," she wheedled. Then she scowled, annoying at herself more than at the question. She'd never considered herself a coward, so why couldn't she just confess what she'd done? She straightened her back, set her jaw and took a deep breath.

"If it pleases you—"

Dani stared open mouthed at the intruder. The white-robed woman shuffled into the room on her knees and let the door close behind her. She kept her eyes downcast, her hands folded meekly; she

would have done the same if Dani had hit her. "If it pleases you," she repeated softly, "the Wise One Amys sent me to bring you to the sweat tent."

She wasn't sure if she was relieved or annoyed. Thoughts tumbled one over another but the thought of refusing was not among them. She had promised the Wise Ones to forget that she was Aes Sedai—the easy part, since she was not—and do exactly as she was told. That was the hard part; she had been away from the Tower long enough to become her own mistress again. But Amys had told her flatly that dreamwalking was dangerous even after you knew what you were about and far more so until then. If she would not obey in the waking world, they could not trust her to obey in the dream, and they would not take the responsibility. So she did chores right along with Aviendha, accepted chastisement with as good a grace as she could muster, and hopped whenever Amys or Melaine or Bair said frog. In a manner of speaking. None of them had ever seen a frog. *Not that they'll want anything but for me to hand them their tea.* No, it would be Aviendha's turn to do that tonight.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," Ilyena muttered cryptically.

"We'll talk when I get back."

That sharp smile again. "And what will we talk about I wonder?"

Saying nothing, Dani snatched up a blue quilted silk cloak she had purchased from Kadere—the merchant had sold everything in his wagons to make room for Moiraine's freight, and at very good prices—and strode out of the room with the *gai'shain* at her heels.

"What is your name?" she asked the woman as they hastened towards the outer door.

"Cowinde," was the docile reply.

There were a few fine scars on the woman's tanned face. "You were a Maiden?"

A quick, fierce flash of deep blue eyes told her that her guess was correct, but just as quickly they lowered again. "I am *gai'shain*. Before and after are not now, and only now exists."

"What is your sept and clan?" Usually there was no need to ask, not even with *gai'shain*.

"I serve the Wise One Melaine of the Jhirad sept, of the Goshien Aiel."

Even the thick cloak was not able to keep her warm when they stepped out in the night. She pulled it tight about her and shivered. "When is your time up?"

Cowinde hunched her back, almost huddling on the spot. "I am *gai'shain*."

"But when will you be able to return to your sept, to your own hold?"

"I am *gai'shain*," the woman hoarsely told the ground before them. "If the answer displeases, punish me, but I can give no other."

"Don't be a dope," Dani said sharply. "And straighten up. You aren't a toad."

The white-robed woman obeyed immediately and stood there, submissively awaiting another command. That brief flare of spirit might as well never have been.

Dani took a deep breath. The woman had made her own accommodation with the bleakness. A foolish one, but nothing she could say would change it. Anyway, she was supposed to be on her way to the sweat tent, not talking with Cowinde.

"Lead the way," she said, shaking her head over the woman.

Overhead, the stars were crisp points in the darkness, and the half moon was bright. The Wise Ones' camp was a cluster of two dozen low mounds, not a hundred paces from where one of Rhuidean's paved streets ended in hard, cracked clay and stones. Moonshadows turned the city into strange cliffs and crags. Every tent had its flaps down, and the smells of fires and cooking blended to fill the air.

The other Wise Ones came here for almost daily gatherings, but they spent nights with their own septs. Several even slept in Rhuidean now. But not Bair. This was as close to the city as Bair had been willing to come; if Rand had not been there, doubtless she would have insisted on making camp in the mountains.

Amys, and even Melaine, had been amenable to moving into the city, but Bair had put her foot down, and they acquiesced. Dani supposed that with Rand bringing so much change, Bair wanted to hold on to as much of the old ways as she could.

Dani held the cloak tight with both hands and walked as fast as she could. Icy tendrils curled under the cloak's bottom, swept in under her skirt every time her legs kicked a gap open. Cowinde had to pull her white robes to her knees in order to keep ahead. Dani did not need the *gai'shain*'s guidance, but since the woman had been sent to bring her, she would be shamed and maybe offended if not allowed to.

The sweat tent looked like any other, low and wide, with the flaps lowered all around, except that the smoke hole had been covered. Nearby a fire had burned down to glowing embers scattered over a few rocks the size of a man's head. There was not enough light to define the much smaller shadowed mound beside the tent entrance, but she knew it was neatly folded women's clothes.

Taking one deep, chilling breath, she hurriedly scuffed off her shoes, let her cloak drop, and attacked the laces of her dress. Domani women might be famed for their seductiveness but there was nothing teasing about the way Dani stripped that night. Teeth clenched, she shed every layer as fast as she could, while goosebumps hard as pin pricks rose all over her skin. No sooner had she kicked off her underwear than she dove into the tent.

The shuddering cold came with her before the flap fell shut behind, then steamy heat clamped down, squeezing out sweat that covered her in an instant sheen while she was still gasping and shaking.

The five Wise Ones who were teaching her about dreamwalking sat sweating unconcernedly, their waist-length hair hanging damply. Seana and Dana were stretched out by the fire, both of them visibly aged, neither of them embarrassed by their nakedness. Bair was talking to Melaine, whose green-eyed beauty and red-gold hair made a sharp contrast to the older woman's leathery face and long white tresses. Amys was white-haired, too—or perhaps it was just so pale a yellow that it seemed white—but she did not look old. She and Melaine could both channel—not many Wise Ones could—and she had something of the Aes Sedai look of agelessness about her. Moiraine, seeming slight and small beside the others, also looked unruffled, although sweat rolled down her pale nudity and slicked her dark hair to her scalp, with a regal refusal to acknowledge that she had no clothes on. The Wise Ones were using slim, curved pieces of bronze, called *staera*, to scrape off sweat and the day's dirt.

Aviendha was squatting sweatily beside the big black kettle of hot, sooty rocks in the middle of the tent, carefully using a pair of tongs to move a last stone from a smaller kettle to the larger. That done, she sprinkled water onto the rocks from a gourd, adding to the steam. If she let the steam fall too far, she would be spoken to sharply at the very least. The next time the Wise Ones met in the sweat tent, it would be Dani's turn to tend the rocks. There were other apprentices in the camp now, but none were ever invited to these meetings. Neither was Raine for that matter. Dani took it as an honour, but wondered what they thought she could do for them.

Dani cautiously sat down cross-legged next to Bair—instead of layered rugs, there was only rocky ground, unpleasantly hot, lumpy and damp—and realized with a shock that Aviendha had been switched, and recently. There were red lines across her muscular back and even on her rounded cheeks. When the Aiel woman gingerly took her own place, beside Dani, she did so with a face as stony as the ground, but a face that could not hide her flinch.

This was something Dani did not expect. The Wise Ones exacted a hard discipline—harder even than the Tower, which took some doing—but Aviendha worked at learning to channel with a grim determination. She could not dreamwalk, but she surely put as much effort into absorbing every art of a Wise One as she could ever have put into learning her weapons as a Maiden. Of course, after she confessed to letting Rand know about the Wise Ones watching his dreams, they had made her spend three days digging shoulder-deep holes and filling them in again, but that was one of the few times Aviendha had ever seemed to put a foot wrong. Amys and the others had often held her up to Dani so often as a model of meek obedience and proper behaviour, seemingly thinking those were things she had ever or would ever aspire to.

"You took long enough in coming," Bair said grumpily, while Dani was still gingerly searching for a comfortable seat. Her voice was thin and reedy, but a reed of iron. She continued to scrape her arms with a *staera*.

"I was busy. Your messenger interrupted a meeting," Dani said.

Bair sniffed. "You are Aes Sedai beyond the Dragonwall, but here you are yet a pupil, and a pupil does not dally. When I send for Aviendha, or send her for something, she runs, even if all I want is a pin. You could do much worse than to pattern yourself after her."

Dani held on to her calm, but she did give the old woman a sharp look. "I won't be running to fetch any pins. You have *gai'shain* for that." If they chose to end the lessons, so be it. That was not what she'd agreed to. She would regret it, though. She'd come to enjoy being among them, and thought of them as friends. Especially Aviendha. She sneaked a glance at the Aiel girl and was surprised to find her looking thoughtful.

"The girl will learn, Bair, or she will not," Melaine said irritably. "Instruct her in promptness later, if she still needs it." Seemingly no more than ten or twelve years older than Aviendha, she usually sounded as if she had a burr under her skirts. Maybe she was sitting on a sharp rock. She would not move if she was; she would expect the rock to move. "I tell you again, Moiraine Sedai, the Aiel follow He Who Comes With the Dawn, not the White Tower."

Obviously, Dani was meant to pick up what they were talking about as they went on.

"It may be," Amys said in a level voice, "that the Aiel will serve the Aes Sedai again, but that time has not come yet, Moiraine Sedai." Her scraping barely paused as she eyed the Aes Sedai calmly.

It would come, Dani knew, now that Moiraine was aware that some of the Wise Ones could channel. Aes Sedai would be journeying into the Waste to find girls who could be taught, and would almost certainly be trying to take any Wise One with the ability back to the Tower, too. Once she had worried about the Wise Ones being browbeaten and dominated, hauled away whenever they wanted; Aes Sedai never let any woman who could channel run free of the Tower for long. She did not worry anymore, though the Wise Ones themselves seemed to. Amys and Melaine could match any Aes Sedai will for will, as they showed every day with Moiraine. Bair could very likely make even Siuan Sanche jump through hoops, and Bair could not even channel.

For that matter, Bair was not the strongest-willed Wise One. That honour went to an even older woman, Sorilea, of the Jarra sept of the Chareen Aiel. The Wise One of Shende Hold could channel less than most Novices, but she was as likely to send another Wise One on an errand as a *gai'shain*. And they went. No, there was no reason to distress herself over Wise Ones being bullied.

"It is understandable that you wish to spare your lands," Bair put in, "but Rand al'Thor obviously does not mean to lead us to punish. No-one who submits to He Who Comes With the Dawn and the Aiel, will be harmed." So that was it. Of course.

"It is not only sparing lives or lands that concerns me." Moiraine made wiping sweat from her brow with one finger into a queenly gesture, but her voice sounded nearly as tight as Melaine's. "If you allow this, it will be disastrous. Years of planning are coming to fruition, and he means to ruin it all."

"Plans of the White Tower," Amys said, so smoothly she might have been agreeing. "Those plans have nothing to do with us. We, and the other Wise Ones, must consider what is right for the Aiel. We will see that the Aiel do what is best for the Aiel."

Dani wondered what the clan chiefs would say about that. Of course, they frequently complained that the Wise Ones meddled in matters that were not theirs, so perhaps it would not come as a surprise. The chiefs all seemed to be hard-willed, intelligent men, but she believed they had as much chance against the combined Wise Ones as a horse had of flying.

"If Rand—" she began, but Bair stepped on her firmly.

"We will hear what you have to say later, girl. Your knowledge of Rand al'Thor is valuable, but you will hold your peace and listen until you are bidden to speak. And stop looking sullen, or I will dose you with bluespine tea."

Dani grimaced. Respect for the Aes Sedai, though a respect between equals, included but little for the pupil, even one they believed was Aes Sedai. She kept her tongue still, in any case. Aviendha gave her a comforting pat on the arm.

"You believe it will not be a catastrophe for the Aiel as well?" It must have been difficult to sound as cool as a winter stream when you glistened from head to foot with condensed steam and your own sweat, but Moiraine apparently had no difficulty. It was ... impressive. And affecting. "It will be the Aiel War all over again. You will kill and burn and loot towns as you did then, until you have turned every man and woman against you."

"The fifth is our due, Aes Sedai," Melaine said, throwing her long hair back over her shoulder so she could work a *staera* across a smooth shoulder. Even heavy and damp with the steam, her hair glistened like silk. "We took no more even from the treekillers." Her glance at Moiraine was too bland not to be significant; they knew she was Cairhienin. "Your kings and queens take as much in their taxes."

"And when the nations turn against you?" Moiraine persisted. "In the Aiel War, the nations united turned you back. That can and will happen again, with great loss of life on both sides."

"None of us fears death, Aes Sedai," Amys told her, smiling gently as if explaining something to a child. "Life is a dream from which we all must wake before we can dream again. Besides, only

four clans crossed the Dragonwall under Janduin. Six are here already, and you say Rand al'Thor means to take all of the clans."

"And Janduin was not turned back," Dana said firmly. "He accomplished his mission and so had no more interest in your people."

"The Prophecy of Rhuidean says he will break us." The spark in Melaine's green eyes could have been for Moiraine or because she was not as resigned as she sounded. "What does it matter whether it is here or beyond the Dragonwall?"

"You will lose him the support of every nation west of the Dragonwall," Moiraine said. She looked as calm as ever, but an edge in her voice said she was ready to chew rocks. "He must have their support!"

"He has the support of the Aiel nation," Bair told her in that fragile, unyielding voice. She emphasized her words by gesturing with the slim metal blade. "The clans have never been a nation, but now he makes us one."

"We will not help you turn him in this, Moiraine Sedai," Amys added just as firmly.

"You may leave us now, Aes Sedai, if it pleases you," Bair said. "We have discussed what you wished to discuss as much as we will tonight." It was politely said, but a dismissal all the same.

"I will leave you," Moiraine replied, once again all serenity. She sounded as though it were her suggestion, her decision. By this time she was used to the Wise Ones making it clear they were not under the Tower's authority. "I have other matters to see to."

That much had to be the truth, of course. Very likely something concerning Rand. Dani knew better than to ask; if Moiraine wanted her to know, she would tell her, and if not ... If not, she would be handed some slippery bit of Aes Sedai avoidance of a lie, or else be told bluntly that it was none of her business. Moiraine knew that "Daniele Sedai of the Green Ajah" was a fraud. She tolerated the lie in public, but otherwise she let Dani know her proper place whenever it suited her.

As soon as Moiraine had gone, in a burst of cold air, Amys said, "Aviendha, pour the tea."

The young Aiel woman gave a startled jerk, and her mouth opened twice before she said faintly, "I must brew it yet." With that she scurried out of the tent on all fours. The second blast from outside dimmed the steam.

Dani jerked her gaze away. Ilyena's earlier admonishment was just too true. She couldn't seem to stop her eyes from wandering lately. Perhaps it was finally being free of the Tower and all its restrictions. For years she had tried to be the good Novice and later the good Accepted. Now ... she didn't know what she wanted to be.

The Wise Ones exchanged looks that were almost as surprised as Aviendha's. And Dani's; Aviendha always did even the most onerous chores efficiently, if not always with a good grace. Something must be troubling her greatly, to make her forget a thing like making tea. The Wise Ones always wanted tea.

"More steam, girl," Melaine said.

That was her, Dani realized, with Aviendha gone. Hurriedly splashing more water on the rocks, she channelled to heat the stones further, and the kettle, until she heard stones cracking and the kettle itself radiated heat like a furnace. The Aiel might be used to leaping from roasting in their own juices to freezing, but she was not. Hot, thick clouds rolled up to fill the tent. Amys nodded approvingly; she and Melaine could see the glow of *saidar* surrounding her, of course, though she herself could not. Melaine merely went on scraping with her *staera*.

Letting go of the True Source, she sat back and leaned close to Bair to whisper, "Has Aviendha done something very wrong?" She did not know how Aviendha would feel about it, but she saw no reason to embarrass her, even behind her back.

Bair had no such compunctions. "You mean her stripes?" she said in a normal voice. "She came to me and said she had lied twice today, though she would not say to whom or about what. It was her own affair, of course, so long as she did not lie to a Wise One, but she claimed her honour required that a *toh* must be met."

"She *asked* you to ..." Dani gasped, but could not finish.

Bair nodded as if it were not very much out of the ordinary at all. "I gave her a few extra for troubling me with it. If *ji* was involved, her obligation is not to me. Very likely her so-called lies were nothing anyone but a *Far Dareis Mai* would worry about. Maidens, even former Maidens, are

sometimes as fussy as men.” Amys gave her a flat look that was plain even in the thick steam. Like Aviendha, Amys had been *Far Dareis Mai* before becoming a Wise One.

Dani had never met an Aiel who was not fussy about *ji'e'toh*, the way she saw it. But this! She was just glad Ilyena wasn’t here.

Apparently, Bair had already put the matter out of her mind. “There are more Lost Ones in the Three-fold Land than I can ever remember before,” she said to the tent at large. That was what the Aiel had always called the Tinkers, the *Tuatha'an*.

“They flee the troubles beyond the Dragonwall.” The sneer in Melaine’s voice was clear.

“I have heard,” Amys said slowly, “that some of those who run after the bleakness have gone to the Lost Ones and asked to be taken in.” A long silence followed. All the Aiel knew now that the *Tuatha'an* had the same descent as themselves, that they had broken away before the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World into the Waste, but if anything the knowledge had only deepened their aversion for some. Poor Merile had gone from being ignored to being cursed openly. For others, however, the *Tuatha'an* must have come to be seen as the real Aiel.

“What does the Lost One who follows Rand al’Thor have to say of this?” Bair asked.

Quite a bit, which they’d know if they didn’t avoid her so determinedly. “Merile is conflicted about the Way of the Leaf herself. She certainly hasn’t been lecturing any of the people who’ve asked her about it”

“But some do ask her,” Dana said grimly.

“He brings change,” Melaine whispered harshly into the steam.

“I thought you were reconciled to the changes he brings,” Dani said, sympathy welling up in her voice. It must be very hard to have your whole life stood on end. She half-expected to be told to hold her tongue again, but no-one did.

“Reconciled,” Bair said, as though tasting the word. “Better to say we endure them, as best we can.”

“He transforms everything.” Amys sounded troubled. “Rhuidean. The Lost Ones. The bleakness and telling what should not have been told.” The Wise Ones—all the Aiel, for that matter—still had difficulty speaking of that.

“The Maidens cluster about him as though they owe more to him than to their own clans,” Bair added. “For the first time ever, they have allowed a man beneath a Roof of the Maidens.” For a moment Amys looked about to say something, but whatever she knew about the inner workings of *Far Dareis Mai* she shared with no-one but those who were or had been Maidens of the Spear.

“The chiefs no longer listen to us as they did,” Melaine muttered. “Oh, they ask our advice as always—they have not become complete fools—but Bael will no longer tell me what he has said to Rand al’Thor, or Rand al’Thor to him. He says I must ask Rand al’Thor, who tells me to ask Bael. The *Car'a'carn*, I can do nothing about, but Bael … He has always been a stubborn, infuriating man yet now he is beyond all bounds. Sometimes I want to thump his head with a stick.” Amys and Bair chuckled as if that were a fine joke. Or perhaps they just wanted to laugh to forget the changes for a time.

“There are only three things you can do with a man like that,” Bair chortled. “Stay away from him, kill him, or marry him.”

Melaine stiffened, her sun-dark face going red. For a moment Dani thought the golden-haired Wise One was about to let fly words hotter than her face. Then a biting gust announced Aviendha’s return carrying a worked silver tray holding a yellow-glazed teapot, delicate cups of golden Sea Folk porcelain, and a stone jar of honey.

It was quite the sight, that strong, proud woman walking naked past, carrying a tray like the maddest kind of maid. Dani couldn’t help but stare longingly. It was not that she intended to cheat on Ilyena again, she told herself hastily, but Aviendha was a good friend, and a stunningly beautiful woman. It would have been nice to be noticed by her, that was all.

Here she was, her body more toned than it had been in recent memory and glistening with sweat, yet Aviendha walked by her and with all the heed she would have given a rock on the side of the road. It was a good bit less than flattering.

She took some small comfort in the fact that Aviendha paid as little attention to the other women in the sweat tent. Maybe she simply wasn’t inclined towards girls. But Liah had joked that

Aviendha had never even kissed a boy so ... Dani was at a loss. Had the woman no interest in companionship of that sort at all?

Oblivious to Dani's gaze, the former Maiden shivered as she poured—no doubt she had not bothered to wrap anything around herself out there—and hurriedly passed around the cups and the honey. She did not fill cups for herself and Dani until Amys told her she could, of course.

"More steam," Melaine said; the chill air seemed to have cooled her temper. Aviendha set down her cup untouched and scrambled for the gourd, plainly trying to make up for her lapse with the tea.

"Daniele," Amys said, sipping her tea, "how would Rand al'Thor take it if Aviendha asked to sleep in his sleeping chamber?" Aviendha froze with the gourd in her hands.

"In his—?" Dani gasped. "You cannot ask her to do such a thing! You cannot!"

"Fool girl," Bair muttered. "We do not ask her to share his blankets. But will he think that is what she asks? Will he even allow it? Men are strange creatures at the best, and he was not raised among us, so he is stranger still."

"He certainly would think that very thing!" Dani scoffed, then recalled her own indiscretions and went on more slowly, "What is it you want of him?" It couldn't just be sex. Amys would surely know what was going on with him and the Maidens. Marriage? Most likely. To be tied to the Aiel by marriage ...

"I ask that you not require this of me," Aviendha said, sounding more humble than Dani would have believed she could. She was sprinkling water in jerky motions, sending up increasing clouds of steam. "I have been learning a great deal the past days, not having to spend time with him. Since you have allowed Daniele and Moiraine Sedai to help me with channelling, I learn even faster. Not that they teach any better than you, of course," she added hastily, "but I want very much to learn."

"You will still learn," Melaine told her. "You will not have to stay every hour with him. As long as you apply yourself, your lessons will not be much slowed. You do not study while you sleep."

"I cannot," Aviendha mumbled, head down over the water gourd. More loudly, and more firmly, she added, "I will not." Her head came up, and her eyes were blue-green fire. "I will not be there when he summons that flip-skirt Isendre to his blankets again!"

Dani gaped at her. "Isendre!" She had seen—and heartily disapproved of—the scandalous way the Maidens kept the woman naked, but this! "You can't really mean he—"

"Be silent!" Bair snapped like a whip. Her blue-eyed stare could have chipped stone. "Both of you! You are both young, but even the Maidens should know men can be fools, especially when they are not attached to a woman who can guide them."

His aunt Dana did not share their anger. "Rand has no shortage of women who seek to catch his eye. I do not think the thief would be able to gain his interest. And she certainly would not hold it."

Seana nodded agreement. "He has nothing good to say of her."

"I am glad," Amys said dryly, "of that and to see you no longer hold your emotions so tightly, Aviendha. Maidens are as foolish as men when it comes to that; I remember it well, and it embarrasses me still. Letting emotions go clouds judgment for a moment, but holding them in clouds it always. Just be sure you do not release them too often, or when it is best to keep control of them."

Melaine leaned forward on her hands, until it seemed the sweat dripping from her face must fall on the hot kettle. "You know your fate, Aviendha. You will be a Wise One of great strength and great authority, and more besides. You already have a strength in you. It saw you through your first test, and it will see you through this."

"My honour," Aviendha said hoarsely, then swallowed, unable to go on. She crouched there, huddling around the gourd as if it contained the honour she wanted to protect.

"The Pattern does not see *ji'e'toh*," Bair told her, with only a hint of sympathy, if that. "Only what must and will be. Men and Maidens struggle against fate even when it is clear the Pattern weaves on despite their struggles, but you are no longer *Far Dareis Mai*. You must learn to ride fate. Only by surrendering to the Pattern can you begin to have some control over the course of your own life. If you fight, the Pattern will still force you, and you will find only misery where you might have found contentment instead."

To Dani, that sounded very much like what she had been taught concerning the One Power. To control *saidar*, you first had to surrender to it. Fight, and it would come wildly, or overwhelm you; surrender and guide it gently, and it did as you wished.

"Will Rand al'Thor refuse to allow her?" Amys asked. "We cannot force him." Bair and Melaine were looking at Dani as intently as Amys. Aviendha was studying her toes in sulky resignation; she knew the Wise Ones would get what they wanted, one way or another.

"I don't know," Dani said slowly. "I'm still getting to know him. If you give him a good reason, perhaps. I think he likes Aviendha." The young Aiel woman heaved a heavy sigh without looking up.

"A good reason," Bair snorted. "When I was a girl, any man would have been overjoyed to have a young woman show that much interest in him. He would have gone to pick the flowers for her bridal wreath himself." Aviendha started, and glared at the Wise Ones with some of her old spirit. "Well, we will find a reason even someone raised in the wetlands can accept."

"It is several nights before your agreed meeting in *Tel'aran'rhiod*," Amys said. "With Nynaeve is it?"

"That one could learn much," Bair put in, "if she were not so stubborn."

"Your nights are free until then," Melaine said. "That is, unless you have been entering *Tel'aran'rhiod* without us."

"Of course not," she told them. She was well aware of the dangers.

"Have you succeeded in finding either Nynaeve's or Elayne's dreams?" Amys asked.

"No, Amys."

Finding someone else's dreams was a lot harder than stepping into *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, especially if they were any distance away. It was easier both the closer they were and the better you knew them. The Wise Ones still demanded that she not enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* without at least one of them along, but someone else's dream was maybe just as dangerous in its own way. In *Tel'aran'rhiod* she was in control of herself and of things around her to a large degree, unless one of the Wise Ones decided to take over; her command of *Tel'aran'rhiod* was increasing, but she still could not match any of them, with their long experience. In another's dream, though, you were a part of that dream; it took all you could muster not to behave as the dreamer wanted, be as their dream took you, and still sometimes it did not work. The Wise Ones had been very careful when watching Rand's dreams never to enter fully. Even so they insisted she learn. If they were to teach dreamwalking, they meant to teach all that they knew of it.

She was not reluctant, exactly, but the few times they had let her practice, with themselves and once with Rhuarc, had been chastening experiences. The Wise Ones had some considerable mastery over their own dreams, so what had happened there—to show her the dangers, they said—had all been their doing, but it had been a shock to learn that Rhuarc saw her as a little more than a child, like his youngest daughters. And her own control had wavered for one fatal moment. After that she had *been* little more than a child; she still could not look at the man without remembering being given a doll for studying hard. And being as pleased with the gift as with his approval. Amys had had to come and take her away from happy play with it. Amys knowing was bad enough, but she suspected that Rhuarc remembered some of it, too.

"You must keep trying," Amys said. "You can reach them, even as far as they are. And it will do you no harm to learn how they see you."

She was not so sure of that herself. Elayne was the heir to a throne, and Nynaeve was as waspish and demanding as they came. Seeing herself reflected through their eyes was unlikely to be fun.

"Tonight I will sleep away from the tents," Amys went on. "Not far. You should be able to find me easily, if you try. If I do not dream of you, we will speak of it in the morning."

Dani suppressed a groan. Amys had guided her to Rhuarc's dreams—she herself had remained only an instant, barely long enough to reveal that Rhuarc still saw her, unchanged, as the young woman he had married—and the Wise Ones had always been in the same tent before when she tried.

"Well," Bair said, rubbing her hands, "we have heard what needed to be heard. The rest of you can remain if you wish, but I feel clean enough to go to my blankets. I am not so young as the rest of you." Young or not, she could probably run any of them into the ground, then carry them the rest of the way.

As Bair was getting to her feet, Melaine spoke, and strangely for her, she was hesitant. "I need ... I must ask your help, Bair. And you, Amys." The older woman settled back, and both she and

Amys looked at Melaine expectantly. "I ... would ask you to approach Dorindha for me." The last words came out in a rush. Amys smiled widely, and Bair cackled aloud. Aviendha seemed to understand, too, and was startled, but Dani was lost.

Then Bair laughed. "You always said you did not need another husband and did not want one. I have buried three, and would not mind another. They are very useful when the night is cold."

"A woman can change her mind." Melaine's voice was firm enough, but belied by the deep flush in her cheeks. "I cannot stay away from Bael, and I cannot kill him. If Dorindha will accept me as her sister-wife, I will make my bridal wreath to lay at Bael's feet."

"What if he steps on it instead of picking it up?" Bair wanted to know. Amys fell back, laughing and slapping her thighs.

Dani did not think there was much danger of that, not the way Aiel customs ran. If Dorindha decided she wanted Melaine for sister-wife, Bael would not have much say in the matter. It no longer shocked her, precisely, that a man could have two wives. Not exactly. *Different lands mean different customs*, she reminded herself firmly. And if the right people were involved, she imagined it might be a rather enjoyable experience.

"I ask you to act as my first-sisters in this. I think that Dorindha likes me well enough."

As soon as Melaine spoke those words, the other women's hilarity changed to something else. They still laughed, but they hugged her and told her how happy they were for her, and how well she would do with Bael. Amys and Bair, at least, took Dorindha's acceptance for granted. Dana took a more sombre view, while Seana had some ribald things to say about Bael. The Wise Ones departed all but arm-in-arm, still laughing and giggling like girls. Not before telling Dani and Aviendha to straighten the tent, though.

"Daniele, could a woman of your land accept a sister-wife?" Aviendha asked, using a stick to push the cover off the smoke hole.

Dani wished she had left that duty till last; the heat began to dissipate immediately. "I don't know," she said, quickly gathering the cups and the honey jar. The *staera* went onto the tray, too. Could *she*? If the offer was made, by Rand and Ilyena, say, what would be her answer? "I suppose it depends on the people involved, and what they think of each other."

Aviendha only grunted and began pushing up the side flaps.

Teeth chattering as loudly as the rattle of teacups and bronze blades on the tray, Dani scurried outside. The Wise Ones were dressing unhurriedly, as though this were a balmy night and they in sleeping chambers in some hold. A white-robed figure, pale in the moonlight, took the tray from her, and she quickly began searching for her clothes. They were nowhere among the remaining garments on the ground.

"I had your things taken to your roof," Bair said, tying the laces of her blouse. "You will not need them yet."

Dani's stomach sank into her feet. It was a long walk back to Ilyena's place. Hopping in place, she flapped her arms in a futile effort for warmth; at least they did not tell her to stop. Abruptly she realized the snowy-robed figure bearing the tray away was too tall for even an Aiel woman. Gritting her teeth, she glared at the Wise Ones, who seemed not to care if she froze to death jumping up and down. To the Aielwomen it might not matter that a man had seen them with no clothes on, at least if he was *gai'shain*, but it did to her!

In a moment, Aviendha joined them and, seeing her leaping about, merely stood there without any effort to find her own garments. She showed no more effect of the cold than the Wise Ones.

"Now," Bair said, settling her shawl on her shoulders. "You, Aviendha, are not only stubborn as a man, you cannot remember a simple task you have done many times. You, Dani, are just as stubborn, and you still think you can linger in your first-sister's roof when you are summoned. Let us hope running fifty times around the camp will temper your stubbornness, clear your minds, and remind you of how to answer a summons or do a chore. Off with you."

Without a word, Aviendha immediately began loping toward the edge of the camp, easily dodging dark-shrouded tent ropes. Dani hesitated only a moment before following, while telling herself it was not because she enjoyed seeing Aviendha in motion. The Aiel woman kept her pace down so she could catch up. The night air froze her, and the cracked stony clay underfoot was just as cold, and tried to catch her toes besides. Aviendha ran with effortless ease.

As they reached the last tent and turned southward, Aviendha said, "Do you know why I study so hard?" Neither the cold nor running had made an impression on her voice.

Dani was shivering so hard she could barely speak. "No. Why?"

"Because Bair and the others always point to you, and tell me how easily you learn, how you never have to have something explained twice. They say I ought to be more like you." She gave Dani a sidelong glance, and Dani found herself sharing a giggle as they ran. "That is part of the reason. The things I am learning to do..." Aviendha shook her head, wonderment plain even by moonlight. "And the Power itself. I have never felt like that. So alive. I can smell the faintest scent feel the slightest stir in the air."

"It is dangerous to hold on too long or too much," Dani said. Running did seem to warm her a little, though now and again a shudder ran through her. "I've told you that, and I know the Wise Ones have, too."

Aviendha merely sniffed. "Do you think I would stab my own foot with a spear?" For a time they ran in silence.

"Did Rand really ...?" Dani said finally. The cold had nothing to do with her difficulty getting the words out; in fact, she was beginning to sweat again. "I mean ... Isendre?" She knew he was promiscuous, but if he had no standards at all that would change things. *Change what?*

At last Aviendha said slowly, "I do not think that he did." She sounded angry. "But why would she ignore switchings if he has shown no interest in her? She is a milk-hearted wetlander who waits for men to come to her. I saw how he looked at her, though he tried to hide it. He enjoyed looking at her."

Dani wondered if Aviendha ever thought of her as a milk-hearted wetlander. Probably not, or they would not be friends. But Aviendha had never learned to worry if what she said might hurt someone; she would probably be surprised to learn that Dani could even think of being hurt.

"The way the Maidens make her dress," Dani admitted, "any man would look. And many women as well." Reminded that she herself was in the open without any clothes, her breasts as unbound as those that bounced with each step Aviendha took, she stumbled and almost fell as she looked around anxiously. The night was empty as far as she could make out. Even the Wise Ones were already back in their tents. Warm in their blankets. She was sweating, but the beads seemed to want to freeze as soon as they appeared.

"He belongs to Elayne," Aviendha said fiercely, completely ignoring the hint.

"I admit I don't know your customs fully, but I doubt his are the same as yours. Even your Aielmen have the right to say no, if they're asked. Far Madding is the only place I know of where that's not the case, and Rand's no Far Maddinger. He is not betrothed to Elayne." Besides, Elayne was as aware of Rand's proclivities as she was. And hadn't turned her nose up at him the way she might have expected. The way Dani probably should be. And wasn't.

"You and she are near-sisters, as you and I are," Aviendha protested, slowing a step before picking it up again. "Did you not ask me to look after him for her? Do you not want her to have him?"

Light! She doubted she'd ask that if she knew what Rand and Dani had done. Or maybe she would, Aiel ways being what they were. And what would be the answer? Elayne was a good person, especially given where she'd been raised. She was nowhere near as spoiled or lazy as Dani had expected her to be, back when they'd been introduced.

"I want them both to have what happiness they can," she sighed. Which would be hard, in love with the Dragon Reborn as she was. Elayne was. Elayne.

"He belongs to her," Aviendha said determinedly.

Dani sighed again. Aviendha simply did not want to understand any customs but her own. The Aiel woman was still shocked that Elayne would not ask Rand to marry her, that a man could ask that question. "I'm sure the Wise Ones will listen to reason tomorrow. They can't make you sleep in a man's bedchamber."

The other woman looked at her in clear surprise. For a moment her grace left her, and she stubbed a toe on the uneven ground; the mishap brought a few curses that would have made even Kadere's wagon drivers listen with interest—and made Bair reach for the bluespine—but she did not stop running. "I do not understand why that upsets you so," she said when the last curse died. "I have slept next to a man many times on raids, even sharing blankets for warmth if the night was very cold, but it disturbs you that I will sleep within ten feet of him. Is this part of your customs? Do you not

trust Rand al'Thor? Or is it me you do not trust?" Her voice had sunk to a concerned whisper by the end.

"Of course I trust you," Dani protested heatedly. "And him. It's just that ..." She trailed off uncertain how to go on. Aiel notions of propriety were sometimes stricter than Amadician's but in other ways they were as lax as any Tinker. "Aviendha, if your honour is involved somehow ..." This was touchy ground. "Surely if you explain to the Wise Ones, they will not make you go against your honour."

"There is nothing to explain," the other woman said flatly.

"I know I don't understand *ji'e'toh* ..." Dani began, and Aviendha laughed.

"You say you do not understand, Aes Sedai, yet you show that you live by it." Dani regretted maintaining that lie with her—it had been hard work to get Aviendha to call her simply Daniele, and sometimes she slipped back—but it had to be kept with everyone if it was to hold with anyone. "You are Aes Sedai," Aviendha continued, "but you said that you would obey, so you run when they say run. You may not know *ji'e'toh*, but you follow it."

Dani found herself smiling in the darkness. The run must have done more to banish the cold that she'd realised, for a warmth settled over her. It was nice to feel she was fitting in. Ilyena's voice, and the question she'd asked came back to haunt her suddenly. She hadn't known her answer back then but it came easily now. She'd come to enjoy being among the Aiel. Their ways spoke to her. Appealed to her even. If she'd had the option, she'd have stayed and embraced their ways entirely. Even, no especially, their marriage customs. Aviendha, for example, would make a fine sister-wife.

They were coming back to where they had begun. As her foot hit the spot, Dani said, "That's one," and ran on through the darkness with no-one to see but Aviendha, no-one to say whether she went back to her bed right then. Aviendha would not have told, but it never occurred to Dani to stop short of the fifty.

## CHAPTER 25: To Hunt the Hunters



Rand woke in near darkness and lay there beneath his blankets trying to think of what had wakened him. It had been something. Not Nici; she slept soundly in the bed beside him. Not the dream; he had been teaching Aviendha how to swim, in a pond in the Waterwood back home in the Theren. Something else. Then it came again, like a faint whiff of a foul miasma creeping under the door. Not a smell at all, really; a sense of otherness, but that was how it felt. Rank, like something dead a week in stagnant water. It faded again, but not all the way this time.

Tossing aside his blankets, he stood up, wrapping himself in *saidin*. Inside the void, filled with the Power, he could feel his body shiver, but the cold seemed in another place from where he was. Cautiously he pulled open the door and stepped out, leaving Nici sleeping soundly behind. Arched windows at either end of the corridor let in falls of moonlight. Nothing moved, but he could feel ... something ... coming closer. Something evil. It felt like the taint that roared through him on the Power.

One hand went to his coat pocket, to the small carved figure of a round little man holding a sword across his knees. An *angreal*; with that he could channel more of the Power than even he could safely handle unaided. He thought it would not be necessary. Whoever had sent this attack against him did not know who they were dealing with, now. They should never have let him wake.

For a moment, he hesitated. He could take the fight to whatever had been sent against him, but he thought it was still below him. Down where the Maidens were still sleeping, by the silence. With luck, it would not bother them, unless he rushed down to battle it in their midst. That would surely wake them, and they would not stand by and watch. Lan said that you should choose your ground, if you could, and make your enemy come to you.

Smiling, he raced the thud of his boots up the nearest curving stairway, on upward, until he reached the top floor. The highest level of the building was one large chamber with a slightly domed ceiling and scattered thin columns fluted in spirals. Glassless arched windows all around flooded every corner with moonlight. The dust and grit and sand on the floor still faintly showed his own footprints, from the one time he had come up here, and no other mark. It was perfect.

Striding to the centre of the room, he planted himself atop the mosaic there, the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai, ten feet across. It was an apt place. "Under this sign will he conquer". That was what the Prophecy of Rhuidean said of him. He stood straddling the sinuous dividing line, one boot on the black teardrop that was now called the Dragon's Fang and used to represent evil, the other on the white now called the Flame of Tar Valon. Some men said it stood for the Light. An appropriate place to meet this attack, between Light and darkness.

The fetid feel grew stronger, and a burned sulphur smell filled the air. Suddenly things moved, slinking away from the stairs like moonshadows, along the outside of the room. Slowly they resolved into three black dogs, darker than night and big as ponies. Eyes shining silver, they circled him warily. With the Power in him, he could hear their hearts beat, like deep drums pounding. He could not hear them breathe, though; perhaps they did not.

He channelled, and a sword was in his hands, its slightly curving, heron-marked blade seeming hammered out of fire. He had expected Myrddraal, or something even worse than the Eyeless, but for dogs, even Shadowspawn dogs, the sword would be enough. Whoever had sent them did not know him. Lan said he had very nearly reached the level of a blademaster, now, and the Warder was sparing enough with praise to make him think he might have passed on to that level already.

With snarls like bones being ground to dust, the dogs hurtled at him from three sides, faster than galloping horses.

He did not move until they were almost on him; then he flowed, one with the sword, move to move, as though dancing. In the blink of an eye the sword form called Whirlwind on the Mountain became The Wind Blows Over the Wall became Unfolding the Fan. Great black heads flew apart from black bodies, their dripping teeth, like burnished steel, still bared as they bounced across the

floor. He was already stepping from the mosaic as the dark forms collapsed in twitching, bleeding heaps.

Laughing to himself, he let the sword go, though he held on to *saidin*, to the raging Power, the sweetness and the taint. Contempt slid along the outside of the void. Dogs. Shadowspawn, certainly, but still just ... Laughter died.

Slowly, the dead dogs and their heads were melting, settling into pools of liquid shadow that quivered slightly, as if alive. Their blood, fanned across the floor, trembled. Suddenly the smaller pools flowed across the floor in viscous streams to merge with the larger, which oozed away from the mosaic to mound higher and higher, until the three huge black dogs stood there once more, slavering and snarling as they gathered massive haunches under them.

He did not know why he felt surprise, dim outside the emptiness. Dogs, yes, but Shadowspawn. Whoever had sent them had not been as careless as he had thought. But they still did not know him.

Instead of reaching for the sword again, he channelled as he remembered doing once long ago. Howling, the huge dogs leaped, and a thick shaft of white light shot from his hands, like molten steel, like liquid fire. He swept it across the springing creatures; for an instant they became strange shadows of themselves, all colours reversed, and then they were made of sparkling motes that broke apart, smaller and smaller, until there was nothing.

He let go of the thing he had made, with a grim smile. A purple bar of light still seemed to cross his vision in afterimage.

Across the great chamber a piece of one of the columns crashed to the floor tiles. Where that bar of light—or whatever it had been; not light, exactly—had swung, neat slices were gone from the columns. A gaping swath cut half the width of the wall behind them.

“Did any of them bite you, or bleed on you?”

He spun at the sound of Moiraine’s voice; absorbed in what he had done, he had not heard her come up the stairs. She stood clutching her skirts with both hands, peering at him, face lost in moonshadow. She would have sensed the things the same way he did, but to be here so quickly she must have run. “The Maidens let you pass? Have you become *Far Dareis Mai*, Moiraine?”

“They grant me some privileges of a Wise One,” she said in a rush, impatience raw in her usually melodious voice. “I told the guards I had to speak with you urgently. Now, answer me! Did the Darkhounds bite you, or bleed on you? Did their saliva touch you?”

“No,” he answered slowly. Darkhounds. The little he knew he had gotten from old stories, the sort used to frighten children in the southlands. Some grown-ups believed, too. “Why should a bite worry you? You could Heal it. Does this mean the Dark One is free?” Enclosed in the void as he was, even fear was distant.

The tales he had heard said the Darkhounds ran the night in the Wild Hunt, with the Dark One himself the hunter; they left no print on even the softest dirt, only on stone, and they would not stop until you faced and defeated them or put running water between you. Crossroads were supposed to be particularly dangerous places to meet them, and the time just after sunset or just before sunrise. He had seen enough old stories walking by now to believe that any of it could be true.

“No, not that, Rand.” She seemed to be regaining her self-control; her voice was silver chimes again, calm and cool. “They are only another kind of Shadowspawn, something that should never have been made. But their bite is death as surely as a dagger in the heart, and I do not think I could have Healed such a wound before it killed you. Their blood, even their saliva, is poison. A drop on the skin can kill, slowly, with great pain at the end. You are lucky there were only three. Unless you killed more before I arrived? Their packs are usually larger, as many as ten or twelve, or so say the scraps left from the War of the Shadow.”

Larger packs. He was not the only target in Rhuidean for one of the Forsaken ...

“We must speak of what you used to kill them,” Moiraine began, but he was already running as hard as he could, ignoring her cries to know where he was going and why.

Down flights of stairs, through darkened corridors where sleepy Maidens, roused by the pounding boots, peered at him in consternation from moonlit rooms. Through the front doors, where Lan stood restlessly with the two women on guard, his colour-shifting Warder’s cloak about his shoulders, making parts of him seem to blend into the night.

"Where is Moiraine?" he shouted as Rand dashed by, but Rand leaped down the broad steps two at a time without replying.

The half-healed wound in his side clenched like a fist, pain he was only vaguely aware of inside the void, by the time he reached the building he sought. It stood at the very edge of Rhuidean, far from the plaza, as far from the camp Moiraine shared with the Wise Ones as it was possible to be and remain in the city. The upper floors had collapsed in a mound of rubble that fanned out onto the cracked earth beyond the pavement. Only the bottom two floors remained whole. Refusing his body's efforts to hunch over around the pain, he went in, still at a dead run.

Once the great antechamber, encircled by a stone balcony, had been tall; now it was taller, open to the night sky, its pale stone floor strewn with rubble from the collapse. In the moonshadows beneath the balcony, three Darkhounds were up on their hind legs, clawing and chewing at a bronze-clad door that shivered under their assault. The smell of burned sulphur hung strong in the air.

Remembering what had happened before, Rand darted to one side as he channelled, the shaft of liquid white fire streaking by the door as it destroyed the Shadowspawn. He had tried to make it less this time, to confine the destruction to the Darkhounds, but the thick wall at the far end of the chamber had a shadowed hole in it. Not all the way through, he thought—it was hard to tell by moonlight—but he would have to fine his control of this weapon.

The bronze sheathing on the door was tattered and torn as though the teeth and toenails of the Darkhounds really had been steel; lamplight shone through a number of small holes. There were pawprints in the floor-stones, but surprisingly few. Releasing *saidin*, he found a place where he would not cut his hand to shreds and pounded on the door. Suddenly the pain in his side was very real and present; he took a deep breath and tried to thrust it away. "Mat? It's me, Rand! Open up, Mat!"

After a moment, the door opened a crack, letting out a spill of lamplight; Mat peered through doubtfully, then pulled the door wider, leaning against it as if he had run ten miles carrying a sack of rocks. Except for a silver foxhead medallion hanging around his neck, its eye shaped and shaded like the ancient Aes Sedai symbol, he was naked. The way Mat felt about Aes Sedai, Rand was surprised he had not sold the thing long since. Deeper in the room, a tall, golden-haired woman was calmly wrapping a blanket around herself. A Maiden, by the spears and buckler lying at her feet.

Rand hastily averted his eyes and cleared his throat. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"We're fine." Uneasily, Mat looked around the antechamber. "Now we are. You killed it, or something? I don't want to know what it was, as long as it's gone. It's bloody hard on a man sometimes, being your friend."

Not only a friend. Another *ta'veren*, and perhaps a key to victory in Tarmon Gai'don; anyone who wanted to strike at Rand had reason to strike at Mat as well. But Mat always tried to deny both things. "They're gone, Mat. Darkhounds. Three of them."

"I told you I didn't want to know," Mat groaned. "Darkhounds now. I can't say it isn't always something new around you. A man wouldn't get bored; not until the day he died. If I hadn't been on my feet for a drink of wine when the door started to open ..." He trailed off, shivering, and scratched a red place on his right arm as he studied the ravaged metal sheathing. "You know, it's funny how the mind plays tricks. When I was putting everything I had into holding this door shut, I could have sworn one of them had chewed a hole right through it. I could see its bloody head. And its teeth. Melindhra's spear didn't even faze it."

Moiraine's arrival was more spectacular this time, running in, skirts held up, panting and fuming. Lan was at her heels with his sword in hand and thunderclouds on his stone face, and right behind, a throng of *Far Dareis Mai* that spilled out into the street. Some of the Maidens wore no more than smallclothes, but every one held her spears alertly and had her *shoufa* wrapped around her head, black veil hiding all but her eyes, ready to kill. Moiraine and Lan, at least, looked relieved to see him standing there calmly talking to Mat, though the Aes Sedai also looked as if she meant to have strong words with him. With the veils, it was impossible to tell what the Aiel thought.

Letting out a loud yelp, Mat darted back into his room and began hastily tugging on a pair of breeches, his capering impeded by the way he kept trying to haul at the breeches and scratch his arm at the same time. The golden-haired Maiden watched with a broad grin that threatened to break into laughter.

"What's the matter with your arm?" Rand asked.

"I told you the mind plays funny tricks," Mat said, still trying to scratch and pull at the same time. "When I thought that thing chewed through the door, I thought it slobbered all over my arm, too, and now it bloody itches like fire. Even looks like a burn there."

Rand opened his mouth, but Moiraine was already pushing past him. Staring at her, Mat fell down while frantically dragging his breeches on the rest of the way, but she knelt beside him, ignoring his protests, clasping his head in her hands. Rand had been Healed before, and seen it done, but instead of what he expected, Mat only gave a shiver and lifted up the medallion by its leather thong so that it hung against his hand.

"Bloody thing is colder than ice all of a sudden," he muttered. "What are you doing, Moiraine? If you want to do something, Heal this itch; it has my whole arm now." His right arm was red from wrist to shoulder, and had begun to look puffy.

Moiraine stared at him with the most startled expression Rand had ever seen on her face. Maybe the only one. "I will," she said slowly. "If the medallion is cold, take it off."

Mat frowned at her, then finally pulled it over his head and laid it beside him. She took his head again, and he gave a shout as if he had been ducked headfirst into ice; his legs stiffened and his back arched; his eyes stared at nothing, as wide as they would go. When Moiraine took her hands away, he slumped, gulping air. The redness and swelling were gone. It took three tries before he could speak. "Blood and ashes! Does it have to be that flaming way every flaming time? It was just a bloody itch!"

"You watch your tongue with me," Moiraine told him, getting up, "or I will find Nynaeve and put her in charge of you." But her heart was not in it; she could have been talking in her sleep. She was trying not to stare at the foxhead as Mat hung it back around his neck. "You will need rest," she said absently. "Stay in bed tomorrow, if you feel like it."

The Maiden in the blanket—Melindhra?—knelt behind Mat and put her hands on his shoulders looking up at Moiraine over his head. "I will see that he does as you say, Aes Sedai." With a sudden grin, she ruffled his hair. "He is my little mischief maker, now." From the horrified look on Mat's face, he was gathering his strength to run.

Rand became aware of soft, amused chuckles behind him. The Maidens, *shoufas* and veils around their shoulders now, had crowded around and were peering into the room.

"Teach him to sing, spear-sister," Adelin said, and the other Maidens crowded with laughter. Rand rounded on them firmly. "Let the man rest. Don't some of you have to put on clothes?"

They gave way reluctantly, still trying to peer into the room, until Moiraine came out.

"Will you leave us, please?" the Aes Sedai said as the mangled door banged shut behind her. She half looked back with a vexed tightening of her mouth. "I must speak with Rand al'Thor alone." Nodding, the Aiel women started for the door, some still jesting about whether Melindhra—a Shaido, it seemed; Rand wondered if Mat knew that—would teach Mat to sing. Whatever that meant.

Rand stopped Adelin with a hand on her bare arm; others who noticed stopped as well, so he spoke to them all. "If you will not go when I tell you to, what will you do if I have to use you in battle?" He did not intend to if he could help it; he knew they were fierce warriors, but he had been raised to believe it was a man's place to die if necessary before a woman had to. Logic might say it was foolish, especially with women like this, but that was how he felt. He knew better than to tell them that, however. "Will you think it a joke, or decide to go in your own good time?"

They looked at him with the consternation of those listening to someone who had revealed his ignorance of the simplest facts. "In the dance of spears," Adelin told him, "we will go as you direct, but this is not the dance. Besides, you did not tell us to go."

"Even the *Car'a'carn* is not a wetlander king," a grey-haired Maiden added. Sinewy and hard despite her age, she wore only a short shift and her *shoufa*. He was getting tired of that phrase.

The Maidens resumed their joking as they left him alone with Moiraine and Lan. The Warder had finally put up his sword, and looked as at ease as he ever did. Which was to say as still and calm as his face, all stony planes and angles in the moonlight, and with an air of being on the brink of sudden movement that made the Aiel appear placid in comparison. A braided leather cord held Lan's hair, greying at the temples, back from his face. His gaze could have come from a blue-eyed hawk.

"I must speak with you about—" Moiraine began.

"We can talk tomorrow," Rand said, cutting her off. Lan's face hardened further, if such was possible; Warders were far more protective of their Aes Sedai, of their position as well as their

persons, than they were of themselves. Rand ignored Lan. His side still wanted to hunch him over, but he managed to keep erect; he was not about to show her any weakness. "If you think I'll help you get that foxhead away from Mat, you can think again." Somehow that medallion had stopped her channelling. Or at least it had stopped her channelling from affecting Mat while he touched it. "He paid a hard price for it, Moiraine, and it is his." Thinking of how she had thumped his shoulders with the Power, he added dryly, "Maybe I'll ask if I can borrow it from him." He turned away from her. There was still one he had to check on, though one way or another the urgency was gone; the Darkhounds would have done what they intended by now.

"Please, Rand," Moiraine said, and the open pleading in her voice halted him in his tracks. He had never heard anything like that from her before.

The tone seemed to offend Lan. "I thought you had become a man," the Warder said harshly. "Is this how a man behaves? You act like an arrogant boy." Lan practiced the sword with him—and liked him, Rand thought—but if Moiraine said the right word, the Warder would do his best to kill him.

"I will not be with you forever," Moiraine said urgently. Her hands gripped her skirts so hard that they trembled. "I might die in the next attack. I could fall from my horse and break my neck, or take a Darkfriend's arrow through my heart, and death cannot be Healed. I have given my entire life to the search for you, to find you and help you. You still do not know your own strength; you cannot know half of what you do. I—apologize—most humbly for any offense I have given you." Those words—words he had never thought to hear from her—came out as if dragged, but they came; and she could not lie. "Let me help you as much as I can, while I can. Please."

"It's hard to trust you, Moiraine." He disregarded Lan, shifting in the moonlight; his attention was all on her. "You have handled me like a puppet, made me dance the way you wanted, from the day we met. The only times I've been free of you were either when you were far away or when I ignored you. And you make even that hard."

Her laugh was as silvery as the moon above, but bitterness tinged it. "It has been more like wrestling with a bear than pulling strings on a puppet. Do you want an oath not to try manipulating you? I give it." Her voice hardened to crystal. "I even swear to obey you like one of the Maidens—like one of the *gai'shain*, if you require—but you must—" Taking a deep breath, she began again, more softly. "I ask you, humbly, to allow me to help you."

Lan was staring at her, and Rand thought his own eyes must be popping out of his head. "I will accept your help," he said slowly. "And I apologize, too. For all the rudeness I've shown." He had the feeling he was still being manipulated—he had had good cause to be rude, when he was—but she could not lie.

Tension drained from her visibly. She stepped closer to look up at him. "What you used to kill the Darkhounds is called Balefire. I can still sense the residue of it here." He could, too, like the fading smell remaining after a pie was carried out of the room, or the memory of something just snatched out of sight. "Since before the Breaking of the World, the use of Balefire has been forbidden. The White Tower forbids us even to learn it. In the War of Power, the Forsaken and the Shadowsworn themselves used it only reluctantly."

"Forbidden?" Rand said, frowning. "I saw you use it once." He could not be sure in the pale light of the moon, but he thought colour flamed in her cheeks. For this once, perhaps she was the one off balance.

"Sometimes it is necessary to do that which is forbidden." If she was flustered, it did not show in her voice. "When anything is destroyed with Balefire, it ceases to exist *before* the moment of its destruction, like a thread that burns away from where the flame touched it. The greater the power of the Balefire, the further back in time it ceases to exist. The strongest I can manage will remove only a few seconds from the Pattern. You are much stronger. Very much so."

"But if it doesn't exist before you destroy it ..." Rand raked fingers through his hair in confusion.

"You begin to see the problems, the dangers? Mat remembers seeing one of the Darkhounds chew through the door, but there is no opening, now. If it had slavered on him as much as he remembers, he would have been dead before I could reach him. For as far back as you destroyed the creature, whatever it did during that time *no longer happened*. Only the memories remain, for those

who saw or experienced it. Only what it did before is real, now. A few tooth holes in the door, and one drop of saliva on Mat's arm."

"That sounds just fine to me," he told her. "Mat's alive because of it."

"It is terrible, Rand." An urgent note entered her voice. "Why do you think even the Forsaken feared to use it? Think of the effect on the Pattern of a single thread, one man, removed from hours, or days, that have already been woven, like one thread picked partly out of a piece of cloth. Fragments of manuscripts remaining from the War of Power say several entire cities were destroyed with Balefire before both sides realized the dangers. Hundreds of thousands of threads pulled from the Pattern, gone for days already past; whatever those people had done, now no longer had been done, and neither had what others had done because of their actions. The memories remained, but not the actions. The ripples were incalculable. The Pattern itself nearly unravelled. It could have been the destruction of everything. World, time, Creation itself."

Rand shivered, nothing to do with the cold cutting through his coat. "I can't promise not to use it again, Moiraine. You yourself said there are times when it's necessary to do what's forbidden." If those Darkhounds would just reform when destroyed by lesser weapons, then what other choice would he have? It would be Balefire or death.

"I did not think that you would," she said coolly. Her agitation was vanishing, her balance restored. "But you must be careful." She was back to "must" again. "With a *sa'angreal* like *Callandor*, you could annihilate a city with Balefire. The Pattern could be disrupted for years to come. Who can say that the weave would even remain centred on you, *ta'veren* as you are, until it settled down? Being *ta'veren*, and so strongly so, may be your margin of victory, even in the Last Battle."

"Perhaps it will," he said bleakly. In tale after heroic tale, the protagonist proclaimed he would have victory or death. It seemed that the best he could hope for was victory *and* death. "I have to check on someone," he went on quietly. "I will see you in the morning." Gathering the Power into him, life and death in swirling layers, he made a hole in the air taller than he was, opening into a darkened room. A gateway, Asmodean called it.

"What is that?" Moiraine gasped.

"Once I've done something, I remember how. Most of the time. I think this used to be called Travelling." That was no answer, but it was time to test Moiraine's vows. She could not lie, but Aes Sedai could find loopholes in a stone. "You are to leave Mat alone tonight. And you won't try to take that medallion away from him."

"It belongs in the Tower for study, Rand. It must be a *ter'angreal*, but none has ever been found that—"

"Whatever it is," he said firmly, "it is his. You will leave it with him."

For a moment she seemed to struggle with herself, back stiffening and head coming up as she stared at him. She could not be used to taking orders from anyone except Siuan Sanche, and Rand was willing to wager she had never done that without a tussle. Finally she nodded, and even made the suggestion of a curtsy. "As you say, Rand. It is his. Please be careful, Rand. Learning a thing like Balefire by yourself can be suicide, and death cannot be Healed." This time there was no mockery. "Until the morning." Lan followed her as she left, the Warder giving Rand an unreadable expression; he would not be pleased by this turn of events.

Rand stepped through the gateway, and it vanished. A few more steps took him to the doorway. He pushed aside the heavy curtain exited into the hallway outside the room where Asmodean slept.

The moon through the windows at the ends of the corridor gave the only light; Asmodean's lamp was out. The flows he had woven around the room were still in place, still firmly tied. Nothing moved, but there was still a faint smell of burned sulphur.

Moving close to the bead curtain, he peered through the doorway. Moonshadows filled the room, but one of them was Asmodean, tossing in his blankets. Wrapped in the void, Rand could hear his heartbeat, smell the sweat of troubled dreams. He bent to examine the pale blue floor tiles, and the prints impressed in them.

He had learned to track as a boy, and reading them was no difficulty. Three Darkhounds had been there. They had approached the doorway one by one, it seemed, each stepping almost in the others' footprints. Had the net woven around the room stopped them there? Or had they merely been sent to look, and report? Troubling to think of even Shadowspawn dogs having that much intelligence.

But then, Myrddraal used ravens and rats for spies, too, and other animals closely linked to death. Shadoweyes, the Aiel called them.

Channelling fine flows of Earth, he smoothed out the floor tiles, lifting up the compressions until he was out in the empty, night-cloaked street and a hundred paces from the tall building. In the morning, anyone would be able to see the trail ending there, but none would suspect that the Darkhounds had gone anywhere near Asmodean. Darkhounds could have no interest in Jasin Natael the gleeman.

He would have felt their presence even if he hadn't been holding on to *saidin*. With his senses enhanced by the One Power, he doubted they would have been able to sneak up on him even without the strange extra-sensory awareness of Shadowspawn it gave him. Rand was not surprised when the black-coated dogs, each as big as a pony, rounded the corner. Even so, he frowned. Three had prowled Asmodean's quarters. Only two remained. Could one have left? To do what? Report? And to whom if so?

With Moiraine's warnings fresh in his mind, he hesitated to weave Balefire. Yet what else could he do? The Shadowspawn could not be suffered to live. Growls rumbled through the night, the creatures gathered themselves to leap, Rand set his jaw and raised his hands. And a skinny figure dropped from the low roof of a nearby building onto a Darkhound's back.

It was a thing of seconds, if that. The weave had been on the verge of forming, the terribly bright, indiscriminate death of Balefire about to lance from his hands. When she plummeted into his line of sight, Rand wrenched the threads apart in desperation. The Darkhound that had leaped at him came within inches of closing its jaws around his head before a hastily spun fist of Air slammed into it and knocked it aside.

The other Darkhound was roaring in pain. Raine's growls were nowhere near as loud, but he heard them even so. Her eyes glowed golden in the moonlit night as her knives rose and fell, silvered steel shining to match the huge fangs of the beast beneath her.

A beast he could not kill while she was riding it. "Raine! Jump clear!"

She ignored him, attacking the creature with a savagery he'd never seen from her before. There might have been words among the spittle-spraying growls she let out, but he could not understand them; save for one term: *Shadowbrother*.

He needed to separate them. Ropes of Air should be enough. The Darkhound he'd knocked aside was gathering itself, so he bound that one first. He was ready to grab Raine and pull her clear of the other one, but when the time came to spin the weave he just stood there staring.

The Shadowspawn had collapsed to the ground. He could not hear its breath, or its heartbeat. Raine stood over it in her ragged travelling dress, long knives held carefully out to the side so that the blood that dripped from them would not touch her. Her face was shadowed but her eyes shone with rapturous triumph. It was almost unsurprising when she threw back her head and howled.

*My lover.* He didn't know whether to be proud or disturbed.

Though reluctant to disturb her in her moment, he kept a close eye on the fallen Darkhound. Soon it would melt and reform, as the ones he'd beheaded had. Soon. Yet time flowed on and no matter how hard he stared the Darkhound remained just a dead lump of meat.

"You killed it," he said, surprised.

"Yes. Kill them all. The worst. The enemy."

Rand didn't much like the way she was talking. Or that faraway look on her face. Skirting the spreading pool of tainted blood, he drew close enough to take hold of the chain that hung from the studded leather collar around her neck. Raine looked at him as if at a stranger.

"Good girl. You did well. That was very brave. You scared me, though. I thought it might get you. I'd hate to lose my girl. My Raine."

She blinked rapidly. "Rand? Yes. I am Raine. It rhymes with Bane, but Bane is not all I am." Shivering, she tossed her knives atop the corpse and leant against his side.

He put his arm around her. And kept hold of the leash. The Darkhound still wasn't moving, though its packmate was straining so hard against the bindings Rand had woven around it that he feared it might break free at any moment. "Why is it staying down? Did you do something?"

Raine looked at him as though he was crazy. "I stabbed it."

"Obviously. I saw that," he said testily. "But the ones I stabbed didn't seem that bothered by it. This one is taking it personally."

That faraway look crossed her face again. "They used to be wolves. They used to dream. Sin. Enemy. Not here. Not there. Like us. Must unmake them."

"Can you do that? You and those like you?" Possibilities tumbled through Rand's mind. If it would spare him the need to use Balefire ...

The last Darkhound wasn't free yet. And Raine had other knives. He led her around to its side, safely clear of those gnashing teeth. The tone of its growls did not change. No fear entered them, only rage and hatred. It would have changed nothing for him if it had been otherwise. Or for Raine. He didn't even get the chance to ask her, she yanked her knife from its sheath and thrust it viciously into the Darkhound's neck. She left it there, too, and they watched in silence as the creature bled out there in the street. They watched as it grew still. And they watched on long afterwards, waiting for a resurrection that never came.

"This is good, Raine," he said at last. "This is very good."

She smiled a feral smile. "Dead Shadowbrothers are always good."

"So are live wolfsisters. You got pretty close to those things; are you sure they didn't bleed on you?" Ignoring her assurances, he ploughed ahead. "I want you to go to Moiraine even so. Get her to check you out. And tell her what happened here. Tell her how they died."

"By being stabbed?"

"You were the only one whose stabbing actually affected them."

She grinned excitedly. "Really!?"

"Really."

"Then I'm not useless," she said, sighing as though relieved of a burden.

"Of course you're not. Whoever said you were?" When she did not answer, he went on.  
"Anyway. Go to Moiraine. I'll see you in the morning. And thanks for your help tonight."

She giggled shyly, no trace of the vicious wolfsister of a few minutes ago to be seen. "I'll see you later!" she called as she rushed off.

Rand watched her go for a moment, thoughts whirling. Then he checked on the Darkhounds again. They were still very dead. Weaving Fire, he disposed of the corpses, and every drop of blood he could find. He'd need to have a word with Perrin. But that was a worry for another day. Or night. There was still one last thing he needed to check on before he could call an end to this one.

## CHAPTER 26: *Night's Daughter*



Every Maiden in the city was likely awake by this time; certainly none would still be asleep under the Roof of the Maidens. Making another gateway there in the street, he stepped back onto the upper floor where he'd fought the first set of Darkhounds. The ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai remained as before, generously coated in dust and sand. Forgotten but intact. The Darkhounds had oozed away from that sign before re-forming. *Under this sign will he conquer.*

It was a more leisurely stroll back down to his bedroom, which proved to be empty. Nici would be downstairs with the others now. That was good. He trusted her not to betray him, Shaido or not, but the fewer people who knew his secrets the better. He latched the door behind him.

Standing in his pitch-black bedchamber, he channelled the lamps alight, but he did not let go of *saidin*. Instead he channelled again, careful not to spring any of his own traps, and a piece of the wall vanished, revealing a niche he had carved there himself.

In the little alcove stood two figurines a foot tall, a man and a woman, each in flowing robes and serene of face, each holding a crystal globe aloft in one hand. He had lied to Asmodean about them.

There were *angreal*, like the round little man in Rand's coat pocket, and *sa'angreal*, like *Callandor*, that increased the amount of the Power that could be safely handled as much over *angreal* as *angreal* did over channelling unaided. Both were very rare, and prized by Aes Sedai, though they could only recognize those attuned to women and *saidar*. These two figures were something else, not so rare, but just as highly valued. *Ter'angreal* had been made to use the Power, not to magnify it, but to use it in specific ways. The Aes Sedai did not know the intended purpose even of most *ter'angreal* they had in the White Tower; some they used, but without knowing whether the use they put them to was anything like the function they had been made for. Rand knew the function of these two.

The male figure could link him to a huge replica of itself, the most powerful male *sa'angreal* ever made, even if he were on the other side of the Aryth Ocean from it. It had been finished just before the Dark One's prison was resealed—*How do I know that?*—and hidden before any of the male Aes Sedai going mad could find it. The female figure could do the same for a woman, joining her to the female equivalent of the great statue he hoped was still almost completely buried in Cairhien. With that much power ... Moiraine had said death could not be Healed.

Unbidden, unwanted, memory returned of the next-to-last time he had dared let himself hold *Callandor*, images floating beyond the void.

*The body of the dark-haired girl, little more than a child, lay sprawled with eyes wide and fixed on the ceiling, blood blackening the bosom of her dress where a Trolloc had run her through.*

*The Power was in him. Callandor blazed, and he was the Power. He channelled, directing flows into the child's body, searching, trying, fumbling; she lurched to her feet, arms and legs unnaturally rigid and jerky.*

*"Rand, you cannot do this," Moiraine cried. "Not this!"*

*Breathe. She had to breathe. The girl's chest rose and fell. Heart. Had to beat. Blood already thick and dark oozed from the wound in her chest. Live, burn you! his mind howled. I didn't mean to be too late! Her eyes stared at him, filmed, heedless of all the Power in him. Lifeless. Tears trickled unheeded down his cheeks.*

He forced the memory away roughly; even encased in the void, it hurt. With this much Power ...

With this much Power, he could not be trusted. "You are not the Creator," Moiraine had told him as he stood over that child. But with that male figure, with only half of its power, he had made the mountains move, once. With far less, with only *Callandor*, he had been sure he could turn back the Wheel, make a dead child live. Not only the One Power was seductive; the power of it was, too. He should destroy them both. Instead he rewove the flows, reset the traps.

"What are you doing there?" a woman's voice said as the wall became apparently whole again. Tying off the flows hastily—and the knot with its own deadly surprises—he pulled the Power into him and turned.

Beside Lanfear, in her white and silver, Elayne or Min or Aviendha would look almost ordinary. Her dark eyes alone were enough to make a man give up his soul. At the sight of her, his stomach clenched until he wanted to vomit.

"What do you want?" he demanded. There were ways to block someone from using the One Power but he was far from certain they would work on a woman as strong as her. And so long as Lanfear could touch the Source, he had more chance of catching the wind in his hands than of holding her prisoner. *One flash of Balefire, and ...*

He could not do it. She was one of the Forsaken, but she was a woman, too. As he had good cause to know, for his sins.

"You have two of them," she said finally. "I thought I glimpsed ... One is a woman, isn't it?" Her smile could have halted a man's heart and made him grateful. "You are beginning to consider my plan, aren't you? With those, together, the other Chosen will kneel at our feet. We can supplant the Great Lord himself, challenge the Creator. We—"

"You were always ambitious, Mierin." His voice grated in his ears. "Why do you think I turned away from you? It wasn't Ilyena, whatever you like to think. You were out of my heart long before ever I met her. Ambition is all there is to you. Power is all you ever wanted. You disgust me!"

She stared at him, both hands pressed hard against her stomach, her dark eyes even larger than usual. "Graendal said ..." she began faintly. Swallowing, she began again. "Lews Therin? I love you, Lews Therin. I have always loved you, and I always will. You know that. You must!"

Rand's face was like rock; he hoped it hid his shock. He had no idea where his words had come from, but it seemed he could remember her. A dim memory, from before. *I am not Lews Therin Telamon!* "I am Rand al'Thor!" he said harshly.

"Of course you are." Studying him, she nodded slowly to herself. That cool composure returned. "Of course. Asmodean has been telling you things, about the War of Power, and me. He lies. You did love me. Until that yellow-haired trollop Ilyena stole you." For an instant, rage made her face a contorted mask; he did not think she was even aware of it. "Did you know that Asmodean Severed his own mother? What they call Stilling, now. Severed her, and let Myrddraal drag her away screaming. Can you trust a man like that?"

Rand laughed aloud. "After I caught him, you helped trap him so he had to teach me. And now you say I cannot trust him?"

"For teaching." She sniffed dismissively. "He will do that because he knows his lot is cast with you for good. Even if he managed to convince the others that he has been a prisoner, they would still tear him apart, and he knows it. The weakest dog in the pack often suffers that fate. Besides, I watch his dreams on occasion. He dreams of you triumphing over the Great Lord and putting him up beside you on high. Sometimes he dreams of me." Her smile said those dreams were pleasant for her, but not so for Asmodean. "But he will try to turn you against me."

"Why are you here?" he demanded. Turn against her? No doubt she was full of the Power right that moment, ready to shield him if she even suspected he meant to try anything. She had done it before, with humiliating ease.

"I like you like this. Arrogant and proud, full of your own strength."

Once she had said that she liked him unsure, that Lews Therin had been too arrogant. Her affection was as feigned as his had been. "Why are you here?"

"Rahvin sent the Darkhounds after you tonight," she said calmly, folding her hands at her waist. "I would have come sooner, to help you, but I cannot let the others know I am on your side yet."

On his side. One of the Forsaken loved him, or rather the man he had been three thousand years ago, and all she wanted was for him to give his soul to the Shadow and rule the world with her. Or a step below her, at least. That, and try to replace both the Dark One and the Creator. Was she completely mad? Or could the power of those two huge *sa'angreal* really be as great as she claimed? That was a direction he did not want his thoughts to take.

"Why would Rahvin choose now to attack me? Asmodean says he looks to his own interests, that he'll sit to one side even in the Last Battle, if he can, and wait for the Dark One to destroy me. Why not Sammael, or Demandred? Asmodean says they hate me." *Not me. They hate Lews Therin.*

But to the Forsaken, that was the same thing. *Please, Light, I am Rand al'Thor.* He pushed away a sudden memory of this woman in his arms, both of them young and just learning what they could do with the Power. *I am Rand al'Thor!* “Why not Semirhage, or Moghedien, or Graen—?”

“But you are impinging on his interests now.” She laughed. “Don’t you know where he is? In Andor, in Caemlyn itself. He rules there in all but name. Morgase simpers and dances for him, her and half a dozen others.” Her lip curled in disgust. “He has men scouring town and countryside to find new pretties for him.”

For a moment shock held him. Elayne’s mother in the hands of one of the Forsaken. Yet he dared not show concern. Lanfear had displayed her jealousy more than once; she was capable of hunting Elayne down and killing her, if she even thought he had feelings for her.

Aside from that, one hard fact floated beyond the void, cold and cruel in its truth. He would not run off to attack Rahvin even if what Lanfear said was true. *Forgive me, Elayne, but I can’t.* She might well be lying—she would weep no tears for any of the other Forsaken he killed; they all stood in the way of her own plans—but in any event, he was done with reacting to what others did. If he reacted, they could reason out what he would do. Let them react to him, and be as surprised as Lanfear and Asmodean had been.

“Does Rahvin think I’ll rush to defend Morgase?” he said. “I have seen her once in my life. The Theren is part of Andor on a map, but I never saw a Queen’s Guardsman there. No-one has in generations. Tell a Theren man Morgase is his queen, and he’ll probably think you’re crazy.”

“I doubt Rahvin expects you to run to defend your homeland,” Lanfear said wryly, “but he will expect you to defend your ambitions. He means to sit Morgase on the Sun Throne, too, and use her like a puppet until the time he can come into the open. More Andoran soldiers move into Cairhien every day. And you sent Tairen soldiers north, to secure your own hold on the land. No wonder that he attacked you as soon as he found you.”

Rand shook his head. It had not been that way at all, sending the Tairens, but he did not expect her to understand. Or believe him if he told her, for that matter. “I thank you for the warning.” Politeness to one of the Forsaken! Of course, there was nothing he could do except hope that some of what she told him was truth. *A good reason not to kill her. She’ll tell you more than she thinks, if you listen carefully.* He hoped that was his own thought, chill and cynical as it was.

“You ward your dreams against me.”

“Against everyone.” That was simple truth, though she was at least as prominent in the list as the Wise Ones.

“Dreams are mine. You and your dreams are mine especially.” Her face remained smooth, but her voice hardened. “I can break through your warding. You would not like it.”

To show his unconcern, he sat down on the foot of his pallet, legs folded and hands on his knees. He thought his face was as calm as hers. Inside him, the Power swelled. He had flows of Air ready to bind her, and flows of Spirit. That was what wove a shield against the True Source. He couldn’t be sure it would work, though. She could pick apart or slice through anything he wove, even if she could not see it. Asmodean was trying to teach him that trick, but it was hard going without a woman’s weaving to practice on.

Lanfear smiled in a predatory fashion. “A primitive stage, but when the players are such as we ... It has been too long, Lews Therin.”

Realising her intent it was a struggle to keep his face impassive. He’d done what he’d had to once before, to keep her cooperative. It would be a lie to say part of him hadn’t enjoyed it, but most of him had been disgusted with himself for doing something so intimate with a woman so evil. And yet, the gains had been many. He managed to keep his features schooled even when the top of her white dress slid over her shoulders seemingly of its own accord. Down it drifted, to reveal a pair of huge pale breasts that remained as perky as a young woman’s, despite Lanfear having been born more than three millennia ago. He kept his features schooled. He was unable to school his cock, however.

A tall woman, when she bent at the waist it brought those breasts down to dangle before his face. Smiling confidently, she took him by the chin and brought his lips to hers.

An invisible force seemed to pull Rand’s hands to those huge breasts. He tried to tell himself she must have used the Power on him, but he feared it was just his own perverseness. They were malleable to the touch, and his squeezing brought a flush to Lanfear’s cheeks.

“Those other women—mere girls—can’t possibly compare to me.”

"They don't. Mere girls, like you say. Playthings." The lies shamed him, turned his stomach. But they were what she wanted to hear, so he tainted his tongue with them.

Sure enough, Lanfear's smile grew broader. She pushed him back onto the pallet and climbed on top of him.

She tried to play the seducer at first, all languid movements and coy smiles. But Lanfear was too fixated for that, too crazy. Her impatience was in the hands that clawed at his shirt, the hips that rocked of their own accord. The teeth that bit his lip, just short of drawing blood.

Rand was fine with that. He didn't want to draw things out, and didn't trust his acting skills enough to play the seduced for long. Lusty, though. Lusty he could do.

The lacy underwear she wore was unlike anything he'd even seen before. There was so little material to it, and no ties, but it rode her hips easily. It was probably from the Age of Legends. Irreplaceable. *Like her, Light have mercy.* Angry hands ripped the flimsy garment to shreds with a roughness he knew he could never bring to bear against its owner.

Far from being annoyed, Lanfear laughed in delight. She pulled his face to her breast and fed him a stiffened nipple. "Goood. Show me how much you need me ..."

Need her? Maybe he did. Want her? Yes. *Burn me. Burn me for true.*

Those were his last thoughts before he rolled the Forsaken over onto her back, spread her legs and thrust his hard cock into her dark depths. All thought fled after that.

Sometime later he found himself lying atop the pallet beside a very naked, very sweaty Lanfear, both of them struggling to catch their breath. Her pussy was full of his seed, and she looked quite pleased with herself. Rand was rather less than pleased with *himself*.

Flashes of memory whipped him. There was surprising strength in those long, slim legs of hers. They had been wrapped vicelike around his waist for much of it. His butt and back still stung from the scrape of her nails. He remembered her coming on his cock, her silky insides fluttering all around him. He remembered being glad of it, and winced now. He'd grabbed her ass when it came time for his own orgasm, to hold her in place and make sure she took every last drop.

Alarm roused him from the post sex lassitude. Somewhere along the way he'd lost his hold on *saidin*. She hadn't channelled against him, however. And probably wouldn't now. A bitter laugh escaped his lips. Trusting a Forsaken was even dumber than fucking one. *Maybe I should just do what Moiraine says. She would never find herself doing something like this with someone so dangerous.*

"Hold to that gladness, Rand. This was but a taste of things to come. Together, you and I will be unstoppable." She laughed, too, but without the bitterness. Rolling over onto her side and propping herself up on one elbow, she trailed her hand over the muscles of his chest. "We will have to work more closely in future. And not just like this. You must open your dreams to me."

He jerked his traitorous eyes away from those pendulous breasts. "How can I do that without leaving myself vulnerable to my enemies?" *Including the one in my bed?*

Lanfear eyed him in a disconcerted fashion, a slight frown marring her beauty, and for a moment he feared she'd heard his thoughts. "I have examined the Aielwomen's dreams. These so-called Wise Ones. They do not know how to shield themselves very well. I could frighten them till they never dream again, never even think of invading yours surely."

"I thought you would not help me openly." He did not dare tell her to leave the Wise Ones alone; she might well do something to spite him. She had made it plain from the start, if not in words, that she meant to have the upper hand between them. "Wouldn't that risk another of the Forsaken finding out? You aren't the only one who knows how to enter people's dreams."

"The Chosen," she said absently. For a moment she chewed a full underlip. "I have watched the girl's dreams, too, the one who trains with you. Daniele. Do you know who she dreams of? Everyone." Smiling, she put on a tone of mock shock. "You would not believe a simple country girl could have such dreams."

She was trying to test his jealousy, he realized. She really thought he warded his dreams to hide thoughts of another woman! "The Maidens guard me closely," he said dryly. "If you want to know how close, look at Isendre's dreams."

Spots of colour flared in her cheeks. Of course. He was not supposed to see what she was trying. Confusion rolled outside the void. Or did she think ...? Isendre? Lanfear knew she was a Darkfriend. Lanfear had brought Kadere and the woman to the Waste in the first place. And planted

most of the jewellery Isendre was accused of stealing; Lanfear's spite was cruel even when petty. Still, if she thought he could love her, Isendre being a Darkfriend was probably no obstacle in her eyes.

"I should have let them send her off to try reaching the Dragonwall," he went on casually, "but who knows what she might have said to save herself? I must protect her and Kadere to some extent in order to protect Asmodean."

The colour faded, but as she opened her mouth again, a knock came at the door. Rand bounded to his feet, naked. No-one would recognize Lanfear, yet if a woman were discovered in his room, a woman whom none of the Maidens below had seen enter, questions would be asked and he had no answers.

But Lanfear already had a gateway open, to somewhere full of white silk hangings and silver. "Remember that I am your only hope of surviving, my love." It was a very cool voice in which to call someone that. "Beside me, you need fear nothing. Beside me, you can rule—everything that is or will be." Leaving her clothes where they lay, she strode to the gateway, somehow managing to look elegant despite being naked, flushed and soiled. She paused only long enough to look back and see if he'd enjoyed the view, which he had, burn him, before she stepped through, and the gateway winked shut.

The knock sounded again before he could stuff her discarded garments under his blanket and drag on a coat. The tails hung low enough to cover what needed covering, if he held it closed.

When he opened the door, Enaila peered past him suspiciously, muttering, "I thought perhaps Isendre ..." She gave him an accusing look. "Spearsisters are searching everywhere for you. No-one saw you return." With a shake of her head, she straightened; she always tried to stand as tall as possible. "The chiefs have come to speak with the *Car'a'carn*," she said formally. "They wait below."

They waited on the columned portico, as it turned out, being men. The sky was still dark, but the first glimmers of dawn lined the mountains to the east. If they felt any impatience with the two Maidens who stood between them and the tall doors, it did not show on their shadowed faces.

"The Shaido are moving," Han barked as soon as Rand appeared. "And the Reyn, the Miagoma the Shiande ... Every clan!"

"Joining Couladin, or me?" Rand demanded.

"The Shaido are moving toward the Jangai Pass," Rhuarc said. "For the others, it is too early to tell. But they are on the march with every spear not needed to defend the holds, herds and flocks."

Rand only nodded. All of his determination not to let anyone else dictate what he would do, and now this. Whatever the other clans intended, Couladin had to plan a crossing into Cairhien. So much for his grand schemes of imposing peace, if the Shaido ravaged Cairhien even further while he sat in Rhuidean waiting for the other clans.

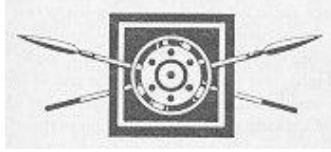
"Then we move for the Jangai, too," he said finally.

"We cannot catch him if he means to cross," Erim cautioned, and Han added sourly, "If any of the others are joining him, we will be caught strung out like blindworms in the sun."

"I won't sit here until I find out," Rand said. "If I can't catch Couladin, I mean to be right behind him into Cairhien. Rouse the spears. We leave as soon after first light as you can manage."

Giving him that odd Aiel bow used only on the most formal occasions, one foot forward and one hand extended, the chiefs departed. Only Han said anything. "To Shayol Ghul itself."

## CHAPTER 27: *Regard*



Raine was still asleep when Rand emerged from her tent the next morning. The *ter'angreal* that gave access to those giant *sa'angreal* were safely tucked away in the satchel at his side. He hadn't wanted to trust his wards to keep them safe, not with Lanfear so near. He hadn't felt safe in his own bed, for that matter. A smile tried to touch his lips when he looked back at the sleeping wolfsister. He'd felt much safer sleeping in her arms, especially after his lips had touched her all over.

The smile never came, though. Even here, on the outskirts of the city, he could see signs of an army marshalling for war. And a war of his making at that.

A dozen Maidens had been squatting in a loose circle around the tent. They rose at his arrival. He knew them all, though some better than others. Adelin led them once more, with Nerise as her second. Ayla and Lidya were there for him, as they had been ever since the Stone. His troublesome cousin Harilin. Riallin, who smiled so sweetly when they were alone but looked so serious now. Linsay, who avoided him in private but grinned as she wished him a good morning. Cara. Reyla. Aca. Briana was bereft of her sisters for once, but surrounded by women she called spearsisters and to whom she was possibly as close. Tenelca, whose clan might or might not end up joining the Shaido. Looking at them, Rand wondered how many would still be there when this war was over. Despite the heat that already beat down on the Waste, his stomach was a knot of ice.

He looked for Nici but could not see her, and hoped there was no meaning behind that as he set out for the city proper, the Maidens falling in around him.

He'd thought to help with the preparations, but it quickly became obvious that there was nothing for him to do. Even if the Aiel had not already been taking care of everything so competently, the simple truth was that Rand knew next to nothing about marshalling an army. He might play the part of the leader, but he was really just making it up as he went. There were others who could do the job much better.

With that thought in mind, he turned to Aca as they were walking through Rhuidean's bustling streets. "Where is Tam?"

Defiance and wariness mixed in her eyes, as they often did when she was around Rand. "Tam al'Thor is with the Shienarans. They believe that they can, as they say it, talk sense to the chiefs. And protect the treekillers from us." Her eyes tightened slightly; an Aiel frown. "He is a strange man sometimes."

Rand frowned more openly. It was no secret what went on between them. Tam and Aca. "These are confusing times for us all." He hadn't spoken to his father for days.

"My mother intends to stay in Rhuidean," Harilin put in suddenly. "She was arguing with Ricu last night. The fool girl thinks to take up the spear. And get her first taste of battle in a war with the Shaido. Rovan was furious. He tried to forbid her from taking part in your invasion."

Rand winced, as much for the idea of a man successfully forbidding a woman anything as for Rovan's misunderstanding of his intent. "Sunadai will talk her out of that nonsense, I assume." The Aiel frowns his outburst got him were a lot less restrained than usual. Rand wasn't about to apologise, however. The last thing he wanted was Ricu running around in the middle of this madness.

"It would not be allowed. There are Maidens older than her who are not yet ready to run with the spears," said Adelin.

"That's good," he muttered. Even so, there were Maidens around him that were young enough to still be considered girls in most places. Riallin, Tenelca, Briana, Reyla. They weren't that much older than Ricu. He shook his head. If he had his way, none of them would be risked in battle. If he had his way, a great many things would be different.

But what was, was. All he could do was forge ahead.

And if there was nothing he could do to help prepare for the march, there were still other things he should be doing before he left. It wasn't hard to find Aya. Most cities had a section generally accepted to be set aside for trade, and Rhuidean was swiftly becoming the same. She was

there with Rin and the rest of the merchants, as he'd expected. She was stiff and distant with him, but that was also as he'd expected and he took no offense. The time he spent with them, organising things that had nothing to do with the war effort, seemed to confuse many of the Maidens. Tenelca and Reyla in particular looked to find the whole thing quizzical beyond words.

Nerise alone seemed to understand what he was doing. Once Aya had gone on her way, armed with the lists Rand had given her, the red-haired Maiden stepped closer and lowered her voice. "You mean for us to make alliance with the wetlanders, then? Why? We do not need them."

She didn't look angry, but there was a challenge in her dark eyes. "Or want them, I know. But closer ties with them will make it easier to organise the war against the Shadow. And beyond that ... fewer conflicts between the Aiel and their neighbours would please me."

Perhaps he should have kept that last part to himself. Aiel liked conflicts. Honour was won in battle, and strength gained through hardship. The things he'd talked about with Loial would likely have horrified Nerise if she'd heard them.

"They are no friends to the Aiel. Have never been friends to us, and likely never will be. The secret history you revealed just made that plainer. They will try to take what is ours." Her face hardened. "And they will die for it, whether you like it or not, *Car'a'carn*."

"You mistake me. If they attack you, kill away. I just don't want you attacking them. I trust that you won't."

She wasn't exactly mollified, but she said no more on the topic. They walked the streets together, taking in the changes the city had already gone through in such a short time. Nerise watched it all as solemnly as he did, but he suspected her thoughts ran in different directions from his own. The Aiel who saw him pass by recognised him by now, one and all. Rand doubted he would ever get used to seeing that look of recognition in the eyes of perfect strangers. It no longer unnerved him, but he certainly didn't like it. Some of the Aiel were as suspicious as Nerise, others outright hostile, but some few looked on him with what he almost thought was warmth. That he liked. That he hungered for. Whether he could see his plans through to the end, and whether they would still look on him warmly if he did, remained to be seen.

He stopped in his tracks when he rounded a corner and saw a familiar face up ahead. Seeing Merile chatting amiably with an Aiel was rare enough to give him pause, even if he hadn't recognised the Aiel in question.

Rand hadn't told Merile about the experiment he and Loial had attempted, and wasn't sure he would have even if it had worked. It had been foolish of him to think it *would* work. Sitting there, singing to a plant, trying to recall the words and tune of the song he'd heard from his Aiel ancestors, had been embarrassing, even with the Ogier's voice booming over his. Loial's seed singing had affected it. Rand's had not. Maybe he'd done it wrong; maybe it was just impossible. Loial had said such abilities were dying out even amongst the Ogier, and the memories he'd seen within those glass columns had told him that they had been weaker amongst the Aiel. The songs might have been useful. Armies needed feeding, after all. There was much that might have been done with them, though he was coming to doubt the Aiel would have liked it. It didn't matter, though. The song hadn't worked.

He wondered what Merile would have thought if it had. The two women must have just finished whatever they were discussing, for Merile left with a cheery wave, never noticing Rand watching. Off she strolled, head swaying from side to side. He was too far away to hear, but he could well imagine her humming a gay tune even as she walked among a people with such a ... complicated history with her own. Oblivious or fearless. It was hard to tell sometimes.

The woman she'd been speaking to glared no daggers at her back, he was pleased to see. But then, Seris had impressed him as more progressive than most Aiel. A forward thinker, not overly beholden to tradition. He liked that. Tradition had never been his friend.

Curious, he strode down the street towards her.

She saw him coming, of course. There was no room for obliviousness here in the Waste where poisonous plants and venomous animals were commonplace, even for a woman who had not taken up the spear.

"I see you, Seris of the Crayt Tomanelle," he said once he drew close.

A wry smile touched her lips. "Hello, Rand." Forward thinking or not, she still blushed slightly after using that improper greeting.

Rand grinned in surprise. "It's good to see you again. What were you and Merile talking about?"

She studied him. "I had heard you two were close. She is pretty, so I suppose it was to be expected. Aiel men, wetlander men, Aiel men who are somehow wetlanders; you all end up wrapped around the finger of some woman."

His grin faded. "What makes you think I'm wrapped around her finger?" In truth, he felt a bit guilty towards her, as if he wasn't giving her the attention she deserved. Or the faithfulness.

"She is a pretty little thing. That is usually all it takes. You may be He Who Comes With the Dawn, but I do not see that that you are especially different ... Seems to happen to all men ..."

Rand thought of Lanfear and Berelain. Even Isendre was admittedly pretty. "I'm not that easily impressed." He walked on, feeling a little disappointed.

Seris came with him. "I meant no offense. What is it about her, then? What is it that draws you?"

"She's sweet and kind and funny." *And half the time she barely seems to remember I'm the Dragon Reborn.* That last weighed more heavily than he'd have once thought it would.

"That could be said of most children," she probed.

"And sadly few adults," he said, wondering what she was getting at.

"That is so, but it being so allows the children to be as they are, at least for a time."

"True enough," he sighed. There would be little room for sweetness and kindness in his future, not if he was to have a chance of winning Tarmon Gai'don.

"Are you sweet and kind?"

She definitely wasn't shy, this Seris. Her questions left him discomfited. "Not anymore."

"And he was never funny," Harilin said.

Rand ignored that. If Seris was going to get so personal, he saw no reason he shouldn't do the same. Turnabout was fair play, after all. And there was something he was curious about. Though about his age, and no Maiden, there was a scattering of light scars on her face. They were not enough to detract from her beauty, but he wondered over them. "How did you get those scars?" he asked. All it took was a single raised brow to quell his righteous thoughts on turnabout. "I mean, they don't make you look any less pretty or anything. You'd barely notice them. I was just curious."

She laughed softly. "It was during a raid on our hold. Years ago, when I was a little girl. Miagoma."

He followed her gaze to Tenelca, who walked alongside eyeing every window and doorway. She did not look their way, but she answered nonetheless. "I remember the afterward of that. Timolan had the *algai'dsiswai* responsible staked out in the sun for days. A few survived."

"I suppose that's one way to keep the peace," Rand muttered.

Tenelca did look then, if only to blink her cool blue eyes at him in confusion. "Peace? They were not punished for raiding. They struck those who were not to be struck."

"I hold no grudge against the Miagoma," Seris said. "Some *algai'dsiswai* simply lack discipline." She and Tenelca exchanged solemn nods. "My first-brother is nearly as bad. And I have heard my mother complain that he is as my father was when he was young. Though I have a hard time imagining that. We have raided the Miagoma as well. All in the finest Aiel tradition. Have you heard how eagerly those same *algai'dsiswai* speak of the coming dance? They would not be so excited on their wedding nights. Have not had a good war in ages."

"I wish we were not about to have one now," he admitted.

The Maidens got that look on their faces, the one he was used to seeing from Aviendha when he said something she thought embarrassing. Rand refused to lower his eyes.

"It is rare for an Aiel man to say such a thing. Rare and welcome," said Seris.

They had come to a small square, where stood one of the many empty fountains that dotted Rhuidean. A nearly naked woman carved from white marble held aloft a jug from which no water flowed. She'd been holding it like that for centuries, in vain hope of relief. There was something sad about her, to his eyes.

"I'd say more, but I don't want to scandalise the Maidens too much. I wouldn't want them to faint."

A dozen women scowled at him, even Riallin and Linsay. "Is this wetlander humour?" Reyla asked. "It is as limp as their ... I say no more. I would not want the *Car'a'carn* to faint in public."

His grin only widened. She kept her distance from him, so perhaps she did not know, but ... "Wrong crowd for that jab. Wrong man."

Ayla and Lidya exchanged some grins of their own, but Tenelca went so stiff you'd have thought he'd shoved something back up her butt. Seris surprised him with a laugh.

"Is that how it is? And here I was thinking you wrapped around the Lost One's finger." That was what Aiel called *Tuatha'an* like Merile: the Lost Ones. "I have *toh*."

"Don't worry about it."

"I ... was not." Seris shook her head over him. "I also sometimes say things that the majority do not approve of. Perhaps if the Maidens give us some space we could speak openly."

He nodded slowly. "I take it you'll be staying in Rhuidean?"

"And you will be leaving."

"Possibly never to return." And there was so much still undone. He looked to Adelin. "Secure the square, would you?"

She nodded and started dispatching Maidens to the three streets that met there. Most went quietly but Reyla looked a bit annoyed for some reason. And Cara gave him a look that demanded to know what he was about. He wasn't sure what either girl's problem was, but decided it could keep.

"So. What is it that the other Aiel find so scandalous?" he asked once they were alone in the dusty square.

Seris took a seat on the low wall that encircled the fountain. "My distaste for raiding our fellow Aiel, for one thing."

His gaze drifted to the scars on her cheek. He made his voice soft. "It bothered you more than you let on."

She was not tall, by Aiel standards, and stretched for height now, pride writ across her face. "I do not mind the scars."

He kept his voice low. "That wasn't what I said."

"No. It was not," she said, relaxing. "And you are correct. It bothered me then, and bothers me now. The others will tell you these feuds make us stronger, but I think we would be at our strongest if we stood united."

With a sudden smile, Rand went and sat beside her on the fountain. "I completely agree. Getting people to set aside their feuds is no easy task, but I do not intend to stop trying."

"Good. That is good. You ... I wish there was something I could do to help." Her eyes, he suddenly realised, were a bit like Aviendha's. A strange shade that he had a hard time putting a name to. In her case, it was either a dark green or a light brown. She lidded them before he could decide, and turned her face away. "It is strange, having an Aiel raised in the wetlands as *Car'a'carn*. And one so young besides. But I think ... I hope that you will be good for the Aiel."

It was such a sweet thing for her to say. He hated to spoil it, but the truth demanded voicing. "I would like to be. But I ... am not as hopeful as you. The future promised is much grimmer than the future I would want."

Her hand closed around his. Though she did not carry a spear, she had a strong grip. "Life is a dream from which we all must wake before we dream again ... But are you not a dreamwalker? You can change the dream."

A thrill ran through him, one born of more than just being touched by a pretty girl. It felt strange. It felt like hope. "I ... am."

"Then change it. Make the future that you want, instead of the one prophesised."

"And if that future has you in it?" he blurted out, his hand tightening around hers.

Seris looked away again. He saw her neck move when she swallowed. "Perhaps you should make that happen, too."

He was surprised to find his hand trembling, when he reached out to touch her unscarred cheek. She let him turn her face to his, and when his lips descended hers rose to meet them. It felt good and right and soon they were hugging each other close, kissing deeply. Her blouse was soft *algode* and she raised no objection when he touched her breast through it. But when he dared to lift her skirts enough to caress a thigh, she clamped her knees together.

"We are in public," she said breathlessly. The flush that suffused her face had almost hid her freckles, though it made the scars stand out whitely.

Rand looked about. The Maidens were nowhere to be seen, off blocking the streets. And none of the buildings seemed to be occupied. "Outdoors perhaps. But I wouldn't call it public."

Seris bit her lip. "Even so."

He let out a long sigh. Her hair had gotten mussed up while they were embracing. She shivered cutely while he did what he could to fix it for her. "I wouldn't want to shame you. I enjoy your company, though. And you are very beautiful. I hope to get back here someday. Perhaps if I do, we can talk some more."

"Perhaps?" Her grip tightened on his blue silk coat. "Perhaps. You ..." She took a shuddering breath. "Perhaps we should not be bound by old customs and taboos."

"What do you mean?"

By way of response, Seris stood up, lifted her skirt, and pulled down her underwear. Her bold display was not spoiled—not for him, at least!—by the nervous looks she darted at the dark staring windows that surrounded them.

"Well, aren't you something special," he whispered. He meant it, too.

For all her boldness, Seris giggled girlishly as she returned to his arms. Her kisses were as ardent as before, but this time she raised no objections when his hand quested up her leg to gently explore that which waited there.

Not content to sit still and be serviced, Seris started running her hand up and down the outline of the cock that now strained against his dark breeches. A gasp escaped her, and she pulled his mouth to her neck while she looked down at that which strained to reach her. He could feel her pulse racing against his lips, and when he slipped his hand under her blouse to cup a breast her heart's wild beating shiver that soft flesh.

"I want you," he confessed. "I hardly know you, but I want you so much."

"I feel the same," she whispered. Her eyes darted about again, and her face went even redder before she raised her voice and continued. "Take it out and put it in me. Take me, right here, right now. Rand."

That was not an offer he was about to refuse. He almost wrecked his own breeches in his haste to unbuckle his belt and free himself. While he did that Seris raised her own skirts and spread her legs to display her pink folds, there under the morning sun of the Aiel Waste. Water was precious in that place, but the water that glistened upon her sex was the most precious of all.

She was young and Rand had no idea if she was a virgin or not, but the thought of going slowly did not occur to him until long after he'd spread those folds with his tip and slid deep into her wet heat. Only as he was bottoming out inside her glorious body and her moans were ringing in his ear did he reel back to look at her face in concern. Her mouth hung open and her brows were knotted, but it was not pain he saw there. He sighed out her name in relief, wrapped his arms around her, and started moving, uncaring of the hard ground on which he knelt.

Her hands found his ass, her caresses urging him on just as much as the kisses she planted on his cheek in between gasps. Her hair streamed through his fingers, and he could see the shadow of her breasts moving underneath her blouse. He wanted to see more, though.

"Seris. Seris. Seris." He said her name several more times before she opened her eyes and looked a question at him. "I want to see them."

A nervous giggle. Another shy searching of the still empty square. Then she shook her head, but not in denial. "I do not know why I hesitate. I am already doing what no decent Aiel girl should do." Even so, her fingers trembled as she undid her laces and pulled down her top, to show him her breasts, lovely and round and tipped with wide pink nipples. He could trace the rays of past suns in the freckles that marched down her chest towards the pale, untouched flesh below.

"You are beautiful all over," he told her.

She bit her lip. "I bet you say that to all the girls, while you are corrupting them."

He took her breasts in his hands and began moving his hips again. "There is nothing corrupt about you."

Pleasured above and below, her moans were louder this time. She reached up to steady herself against the statue behind, her hands closing upon the arm of the beautiful, forlorn woman with her sadly empty jug. It was the beautiful woman in his arms that occupied Rand's thoughts, though, the one whose legs closed around him, and whose hips now spasmed mindlessly.

Beautiful as she looked, wonderful as it felt, he seized a moment between moans to claim her lips with his. When she broke their kiss to gasp for breath, he looked deep into those mysterious eyes of hers. There was something else he wanted even more than to look at and feel her. "I want you to come for me. Show me how you'd finish yourself."

"Oh, Light!" This time she did not look around them, just stared at him red-faced. She did as he wished, though, reaching a trembling hand down to rub at the soft, red-furred mound just above where they joined.

Seris came for him. She came hard, her hot juices flowing down the length of his shaft, watering the arid ground in the way that poor statue never had. She went wild in her coming, and lost her grip on the statue's arm, but Rand caught her in his arms and held her tight while the wildness shook her so gratifyingly.

"That's my girl," he breathed, smiling. It was every bit as beautiful as he'd imagined.

She was gasping and moaning still, so he couldn't be certain, but for a moment he thought he'd heard her say, "I would be." But then he wrote it off as his preening imagination.

Once she had quietened a bit, he gave over stroking her hair and started to move a little again. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm not sure I can hold back much longer."

Seris smiled at him, flushed, half-naked, while he was inside her and coated in her juices, she smiled a dazzling smile. "I do not want you to. Finish inside me, right here in the open." She took her own breast in hand and made a display of squeezing it lewdly. "Fuck me, Rand."

He did. Oh, light but he did. He pounded that sweet pussy as hard as he could, there under the morning sun, until pleasure surged up his body to blank his mind, and his come surged down his shaft to pump Seris' womb full.

Somehow he found himself sitting on his heels with Seris keeling in his lap, his face pressed to her breast, her fingers combing through his hair. That was nearly as nice as the orgasm had been.

"Well," he told her breast, "you really do have some outlandish ideas about the Aiel's future."

"This is not what I meant!" she exclaimed, rearing back to look at his face. Only when she saw the smile there did she laugh. "There are other things we should explore. Other ways. But this was ... this was good, too. I like ... I like ..."

He wondered what it was she didn't dare say. He knew what he would like, but he also knew it could not be. He shouldn't say it. He'd just make a fool of himself. He said it anyway. "I'd like it if this was the future. You. In my arms, just like this. That would be a good dream."

Her breath hitched. "It could be."

Rand lowered his eyes. "What will you do, here in Rhuidean, when I ... while I am away?"

He had slid out of her in his softening, but Seris did not get up. "Try to persuade those that have come to stay, and invite others to join us. Rhuidean has always been sacred, a place of peace in a land of war. It could be more than that. It could be a place to make peace instead of war."

"I like that idea."

She smiled. "It will not be easy, though. Even under the Peace of Rhuidean, old feuds fester. They may not raise their spears against each other, but that does not mean that they are united."

"I think you'd be good at uniting people," he said, touching her cheek. The scarred one this time.

She leaned into his touch. "You are kind to say so, but I ..." Her eyes steadied on his. "I will try. My chief ... of chiefs."

She flushed anew when he cupped her breast. Rand tried to burn the image onto his mind, of her sitting there with her blouse around her elbows, the sun lighting her disarrayed red hair, her nipples engorged with passion. "I really do wish I can come back here someday."

Seris clasped his face and planted a firm kiss on his lips. "I will be most bitterly disappointed if you do not. I hope to have much more to show you when you do."

He looked at her breasts again, and smiled lasciviously.

"Not that!" she exclaimed, shaking her head as she fixed her clothes determinedly.

When she got up, Rand sighed and lay down on the gritty tiles so he could get his own affairs in order. They hadn't stripped, so it wasn't long before they were standing there in the square together once more, with nothing to show for their adventure save their flushes.

"Are you sure no-one was able to see?" Seris asked.

A decent man would reassure her. He wouldn't tease her. "Yes. No-one was here except for us." She calmed a bit. A tough girl, Seris, and never mind that she was no *Far Dareis Mai*. He shouldn't, but it slipped out. "Now, whether anyone heard you, that I can't say..."

She clapped a hand over her mouth. "You better be joking!"

"But it was such a sweet song you were singing," he said innocently.

"Oh, Light!"

Cute as it was, she looked a little more alarmed than he'd wanted, so he decided to relent. "But even if someone did hear, they could never know who it was. They could only know that there was a girl somewhere in Rhuidean with a voice more beautiful and a heart more bold than any other."

She stared at him for a long moment. "You better bloody come back, you know. Or, *Car'a'carn* or not, I will take up the spear and carve you for dinner."

Rand laughed. It was the sweetest threat he'd ever heard. He must have gone mad at last.

## CHAPTER 28: A Departure



Yawning in the early-morning greyness, Dani pulled herself up onto her white stallion, then had to handle her reins smartly as Brightwind frisked about. The animal had not been ridden in weeks. Aiel not only preferred their own legs, they avoided riding almost completely, though they did use packhorses and pack mules. Even if there had been enough wood to build wagons, the terrain in the Waste was not hospitable to wheels, as more than one peddler had learned to his or her sorrow.

She was not looking forward to the long journey west. The mountains hid the sun now, but the heat would grow by the hour once it climbed clear, and there would be no convenient sweat tent to duck into at nightfall. Her wide-brimmed hat always did a good job of keeping the sun off, but that didn't make the coming march any less daunting.

Once she had settled Brightwind down, Dani found Amys looking at her, and shared a smile with the Wise One. All of that running the night before was not the reason she was still sleepy; if anything, it had helped her sleep even more soundly. She had found the other woman's dreams last night, and in celebration they had sipped tea in the dream, in Cold Rocks Hold, early on an evening when children were playing among the crop-planted terraces and a pleasant breeze blew down the valley as the sun sank.

Of course, that would not have been enough to steal her rest, but she had been so exultant that when she left Amys' dreams, she did not stop; she could not, not then, no matter what Amys would have said. There had been dreams all around, though with most she had no idea whose they were. With most, not all. Melaine had been dreaming of suckling a babe at her breast, and Bair of one of her dead husbands, both of them young and yellow-haired. Dana dreamed of Healing with the One Power, despite not being able to channel. And Seana ... well. Seana had been dreaming of men. Quite a few of them. Dani had been especially careful not to enter those; the Wise Ones would have known an intruder in an instant, and she shuddered to think of what they would have done before letting her go.

She had found Rand's dreams but visiting him there had proven impossible. Her only attempt had been like running headlong into an invisible stone wall. She soon realised he had warded himself against such visits, and accepted his decision. Dani would not try again unless invited. No was no, after all. She'd found Raine's dreams, too, but they'd proven too disturbing to watch for long; full of flashing fangs and roaring beasts. Hunts and vicious struggles. After what she'd heard, that was understandable. Darkhounds. How could anything so big move so fast, or hide so well? After a lengthy hesitation she had sought out Ilyena, too, only to find her mind as warded as Rand's. That had been almost a relief, for Dani worried about what she might find there.

Ilyena remained near, sitting in frosty silence on the white mare she'd named Nienda. It meant "lost girl" in the Old Tongue.

All around them *gai'shain* were bustling about, loading the Wise Ones' camp onto mules. Before long, only an Aiel or someone just as skilled at tracking would be able to tell there had ever been tents on that patch of hard clay. The same activity covered the surrounding mountain slopes, and the hubbub extended into the city as well. Not everyone would be going, but thousands would. Aiel thronged the streets, and Master Kadere's train of wagons stood strung out across the great plaza, laden with Moiraine's selections, the three white-painted water wagons at the end of the line like huge barrels on wheels behind twenty-mule teams. Kadere's own wagon, at the head of the column, was a little white house on wheels, with steps at the back and a metal stovepipe sticking out of the flat roof. The thick, hawk-nosed merchant, all in ivory-coloured silk today, swept off his incongruously battered hat as she rode past, his dark, tilted eyes not sharing in the wide smile he flashed at her.

She ignored him frostily. His dreams had been decidedly dark and unpleasant, where they were not lewd as well. *He ought to have his head dunked in a cask of bluespine tea*, she thought grimly.

Approaching the Roof of the Maidens, she guided her horse carefully through scurrying *gai'shain* and patiently standing mules. To her surprise, one of those loading the Maidens' things

wore a black robe, not white. A woman, by the size of her, and staggering under the weight of a cord-tied bundle on her back. Bending as she guided Brightwind past, to get a look inside the woman's cowl, Dani saw Isendre's haggard face, sweat already rolling down her cheeks. She was glad the Maidens had stopped letting the woman go outside—or sending her out—more naked than not, but it did seem needlessly cruel to robe her in black. If she was sweating so hard already, she would nearly die once the day's heat took hold.

Still, *Far Dareis Mai* business was none of hers. Aviendha had told her so gently but firmly. Adelin and Enaila had been little short of rude about it, and a wiry, white-haired Maiden named Sulin had actually threatened to haul her back to the Wise Ones by her ear. That was all well and good, if troubling. Dani was not a Maiden, after all, though sometimes she found herself daydreaming about what it would have been like. The Maidens had accepted one wetlander among their number—Rand's mother—why not another? But it would have been impossible even if they allowed it, and even if Dani had really been willing to go through with it. She could channel. That ruled her out as surely as it had Aviendha.

The quickness with which she heeled Brightwind on through the crowd had nothing to do with acceptance of *Far Dareis Mai* justice, or her uncomfortable awareness that some of the Maidens were eyeing her, no doubt ready to lecture if they thought she intended to interfere. It even had little to do with her dislike of Isendre. She did not want to think about her glimpse of the woman's dreams, just before Cowinde had come to rouse her. They had been nightmares of torture, of things being done to the woman that sent Dani fleeing in horror, and with something dark and evil laughing as it watched her run. No wonder Isendre looked haggard. Dani had started up out of her sleep so quickly that Cowinde had jumped back from laying a hand on her shoulder.

Rand was in the street in front of the Maidens' Roof, wearing a *shoufa* against the coming sun and a blue silk coat with enough gold embroidery to befit a palace, though it hung open halfway down the front. His belt had a new buckle, an elaborate thing shaped like a Dragon. Standing beside *Jeade'en*, his dappled stallion, he was talking with the clan chiefs and some of the Aiel traders who would be staying in Rhuidean.

Jasin Natael, nearly at Rand's heels, with his harp on his back and holding the reins of a saddled mule bought from Master Kadere, was even more elaborately dressed, with silver embroidery nearly hiding his black coat, and spills of white lace at his neck and cuffs. Even his boots were worked in silver where they turned down at the knee. The gleeman's cloak with its patches did spoil the effect, but gleemen were odd folk.

The male traders wore the *cadin'sor*, and though their belt knives were smaller than those of warriors, Dani knew they could all handle a spear if called to; they had something, if not all, of the deadly grace of their brothers who carried the spear. The women traders, in loose white *algode* blouses and full woolen skirts, head scarves and shawls, were more easily distinguishable. Aielwomen usually wore multiple bracelets and necklaces of gold and ivory, silver and gemstones, some of Aiel make, some traded for, and some looted. Among Aiel traders, though, the women displayed twice as many, if not more.

She caught part of what Rand was telling the traders.

"... give the Ogier stonemasons a free hand on some of what they build, at least. On as much as you can make yourselves. There's no point in just trying to remake the past."

So he was having them send to the *stedding* for Ogier to rebuild Rhuidean. That was good. Much of Tar Valon was Ogier work, and where they were left to their own devices their buildings were enough to take the breath away. Loial loomed to the side, she saw, a notebook in hand and an approving look on his broad face.

Mat was already up on his gelding, Pips, with his own wide-brimmed hat pulled down and the butt of that odd spear resting on his stirrup. As usual, his high-collared green coat looked slept in. She had avoided his dreams. One of the Maidens, a very tall golden-haired woman, gave Mat a roguish grin that seemed to embarrass him. Or perhaps it was her and Ilyena's arrival that did that. He had tried his luck with both of them, back when he was staying in the White Tower. She exchanged looks with Ilyena, or tried to. Her pillow-friend would not meet her eyes.

"He told her to be quiet, and she did," Mat said as she halted Brightwind. He nodded toward Moiraine and Lan, she in pale blue silk, gripping the reins of her white mare, and he in his Warder's cloak, holding his great black warhorse. Lan was watching Moiraine intently, expressionless as

always, while she looked ready to burst with impatience as she glared at Rand. "She started telling him why this is the wrong thing to do—sounded to me like she was saying it for the hundredth time—and he said, 'I've decided, Moiraine. Stand over there and be quiet till I have time for you'. Like he expected her to do as she was told. And she did. Is that steam coming out of her ears?"

His chortle was so pleased, so amused at his own wit, that it nearly distracted her from his news. For a moment she stared at Moiraine, perplexed. The Aes Sedai had done as Rand told her? Without protest? That was like one of the Wise Ones obeying, or the sun rising at midnight. She had heard about the attack, of course; rumours about giant dogs that left footprints on stone had been all over this morning. She could not see what that could have to do with this, but aside from the news of the Shaido it was the only new thing she knew of, and not enough to produce this reaction. *Nothing* could produce it, that she could think of. Doubtless Moiraine would tell her it was none of her concern, but how could that be when she and the other Accepted were supposed to be following her lead? *She* wasn't about to sit still and be quiet, no matter what Rand—or Moiraine!—said!

Spotting Aviendha, standing on the bottom step of the Roof, she guided Brightwind around to the other side of the crowd near Rand, exchanging smiles with Raine and Merile as she went. The Aiel woman was staring at him as hard as the Aes Sedai did, but with absolutely no expression. She kept turning the ivory bracelet on her wrist over and over, apparently without realizing it. Somehow or other that bracelet was part of the difficulty the woman was having with him. Dani did not understand; Aviendha refused to talk about it, and she could not just ask someone else, not when it might embarrass her friend. Her own flame-carved ivory bracelet was a gift from Aviendha, to seal them as near-sisters; her return gift had been the silver necklace the other woman wore, which Master Kadere claimed was a Kaltori pattern called snowflakes. She had had to ask Moiraine for enough money, but it had seemed appropriate for a woman who would never see snow. Or would not have if she was not leaving the Waste; small chance that she could return before winter.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

She had to repeat the question before Aviendha gave a start and stared up at her. "Alright? Of course I am."

"Let me speak to the Wise Ones, Aviendha. I'm sure I can convince them that they cannot just make you ..." She could not make herself say it, not out here where anyone in the crowd might hear.

"Does *that* still worry you?" Aviendha shifted her grey shawl and gave a small shake of her head. "Your customs are still very strange to me." Her eyes drifted back to Rand like iron filings drawn to a lodestone.

"You do not have to be afraid of him."

"I am not afraid of any man," the other woman snapped, eyes flashing blue-green fire. "I want no trouble between us, Daniele, but you should not say such things."

Dani sighed. Friend or not, Aviendha was quite capable of trying to box her ears when offended enough. In any case, she was not sure she would have admitted it, either. Aviendha's dream had been too painful to watch for long. Naked but for that ivory bracelet, and that seeming to drag at her as if it weighed a hundred pounds, Aviendha had been running as hard as she could across a cracked clay flat. And behind her, Rand came, a giant twice the size of an Ogier on a huge Jeade'en, slowly but inexorably catching up.

But you could not simply tell a friend that she was lying. Dani's face heated slightly. Especially not when you would have to tell her how you knew. *She would box my ears, then. I won't do it again. Go rummaging about in a friend's dreams.* It was one thing to spy on a stranger, but a friend's dreams should be sacrosanct. Not that it was spying, exactly, but still ...

The crowd around Rand was beginning to break up. He swung into his saddle easily, imitated promptly by Natael. One of the traders, a broad-faced, flame-haired woman wearing a small fortune in worked gold, cut gems and carved ivory, lingered, though. "Car'a'carn, do you mean to leave the Three-fold Land forever? You have spoken as if you will never return."

The others stopped at that and turned back. Silence spread on an expanding ripple of murmurs telling what had been asked.

For a moment Rand was silent as well, looking around at the faces turned to him. His gaze settled on a young woman in the crowd whose pretty face was marred by a scattering of light scars. She stared back expectantly. At last he said, "I hope to return, but who can say what will happen? The

Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills." He hesitated, with every eye on him. "But I will leave you something to remember me by," he added, sticking a hand in his coat pocket. He looked at that girl again before adding, "A regard gift, if you will."

Abruptly a fountain near the Roof burst to life, water gushing from the mouths of incongruous porpoises standing on their tails. Beyond that, a statue of a young man with a horn raised to the sky suddenly was putting up a spreading fan, and then two stone women farther on were casting sprays of water from their hands. In stunned stillness the Aiel watched as all the fountains of Rhuidean flowed once more.

"I should have done that long since." Rand's mutter was no doubt meant for himself, but in the hush Dani could hear him quite clearly. The splash of hundreds of fountains was the only other sound. Natael shrugged as if he had expected no less.

It was at Rand that Dani stared, not the fountains. Each time she saw him do things like this, it was like learning that he could channel all over again. Growing up, she had been taught that only the Dark One was more to be feared than a man who could channel. *Maybe Aviendha's right to be afraid of him. Maybe I should be, too.*

But when she looked down at Aviendha, open wonder shone on her face; so much water delighted the Aiel woman as the finest silk dress might have Dani, or a garden full of flowers.

"It is time to march," Rand announced, reining the dapple westward. "Anyone who isn't ready will have to catch up." Natael followed close behind on the mule. Why did Rand let such a bootlicker stay near him?

The clan chiefs immediately began passing orders, and the bustle increased tenfold. Maidens and Water Seekers darted ahead, and more *Far Dareis Mai* closed around Rand as a guard of honour, incidentally enclosing Natael.

Aviendha strode beside Jeade'en, right at Rand's stirrup, easily matching the stallion stride for stride even in her bulky skirts. Her friend wore that look of grim determination again, as if she had to put her arm into a viper den.

The scarred girl they were leaving behind wore a very different expression. She was touching her lips as she watched Rand leave, her eyes going from him to the fountains and back, her expression unchanging. Dani did not know her, but she knew that look.

"I might need to borrow one of the Ogier's books to keep track of them all," she muttered as she heeled her horse to a trot, Ilyena sullen at her side. She could only hope he was done collecting admirers for a while. This was getting ridiculous.

\* \* \*

Settling herself in her saddle, Moiraine patted Aldieb's arched neck with a gloved hand, but she did not immediately follow Rand. Hadnan Kadere was bringing his wagons up the street, driving the lead wagon himself. She should have made him tear that wagon down to carry cargo as she had the others like it; the man was frightened enough of her, of Aes Sedai, to have done it. The doorframe *ter'angreal* was lashed firmly in the wagon behind Kadere, canvas tied over it tightly so no-one could fall through by accident again. A long line of Aiel—*Seia Doon*, Black Eyes—strode along on either side of the wagon train.

Kadere bowed to her from the driver's seat, but her gaze swept on down to the line of wagons, all the way to the great square surrounding the forest of slim glass columns, already sparkling in the morning light. She would have taken everything in the plaza if she could, rather than the small fraction that would fit into the wagons. Some were too large. Like the three dull grey metal rings, each more than two paces across, standing on edge and joined at the middle. A braided leather rope had been strung around that one, to warn all from entering without the Wise Ones' permission. Not that anyone was likely to, of course. Only the clan chiefs and the Wise Ones entered that square with any sense of ease; only the Wise Ones touched anything, and they with something approaching proper reticence.

For countless years the second test faced by an Aiel woman who wanted to be a Wise One had been to enter the array of glittering glass columns, seeing exactly what the men saw. More women survived it than men—Bair said it was because women were tougher, Amys that those too weak to survive were winnowed out before reaching that point—but it was not a certainty. Those who did

survive were not marked. The Wise Ones claimed that only men needed visible signs; for a woman, to be alive was enough.

The first test, the first winnowing, before any training even, was to step through one of those three rings. Which one did not matter, or perhaps the choice was a matter of fate. That step seemingly took her through her life again and again, her future spread out before her, all of the possible futures based on every decision she might make for the rest of her life. Death was possible in those, too; some women could not face the future any more than others could face the past. All possible futures were too many for a mind to retain, of course. They jumbled together and faded away for the most part, but a woman gained a sense of things that would happen in her life, that must happen, that might happen. Usually even that was hidden until the moment was on her. Not always, though. Moiraine had been through those rings.

*A spoonful of hope and a cup of despair, she thought.*

"I do not like seeing you like this," Lan said. From Mandarb's back and his own height, he looked down on her, disquiet creasing the corners of his eyes. For him that was near tears of frustration from another man.

Aiel streamed by on both sides of their horses, and *gai'shain* with pack animals. Moiraine was startled to realize that Kadere's water wagons had already gone by; she had not realized she had been staring at the plaza for so long.

"Like what?" she asked, turning her mare to join the throng. Rand and his escort were already out of the city.

"Worried," he said bluntly, no readable expression on that stone-carved face now. "Afraid. I've never seen you afraid, not when we had Trollocs and Myrddraal swarming over us, not even when you learned the Forsaken were loose and Be'lal was sitting almost on top of us. Is the end coming?"

She gave a start, and immediately wished she had not. He was looking straight ahead over his stallion's ears, but the man never missed anything. Sometimes she thought he could see a leaf fall behind his back. "Do you mean Tarmon Gai'don? A redbird in Seleisin knows as well as I. The Light send, not so long as any of the seals remain unbroken." The two she had were on one of Kadere's wagons, too, packed in separate casks stuffed with wool. A different wagon than the redstone doorframe; she had made sure of that.

"What else could I mean?" he asked slowly, still not looking at her, and making her wish she had bitten her tongue. "You have become—impatient. I can remember when you could wait weeks for one tiny scrap of information, one word, without twitching a finger, but now—" He did look at her then, a blue-eyed gaze that would have intimidated most women. And most men as well. "The oath you gave to the boy, Moiraine. Whatever under the Light possessed you?"

"He has been drawing further and further away from me, Lan, and I must be close to him. He needs whatever guidance I can give, and I will do everything short of sharing his bed to see that he gets it." The rings had told her that she might end up going that far. She had never intended it—the very idea still shocked her!—but in the rings it was something she would or could have considered in the future. It was a measure of her growing desperation, no doubt. In some of those futures it had brought ruination on everything. She wished she could remember how—there were keys to Rand al'Thor in anything she could learn about him—but only the simple fact of calamity remained in her mind. Among the other possibilities that the rings had shown, if she went down that path, lay humiliation and rejection, pleasure and pain. Tears. It never ended well, she recalled that much.

"Perhaps it will help your humility grow, if he tells you to fetch his slippers and light his pipe." She stared at him. Could that be a joke? If so, it was not amusing. She had never found that humility served very well in any situation. Siuan claimed that growing up in the Sun Palace in Cairhien had put arrogance deeply into Moiraine's bones, where she could not even see it—something she firmly denied—but for all that Siuan was a Tairen fisherman's daughter, she could match any queen stare for stare, and to her arrogance meant opposition to her own plans.

If Lan was attempting jokes, however feeble and wrongheaded, he was changing. For nearly twenty years he had followed her, and saved her life more times than she cared to count, often at great risk to his own. Always he had accounted his life a small thing, valuable only for her need of it; some said he wooed death the way a bridegroom wooed his bride. She had never held his heart, and never felt jealousy toward the women who seemed to throw themselves at his feet. He had long claimed that

he had no heart. But he had found one this past year, found it when a woman tied it on a string to hang around her neck.

He denied her, of course. Not his love for Nynaeve al'Meara, once a Wisdom in the Theren and now an Accepted of the White Tower, but that he could ever have her. He had two things, he said, a sword that would not break and a war that could not end; he would never gift a bride with those. That, at least, Moiraine had taken care of, though he would not know how until it was done. If he did he would very probably try to change matters, stubborn fool man that he could be.

"This arid land seems to have withered your own humility, al'Lan Mandragoran. I shall have to find some water to make it grow again."

"My humility is honed to razor sharpness," he told her dryly. "You never let it grow too dull." Wetting a white scarf from his leather water bottle, he handed her the sodden cloth. She tied it around her temples without comment. The sun was beginning to rise above the mountains behind them, a searing ball of molten gold.

The thick column snaked up the barren side of Chaendaer, its tail still in Rhuidean when its head had crested the slope, then down onto rough, hilly flats dotted with rock spires and flat-topped buttes, some streaked with red or ochre through the grey or brown. The air was so clear that Moiraine could see for miles, even after they were down off Chaendaer. Great natural arches reared, and in every direction jagged mountains clawed at the sky. Dry gullies and hollows split a land sparsely dotted with low, thorny bushes and leafless spiny plants. The rare tree, gnarled and stunted, usually bore spines or thorns as well. The sun made it an oven. A hard land that had shaped a hard people. But Lan was not the only one changing, or being changed. She wished she could see what Rand would make of the Aiel in the end. There was a long journey ahead for everyone.

## CHAPTER 29: *The Nine Horse Hitch*



A wide straw hat shaded Siuan's face as she let Logain lead the way through Murandy's Shilene Gate under the late-afternoon sun. The city's tall grey outer walls were in some disrepair; in two places she could see, tumbled stone lowered the wall to no more than a tall fence. Min and Leane rode close behind her, both tired from the pace the man had set over the weeks since Kore Springs. He wanted to be in charge, and it took little enough to convince him that he was. If he said when they started of a morning, when and where they stopped of a night, if he kept the money, even if he expected them to serve his meals as well as cook them, it was of little account to her. All in all, she felt sorry for him. He had no idea what she planned for him. *A big fish on the hook to catch a bigger*, she thought grimly.

In name, Murandy was part of Altara, the seat of Lord Roedran, but lesser nobles in Murandy spoke the words of fealty, then refused to pay their taxes, or do much of anything else that Roedran wanted, and the people did the same. Which was exactly the attitude that Roedran himself took towards Queen Tylin off in the capital, so Siuan had no sympathy for his position. Altara was a nation in name only, the people barely held together by supposed allegiance to the queen and fear that Amadicia or Illian might snap them up if they did not hold together in some fashion.

Stone walls crisscrossed the city, most in a worse state than the outer bastions, for Murandy had grown haphazardly over the centuries, and more than once had actually been divided among feuding nobles. It was a dirty city, many of the broad streets unpaved and all of them dusty. Men in high-crowned hats and aproned women in skirts that showed their ankles dodged between merchants' lumbering trains, while children played in wagon ruts. Trade kept Murandy alive, trade up from Illian and Ebou Dar, from Ghealdan to the east, Amadicia to the west and Andor to the north. Large bare patches of ground through the city held wagons parked wheel-to-wheel, many heavy-laden under strapped-down canvas covers, others empty and awaiting freight. Inns lined the main streets, along with horse lots and stables, nearly outnumbering the grey stone houses or shops, all roofed with tiles in blue or red or purple or green. Dust and noise filled the air, clanging from the smithies, the rumble of wagons and curses of the drivers, boisterous laughter from the inns. The sun baked Murandy as it slid toward the horizon, and the air felt as though it might never rain again.

When Logain finally turned in to a stableyard and dismounted behind a green-roofed inn called The Nine Horse Hitch, Siuan clambered down from her horse gratefully and gave it a doubtful pat on the nose, wary of teeth. In her view, sitting on the back of an animal was no way to travel. A boat went as you turned the rudder; a horse might decide to think for itself. Boats never bit, either. At least those awful first days of stiffness were gone, when she was sure Leane and Min were grinning behind her back as she hobbled about in the evening camp. After a day in the saddle, she still felt as if she had been thoroughly beaten, but she managed to hide it.

As soon as Logain began bargaining with the stableman, a lanky, freckled old fellow in a leather vest and no shirt, Siuan sidled close to Leane. "If you want to practice your wiles," she said softly, "practice them on Dalyn the next hour." Leane gave her a dubious look. She had dabbled in smiles and glances at some of the villages since Kore Springs, but Logain had gotten no more than a flat look, for the likelihood that his preening desire to be in control and have his bruised ego soothed might extend to being serviced in other ways was very much there. After a moment, Leane sighed and nodded. Taking a deep breath, she glided forward in that startling sinuous way, leading her arch-necked grey and already smiling at Logain. Siuan could not see how she did that; it was as if some of her bones were no longer rigid.

Moving over to Min, she spoke just as quietly again. "The instant Dalyn is done with the stableman, tell him you are going to join me inside. Then hurry ahead, and stay away from him and Amaena until I come back." From the noise roaring out of the inn, the crowd inside was big enough to hide an army. Surely big enough to hide the absence of one woman. Min got that mulish look about her eyes and opened her mouth, no doubt to demand why. Siuan forestalled her. "Just do it, Serenla.

Or I'll let you add cleaning his boots to handing him his plate." The stubborn look remained, but Min gave a sullen nod.

Pushing the horse's reins into the other woman's hands, Siuan hurried out of the stableyard and started down the street in what she hoped was the right direction. She did not want to have to search the entire city, not in this heat and dust.

Heavy wagons behind teams of six or eight or even ten filled the streets, drivers cracking long whips and cursing equally at the horses and at the people who darted between the wagons. Roughly dressed men mingling through the crowds in long wagon drivers' coats sometimes directed laughing invitations at women who passed them. The women who wore colourful aprons, sometimes striped, their heads wrapped in bright scarves, walked on with eyes straight ahead, as though they did not hear. Women without aprons, hair hanging loose around their shoulders and skirts sometimes ending a foot or more clear of the ground, often shouted back even ruder replies.

Siuan gave a start when she realized that some of the men's suggestions were aimed at her. They did not make her angry—she really could not apply them to herself in her own mind—only startled. She was still not used to the changes in herself. That men might find her attractive ... Her reflection in the filthy window of a tailor's shop caught her eye, not much more than a murky image of a fair-skinned girl under a straw hat. She was young; not just young-appearing, as far as she could tell, but young. Not much older than Min. A girl in truth, from the vantage of the years she had actually lived.

*An advantage to having been Stilled*, she told herself. She had met women who would pay any price to lose fifteen or twenty years; some might even consider her price a fair bargain. She often found herself listing such advantages, perhaps trying to convince herself they were real. Freed from the Three Oaths, she could lie at need, for one thing. And her own father would not have recognized her. She did not really look as she had as a young woman; the changes maturity had made were still there, but softened into youth. Coldly objective, she thought she might be somewhat prettier than she had been as a girl; pretty was the best that had ever been said of her. Handsome had been the more usual compliment. She could not connect that face to her, to Siuan Sanche. Only inside was she still the same; her mind yet held all its knowledge. There, in her head, she was still herself.

It wasn't just the men you had to be wary of in Murandy, though. Crime was rife here. She saw a woman lounging in a cushioned chair on one of the porches she passed. No great thing, in some cases. But this woman had a face as hard as any Warder's, and half a dozen thick-shouldered men loitered around her, watching the street. Some skinny fellow was standing before her seat, cap in hand. Siuan heard a name, Calio, and some talk of protection fees. She had already crossed to the other side of the street before the thugs turned their frowns her way. The Defenders back in Tear had kept a strict discipline ... but only over anything that might disadvantage the High Nobles. Scenes like that had been commonplace in her youth, and she'd learned to mind her own business. She wasn't at all sure how pleased she should be that that habit came back to her so easily.

Some of the inns and taverns in Murandy had names like The Farrier's Hammer, or The Dancing Bear, or The Silver Pig, often with garish signs painted to match. Others had names that should not have been allowed, the mildest of that sort being The Domani Wench's Kiss, with a painting of a coppery-skinned woman—bare to the waist!—with her lips puckered. Siuan wondered what Leane would make of that, but the way the woman was now, it might only give her notions.

At last, on a side street just as wide as the main, just beyond a gateless opening in one of the collapsing inner walls, she found the inn she wanted, three stories of rough grey stone topped with purple roof tiles. The sign over the door had an improbably voluptuous woman wearing only her hair, arranged to hide as little as possible, astride a barebacked horse, and a name that she skipped over as soon as she recognized it.

Inside, the common room was blue with pipesmoke, packed with raucous men drinking and laughing, trying to pinch serving maids, who dodged as best they could with long-suffering smiles. Barely audible over the babble, a zither and a flute accompanied a young woman singing and dancing on a table at one end of the long room. Occasionally the singer swirled her skirts high enough to show nearly the whole length of her bare legs; what Siuan could catch of her song made her want to wash out the girl's mouth. Why would a woman go walking with no clothes on? Why would a woman sing about it to a lot of drunken louts? Why was that red-haired woman in the corner letting one of those

louts grope her chest while she sucked the last drops out of the bottle? It was not a sort of place she had ever been into before. She intended to make this visit as brief as possible.

There was no mistaking the inn's owner, a tall, heavyset woman encased in a red silk dress that practically glowed; elaborate, dyed curls—nature had never produced that shade of red, surely never with such dark eyes—framed a thrusting chin and a hard mouth. In between shouting orders to the serving girls, she stopped at this table or that to speak a few words or slap a back and laugh with her patrons.

Siuan held herself stiffly and tried to ignore the considering looks men gave her as she approached the crimson-haired woman. "Mistress Tharne?" She had to repeat the name three times each louder than the last, before the inn's owner looked at her. "Mistress Tharne, I want a job singing. I can sing—"

"You can, can you now?" The big woman laughed. "Well, I have a singer, but I can always use another to give her a rest. Let me be seeing your legs."

"I can sing 'The Song of the Three Fishes,'" Siuan said loudly. This had to be the right woman. Surely two women in one city could not have hair like that, not and answer to the right name at the right inn.

Mistress Tharne laughed harder still and slapped one of the men at the nearest table on the shoulder, jolting him half off his bench. "Not much call for that one here, eh, Pel?" Gap-toothed Pel, a wagon driver's whip curled around his shoulder, cackled with her.

"And I can sing 'Blue Sky Dawning'."

The woman shook, scrubbing at her eyes as though she had laughed herself to tears. "Can you, now? Ah, I'm sure the lads will love that. Now let me see your legs. Your legs, girl, or get out!"

Siuan hesitated, but Mistress Tharne only stared at her. And an increasing number of the men did, too. This had to be the right woman. Slowly, she pulled her skirt up to her knees. The tall woman gestured impatiently. Closing her eyes, Siuan gathered more and more of her skirt in her hands. She felt her face growing redder by the inch.

"A modest one," Mistress Tharne chortled. "Well, if those songs are the extent of your knowledge, you'd better have legs to make a man fall on his face. Can't tell till we get those woollen stockings off her, eh, Pel? Well, come on with me. Maybe you have a voice, anyway, but I can't hear it in here. Come on, girl! Hustle your rump!"

Siuan's eyes snapped open, blazing, but the big woman was already striding toward the back of the common room. Backbone like an iron rod, Siuan let her skirts fall and followed, trying to ignore the guffaws and lewd suggestions directed at her. Her face was stone, but inside, worry warred with anger as she hurried after Mistress Tharne.

Before being raised to the Amyrlin Seat, she had run the Blue Ajah's network of eyes-and-ears; some had also been her own personal listeners both then and later. She might no longer be Amyrlin, or even Aes Sedai, but she still knew all of those agents. Duranda Tharne had already been serving the Blue when she took over the network, a woman whose information was always timely. Eyes-and-ears were not to be found everywhere, and their reliability varied—there had been only one that she trusted enough to approach between Tar Valon and here, at Four Kings, in Andor, and she had vanished—but a vast amount of news and rumour passed through Murandy with the merchants' wagon trains. There might be eyes-and-ears for other Ajahs here; it would be well to remember that. *Caution gets the boat home*, she reminded herself.

This woman fit the description of Duranda Tharne perfectly, and surely no other inn could have a name so vile, but why had she responded as she did when Siuan identified herself as another agent of the Blue? She had to risk it; Min and Leane, in their own fashion, were growing as impatient as Logain. Caution got the boat home, but sometimes boldness brought back a full hold. At the worst, she could knock the woman over the head with something and escape out the back. Eyeing the woman's width and height, and the firmness of her thick arms, she hoped that she could.

A plain door in the corridor that led to the kitchens opened into a sparsely furnished room, a desk and one chair on a scrap of blue carpet, a large mirror on one wall, and surprisingly, a short shelf with a few books. As soon as the door was shut behind them, diminishing if not cutting off the noise of the common room, the big woman rounded on Siuan, fists planted on ample hips. "Now, then. What do you want with me? Don't bother giving me a name; I don't want to know, whether it's yours or not."

A little of the tension oozed out of Siuan. Not the anger, though. "You had no right to treat me in that manner out there! What did you mean forcing me to—!"

"I had every right," Mistress Tharne snapped, "and every necessity. If you'd come at opening or closing, as you're supposed to, I could have hustled you in here and none the wiser. Do you think some of those men wouldn't be wondering if I escorted you back here like a long-lost friend? I can't afford to have anyone wondering about me. You're lucky I didn't make you take Susu's place on the table for a song or two. And you watch your manner with me." She raised a wide, hard hand threateningly. "I've married daughters older than you, and when I visit them, they step right and talk proper. You come Mistress Snip with me, and you'll be learning why. Nobody out there will even hear you yelp, and if they did, they wouldn't interfere." With a sharp nod, as if that were settled, she put fists on hips again. "Now, what do you want?"

Several times during the onslaught Siuan had tried to speak, but the woman rolled over her like a tidal wave. That was not something she was accustomed to. By the time Mistress Tharne was done she quivered with anger; both hands held her skirts in a white-knuckled grip. She held on to her temper every bit as hard. *I am supposed to be just another agent*, she reminded herself firmly. Not the Amyrlin anymore, just another agent. Besides, she suspected that the woman might carry out her threat. This was something else still new to her, having to be wary of someone under her eye just because they were larger and stronger.

"I was given a message to deliver to a gathering of those we serve." She hoped Mistress Tharne took the strain in her voice for being cowed; the woman might be more helpful if she thought Siuan properly intimidated. "They were not where I was told to find them. I can only hope you know something to help me find them."

Folding her arms under a massive bosom, Mistress Tharne studied her. "Know how to hold your temper when it suits, eh? Good. What's happened in the Tower? And don't try denying you come from there, my fine haughty wench. Your message has courtier writ large all over it, and you never got that snooty manner in a village."

Siuan drew a deep breath before answering. "Siuan Sanche has been Stilled." Her voice did not even tremble; she was proud of that. "Elaida a'Roihan is the new Amyrlin." She could not keep a hint of bite out of that, however.

Mistress Tharne's face showed no reaction. "Well, that explains some of the orders I've gotten. Some of them, maybe. Stilled her, did they? I thought she'd be Amyrlin forever. I saw her once, a few years ago in Caemlyn. At a distance. She looked like she could chew harness straps for breakfast." Those impossible scarlet curls swung as she shook her head. "Well, done's done. The Ajahs have split, haven't they? Only thing that fits; my orders, and the old buzzard Stilled. The Tower's broken, and the Blues are running."

Siuan ground her teeth. She tried telling herself the woman was loyal to the Blue Ajah, not to her personally, but it did not help. *Old buzzard? She's old enough to be my mother. And if she was, I'd drown myself.* With an effort, she made her voice meek. "My message is important. I must be on my way as soon as possible. Can you help me?"

"Important, is it? Well, I'm not doubting it. Trouble is, I can give you something, but it's up to you to cipher it out. Do you want it?" The woman refused to make this any easier.

"Yes, please."

"Sallie Daera. I don't know who she is or was, but I was told to give her name to any Blue who came around looking lost, so to speak. You may not be one of the sisters, but you carry your nose high enough for one, so there it is. Sallie Daera. Make of it what you will."

Siuan suppressed a thrill of excitement and made her face dejected. "I never heard of her, either. I'll just have to go on looking."

"If you find them, you tell Aeldene Sedai I'm still loyal, whatever's happened. I've worked for the Blues so long, I wouldn't know what to do with myself else."

"I will tell her," Siuan said. She had not known that Aeldene was her replacement controlling the Blues' eyes-and-ears; the Amyrlin, whatever Ajah she came from, was of all but part of none. "I suppose you need some reason for not hiring me. I really cannot sing; that should do."

"As if it mattered to that lot out there." The big woman quirked an eyebrow and grinned in a way Siuan did not like. "I'll think of something, wench. And I'll give you a bit of advice. If you don't

climb down a rung or two, some Aes Sedai will take you down the whole ladder. I'm surprised it hasn't been done already. Now go on. Get out of here."

*Hateful woman,* Siuan growled in her head. *If there was a way to manage it, I'd have her doing penance till her eyes popped.* The woman thought she deserved more respect, did she? "Thank you for your help," she said coolly, making a curtsy that would have graced any court. "You have been too kind."

She was three steps into the common room when Mistress Tharne appeared behind her, raising her voice in a laughing shout that cut through the noise. "A shy maiden, that one! Legs white and slender enough to set you all drooling, and she bawled like a baby when I told her she'd have to show them to you! Just sat right down on the floor and cried! Hips round enough for any taste, and she ...?" Siuan stumbled as the tide of laughter rose, never quite drowning out the woman's recitation. She managed another three steps, face red as a beet, then fled at a run.

In the street, she paused to get her breath back and let her heart stop pounding. *That horrible old harridan! I should ...!* It did not matter what she should do; that disgusting woman had told her what she needed. Not Sallie Daera; not a woman at all. Only a Blue would know, or even suspect. Salidar. Birthplace of Deane Aryman, the Blue sister who had become Amyrlin after Bonwhin and had rescued the Tower from the ruin Bonwhin had poised it for. Salidar. One of the last places anyone would look for Aes Sedai, short of Amadicia itself.

Two men in snowy cloaks and brightly burnished mail were riding down the street toward her, reluctantly moving their horses aside for wagons. Children of the Light. They could be found everywhere these days. Tipping her head down, watching the Whitecloaks cautiously from beneath the brim of her hat, Siuan moved closer to the blue-and-green front of the inn. They glanced at her as they rode by—hard faces beneath shining conical helmets—and passed on.

Siuan bit her lip in vexation. She had probably called their attention to her by shrinking back. And if they had seen her face ...? Nothing, of course. Whitecloaks might try to kill an Aes Sedai the found alone, but hers was an Aes Sedai face no longer. Only, they had seen her try to hide from them. If Duranda Tharne had not upset her so, she would not have made such a foolish error. She could remember when a little thing like Mistress Tharne's remarks would not have made her stride waver in the least, when that overgrown dyed fishwife would not have dared say a word of it. *If that termagant doesn't like my manner, I'll ...* What she would do was continue about the business she was on before Mistress Tharne pummelled her so she could not sit a saddle. Sometimes it was hard remembering that the days were gone when she could call queens and have them come.

Striding down the street, she glared so hard that some of the wagon drivers bit back the comments they had been going to make to a pretty young woman alone. Some of them did.

## CHAPTER 30: Tables Turned



Min sat on a bench against the wall of the crowded common room in The Nine Horse Hitch watching a table surrounded by standing men, some with coiled driver's whips, others wearing the swords that marked them merchants' guards. Six more sat shoulder to shoulder around the table. She could just make out Logain and Leane, sitting on the far side. He wore a disgruntled frown; the other men hung on Leane's every smiling word.

The air was thick with pipesmoke, and full of chatter that nearly drowned the music of flute and tambour and the singing of a girl dancing on a table between the stone fireplaces. Her song had to do with a woman convincing six men that each was the only man in her life; Min found it interesting even when it made her blush. The singer darted jealous glances at the crowded table from time to time. Or rather at Leane.

The tall Domani woman had already been leading Logain by the nose when they entered the inn and she had attracted more men like flies to honey with that swaying walk and the smouldering light in her eyes. There had very nearly been a riot, Logain and the merchants' guards with hands on swords, knives being drawn, the stout proprietor and two heavily muscled fellows rushing in with cudgels. And Leane had doused the flames much as she had ignited them, with a smile here, a few words there, a pat on the cheek. Even the innkeeper had lingered awhile, grinning like a fool, until his custom called him away. And Leane thought she needed practice. It hardly seemed fair.

*If I could do that to one particular man, I'd be more than satisfied. Maybe she'd teach me—Light, what am I thinking?* She had always been herself, and everyone else could accept her as she was or not. Now she was thinking about changing what she was, for a man. It was bad enough that she had to hide herself in a dress, instead of the coat and breeches she had always worn. *He'd look at you in a dress with neckline cut low. You've more to show than Leane does, and she—Stop that!*

"We have to go south," Siuan said at her shoulder, and Min gave a start. She had not seen the other woman come in. "Now." From the shine in Siuan's blue eyes, she had learned something.

Whether she would share it was another matter. The woman seemed to think she was still Amyrlin, most of the time.

"We cannot reach anywhere else with an inn before nightfall," Min said. "We might as well take rooms here for the night." It was pleasant to sleep in a bed again instead of under hedges and in haystacks, even if she did usually have to share it with Leane and Siuan. Logain was willing to rent them all rooms, but Siuan was tight with their coin even when Logain was doling it out.

Siuan looked around, but whoever in the common room was not staring at Leane was listening to the singer. "That isn't possible. I—I think some Whitecloaks may be asking questions about me."

Min whistled softly. "Dalyn won't like that."

"Then do not tell him." Siuan shook her head at the gathering about Leane. "Just tell Amaena that we have to go. He'll follow. Let us just hope the rest don't as well."

Min grinned wryly. Siuan might claim that she did not care that Logain—Dalyn—had taken charge, mostly by just ignoring her whenever she tried to make him do anything, but she was still determined to bring him to heel again.

"What *is* a Nine Horse Hitch, anyway?" she asked, getting to her feet. She had gone out front hoping for a hint, but the sign over the door bore only the name. "I have seen eight, and ten, but never nine."

"In this town," Siuan said primly, "it is better not to ask." Sudden spots of colour in her cheeks made Min think that she knew very well. "Go fetch them. We've a long way to go, and no time to waste. And don't let anyone overhear you."

Min snorted softly. With that small smile on Leane's face, none of those men would even see her. She wished she knew how Siuan had brought herself to the Whitecloaks' attention. That was the last thing they needed, and it was not like Siuan to make mistakes. She wished she knew how to make

Rand look at her like those men were looking at Leane. If they were going to be riding all night—and she suspected they were—maybe Leane *would* be willing to give her a few tips.

Most of the men barely glanced at her when she came to whisper her message in Leane's ear, but Logain gave her a hard frown. She hadn't needed Siuan's warning to know to avoid being alone with him. She'd met men like that back in Baerlon, and fought them off, too.

It wasn't a situation she wanted to linger in, so she retreated to the comfortable sights of the inn's stable, and the not quite so comfortable smells that came with it. The sun had gone down by then but a pair of covered lanterns hung from poles near the entrance, safely away from all the hay. It cast a little light inside, but the glare made it hard to see anything in the street beyond. *Story of my life. You'd think, being able to see the future, I'd be more in control.*

She never had been, though, not even when she'd tried to be.

Min didn't bother to go looking for the stablemen. They were probably drunk. And besides, Siuan would want as few people as possible knowing when they left and what direction they went. She hadn't even deigned to tell Min, after all—and she was travelling with them! So she saddled the horses herself, paying special attention to her Wildrose.

She was in Wildrose's stall when she heard familiar voices approaching. Logain's deep rumble and Leane's sultry response. The horse's ears perked up but Min thought nothing of it, not until Logain's voice grew more insistent. Then she stopped rubbing the sorrel mare's nose and felt her own ears perking.

"Anger is good, though," Logain claimed. "Anger makes you feel alive. It rare that I've felt that, ever since you lot did this to me."

"I had no voice in that judgement," Leane said smoothly. Min noticed that she didn't say she hadn't wanted it done, though. "A stallion can still run and fight, even after being gelded," she went on reassuringly.

Though they were beyond her sight, Min could easily imagine Logain's nostrils flaring. "I am no gelding! Do you mock me, woman?"

"Of course I do not! You know I have suffered the same fate," said Leane, a hint of her old, clipped self returning to her voice, rather to Min's relief.

Logain didn't sound relieved, however. "Then you know how hard it is to find reasons to keep going," he growled. "I've watched you struggle with it. You and the other one. You both try to hide it, but I'm not as blind as you think me. You were more alive today than you've been for all these weeks. You enjoy this. Teasing men ... teasing me ..."

Leane gasped. "I did not give you permission to touch me."

"No. You dared me to. Aes Sedai can't lie, right? Don't try to tell me you don't want it. I know what it means when a woman's nipples stand out like this."

Those gasps continued, and Min was on the verge of stepping out and trying to break things up, but the noises Leane was making took on a rather different tone all of a sudden.

"I could never love a man like you," she groaned.

"Who said anything about love? I want to feel alive. And so do you ..."

"I ... do ..." she admitted.

There were no more words after that. A distant stall thumped open, and more thumps soon followed, a rhythmic sound that she could well guess the meaning of. Min slunk out of Wildrose's stall like a thief in the night, red of face, holding her breath. She needn't have bothered. The stable proper was empty, and the two people hiding in that other stall probably wouldn't have noticed her if she'd started singing that scandalous song about the girl and her six men. As she crept to the door that led into The Nine Horse Hitch, she strained her neck to risk a peek. Leane was up against one wooden wall, her long legs wrapped around Logain's waist. His muscular ass clenched again and again as he fucked her vigorously. She had one hand against his chest, as if she would push him away, but the other was tangled in his dark, curling hair. The copper-skinned woman's eyes were squeezed shut and her mouth hung open as she moaned in pleasure.

Min shut the door behind herself so slowly that a cat probably wouldn't have heard the click.

Safely ensconced in the connecting corridor, the sounds of stable and common room alike muffled by wooden doors, Min breathed a sigh of relief and tried to calm herself. She never would have thought Leane would actually do it. That an Aes Sedai would let a false Dragon fuck her like

that! She must have missed the sign when they entered Murandy, the one that read, “Abandon your morals, you who enter here”.

Still. She stayed in the corridor. Neither Leane nor Logain were friends of hers, not really, but they were travelling companions at the least. It didn’t feel right to let anyone walk in on them.

Her survey of the area was brief. No furniture, nor even a bench to sit on. The one door she hadn’t been through before opened into a dirty tool closet, full of broken saddles and stained shovels. She didn’t stay long. Loitering in the corridor, she spent her time composing excuses she might use to steer any of the customers away. Or tried to anyway. It was hard to come up with a good one. When the door from the common room opened, she stood away from the wall at once, a tale of diarrheic horses being hastily attended to by long-suffering grooms ready to fly from her lips.

It was only Siuan, though, looking ready to march. “Why are you lazing about here? Get a move on, girl,” she said as Min stood there with her mouth hanging open.

She snapped it shut again and glared as the former Amyrlin—former!—walked by. Almost, she let her open that door. It would have served her right to get an eyeful! Almost.

Min spoke just as Siuan was reaching for the latch. “You don’t want to go in there. Not yet.”

Piercing blue eyes turned towards her, silently demanding an explanation. Min crossed her arms beneath her breasts, but she gave it anyway. “Leane and Logain are busy.”

“Busy?”

She raised her brows. Whatever the Aes Sedai’s rules concerning such things, the woman could not be that sheltered. Sure enough, the realisation hit Siuan mere moments before her curse blistered the air. “I just told her to distract him!”

“Well, he looked pretty distracted to me,” Min said snippily.

“Don’t give me your lip, girl.”

“Oh, stop that,” Min growled. “You aren’t the, the woman in charge anymore. Every time you take out your anger on me, I almost wish I’d left you in that dungeon. I won’t be bullied by you!”

Siuan scowled. “Bullied is it? Well, maybe that’s a fair catch. But you could do a lot worse than being bullied by me, g—Serenla. The way you go borrowing trouble, you’re lucky you’ve gotten this far without losing that pretty head of yours.”

“I don’t go looking for trouble,” she said. Elayne did, it was true—she was as brave as she was beautiful; which was to say too much at times—but Min? Why would anyone think that?

“Fishguts! Then why does it keep finding you?”

She leaned back against the wall and sighed. “I don’t know.” A quiet life would have suited her just fine. But here she was, destined to fall in love with the Dragon Reborn. *Already in love with him, Light help me. Not that he cares, the bloody Trolloc!*

“It’s probably those big dark eyes of yours,” Siuan said. She leant against the wall, uncomfortably close. “They make you look so innocent. So in need of corrupting ...”

Min flushed. “I told you. I won’t be bullied anymore. I’m not going to just drop to my knees and do whatever you tell me to.”

Siuan sniffed, but she leaned back at least. “You call that bullying? I barely even had to push you, you naughty little minx.”

That!—that wasn’t ... She had so pushed her! “W-well, you needn’t expect it to happen again, is all I’m saying. I’m not your plaything!”

“A big girl now, are you? Tough and in charge?” Her snort said what she thought of that. “We’ll see. But if you want to pretend to be ... I bet I could make you feel it.”

Min pushed the former Amyrlin’s hand away from her breast and gave her a firm look. When she went ahead and touched her thigh through her skirt, she pressed her knees together and said, “Stop that,” but Siuan went on. She wasn’t rough, but there was still the light of command in those piercing eyes of hers. It remained even as she was descending to her knees. The sight of her there froze Min’s defensive hands and her words of denial alike. Her heart was racing.

Siuan lifted her skirt and kissed her legs with hands and lips alike. Min’s knees remained firmly pressed together but she couldn’t deny her body’s reaction. Her eyes darted to the doors as Siuan kissed her way upwards.

“Someone might see!” she hissed. “Not here.”

She heard the woman’s chuckle, and felt it as well, so close was she to the thin cloth that covered Min’s sex. “Not here, eh? Where then? Hmm. There’s a thought.”

For a moment she considered refusing, just to silence that knowing voice. But her excitement was too great. Giving a wary look to the door to the common room, she took Siuan by the arm and hurried her towards the storeroom she'd seen earlier. There wasn't much room to move in there, and no real way to get comfortable, save to lean on the stacked saddles, but at least it was private.

"So it's come to this. Well. Any storm can be weathered, if the sailor is determined enough," Siuan muttered as she took in the clutter. She stepped to Min and planted a firm kiss on her mouth, though one that didn't last very long. "I don't think it's here you want me to be kissing, is it?"

Min swallowed. "No."

"Then show me ..."

Blushing, she turned around and lifted her skirts long enough to pull down her underwear, and then leant over the saddles. She was already wet, and she was sure Siuan would be able to see it. A hand came to rest on her bottom, to squeeze and fondle. "Such a pretty little butt you have ... A pity there are no lamps in here ..."

With that, the door clicked shut, sealing them in darkness. The sound of Min's breathing seemed louder somehow. She was more aware of the sensations, too, and gasped when a wet tongue touched her sex. Her hand closed around something; a rake, a spade, she knew not what. She struggled to steady herself as Siuan Sanche gave her pussy any expert's going over. A finger now stripped of a Great Serpent ring probed her inside, to stir her up.

It stayed there even as the former Amyrlin kissed her way upwards.

Min thought nothing of that at first, not until a hand parted her cheeks and something soft and wet touched the little hole between them. Then she gasped even louder.

"That's the wrong one!" she warned, sure Siuan must have gotten confused in the dark.

But then she heard her chuckle. "Is it? Or are you the boss now, just like you wanted?"

Heart racing, Min could only lean there and shiver as that tongue went to work on her. It felt ... good. She'd never imagined it would feel so good, that somewhere so dirty would be so sensitive. Her toes tried to curl in her shoes. Around and around the Amyrlin's tongue went, sending a new wave of pleasure through Min's body each time it did.

When, after an unknowable time, Siuan leaned away for a breath, Min threw a hand back and grabbed her by the hair and pushed her back in place, unable to countenance it ending before she came. She was so close. Her temerity got her a slap on the bum, but she didn't let go and the blessed tongue soon went back to work. She could never have imagined herself doing what she did then, grinding her ass against the Amyrlin Seat's mouth to urge her to pleasure her more, but there she was, in the dark, doing just that.

She had long since forgotten about being quiet. Had forgotten everything except that new pleasure. She barely even noticed how loud was the cry she let out when her orgasm crackled through her. She was shivering all over when another slap on the bottom brought her back to awareness.

"You're pulling my hair."

Min let go at once. "Am I? Sorry, I ... I don't know what came over me."

Siuan snorted. "Oh, I think half the inn knows what came, girl."

She felt her face blaze. She couldn't even be mad about going back to "girl", such was her embarrassment. "Is anyone outside?" she asked desperately.

"Not that I heard."

Min got up in a hurry and struggled to right herself in the darkness. "We have to go!"

"Giving orders. And not even going to reciprocate? Guess I flattered you too much," Siuan muttered.

"There's no time!" Min hissed, fumbling for the door. They had to get away before someone came to investigate. She wasn't sure what it was she imagined happening if they were caught, she was just sure she didn't want to be!

When she finally found the latch and emerged blinking into the hallway, she found it blessedly empty. Siuan finished wiping her mouth and came out right behind her. Min flushed again, unsure why it was she and not that blue-eyed harridan that had difficulty maintaining eye contact. Everything was wrong today. Everything was backwards.

Cool as she looked, Siuan was right on her heels when they hurried into the stable. Min no longer cared if Leane and Logain were still in a compromising position. It was them or her now, and she chose them. Luckily for all involved, the former Aes Sedai and the former false Dragon were fully

clothed, standing in the middle of the stable with the reins of their horses in hand, Logain looking even smugger than ever, and Leane looking like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

Siuan's face betrayed nothing of what she knew. Or what she'd done. Min was sure the eyes Siuan had claimed made her look innocent must have been as big as teacups just then.

"Everyone mount up," Siuan barked. "I know where we need to go."

Logain grumbled, of course, but his eyes followed Leane as she climbed gracefully into her saddle. And when the three women rode out into the night, he was left with little choice but to follow.

## CHAPTER 31: An Old Pipe



A gust of wind swirling dust down the Murandy street caught Gareth Bryne's velvet hat, sweeping it from his head directly under one of the lumbering wagons. An iron-rimmed wheel ground the hat into the hard clay of the street, leaving a flattened ruin behind. For a moment he stared at it, then walked on. *It was showing travel stains anyway*, he told himself. His silk coat had been dusty before reaching Murandy, too; brushing no longer did much good, when he even took the trouble. It looked more brown than grey, now. He should find something plainer; he was not on his way to a ball.

Dodging between wagons rumbling down the rutted street, he ignored the drivers' curses that followed him—any decent squadman could give better in his sleep—and ducked into a red-roofed inn called The Wagon Seat. The painting on the sign gave the name an explicit interpretation.

The common room was like every common room he had seen in Murandy, wagon drivers and merchants' guards packed in with stablemen, farriers, labourers, every sort of man, all talking or laughing as loud as they could while drinking as much as they could, one hand for the cup and one to fondle the serving girls. For that matter, it was not all that much different from common rooms and taverns in many other towns, though most were considerably milder. A buxom young woman, in a blouse that seemed about to fall off, capered and sang atop a table at one side of the room, to the supposed music of two flutes and a twelve-string bittern.

He had little ear for music, but he paused a moment to appreciate her song; she would have gone over well in any soldiers' camp he had ever seen. But then, she would have been as popular if she could not sing a note. Wearing that blouse, she would have found a husband in short order.

Joni and Barim were already there, Joni's size enough to grant them a table by themselves despite his thin hair and the bandage he still wore around his temples. They were listening to the girl sing. Or at least staring at her. He touched each man on the shoulder and nodded toward the side door that led to the stableyard, where a sullen groom with a squint delivered their horses for three silver pennies. A year or so earlier Gareth could have bought a fair horse for no more. The troubles to the west and in Cairhien were playing havoc with trade and prices.

No-one spoke until they passed the city gates and were on a seldom-travelled road winding north toward the River Storn, little more than a wide dirt track. Then Barim said, "They was here yesterday, my lord."

Gareth had learned that much himself. Three pretty young women together, obvious outlanders, could not pass through a city like Murandy without being remarked. By men, anyway.

"Them and a fellow with shoulders," Barim went on. "Sounds maybe like that Dalyn that was with them when they burned down Nem's barn. Anyway, whoever he is, they was at The Nine Horse Hitch for a bit, but all they did was drink some and leave. That Domani girl the lads was telling me about, she nearly kicked up a fuss flashing her smile and swaying about, but then she calmed everything down again the same way. Burn me, but I'd like to meet me a Domani woman."

"Did you hear which way they went, Barim?" Gareth asked patiently. He had not been able to learn that.

"Uh, no, my lord. But I heard there's been plenty of Whitecloaks passing through, all heading west. You think maybe old Pedron Niall's planning something? Maybe in Altara?"

"That's not our business anymore, Barim." Gareth knew his patience sounded a little frayed this time, but Barim was an old enough campaigner to stick to the matter at hand.

"I know where they went, my lord," Joni said. "South, on the Gold Road, and pushing hard by what I heard." He sounded troubled. "My lord, I found two merchants' guards, lads who used to be in the Guards, and had a drink with them. Happens they were in a stew called The Good Night's Ride when that girl Mara came in and asked for a job singing. She didn't get it—didn't want to show her legs the way the singers in most of these places do, as who can blame her?—and she left. From what Barim told me, it was right after that they all set off south. I don't like it, my lord. She isn't the kind of girl to want a job in a place like that. I think she's trying to get away from that Dalyn fellow."

Strangely, despite the lump on his head, Joni had no animosity toward the three young women. It was his opinion, often expressed since leaving the manor, that the girls were in some sort of predicament and needed to be rescued. Gareth suspected that if he did catch up to the young women and take them back to his estate, Joni would be after him to turn them over to Joni's daughters to mother.

Barim had no such feelings. "Ebou Dar." He scowled. "Or maybe Illian, or Amadicia. We'll kiss the Dark One getting them back. Hardly seems worth the annoyance for a barn and some cows."

Gareth said nothing. They had followed the girls this far, and Murandy was a bad place for Andormen. Only a fool would chase into Murandy after an oathbreaker's eyes. How much bigger a fool to follow halfway across the world?

"Those lads I talked to," Joni said diffidently. "My lord, it seems a lot of the old lads who— who served under you are being sent off." Emboldened by Gareth's silence, he went on. "Lots of new fellows in. Lots. Those lads said at least four or five for every one told he wasn't wanted anymore. The sort that like to cause trouble more than stop it. There's some calling themselves the White Lions who only answer to this Gaebrial"—he spat to show what he thought of that—"and a bunch more not part of the Guards at all. Not House levies. Near as they could say, Gaebrial's got ten times as many men under arms as there are Guards, and they've all sworn to the throne of Andor, but not to the Queen."

"That's no longer our business, either," Gareth said curtly. Barim had his tongue stuffed into his cheek, the way he always did when he knew something he either did not want to tell or was not sure was important enough. "What is it, Barim? Out with it, man."

The leather-faced fellow stared at him in amazement. Barim had never figured out how Gareth knew when he was holding back. "Well, my lord, some of the folks I talked to said some of those Whitecloaks yesterday was asking questions. About a girl sounds like that Mara. Wanted to know who she was, where she went. Like that. I heard they got real interested when they learned she was gone. If they're after her, she could be hanged before we ever find her. If they have to go to the trouble of chasing her down, they might not ask too many questions about whether she's really a Darkfriend. Or whatever it is they're after her for."

Gareth frowned. Whitecloaks? What would the Children of the Light want with Mara? He would never believe she was a Darkfriend. But then, he had seen a baby-faced young fellow hanged in Caemlyn, a Darkfriend who had been teaching children in the streets about the glories of the Dark One—the Great Lord of the Dark, he had called him. The lad had killed nine of them in three years, as near as could be discovered, when they looked like turning him in. *No. That girl is no Darkfriend and I'll stake my life on it.* Whitecloaks were suspicious of everyone. And if they took it into their heads that she had fled Murandy to avoid them ...

He booted Traveller to a canter. The big-nosed bay gelding was not flashy, but he had endurance, and courage. The other two caught up soon enough, and they kept their mouths shut, seeing the mood he was in.

Two miles or so from Murandy, he turned off into a thicket of oak and leatherleaf. The rest of his men had made a temporary camp here, in a clear space under thick, spreading oak limbs. Several small, smokeless fires were burning; they would take any opportunity to brew up some tea. Some were dozing; sleep was another thing an old soldier never missed a chance to snatch.

Those awake kicked the rest out of their naps, and they all looked up at him. For a moment he sat his saddle studying them. Grey hair and bald heads and age-creased faces. Still hard and fit, but even so ... He had been a fool to risk bringing them into Murandy just because he had to know why a woman had broken an oath. And maybe with Whitecloaks after them. No telling how far or how long from home before it was done. If he turned back now, they would have been gone more than a month before they saw Kore Springs again. If he went on, there was no guarantee the chase would stop short of the Sea of Storms. He should be taking these men, and himself, home. He should. He had no call to ask them to try snatching those girls out of Whitecloak hands. He could leave Mara to Whitecloak justice.

"We will be heading south," he announced, and immediately there was a scramble of dousing fires with the tea and fastening pots to saddles. "We will have to press hard. I mean to catch them soon, if I can, but if not, there's no telling where they'll lead us. You could see Illian or Amador or Ebou Dar before we're done." He affected a laugh. "You'll find out how tough you are if we reach

Ebou Dar. They've taverns there where the barmaids skin Illianers for dinner and spit Whitecloaks for sport."

They laughed harder than the jest was worth.

"We won't worry with you along, my lord," Thad cackled, stuffing his tin cup into his saddlebags. His face was wrinkled like crumpled leather. "Why, I hear you had a run-in with the Amyrlin herself once, and—" Jar Silvin kicked him on the ankle, and he rounded on the younger man—grey-haired, but still younger—with a clenched fist. "Why'd you do that, Silvin? You want a broke head, you just—What?" The meaningful glares Silvin and some of the others were giving him finally sank in. "Oh. Oh, yes." He buried himself in checking the girth straps on his saddle, but no-one was laughing anymore.

Gareth forced his face to relax from stoniness. It was time he put the past in the past. Just because a woman whose bed he had shared—and more, he had thought—just because that woman looked at him as though she had never known him was no reason to stop speaking her name. Just because she had exiled him from Caemlyn, on pain of death, for giving her the advice he had sworn to give ... If she came a cropper with this Lord Gaebil who had suddenly appeared in Caemlyn, it was no longer any concern of his. She had told him, in a voice as flat and cold as smooth ice, that his name would never be spoken in the palace again, that only his long service kept her from sending him to the headsman for treason. Treason! He needed to keep spirits up, especially if this turned into a long chase.

Hooking a knee around the high cantle of his saddle, he took out his pipe and pouch and filled his pipe with tabac. The bowl was carved with a wild bull collared with the Rose Crown of Andor. For a thousand years that had been the sign of House Bryne; strength and courage in service of the queen. He needed a new pipe; this one was old.

"I didn't come out of that as well as you might have heard." He leaned down for one of the men to hand him a twig still glowing from one of the spent fires, then straightened to puff his pipe alight. "It was some three years ago. The Amyrlin was making a progression. Cairhien, Ghealdan, Tear, Illian, and finishing up in Caemlyn before returning to Tar Valon. At that time we were having problems with Valreio border lords—as usual." Laughter rippled; they had all served on the Valreio border a one time or another. "I had sent some of the Guards down to set the Valreio straight on who owned the sheep and cattle on our side of the border. I never expected the Amyrlin to take an interest." He certainly had their attention; preparations to leave were still going on, but more slowly.

"Siuan Sanche and Elaida closeted themselves with Morgase—" There; he had said her name again, and it did not even smart. "—and when they came out, Morgase was half thunderhead, with lightning shooting out of her eyes, and half ten-year-old who'd been hauled up by her mother for stealing honeycakes. She's a tough woman, but caught between Elaida and the Amyrlin Seat ..." He shook his head, and they chuckled; Aes Sedai attentions were one thing none of them envied lords and rulers. "She ordered me to remove all troops from the border with Valreis immediately. I asked her to discuss it with me in private, and Siuan Sanche jumped all over me. In front of half the court, she chewed me up one side and down the other like a raw recruit. Said if I couldn't do as I was told she'd use me for fishbait." He had had to beg her pardon before it was done—in front of everyone, for trying to do as he had been sworn to do—but there was no need to add that. Even at the end he had not been sure that she would not make Morgase behead him, or have it done herself.

"Must have meant to catch herself a mighty big fish," someone laughed, and others joined in.

"The upshot was," Gareth went on, "my hide got singed, and the Guards were ordered back from the border. So if you're looking to me to protect you in Ebou Dar, just remember it's my opinion those barmaids would hang the Amyrlin out to dry along with the rest of us." They roared with mirth.

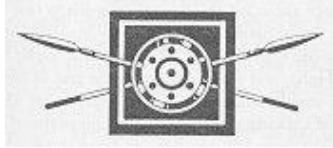
"Did you ever find out what it was about, my lord?" Joni wanted to know.

Gareth shook his head. "Aes Sedai business of some sort, I expect. They don't tell the likes of you and me what they are up to." That earned a few chuckles as well.

They mounted up with an alacrity that belied their ages. *Some of them are no older than me*, he thought wryly. Too old to go chasing after a pretty pair of eyes young enough to be his daughter's if not his granddaughter's. *I only want to know why she broke oath*, he told himself firmly. *Only that*.

Raising his hand, he signalled forward, and they headed south, leaving a trail of dust. It would take hard riding to catch up. But he meant to. In Ebou Dar or the Pit of Doom, he would find them.

## CHAPTER 32: One Spear, Six Sisters



It had been plain from the start that the pains of the march west would hit the “wetlanders” harder than the Aiel. Since Rand was too busy acting the big chief to pay proper attention to them, Dani often found herself taking care of Raine and Merile. Helping them to cope with the conditions, that is. The harsh conditions didn’t leave much room for anything except crawling into a tent at night, at least for her. Rand was indefatigable. The only nights he slept alone were when Aviendha shared his tent.

The secret of what had been going on under the Roof of the Maidens didn’t seem to be much of a secret anymore. Some of the Wise Ones took it better than others. Dana was full of proper aunts’ disapproval, while Seana found the whole thing funny. Bair complained that they were making things harder for Aviendha, to which Seana responded that they were only making it harder for themselves. Bair hadn’t laughed, though Dani hadn’t been able to contain her own.

More troubling was the reaction of Yusana. No dreamwalker but a powerful channeler, she had a husband who looked older than her and who was probably half her age, as well as six identical daughters. She often clashed with Amys, who did not welcome her intrusion in their councils.

Dani didn’t much care about that, but she did care about what she’d overheard while tidying up after one of those clashes. It had been dark by then, but Yusana and her daughters’ voices had come to her ears clearly from the night outside the tent.

“Mother? You summoned us?” one of the girls asked. She didn’t know which, for they were as alike as peas in a pod.

“I have a task for you. Rand al’Thor is dangerous,” Yusana answered. Dani had immediately stopped what she was doing.

“Is he not the *Car'a'carn*?”

“He is,” Yusana allowed, to Dani’s relief. “What is done is done. But now I need you to travel with him. I realise what I am asking of you, and I am asking that you keep your purpose a secret—even from your spearsisters. I need someone to watch the *Car'a'carn* closely, and let me know who he speaks to and what is said. And more importantly, I need you to study him closely. I need to know what he thinks, what he does. Become part of his group, earn his trust, get him to confide in you.”

“We will do as you ask, Mother. But Mother, many of our sisters speak well of the *Car'a'carn*. He did not seem to pose a threat to us,” a different sister said.

“Ah, but he does. Do not be fooled by the exterior,” her mother advised. “It is his nature you must beware. His past self broke the world once; he will do so again. I am trusting you with this task, my daughters. Do not disappoint me. The world, the Aiel, may depend on it.”

Dani did not leave the tent until she was sure Yusana and her girls were long gone. The stars above were almost mirrored by the cookfires and lamps that dotted the land, so huge was the army Rand had gathered.

She approached Rand’s tent hesitantly. A sliver of light showed along the tent flap. A Maiden seemed to rise out of the ground as she came closer, horn bow on her back, quiver at her waist, and spears and buckler in hand. Dani could not make out any others in the darkness, but she knew they were there, even here surrounded by six clans all claiming loyalty to the *Car'a'carn*. The Miagoma were somewhere to the north, paralleling their march; Timolan would not say what his intentions were. Where the other clans were, Rand did not seem to care. His attention was all on the race for Jangai Pass.

“Is he awake, Enaila?” she asked.

Moonshadows shifted on the Maiden’s face as she nodded. “He does not sleep enough. A man cannot go without rest.” She sounded for all the world like a mother fretting over her son.

A shadow beside the tent stirred, became Aviendha with her shawl wrapped around her. She did not seem to feel the cool, only the hour. “I would sing him a lullaby, if I thought it might work. I have heard of women being kept awake all night by an infant, but a grown man should know that others would like to have their blankets.” She and Enaila shared a quiet chuckle.

Shaking her head over Aiel strangeness, Dani bent to peer through the crack. Several lamps lit the interior. He was not alone. Natael's dark eyes looked haggard, and he stifled a yawn. He at least wanted sleep. Rand lay sprawled close by one of the gilded oil lamps, reading a battered leather-bound book. One translation or another of the Prophecies of the Dragon, if she knew him at all.

Abruptly he flipped back through the pages, read, then laughed. She tried to tell herself there was nothing of madness in that laugh, only bitterness. "A fine joke," he told Natael, snapping the book shut and tossing it to him. "Read page two hundred eighty-seven and page four hundred, and tell me if you don't agree."

Dani's mouth tightened as she straightened. He really should be more careful with a book. She could not speak to him, not in front of the gleeman. "Why don't you join them, Aviendha? If you were there, maybe he'd want to talk of something besides that book."

"He wanted to talk with the gleeman, Daniele, and he seldom does that in front of me or anyone. Had I not left, he and Natael would have."

"Children are a great worry, I have heard." Enaila laughed. "And sons the worst. You may find out the truth of this for me, now that you have given up the spear." Aviendha gave her a moonlit frown and stalked back to her place against the side of the tent like an offended cat. Enaila seemed to think that funny, too; she clutched her sides laughing.

Muttering to herself about Aiel humour—she almost never understood it—Dani made her way to her own tent, not far from Rand's, and sought her blankets.

So it was that the next day, when her training session with the Maidens devolved into an argument about whether or not they should join those Aiel who were teaching Rand to fight, she found herself silently siding with those who argued for tradition. The suggestion had been made by the sextuplets, after all.

*Far Dareis Mai*'s fighting style was different from the other Aiel societies'. It was carefully crafted to give them an advantage over their often bigger and more muscular male counterparts, and they guarded its secrets zealously. The suggestion that they might share those secrets with a man nearly made the sparring session turn into a real fight.

Sulin had to step in to stop that, but even the white-haired Maiden was unable to silence the arguing from both sides. Su and Renay felt that anything that protected or helped the *Car'a'carn* to protect himself was something they should do. Rhamys argued that if they could get Rand to promise not to tell anyone else then there would be no harm, which won her some cutting comments on naivety from Ani that stopped just short of questioning Rand's honour.

The Maidens had still been arguing that morning well after the rest of the army had resumed the march west. But for all their arguing, no agreement had been reached. The most that could be said was that Sulin and the other leaders had not forbidden it. Watching the sextuplets, Dani had resolved to check in on Rand the next day, when his morning routine brought him to Lan and the others.

Sure enough, he had a bit more company than usual. She stood on a ridge overlooking it all, as he grappled shirtless with Rhuarc in the relative cool of the morning. Her muscles still felt stiff from all the exercise she'd done the day before, but Rand moved easily despite training far more often. Or perhaps because of training more often. She found herself massaging the bruises Adelin had given her, while reluctantly considering going back for more. She wasn't the only one watching, either. Moiraine had already been there when she and Ilyena arrived, and gave them the tiniest nod of recognition when they led their horses over to join her.

"You have not come to gawk at this for some time. What has changed?" Moiraine asked.

Dani could only hope her skin tone hid her blush. She might well have gawked early on, little as she liked Moiraine saying so. But peeking was for things outside your reach, and Rand was no longer that, for her.

She opened her mouth to answer but Ilyena spoke first. "Is that why you are here? Spying on topless boys half your age? Tut tut."

Dani's mouth stayed open. She knew Ilyena had a tongue on her, but she hadn't heard her direct it towards an Aes Sedai like that since the earliest days of their Novice training. Moiraine's face showed nothing, but surely she had to be as shocked as Dani.

"You have been too long away from the Tower. You all have," the Aes Sedai said. "Your return will not be easy for you."

Ilyena lowered her eyes before that cool threat, but only so she could chuckle at the ground between her feet.

"The Maidens were arguing about whether or not to help train him," Dani said, trying to wrench the conversation away from that topic. She jerked her chin at the group of women crouching at the edge of the clearing below. Yusana's daughters were there but they were not alone. Nearly a dozen other Maidens had joined them, Adelin included.

"And that is what occupies your thoughts this morning, Daniele? The traditions of *Far Dareis Mai*? Too long away indeed. We march with an Aiel army larger than that which fought at the Shining Walls, an army that is bound for the Jangai Pass and all that waits beyond. Plans long in the making teeter on the brink of disaster, hundreds of thousands of lives stand ready to end, and you spend your morning wondering whether *Far Dareis Mai* will extend their training to a male. You are as much a fool as he is."

She ground her teeth. Years of training had never quite managed to make her just accept being spoken to like that. "I take it he hasn't decided to change his plans just because you asked a bit more nicely," she grated. "Lessons not going well?"

Moiraine glared darkly at the man down below, who was obviously blocking a flurry of punches from one of the younger Aielmen. "What lessons? I offer to distil for him a lifetime of knowledge and education in the greatest city in the world, and all he can say is that he'll listen 'when he has time'. Time! Look how he spends his time. Our time."

Her Warder was among the men down there. Dani had no doubt she would have ordered Lan to start ignoring Rand had it been only him he went to for these sessions. The Aes Sedai's patience, once seemingly infinite, was visibly frayed.

Lan's attention swivelled instantly to the Maidens when a handful of them rose and moved towards the struggling men. The other Aiel noticed almost as quickly, and ribald jokes about muscles, spears and women who couldn't restrain themselves soon rang out. Some of the Maidens gave as good as they got, with Rondha shouting insults and Adelin trading jokes. Rhamys and Renay looked pretty embarrassed, though, with the former only pressing on after her father looked a question at her. Words were exchanged between them but Dani couldn't hear, for she was too busy being distracted by the sight of Rhuarc topless. A man of his years had no business having a body like that.

She heard the men's reaction to Renay's suggestion that Rand should come with them so they could speak in quiet, however, and glared at them just as hotly as any of the Maidens. Renay's cheeks flared and some of the Maidens who hadn't approached shot to their feet, with Ani even going so far as to raise her black veil.

"I'll be happy to talk to you later," Rand rushed to say, "but I'm kind of in the middle of something now."

One of the younger Aielmen, a yellow-haired lout she thought named Zell, immediately undid Rand's peacemaking by implying something that was no less offensive for Dani knowing it to be true.

"The more girls the better!" crowed another lout named Jarasai.

"Private is private. Public is public," Rand said firmly. The other men's smiles grew chagrined, and Zell shrugged an apology.

Adelin's eyes remained on him, and her words came out cold. "We have discussed the matter of your training, *Car'a'carn*. It has been decided that all techniques must be made known to you, for your own protection."

Rand looked confused. "Meaning ...?"

One of the sextuplets stepped forward. "The training she speaks of is something custom dictates be reserved for *Far Dareis Mai*, but I do not see the harm in instructing you in some basic principles. I do not understand how you and *Aan'allein* fight, but I will instruct you on how Aiel girls are raised on warfare."

"He is already learning all that stuff. From us," Zell scoffed.

"He is not," was all Rhuarc said, but those men who'd begun to echo the youth's claim fell immediately silent.

Rand hadn't scoffed but he looked less than eager to take her up on her offer even so. "You want me to train with you as well, Briana? To fight you?"

"You ... know my name?" she said, glancing at her sisters—each looking like her reflection—in surprise. "A lucky guess. Yes. It has been decided that we will break tradition by showing you some of the advanced techniques we have developed to defeat larger opponents."

"You are a lucky boy," said Rondha.

Renay nodded. "You should be honoured, Rand. Al'Thor."

"I am," he said slowly, though he still didn't look at all eager.

"What is wrong with him?" she muttered.

She hadn't expected an answer, but Moiraine's cool chimes sang out. "The matriarchy in the Theren are stern in their adherence to tradition. Mother's make sure to instil in their sons the belief that it is a terrible sin to use violence against a woman. You see the results. Even voluntary sparring like this is enough to make him quail. It could have been an asset. It might yet. Or it might doom us all."

Ilyena laughed. When she saw Dani and Moiraine raising their brows at her, she just laughed all the harder. Rand certainly wasn't laughing down below. Nor was Dani. The Black Ajah would skin him alive if they ever got their hands on him. She knew from experience how cruel they could be. Would he quail if he was ever asked to fight them, too? This was a much bigger problem than Moiraine made it out to be!

"You see now why we must go apart. This is an offer extended only to He Who Comes With the Dawn," Adelin said, casting a proud look around at the other men.

"It is as I have said, Rand al'Thor," said Rhuarc. "Adaptability is a great strength in any warrior. Or leader. We will go aside, that you might learn what they have to teach."

He spoke no orders to the others, just gathered his things and loped off towards the campsite, but every last Aiel man there followed his lead. She found herself wondering how he did that.

Lan was not so swift to abandon Rand among the warrior women. Under his cold gaze Ani lowered her veil at last. The sextuplets stood straight before his scrutiny, but there was a shuffling of feet among them when he finally turned his attention elsewhere. One sister whispered something to another as Lan was striding over to Moiraine. From the looks they were giving his back, she doubted it was anything ribald.

"All Aiel fighting principles rely on foundations," Briana told a hunch-shouldered Rand. "If one does not understand the most basic of fighting moves, it is not possible to understand the higher tiers. It is similar to learning the alphabet of a language before being able to use words, then sentences. Some sentences are more complex than others, however. So it is with *Far Dareis Mai*'s fighting style."

There was a pause, while the Maidens waited cold-eyed for Rand to make some comment on female verbosity. No comment was forthcoming. He just stood there, listening intently.

Moiraine sniffed. "To this he listens. Perhaps if I ..." Abruptly, she turned away and started leading her horse back to camp. "Come, Lan. They will not welcome your eyes upon them. And the sooner he is done with this farce, the sooner we can get on with the real work."

The Warder took his own horse's lead and followed, naturally. What was less natural was the way his gaze lingered on Moiraine instead of their surroundings. Stone-faced or not, Dani thought he looked a bit worried.

"It is difficult sometimes for others to truly speak their heart, or listen to it. The words often prove difficult, or they do not come at all," Briana told Rand. Dani gave a start. "Battle is a pure form of expression. It is heart and discipline reduced to movement and motion. In battle, the words are swept away, giving way to actions. Mercy, sacrifice, anger, fear: these are pure moments of expression."

"You are saying I should read my opponent and predict what they want to do next, in the way I would read, ah, someone in ... other physical encounters," said Rand. When he choked himself off, Dani felt her cheeks warming. She risked a glance at Ilyena, and saw her blushing, too. *What? Why would she ...?*

"She was not likening it to that!" Renay insisted, scandalized.

But Rhamys was nodding thoughtfully. "I never thought about it like that. You are wise to see it, Rand al'Thor."

"No he is not!" Adelin snapped.

Briana remained cool, though. "As a foundation, I will instruct you in our elementary movements. The body itself is the first weapon you must master. It is not something that can be

described. Let us duel, you and I, and that will teach you more than my words can. Use only your hands and feet to strike at me, nothing else, or our combat shall be over. Do not resort to using the One Power; such things will obstruct the learning."

Rand set his jaw stubbornly. "You can show me things, but I'm not going to hit you."

Rondha frowned at him. "Why not?"

"It wouldn't be right. You're ... women."

"We are *Far Dareis Mai!*" she snapped. "Not some weavers sheltering in the holds of their mothers!"

"I think it is a wetlander thing," Renay said. "When we fought at Emond's Field, the women there took up arms against the Shadow, only to face the scorn of their own clan for breaking tradition."

Ani snorted. "Wetlanders."

"It is the way we were raised," Rand said.

The fair-haired Maiden, shorter than most, tried her best to look down at him. "If somebody told you to die, would you?"

He scowled at her. "No. If somebody told you to do something that was against *ji'e'toh*, would you?"

Even Renay, usually supportive of him, put her hands on her hips and frowned censoriously over that. "There is no need to be so rude, Rand. You should know by now how important *ji'e'toh* is. It is not comparable to some wetlander tradition."

Watching him share an incredulous stare around at the Maidens, none of whom were at all moved by it, Dani found herself laughing softly. She supposed that was the way of the world. Everyone thought their customs were massively important, and that other people's were just silly. Did she have similar blind spots of her own? Probably. But she couldn't think what they might be.

"This is a good thing to learn," one of Briana's sisters said, and Dani's smile faded. Whether he knew it or not, Rand was revealing his weaknesses.

The other sextuplets nodded, but Briana was busy shaking her head over Rand. "Your modesty has no place in combat, even the youngest of the Aiel understand this. You should as well. Now, are you ready?" She glided over to the centre of the clearing, where the men had recently been sparring, and took a fighting stance. Rand followed reluctantly.

"If you refuse to fight, that will be fine as well," Rondha said, examining her fists. "I could always use something to tighten my knuckles against."

"I will ... defend myself," Rand said, the words coming out as if dragged.

Briana ignored his attitude. "Very well, I shall match my movements to resist your efforts. And do not hold back, or I will hurt you."

She went at him then. Shorter and slighter, she would not have looked a threat at a glance, but she attacked with swift, sharp jabs. Rand did nothing but block, which did not exactly help his situation. He dodged or parried many an attack, but invariably some slipped through. Some landed cleanly, and where they did Rand started moving more sluggishly. A frown marred his handsome face, but he refused to launch any kind of counterattack to Briana's assault.

"The Light is going out, isn't it?" Ilyena asked quietly.

"Don't say that." But despite her words, a worry was taking root in Dani's heart.

There was something off about Briana's attacks, too. Dani had trained with the Maidens, but the way she was attacking him—all stiff fingers, hands moving like a striking snake—was unlike anything they had ever taught her. And Rand's arm, the one she'd landed her cleanest hits on, was hanging at his side now as if too numb to lift.

"What is this?" he asked.

"A lesson," she answered. She came at him from his undefended side and kicked his feet out from under him. No sooner had he hit the hot sand than she was on him, grabbing his other arm and pinning it behind his back.

The other Maidens gathered around their prone "saviour". Adelin folded her arms beneath her breasts and looked down at him. "What we will teach you is precision. There are places to strike and ways to strike them that can make even a little force do as much damage as a hammer swung by a blacksmith."

"This could be a path to great honour for you. And for us," one of the sextuplets said. "To defeat an opponent without killing them brings more honour, and these techniques make that easier to do. Which is part of why we do not show it to the men."

"They preen too much as it is," another sister claimed.

Briana released Rand's arm and got off his back. "The true test of battle is how much force to bring against opponents," she said as she offered him her hand. "If you wish to kill them, do not hold back. But if you wish to stun them, incapacitate them, then you must choose your attacks carefully, using just the right amount of force, just the right weapon, to stop them."

He took her hand with the only one of his that was still working. "Just stun them? ... I think I could do that."

"I told you they preen too much."

"Face down in the dirt only a moment ago, and now he boasts."

"I think I will take him next. But I warn you, Rand al'Thor. I am not as gentle as my sister."

He nodded glumly. "I have gotten that impression of you, Cirana."

The woman—Cirana—looked surprised. "How did you know it was me?"

Rand shrugged. "Why wouldn't I?"

Dani could well understand the looks the sisters exchanged. She herself could not have told them apart if her life had depended on it, and she doubted many others could. She wiped the sullen look from her own face as soon as she realised it was there. Adelin had her back turned anyway. Tiers, Briana had spoken of. And what tier were they teaching her? The child's one? She'd thought she was making progress but they'd certainly never spoken like this during her training sessions, or shown her any of this stiff fingered malarkey.

She turned away from them and stalked off, leading her horse just as Moiraine had done. And Ilyena followed, just as Lan had.

"Maybe some good will come of it," Dani said as they walked. "He has to at least be willing to defend himself."

Ilyena said nothing, so neither did she for a time. But there were questions she needed to ask, so it was inevitable that the silence be broken.

"Do you not like him?"

She refused to look at her. "When have you ever known me to like anyone? Except you."

Dani rolled her eyes. "Oh, spare me. You aren't half as fearsome as you like to think yourself. I just thought you looked a bit worried back there ..."

"I do not want him dead, for what little that is worth," Ilyena muttered.

She forced a laugh. "Light! So you are secretly in love with him, is that it?"

"Are you?"

They stopped there under the morning sun, now rising in the sky. The vanguard of the Aiel army was already marching, and others were streaming along in their wake. But Dani had eyes only for Ilyena, whose hair glowed golden in the sun. Neither woman spoke. They just stared at each other as the world moved by, words that neither dared voice riding the heat haze around them.

They were still staring wordlessly when their own section of the column, where their fellow Accepted rode, caught up to them and Mayam called out a question, breaking their trance. Ilyena greeted her with uncharacteristic cheerfulness, and they rode along together for much of the day. Dani secretly wished it didn't feel so much like they were seeking shelter from each other.

The Aiel Waste was not the prettiest of lands to begin with, and they saw little of it through the haze of dust kicked up by so many people on the move. The heat was oppressive and the day seemed to drag on forever. For all her vivid memories of how cold it could get here at night, Dani welcomed the sun's touch upon the horizon. She was sure she would sleep soundly that night.

Her horse's tired plodding eventually brought them up to Rand, who was sitting his dappled stallion and exchanging words with Moiraine. About lessons no doubt. Tents were going up for as far as she could see. Close by, a group of *gai'shain* were putting up Rand's. It was time to stop for the night, thank the Light.

"That's very interesting, Moiraine. We should talk more tomorrow, on the march," Rand said. The Maidens were with him, of course. Even here, surrounded by other Aiel. Perhaps especially here, surrounded by other Aiel. All six of the sisters were among his current group of guards, she noticed.

"We should talk over breakfast. There is much you must know," the Aes Sedai insisted.

But Rand shook his head. "My morning is full, as you know."

"Evenings also," busty Rhamys said solemnly.

The sextuplets exchanged looks and then clustered together, whispering.

The sharp look she was getting from Moiraine seemed only to confuse Rhamys. It did not confuse Rand, when she turned it on him, but it did not move him, either. "You march for Cairhien. How much do you know of its history? Can you tell me of the vendettas between the Great Houses, who hates who and why? You must know who to contact and how to communicate with them if you are to hope to succeed."

One of Yusana's daughters sidled up to him. With her pale eyes, paler hair and tanned skin, she was the opposite of Moiraine in colouring, but she matched the Aes Sedai's lack of expression. "To the Aiel, battle is a means of communication. It is an art, in the truest sense of the word. Stance, form, discipline are a means of expression and communication. They speak ones heart, and ones devotion to their cause. The methods you use to meet your opponent speak truer than any words can express. When you risk pain or death, there is no truer sacrifice or strength. When you risk pain and death for another, there is no truer test of your beliefs and strength."

Rand nodded interestedly. "I think I noticed it earlier. The little twitches, a widening of the eye. They tell you what the person is thinking, in a way. And if you know what they are thinking you can predict what they are going to do."

"That is part of it, yes. We can show you more," the Aiel girl said.

"Fascinating as I am sure that must be ... to someone," Moiraine said with barely concealed impatience, "the political situation in Cairhien and the likelihood of further bloodshed resulting from its mismanagement must take precedence. I am sure even—I am sure you agree, don't you Rand?"

He nodded again, though reluctantly this time. "That is so."

"We can discuss it further in private, if you like, *Car'a'carn*. My sisters and I have much to teach you. And we wish to learn more of you."

It was solemnly said, but the sudden redness in Rand's cheeks made plain she wasn't the only one who heard something scandalous behind that bland proposition. Dani did not for a moment think he would refuse.

And sure enough ... "I'd like that."

"Are your priorities truly so misplaced?" Moiraine said. For a wonder, the Aes Sedai's colour was nearly as high as Rand's.

That odd reaction drew his attention, but only for a moment, what with those six sisters, each as pretty as the next, clustering together before the entrance to his tent. "Tomorrow, Moiraine. On the march. We'll talk then." He walked away, leaving the Aes Sedai to seethe in her frustrations.

Dani watched him disappear into the tent with Yusana's girls, and oddly enough her only real jealousy was that she was not going with him. *Maybe I am becoming too Aiel.*

"Six? Huh. Not bad. But I bet I could handle seven," said Mayam.

Dani stared, thinking she might not be the only one so afflicted. "Light, Mayam! It's not a competition!"

Ilyena snickered but Moiraine was far less amused. "Aes Sedai should not do such things. We are supposed to hold ourselves to the highest standards. Not allow ourselves to be debased in such a manner."

Mayam's back stiffened. "Debased? You have no idea what I made those men do for me. But then, a proper Aes Sedai literally couldn't imagine it."

"You are a disgrace," Pedra sneered.

Moiraine turned her piercing stare from the dark Accepted to the dark tent that Rand had disappeared into. "It is him. It has to be. He is so strongly *ta'veren* that his influence extends to those around him, twisting them into something they would not have been."

Pedra was fierce in her agreement, while Theodrin nodded with a sad sigh. As someone caught up in that *ta'veren* influence, however, Dani could not muster a matching outrage.

\* \* \*

Rand refused to make any assumptions just because he was alone in a tent with six Maidens. They might intend to attack him, either as a test or in genuine hostility. The way they had spread out to

surround him certainly put him on edge. He didn't know these women that well. But the idea of getting to know them better slithered into his mind.

*They wouldn't. They're sisters, real sisters, not just spearsisters.* He'd been away from home long enough to realise that most people would have a problem with that. He didn't, but he was a bit strange. Supposedly. Enough people had said it, at least.

"So. What was it you wanted to discuss?" he asked.

A few of the sisters laughed softly, but Briana remained solemn. It was she who spoke. "We would like to take your measure."

Rand's brows rose. There were many women from whom he would have taken that for a ribald joke, but Briana's face showed not a hint of a smile. *No. Just talking. Has to be.*

"Alright. But I'm not going to tell you any more than I already tell Aviendha."

"You have already told us much, whether you realise it or not."

"I have?"

"Yes. Though not with words."

He rubbed his chin. "Ah. Yes, of course. It goes both ways." But what had he revealed to them that he did not mean to? His plans called for secrecy. All the best plans did. The attack the enemy did not see coming was far more likely to succeed.

"You have spoken to us without words," another of the sisters said. Arren, he was almost sure. They looked so alike that it was difficult to tell, despite how hard he'd been trying to remember which was which. Arren was calmer than the others, which qualified her as unflappable.

"There are other things you might say to us. Without words," said Atris, who was perhaps the least calm of them all.

Rand watched her carefully. Her lips were red. It could have been eagerness. He tried not to assume, but his heart sped up. "What would you have me say, without words, here tonight?" he asked quietly. A soft rustle brought his gaze back to Briana, who was taking off her top. Her *shoufa* already lay atop the rugs. "Ah ... are we talking about, um, naked wrestling here?"

"Some duels among the Aiel are rituals, and do not allow for anything that restricts movement. But that is not what we are talking about here," she said, unashamed.

Rand gulped. Blood and ashes! Was it just her? He'd like that. She was the nicest of the six, by his reckoning. The others were also starting to undress. He liked that, too, there was no denying it.

"We aren't going to be talking at all, are we?"

Briana nodded. "You are correct, words are merely words, and they fail to communicate what I intend to teach you."

"What *we* intend to teach you," Hani added. It wasn't the first time she'd corrected one of the others in his hearing.

She had a narrow waist, he saw. All the sisters did. And fine hips. He wouldn't be able to tell them apart that way. Wide eyes darted around him as he searched for distinguishing marks. Briana's skin was without blemish but Hani had a mole on one breast, and Mica showed a long scar on one slender thigh. Cirana was a bit more muscular than the others, Arren thinner. The pale hair atop Atris' mound was thicker than those of her sisters, and she hid it from his stare in a way the others had not. She was definitely blushing now; those lips were very red, and very kissable.

"You should be naked for this as well, *Car'a'carn*," Arren said, as she stole up behind to help him with his coat. She didn't seem bothered that her sister Mica did the same with his shirt. Back in the wetlands it would have been considered a great scandal, he knew. He wasn't sure what the Aiel would make of it, but when he dared to cup one of Mica's breasts in his hand he felt her heart racing in time with his own.

Cirana and Atris watched as Hani knelt to pull down his breeches, and Briana knelt beside her, to make a mirrored motion that rid him of his underwear. Atris gasped, and the hand that had been shielding her sex now pressed against it.

"You are speaking loudly to us now, Rand al'Thor," said Briana, her face inches away from his straining erection.

"Very loudly. Tell us more," Hani said, her breath tickling his balls in what was only a light prelude to what her tongue soon did. Rand moaned.

Briana smiled up at him. "I hear, and obey," she said, before taking his other ball completely into her mouth and sucking gently upon it.

"We are like mirrors. Few can tell us apart," Atris said as she watched her sisters pleasure him so scandalously.

"I can, Atris," Rand managed.

"We shall see. This should be an interesting test, indeed," Cirana said.

It was a test that Rand tried to focus on. He made a point of remembering their small differences, of speaking their names as he was with them. But concentrating in the midst of such an orgy of beautiful flesh and decadent acts was beyond difficult.

He knew that Arren was the one who pulled him to the bed, for she was still hugging him from behind while her sisters sucked and licked him. Hers was the first sex in which he slotted, when the feel of her stiff nipples pressing against him as she brushed his hair became too much. He turned and took her without a word while the other clustered around, watching their mirror being ridden to orgasm, listening as he murmured her name while she was coming on his cock.

He was still inside her when he reared back, searched for and spotted Hani, then grabbed her by the hips and brought her around so he could further weten her already wet sex. One good turn deserved another, after all. Briana was still kneeling with him, staring up at a sister whose head was now thrown back in pleasure. It must have been very strange, to see someone so like yourself from such an angle, but she pressed herself against him rather than pulling away. His hand went to her thigh, and then up; her breath came faster, and became a moan when his fingers found her most sensitive place.

"So it is not all take, with you," one of them said. "This is good to know. What will you give to the Aiel?"

Rand replaced his tongue with his fingers, curled just so, before eyeing the Maiden hotly. "I know what I want to give the Aiel in front of me."

He shifted his hips. Arren groaned when he popped out of her, while the speaker smiled to see what she was now being offered. She pushed Briana aside, ignoring her sister's outraged hiss, and knelt atop him. He didn't need to see the muscles that straining on her legs when she took him inside. He knew her already. "You have a sweet little pussy, Cirana."

She started riding him. "You like that, do you? Will you come for me, Rand al'Thor?"

"If you keep doing that, it will be hard not to," he gasped. He fell back and pulled Hani with him. "Get up here, Hani." Under his guidance, she climbed up to sit on his face, allowing him to bring his tongue to bear against her once more.

He didn't need her moans to know she was enjoying it. The way she ground herself against him was confession enough. There wasn't much he could see beyond her pussy as the two sisters rode him, but he could feel and hear a great deal.

Hani came before her sister did. Rand marked the way she crawled off him even while her body was jerking uncontrollably. She didn't want to hurt him. Nice girl. She didn't notice the way he smiled at her, though, while she was curling up on the bed and trying to catch her breath. And he wasn't able to smile for long, either, for her scarred sister Mica promptly came and took her place.

"Keep going. Tell us all," she said before her pussy descended towards him.

His tongue was tired by then, but he went to work with gusto.

Mica sat the other way around, allowing him to feast his eyes on her ass cheeks as she sat on his face. It allowed her and Cirana to embrace as well, but embrace was all they did. Chest to chest, breast to breast, knelt the sisters as they shared the man beneath them. It was a display of trust, however, not of desire. Their lips never touched, and though they clung to each other their hands did not roam anywhere sensitive. Rand found it strangely moving.

Cirana saw it, too. She was looking down at him from over her sister's shoulder. The nod she gave him was a simple thing and not remotely intimate in comparison to the way their sexes were joined, but somehow it warmed Rand more.

Yet, even more strangely, instead of driving him to finish, it actually called him away from the precipice on which he'd been balanced. He remained hard and under control long after feeling Cirana tighten around him and hearing her cry out. Even when Mica leant forward to take his freshly abandoned cock in her mouth, she was not able to bring him off before she herself reached her climax.

Rand eased her off and sat up, eager for more. Briana and Atris had plainly watched it all, for their faces were flushed and their nipples were straining to be touched. Their stares went from him to

each other. He could not have guessed at the thoughts and emotions they silently conveyed, but it was Briana who lowered her head.

“I will attend to myself.”

Atris took several steps towards him before she could stop herself, then made a great show of looking away. “If you really must, I suppose I will not stop you.”

Rand’s snort was not purely one of lust when he grabbed her by the hips and pulled her down onto the bed. Her gasps were sweet, and grew sweeter when he put her on her hands and knees. But they were at their sweetest when his cock spread her sopping wet pussy and parted the silky walls within. Her butt looked just like Mica’s, he was pleased to see. He stared at it, revelling in the way it jiggled each time his hips slapped up against her.

Atris gripped the sheets tightly and kept her knees pressed together as she let him have his way with her. It kept her nice and tight, and he would have been content with that. But, as Cirana had said, he wasn’t one for taking without giving.

“Spread your legs for me, Atris,” he rumbled. For a wonder, she did. He wasn’t sure if the whimper she let out then was due to her own reaction or to what he started doing with his hand when he reached around, but he liked the way it sounded either way.

“She should be more honest,” Arren was telling Mica, who nodded agreement.

Atris was very red in the face when she looked at her sisters. Only one word managed to slip out past her gaps. “Betrayal.”

Amusing as that was, it struck a chord with Rand. He looked to Briana, who was doing exactly what she’d said she would do. *Her* honesty no-one could find fault with. He looked up from the fingers that busily toyed with her sex, over the toned stomach and pretty breasts, to the open lips he would have liked to kiss, and then met her pale-eyed stare.

Under her forthright gaze he was left with no doubt that she wished it was her in her sister’s place, being given everything that Atris was being given. When Atris started pressing her hips back against him and writhing wantonly, Briana’s fingers sped up. The two sisters, so alike and yet so different, came as one. Briana blushed and looked away, while Atris collapsed to the bed, staring over her shoulder at him, her eyes glazed with pleasure in a way that almost made them seem worshipful.

Rand could have come then. It would have been so easy. But ... Briana. He couldn’t help but feel he’d let her down.

Cirana saw that, too. “Why do you stop, Rand al’Thor? Finish in her. There are no foolish girls here, there will be no pregnancy.”

Atris trembled, either in anticipation or at the shame of hearing her sister speak of her so. He would have liked to do what Cirana suggested, and tried to communicate that with the hands that caressed Atris’ hips even as he spoke a very different message.

“I don’t like ... failing. Breaking a promise. Leaving a job half done. Whatever you want to call it. Six there were. But only five I’ve touched.”

Atris no longer seemed capable of expression and Briana looked uncertain, but the other four sisters smiled at him.

“And so we learn of you, as she wished,” said Arren.

Rand’s eyes narrowed. “Who wished?”

She shook her head. “We cannot answer that. Not with words.”

Briana came to touch his shoulder and press her breast against him. It was doubtless intended as a distraction, but it was one that worked well, Shadow take him. “It is sensitive afterwards, but I could pleasure you in other ways,” she suggested. She took hold of his hips and eased his manhood out of her sister, who groaned her annoyance.

“What do you mean?” Rand asked.

Briana bit her lip. “Your stance, your movements; I can sense shades of meaning, and an echo of something I have yet to experience.”

Arren bolted up on the bed. “You do not mean ... what our spearsisters spoke of?”

“I think she does,” said Cirana.

Rand wouldn’t have thought there was anything in the world that could possibly move a girl to blush brighter than being involved in an orgy with her five sisters would, but he was proven wrong then. Whatever it was, Briana could not speak of it. Nor could she meet his eyes, she who had stared with such forthrightness while masturbating in front of him.

It fell to the others to rise from their relaxations and take their sister in hand. Onto the bed they guided her, into the exact stance Atris had so recently taken. It was Arren and Hani who took hold of her pretty cheeks and parted them to show him the puckered little hole between.

“Oh!”

Four sisters giggled. Briana just knelt there and trembled, while Atris bestirred herself enough to huff jealously.

“Well, burn me for true if I ever turn down an offer like that,” Rand said. It was a struggle to compose himself enough to briefly seize *saidin*, and never had the unnatural thrill and even less natural queasiness that doing so brought been less welcome. He let go and once, and pushed those sensations away, focusing all his attention instead on his now slick cock as he guided it toward the hole Briana was offering him. Her sisters gathered around, to kneel with them and watch.

Briana held to her silence when she felt him press against her butt. She held it all the way through his slow thrust, right up until he popped past her ring, then a sharp gasp escaped her. She clamped her jaws shut after that, and endured in silence until he was so far inside her that his balls pressed up against her pussy.

“Would mine look like that?” one of the sisters asked.

No-one answered, and Rand did not look to see who had spoken. He had eyes only for Briana. He reached over and touched her cheek, making her look at him. Only then did he start moving. And only when he saw the pleasure in her eyes, and knew it was that and not pain that had her trembling so, did he smile.

“She loves it.”

“How would she not. She was always the last among us.”

Rand ignored their words, despite how they made Briana blush even hotter. She was so tight. And he was so ready to come. Even so, he wanted to savour this feeling as long as he could, so kept his thrusts long and slow. The other five sisters pressed in upon him as he rode Briana. There were hands on his ass, his stomach, his chest. Lips touched the side of his neck and face. Someone reached down to cup and squeeze his balls. A wet tongue tickled his ear.

It was just too much.

Pleasure and futile denial mingled in the cry that he let out when his come rushed down his cock to flood Briana’s bowels. Thought fled before that blinding pleasure but he could still hear.

“Look at him pumping it into her.”

“There is so much.”

“Virile, I do not doubt. He would give many children, tall and fair to look on.”

“Not what she wants, I think, but good to know. The Aiel would be strengthened.”

“She cannot be the mother of his children like that. If he had finished in me ...”

“Do not suggest it!”

“I refuse to consider this a shame.”

“It is not. And do not allow her to tell you otherwise.”

When he started to come back to himself, he was surprised to find that Arren and Cirana had a hold of his manhood and were gently disentangling him from Briana, who was looking oddly defiant for a woman with a cock up her butt.

“That was incredible,” he groaned. He sat on his heels, shoulders slumped. “And you were right. It is a great way to get to know someone. Or someones.”

“You make light, but you are not completely wrong,” one of them allowed.

“I’m glad you think so, Hani.”

She grinned in surprise. “You really have no difficulty telling us apart?”

Well, no difficulty might be an exaggeration, but it was something he could manage, at least. But this was not a moment for pedantry. So he smiled back at her and said, “I do not.”

All of the sisters looked well pleased by that. Though, to his disappointment, none of them were pleased enough to stay the night.

“What is private remains private only so long as it can be without being dishonest,” Arren explained.

“If we stayed the night, no-one would be able to say that we probably just came here to continue your training in combat,” Briana added apologetically.

Atris had already finished pulling on her *cadin'sor*. “Besides, who would want to sleep here? We have accomplished what we set out to accomplish, and learned what we needed to learn. For now.”

“So there are other ‘questions’ you’d like to ask in the future?” he said.

She flushed. “I do not like the way you said questions!”

The others were mostly dressed by then, too. Rand remained naked, and found it discomforting to be the only one so, even when the clothed were those he’d so recently been intimate with. Hani and Mica took Atris in hand, whispering fiercely of her need to compose herself. Briana came closer to him, a slight hitch to her gait that she blushed on realising he’d noticed. That wasn’t what she wanted to talk about, though.

“Before I go, *Car'a'carn*—”

“Rand. For the love of the Light. After this, you can and should call me Rand.”

“I … Yes. Rand …” Short pale strands flew with the abrupt shaking of her head. “Rand al’Thor, I mean. Question for you, if I may ask it. You have touched the One Power—I saw you do so during our, our explorations; what does it feel like? I wish to know.”

It wasn’t something he liked talking about. But he felt he owed her an answer. “Like lightning sizzling along your veins. Like an orgasm that won’t end. It’s the inescapable realisation that the saying is true, and there really can be too much of a good thing.” And was that not true of his own cavortings? *Stop. Focus. Shut up. Never.* He pressed on. “And that’s just without taking the taint into account. With it … It’s like trying to choke down stale vomit because if you don’t you’ll starve.”

Briana’s eyes were wide. “I see. Thank you. I appreciate you sharing your knowledge with me.”

Rand grimaced. That really wasn’t the way to end an encounter like this. He wished he knew as much about women as Mat and Perrin did. They’d have had the romantic words this girl deserved. “I’m sorry. I should have phrased it differently.”

But Briana only shook her head. “Do not be sorry for honestly answering a question I asked. We have both learned more of each other.” She shuffled her feet a bit, looked away. “I am not very good at this kind of talking. I prefer speaking with my hands, or my spear.” Her eyes came back to his, full of resolve. “You will hear me better when we meet the Shaido on the battlefield. Until then, sleep well and wake, *Car'a'carn*.”

She was the last of the six to duck out of the tent. Rand remained staring at the space they had been long after they had departed. At last he shook himself, dragged the blankets over his nudity in a vain effort to ward off the growing chill, and tried to take her advice.

## *CHAPTER 33: Power Play*



The hood of her blue silk cloak was barely enough to keep the sun off Moiraine's head, but her stares were doing a better job of keeping people away from Rand. It was irritating how relieved that made her feel, and even more irritating how often she had to shoot one of those stares at someone, but at least she had finally managed to secure some of his time.

"First among those nations is, of course, Tar Valon," she went on, after making that silly Tinker girl lower her eyes and fall back to her place among the marching army, "home of the White Tower, with a large and loyal population and firm ties to the three other nations that share its borders.

One of those nations, Andor, would be considered the second strongest at the moment. Like Tar Valon it has a large and unified populace and rich trade from the rivers, though here Andor has the advantage for it controls large stretches of both the Erinin and the Arindrelle, whereas Tar Valon has only its port of Nesum near the headwaters of the Arindrelle, lightly held and rarely visited by traders.

A second of Tar Valon's neighbours, Valreis, could be argued to be third in power, though it is an argument that would be contested by some. Valreis has too-often squandered its power in wars with its neighbours, especially Falmerden. It has come into conflict with Andor as well, in the not so distant past, and only the Amyrlin's intervention prevented open war. Those three nations combined, with Tar Valon at the head, naturally, are a power that cannot be contested with. You can see why the Amyrlin would be insistent that nothing cause division among them."

Rand's mouth thinned but he did not dispute her words. For once he was actually listening to what she had to say. Quickly dismissing the impulse to once more remind him of the folly of disrupting Siuan's plan—if he had not listened before, he certainly wasn't going to now that the army was on the move—she pressed on, hoping that the grace with which she met his misty gaze would say what words did not.

"Most likely to object to the Valreio placement on this list would be Saldaea. The largest of the Borderlands, Saldaea controls a vast grassy plain that allows them to feed and water their famed herds of horses. They are commonly accepted to field the finest light cavalry in the world. Nor are they a poor people, with access to the headwaters of the Erinin and all the trade that flows along it.

There are four nations who might be considered next in power, though attempting to rank them would be a task destined to cause argument.

For my part I would place the last of Tar Valon's neighbours ahead of the other three. Though I will acknowledge that it is a close contest. Arafel has a rich economy and a strong military in addition to its alliances with the other Borderlands and with Tar Valon. A most potent combination.

Illian and Tear have the advantage of Arafel both in population size and wealth, but they cannot match the prowess of Arafel's soldiers. Worse, both nations stand alone, with no ally willing to commit to them, knowing that allying with one would simply win the enmity of the other. Those two nations have fought more wars against each other than any other on Valgarda. Their enmity goes deep.

Richer still is Arad Doman. The Queen of Arad Doman wields little true power; the nation is managed instead by the Council of Merchants, and managed very well. Nor is their military prowess to be despised, though it is small by the standards of some. Small, but strong enough to thwart the armies of Amadicia long enough for the financial costs of such a conflict to inspire Pedron Niall to cut his losses during their recent war."

"It was Rodel Ituralde that made the difference," Dani put in, somewhat to her annoyance. "He is a hero, and a great general. He's definitely someone you'll want to get on your side, Rand."

The Domani didn't notice her stare, but that hateful Volsuni did. And smiled sharply. "Though some might say you have too many people on your side already."

Rand shot Ilyena a sidelong glance, looking unsure and uncomfortable in a way that reminded Moiraine of the way he'd been back when she'd first taken him out of the Theren. No regretful sigh escaped her, of course, but she once more lamented the changes in him, necessary as they had been.

He had been so much easier to manage when he'd been afraid of her. And when there were not so many other women competing for his attention.

"Daniele is correct in this," Moiraine said coldly. Alerted by her tone, the two Accepted fell silent. "A great captain like Ituralde should be courted, but one should not be blinded by reputation alone. Pedron Niall is no less qualified, but it would be foolish to imagine that he will ever be anything but your enemy." She pursed her lips. "Come to speak of it, it may be that I am slighting Amadicia by not ranking it higher, but the Whitecloaks have a talent for inspiring enmity in their neighbours. Still, unpleasant as they are, the Children are not without skill at arms and the nation they rule—and make no mistake, they *do* rule Amadicia; the Queen is merely a figurehead—that nation is not a small one."

Thankfully, Pedra remained silent as she listened to Moiraine's description of her nation of birth. Theodrin was content simply to listen, too. It pleased Moiraine that at least two of the Accepted who had accompanied them from Tear remained outside Rand's influence. Mayam was silent, too, but that one would likely need another decade in white before she was fit to test for the ring, after the way she had been behaving.

Rand had followed her look, and a frown now marred his youthful beauty. He had gotten used to having so many women of the Tower in his party, but not to being exclusive to their company. When he opened his mouth to address the Maidens marching nearby, Moiraine hurried on.

"I shall place Tarabon here on my list, but I must confess that there are those who would place it much higher, perhaps even second to Tar Valon." The Shaido girl, Nici, met her stare with surprising ease, but at least she left whatever she'd been about to say unspoken. "The island nation has no neighbours, no rivals, is as rich as Arad Doman and more populous than Tear and Illian combined. Throughout the centuries Tarabon has been the place that refugees hope to reach when war ravages the mainland. Some of those who managed to flee there returned to their homelands once the storm had passed but more stayed. Peoples of all sizes, shapes and colours can be found on Tarabon, living in relative peace. That is all well and good of course, but peace will not avail us much at Tarmon Gai'don. Unfortunately Tarabon has little in the way of a military, relying instead for its defence on the seas and the sure belief that trying to hold such a large and unified area by force would be a folly no another nation would be arrogant enough to attempt.

Next, I think would be Shienar and Volsung, the easternmost and westernmost of the Borderlands respectively. Neither is the most populous or richest of lands, but they are stoutly held and well governed. Were I forced to choose I might give the advantage to Shienar, assuming that the Aiel to their east are no longer a distraction they will have to fear. Volsung still has its unique breeds of Trolloc to contend with, forcing them to guard the coast as well as the mountains and is more isolated than most nations. It is perhaps the most embattled of the Borderlands."

Ilyena tossed her fair hair. "Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. And the Wheel has been trying to kill us for a thousand generations."

"They sound like a good people to dance with," a Maiden she did not recognise said.

Moiraine did not need to silence her; Rand did it himself. "We will not be dancing with any Borderlanders. We never should have."

She noted that "we" and did not like it. But what could she do about it now? Too many of the Aiel had wormed their way into his good graces. Perhaps she should have intervened when Tam was urging him to seek out his blood relatives. She'd thought it a mistake on the man's part, an act destined to lessen his own unwelcome influence over Rand—and perhaps it still was. But it hadn't helped Moiraine, either. And some of the Aiel had obviously succeeded in endearing themselves to him in other ways as well, just as the Wise Ones intended.

Moiraine could have done the same, of course, but such an act was far beneath her dignity. She had never done such a thing with a man. She had never planned to, either. Most Aes Sedai died never having allowed themselves to be sullied by the lesser sex's touch. The very thought of letting Rand ... She looked away from him, suddenly unsure. Those Maidens probably knew things she did not, on that topic if on nothing else.

"Kaltor could help with Volsung's woes, and the Volsuni are vocal in claiming that Kaltor *should* help with that. But the last, and some might say, least, of the Borderlands also faces calls from its eastern ally, Arafel, for help in patrolling the vast expanse of the Mountains of Doom. Kaltor responds to both demands by pointing out that it simply does not have the soldiers needed to cover so

much land, and argues that the other two should expand their own borders and increase the size of their armies. Which neither land, hardly unchallenged by Trolloc raids themselves, is willing to do." Moiraine calmed as she spoke on of things more familiar to her. "In recent times Kaltor has attempted to solve this problem economically, by taking inspiration from Arad Doman and promoting its own merchants guilds in the hope that the coin made from their trade can be used to bring in southern mercenaries to bolster the defences. It remains to be seen how wise a course this proves. Mercenaries are not known for their trustworthiness or willingness to stand against Shadowspawn.

Until recently Cairhien would have been considered a major power in the land, perhaps close to Valreis, certainly equal to Tear or Illian. But the Aiel War has left them devastated, politically, militarily, economically, and in terms of population. The Sun Throne's control of its outlying towns had already grown weak when the current civil war began; it seems likely it will be even worse now."

Rand was watching her carefully. She knew he expected her to be upset by that, being Cairhienin herself. That, too, was something he needed to learn. Nations mattered not. Only their victory at Tarmon Gai'don could be allowed to matter. Even their own lives did not matter when placed on those scales. He would learn ...

"Falmerden would be next in power," Moiraine continued calmly. "A small land, and never rich, but noted for its soldiers. They have fiercely, if not always successfully, resisted invasions from their more powerful neighbour, Valreis. And even when those invasions succeeded, the Falmerans made things so difficult for the conquerors that Valreis eventually withdrew or was driven out by a popular uprising. Most recently they have come into conflict with the Seanchan, as you know, and offered them much the same hospitality.

Ghealdan is the most notable of the remaining nations. A relatively vigorous, if scattered, population and a share of the trade on the Arindrelle keeps them relevant. But they are not a unified people. The Queen's power is oft contested, especially the farther one journeys from her capital of Jehannah.

The situation is similar in Altara, only much worse. Altarans rarely even identify themselves as Altarans anymore. The term is mainly used by foreigners. Natives of that land are more likely to call themselves Ebou Dari or Murandians, or Inishlinni; named for whatever town or city they were born in. The Queen in Ebou Dar is named Queen of Altara, but in truth she is queen of that city alone, her commands ignored by almost everyone beyond her city walls. Still, there are quite a few Altarans, and they are noted as fierce fighters when roused. If they could ever be unified, they would be a worthy nation once again.

It is unlikely that Far Madding will be of any great help to you. Like Arad Doman they are a mercantile people, unlike Arad Doman they have no military beyond the city watch of their capital. Like Tar Valon the capital is built on an island in the river Erinin, unlike Tar Valon it relies on that placement alone for its defence. They are wealthy enough, but even could you persuade them to follow a male, which I would consider near impossible, they would be of little value in the war effort.

Last and least of all nations still considered to be nations is Mayene. It is little more than a city on a narrow peninsula, isolated from all other lands save its demanding neighbour, Tear. Its trade is enough to make it desirable, but not enough to make it strong."

To her annoyance, Rand was smiling in reminiscence, his misty gaze no longer on her but on the horizon. Thoughts of things she could do to jerk that gaze back to her flashed through Moiraine's mind and were quickly suppressed. *Even at a distance that overly-endowed trollop captures his thoughts, while I ...* Was it really so important? Was the connection he made with those who shared his bed so special?

She pulled her hood forward, to shield her face from the heat. "There are some other peoples on Valgarda, like your Thereners, who owe allegiance to no nation. They are rarely of note, usually remnants of long fallen Queendoms or refugees who built themselves a village in the backwoods where they hoped no-one would find them. You would be unwise to expend your effort on making them more than they are. You simply will not have the time. Concentrate instead on nations as they are, and you will do well."

Moiraine waited to hear what his first question would be. It would reveal something of what he intended to do after taking Cairhien. Or so she thought.

"What are those Trollocs you spoke of like, the ones who come from the sea. Can they actually breathe like fish?"

She frowned slightly, only half listening to Ilyena explaining that some of them could do just that. Trollocs? Why would he ask after Trollocs? Unless ... He knew. He knew that if he asked her about Ghealdan or Illian, Shienar or Saldaea, he'd be giving himself away. So he asked about Volsung of all places, a land as far away as possible. She surprised herself with a little flash of pride over how shrewd he'd grown. She also surprised herself with a bigger flash of hurt over how completely he distrusted her. All she had done for him, all she had sacrificed, all she would—what would it take to make him see her as she was instead of as the heartless betrayer he imagined her to be!?

As they rode on that day, the stares she shot at the various women who approached him grew hotter and hotter. She made the wolfsister slink away from her tail between her legs, figuratively speaking. She firmly shut down those annoying sextuplets and their talk of actions speaking louder than words, though she could not silence the echo of their voices. But though she secured his attention for most of the day, and spoke until her throat began to hurt, she still had not covered a fraction of the topics she needed to cover with him.

"This has been interesting, Moiraine. We'll continue some other time," Rand said as the sun was slipping under the horizon. The day's march was coming to a close, and the Aiel were already moving to make camp. She slid from her saddle as soon as he dismounted and handed his reins to a nonplussed Maiden.

"We can continue now. They do not need you to help them set up tents," she said firmly.

He blinked at her. "We've been at this all day. I need to make it up to ... uh, there's something I need to take care of."

He did not turn away fast enough to hide his blushing from her. Not *something*, plainly. Someone. Someone who was able to inspire him to turn his broad back on her. The nerve!

"My humility is not the only one being sharpened lately," Lan said after Rand has left them alone in the evening light. She glared at him. He had not spoken a single word that day, simply ridden at her side, watching for threats, and when he finally broke his silence it was to mock her.

"Your humility has always been more arrogance than most kings could muster. And silence better suits your wit."

She managed to keep her steps graceful, but the urge to stalk like a cat was strong within her. Lan followed, of course. Rand was another story. Where was he off to? There was so much she needed to tell him.

The *gai'shain* had already set up her tent for her, as the Wise Ones had instructed them to. When Moiraine reached it she ducked inside at once and plopped down on the pallet to consider her options. At least he was listening. That was an improvement. The oath that desperation had forced her to swear him had had that much effect, at least. She could have wished for more, but wishes had never mattered and never would, neither her own nor anyone else's.

She sat alone, considering her situation, for quite some time. There was much she would have liked to have done, many other options she would have liked to have explored, but like wishes, her desires did not matter in the grand scheme of things. Now she would just have to make the most of what time he afforded—sudden anger, the likes of which she could never let show in public, creased the Aes Sedai's ageless face. Time he afforded! Was she to follow him around like that witless Tinker, wondering when he would find time for her? She should be *taking* the time she needed! She should be taking ...

Alone in the tent, Moiraine flushed hotly. *I cannot. I should not. I ... I need some air.*

Lan was asleep in the next nearby. She could tell by the bond they shared. There was no need to wake him. The Aiel had offered her not the slightest threat in all the time she'd been here. They were unlikely to do otherwise this night. Besides, she was more than capable of dealing with any challenge they might offer.

So she walked alone through the darkened camp, ignored by sentries at their duty and night owls gathered around the campfires. Ignored again.

Rand's tent was indistinct from the others but she knew it at once. There were Maidens gathered nearby, and a man's muffled voice could be heard within. Her steps halted. She had not intended to come here. Why? Had his *ta'veren* nature drawn her? It was a more welcome explanation than any other.

*Far Dareis Mai* watched her approach the tent, but none of them moved to bar her way. The voices from within sounded casual enough that she was sure Rand and whoever it was were not doing

anything untoward. But was it before or after? She didn't want to walk in on them in a state of undress. She just wanted to teach Rand what he needed to learn.

So she pushed the tent flap away and stepped inside, pausing not for needless composure but to allow her eyes to adjust. When they did, she found three people staring at her, all fully dressed, she was glad to see.

The only knew one of the Maidens. Tall, thin Renay was a somewhat plain woman, and not one of those she would have expected Rand to be so cosy with. She filed the information away—it wasn't just looks that drew him. The other one was young, pretty and yellow-haired, a much more typical draw for boys. The two girls were plainly intimidated by her sudden arrival. Rand's anger was even more plainly displayed.

"What are you doing here? When I said later, I meant tomorrow. And did no-one ever teach you to knock? We could have—I mean, I was almost raised in a barn, but even I know to knock!"

"There is still much you must learn," she said in her most commanding voice. "If you are awake enough to play then you are awake enough for our lessons to continue."

He set his jaw stubbornly. "They'll continue when I feel like letting them."

But Moiraine wasn't about to be put off. She turned her piercing stare on the Maidens. "Leave us. And do not return this night."

Neither girl could meet her stare. They were already hunched over by the time they reached the entry, so even Renay didn't have to duck to let herself out. Moiraine was glad to see that some people still knew what deference was due an Aes Sedai. Rand certainly didn't.

"You have no right," he began roughly, but she spoke over him, her voice cool.

"I have more than the right, I have the duty. For the entirety of my adult life I have searched for you. Prepared for this war we fight. I will not allow it to end in failure, no matter the price. To me, to you, to anyone."

To her surprise, Rand's anger was extinguished as quickly as it had flared. "I will pay the price fate has decreed for me, Moiraine," he said quietly. "But I will snatch what moments of happiness I can along the way."

It was not the most unreasonable of positions, she supposed. And positions could change ... She kept her face still, but inside her was a maelstrom. Wanting to reach for a little happiness before meeting his fate. She could emphasise with that. Wanting warmth, intimacy, pleasure. Who would truly disdain such things, especially in the face of death? But not at any price. There was where he went astray. She should not do the same, could not; would not? But what was the price, really? In none of those other futures had he been half so promiscuous as he was now. It was not as if she'd be interfering in an important relationship's development.

Moiraine felt her face heat as she realised what she was considering. It would be the one sure way to guarantee his attention, and the Pattern needed him to learn what she had to teach. She could do it, for the Pattern. He was still standing there looking at her. Tall and fit and handsome, with his fiery hair and cool eyes. Defiant. She could do it, for herself.

"So be it," she whispered, heart racing.

Rand blinked at her. "Well. That's good. Now, if you don't mind I'd like to get some rest ..."

A hurt and nervousness that Moiraine was not accustomed to feeling snaked into her at his hinting for her to leave. What if he rejected her advances here much as he'd been rejecting her company these past months? Never in her life had she experienced such a thing. She allowed none of her nervousness to show, of course. "That is not what you want, though the words are not untrue. You are learning."

Instead of being pleased by her praise, Rand got that wary look on his face again. When he looked to the tent flaps, she glided towards him. If she was going to warm their night, she would have to take action. If she was going to win his acceptance, she was going to have to give herself to him completely. He looked even taller when she stood close to him, and even younger when he gaped down at her.

"What are you doing?" he asked breathlessly.

She reached up to touch his cheek. "I swore to obey you as a *gai'shain* would, remember? And you are not the only one who hungers for warmth. So why do you hesitate to claim it? Do you not dare?"

She saw the truth of that in his wary eyes, and the flush of his cheeks. His hands came to her sides, ready to push or pull. But he was a young man still. Pride showed plainly in the moment before his mouth descended to touch hers.

Moiraine felt a heady rush of triumph, among other things. She knew she should press her advantage, but it was all so fascinating. She had never kissed a boy before, only other women. His lips were hard on hers. She could measure his mounting passion by the way they moved against her. Strong arms wrapped around her, pressing her against his chest. She felt something squeeze her bottom and gave a start before realising it was his hand. How bold of him. As an Aes Sedai, she should rebuke him for the presumption. But then, an Aes Sedai should not have allowed things to get this far. And as a woman ...? As a woman, she felt her body responding to his touch.

Determined not to be outdone, she ran her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer, so that she might slip her tongue into his mouth and tease him. Siuan had always liked the ways she used her mouth.

Rand liked it, too. He cupped her breast and squeezed it roughly. It felt better than it should have, so Moiraine made herself step back. She needed to take control of this.

He didn't try to stop her from retreating; he just stood there breathing heavily, a rather noticeable bulge in his dark breeches. Heat marred her cheeks as she imagined what was lurking in there. She'd never touched one before, but she'd overheard enough of his antics in recent times, on the occasions when she used the *kesiera* that still rested against her forehead to check up on him. Overheard and even, on one shameful occasion, allowed her hands to roam across her privates as she imagined what he must be doing to cause such noises.

That those imaginings were so close to becoming reality excited Moiraine more than she'd ever imagined it would. She had to look away from his hungry stare. But as soon as she'd composed herself, she looked back again, to watch the play of expressions on his face as she undressed in front of him. Her blue silk dress soon puddled on the floor around her feet. His chest swelled faster at the sight of her white shift, and faster still when she slid the straps over her shoulders. Telling herself it was to establish boundaries and not because she was enjoying it, she inched the shift down as slowly as she could. When it popped over her outthrust breasts and fell to the floor, Rand swore huskily.

"You are so beautiful."

That long delayed display of appreciation was more welcome than it should have been.  
"Thank you, Rand. Now, was that so hard?"

Rand had been undressing, too, if less artfully, but his hands had gone still of their own accord once she started playing with her shift. Pleased with the stunned way he stood there, Moiraine glided close to caress his now-naked chest.

The buckle of his belt was steel wrought in the likeness of the creature on the Dragon Banner. Aviendha had had it made for him, she knew. She knew why the Wise Ones were urging her to stay close to him as well. And she did not care. Working swiftly, Moiraine knelt and pushed down his breeches and smallclothes to free the manhood she meant to claim.

Even so, she felt her eyes widen and her face grow hot when it sprang free almost close enough to touch her face. It was so big! Long and thick. It was hard to imagine that thing fitting inside her. The very thought had her panting open-mouthed.

A low moan made her look up. Rand was staring down at her, looking a lot more boyish than he usually did in her company. She smiled coyly. "How often have you dreamed of this, I wonder ..." She watched his reaction as she planted an experimental kiss on the head of his cock. When he gasped a prayer, she smiled wider before kissing him again. Even the smell and taste of his sex was somehow bigger than what she was used to. It was not as unpleasant as she had been led to believe, and his obvious excitement was pleasing to see. She ran her lips down one side of his manhood and back up the other, let her wet tongue trail along the hot, stiff flesh.

Growing bolder, she pulled his stiff shaft down, aiming it at her open mouth. He moaned in pleasure when she closed her mouth around it and began sucking. Her hidden nervousness was fleeing fast. It seemed her skills translated from one gender to the other rather easily. Rand stood there and let her suck on him for some time, before finally moaning her name.

She liked the way he said it, even if it was rather exasperating. To think that this was all it took! She slipped him out of her mouth, but kept him firmly in hand. "Would you like to discuss the laws of succession in Tarabon now, Rand?" she teased, with the falsest of innocence in her voice.

"No," he growled, falling to his knees before her. "Not now. Later. First I need to taste you." He wrapped her in his arms and they fell onto the soft cushions, caressing each other's naked bodies.

She supposed she could allow him to have his fun, if it made him a more attentive student. Later would come soon enough, and then she could instruct him in what he would need to know to fulfil his destiny. Moiraine tried to compose her coming lesson, but it was a bit hard with the way he was sucking on her nipple. She found herself writhing beneath him, and somehow her fingers had started stroking his hair. It probably felt nice for him. The way his fingers combed through her tresses certainly did. She lamented their removal only long enough for them to arrive at her breast.

There was no way to hide it when he sat back and beheld the effect he'd had on her. She lay there, nipples stiff, face flushed, her arousal doubtless showing through her smallclothes, that last thin barrier to the sacred Aes Sedai dignity she was throwing aside for him. He certainly looked pleased by what he saw, but he did not leer smugly the way she might have feared. He looked awed. So she just lay there, heart racing, as he slid her underwear down her legs. He set the flimsy fabric aside, then looked at her expectantly.

Moiraine allowed her legs to spread like a flower opening to the sun; she let him see her everything.

Rand's nostrils flared and suddenly he was on her. His mouth pressed against her sex and his tongue thrust inside her with surprising ardour. She gasped his name, and felt him smile against her softness. Then he went to work with an expertise a boy of his age should not have had. He kept a firm grip on her hips as he searched out and found her most sensitive places. That grip was the only thing preventing her from thrashing on the pallet. That he knew how she would respond was galling. She was supposed to be the one seducing him, after all. Yet there she was, clasping a hand over her mouth to hold back her voice as her toes curled involuntarily. Her hand stole down like a thief in the night, to press his face against her and claim the pleasure she had so long denied herself.

Siuán would have stayed there until she was finished, but Rand wanted more. He crawled upwards until he was looming over her, that huge shaft of his dangling between them. She knew what he wanted to do with it, where he wanted to stab it. She could still stop this, preserve her dignity as an Aes Sedai. She could live the rest of her days never knowing what it would have felt like to let him touch her deep inside.

She looked him in the eyes, wrapped her arms around him, and waited.

For some reason, Rand was unable to meet her eyes. That sudden shyness certainly didn't stop him from embracing her, though. He rested his weight upon her and she felt his stiff manhood rubbing against her flesh, searching for the way in. When he found it and slipped into her wet hole, Moiraine gasped loudly. In he slid, spreading her, filling her, touching places that had never been touched. It was thrilling and alien and scandalously good. The way he kissed the side of her neck as he went deeper and deeper added to her pleasure. She tried to remind herself of all the reasons it was wrong, of why the Tower forbade such contact, but it was hard to think over the joyous cries her body let out at that long-delayed joining. By the time he stopped that first, slow arriving, her legs had somehow wrapped themselves around his waist.

The thing that pierced her felt fiery hot, like the hair of him that owned it; owned her. It was hard but not rough. Firm. When it silked back out of her she couldn't help but whimper shamelessly.

Hearing that sound from her seemed to drive Rand wild. He fucked her then. And that was the only word for it. Sometimes his cock thrust into her so hard it made her gasp in pain. Most of the time his thrusts made her gasp in pleasure. He didn't seem to notice the difference. The distance between them was quite thoroughly cast aside. His panting breath tickled her ear each time he bucked his hips, and for a time it mingled with her own when he reared back to look at her face as he fucked her. Whatever he saw there, unguarded as it was, must have pleased him because he claimed her lips in a fierce kiss afterwards.

A fierce but brief kiss, for he broke away and went right back to fucking her as hard as he could. Moiraine had resolved to do what she had to do shatter the icy wall between them. She hadn't been able to truly imagine what that might mean until she found herself being used so wantonly. And she certainly hadn't imagined enjoying it so much. Her sex had become a font of complete pleasure, and the way his smooth chest rubbed against her stiff nipples only teased her more.

Watching his muscular young body move pleased her eye; touching it did the same for her hand. His shoulders were heavy and strong, yet yielding to her touch. His taut bottom was the same,

and clenched in time with the pleasure stabbing through her, filling her up such that she was ready to ... ready to ... to burst!

"Rand!" she cried as she came. She hadn't meant to say anything but the sound burst out of her in the moment her climax burst within.

Embarrassment tried to snake through the pleasure. How was she to explain away her outburst? A trusted teacher was what she needed to be. Not a lover. She couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't allow him to see her so, no matter how much appeal the idea suddenly had. She didn't have to explain, though, for Rand didn't seem to notice that she had come. He was still thrusting away, mindlessly pursuing the pleasure her body offered him. That was to the good. It was. She refused to be hurt.

He kept going while she was shivering in his arms, and after when she was trying to process what had happened. He was still going when she felt a second climax start to build within her. Light. No wonder so many of them stayed around after finding out the truth. Her composure was a thing of the distant past. Unfamiliar sweat stained her body as she panted in his hot embrace. Her hair was a mess, her *kesiera* tangled within it somewhere. Shameful, wanton sounds were issuing from her lips with each rocking of his hips.

Rand liked to hear it, too, and to see her in her debased state. She knew it from the way he smiled down at her and cupped her face between his palms, in the way he whispered her name in the moments before a few final fevered thrusts brought it all to an end.

Her eyes shot open when she felt him spill a liquid heat inside her womb, where nothing not of her making had ever been spilled. Aes Sedai did not bear children, of course, but knowing how it would have felt to conceive one was a more welcome revelation than she'd expected. It was so new and exciting that she found herself on the edge once more. Her hips grinded against him, milking his cock and seeking that elusive release.

She found it just as Rand's strength failed. He collapsed atop her and she shook under his weight, her breath coming in short sharp gasps as her body drank up all he had given her, like a thirsty woman lost in the Waste. She could feel all the tension leaking out of him as he slid down to rest his cheek against her breast, right above her heart. He seemed happy to stay there.

She was happier than she'd ever imagined she would be to let him, too. As she petted the hair of her young ... student, little cooing rhymes she barely remembered from her childhood spilled from the Aes Sedai's lips. Disgraceful as her sisters would doubtless have thought it, Moiraine did nothing to stop herself.

\* \* \*

It was the Domani who woke Rand from his stupor. Apparently their queen was appointed by the Council of Merchants and could be removed by that same Council provided at least three quarters of them agreed to it. *She couldn't be much of a queen, then,* thought Rand. He snorted in a breath, raising his head and blinking around stupidly. "What?" he muttered.

"This has led to restrictions on the military capabilities of the nation. Arad Doman's nobility maintain only small groups of house guards, lest the Queen grow truculent and challenge the Council's wishes," Moiraine continued. She lay naked in Rand's bed, yet her Aes Sedai serenity was back in place. He sighed, wondering how long she had waited after their lovemaking before continuing her lecture.

"It is important that you know these things, Rand," Moiraine said sternly.

"I know, I know," he agreed, smiling ruefully.

Moiraine's hair was darker than ever, the ornamental blue stone she wore upon her brow peeked out from amidst her soaking wet waves. The skin of her face and chest was still reddened from their recent exertions. She had never looked more beautiful to him.

She had pulled a blanket over herself and held it firmly to her breast. All distractions hidden from view, if not from memory.

The sight of Moiraine's beautiful mask of a face, sullied with his cock in her mouth had been firmly branded upon his memory. The small frown that had marred her ageless composure as she clasped one hand over her mouth while he was licking her. The way she had squeezed her eyes shut and moaned so wantonly while he was fucking her ... He felt himself stirring again under the blankets she had thoughtfully—kindly?—pulled over him.

It was hard to think of her as being kind, but it was harder still to be so cruel as to send her away after what they had done. So he lay there and listened to her lecture, as dismay grew within him.

*I knew this was a bad idea; now I'll never get any rest. The lessons will be never-ending!*

And how was he to keep his plans secret from her if she was never far from his side? No doubt that was why the Aes Sedai had chosen to place herself in his bed. Still, Moiraine ... she was worth putting up with any amount of nagging and risk.

"There will be plenty of time for lessons. Aren't you tired?" Rand hinted.

Moiraine looked as serene as ever, yet he thought he saw a hint of fear in her eyes. "We never have as much time as we'd like to have, Rand. It is best to make use of it fully," she said quietly. Rand, whose prophesised death loomed ever over him, nodded solemnly.

"Will you be staying with me tomorrow night as well, then?" he asked boldly.

Moiraine pursed her lips together and gave him an arch look at that presumption. Which took some skill, given the givens. "Assuming you learn quickly it may not be necessary for me to stay at all," she said, her voice carefully neutral.

"It's just as well I'm such a terrible student, then," Rand said with a roguish half-smile.

The Aes Sedai surprised him with a soft laugh. "Well. I shall have to tutor you in private." She looked away and added, "This new-found eagerness is appreciated by the way."

Rand felt a thrill of anticipation, his tiredness fading. He leaned over and tried to kiss Moiraine's lips but she ducked her head aside. "There will be time for that later," she said firmly.

"We don't have that much time," Rand countered, taking hold of the blanket and slowly, gently tugging it down. "I'd like to make use of it fully." Moiraine tilted her head slightly in acknowledgment, yet her grip upon the sheet held firm, resisting Rand's insistent little tugs. "Besides, there's no reason we can't talk and do ... other things at the same time," he added. "The Domani for example. The Council of Merchants are going to be a problem. Little as they may like it they are going to have to gather a much larger army. Could they be made to see reason on that, or will more drastic measures be needed?"

Moiraine relaxed her grip upon the sheet with a small sigh, allowing Rand to unveil her small breasts once more. He grinned and gave them a kiss of welcome as she expounded in detail on the private dealings of the various women who held the true power in Arad Domon.

Rand listened to her lecture as his hands and mouth roved over her body. He kneaded her breast gently in his hand and planted a kiss upon her cute belly button. When he moved to explore Moiraine's dark-haired and moist vagina with his fingers, however, the melodious flow of her words was cut off by a sharp gasp.

The Aes Sedai denied Rand's explorations. Clamping her thighs together and raising the volume of her voice as she renewed the lecture. *There might be a way to negate the Council if I can get all but a quarter of their number firmly on my side, Rand thought, then I could deal directly with the Queen instead of having to worry about a committee of squabbling merchants. Bribery perhaps. But more importantly ...* he reached his arm around Moiraine's slender waist and turned her over, finally getting a good view of her pert bottom. "As lovely as I thought it would be," he murmured in satisfaction. Moiraine let out a soft sound, it was there and gone so fast Rand almost missed it. Not a giggle, surely. Not her. She continued apace, head resting upon one slender hand as she lay on her belly and gave forth. Kneeling behind her, Rand planted kisses on each soft, round cheek and conceived a wicked plan ...

He walked his fingers down the graceful curve of Moiraine's spine before bringing them to rest on her tight, hairless sphincter. He rubbed one fingertip around her opening in light, circular motions, slipped another within her hot, dry hole to the middle joint. She tightened her butt reflexively, almost trapping Rand's digit, and frowned back over her shoulder at him. Rand smiled sheepishly, then withdrew to knead the soft flesh of her buttocks for a time. He soon returned to her hole, using his tongue this time instead of his fingers. They were busy stroking his hardening cock and gathering its juices. The Aes Sedai did not resist when her slid two wet fingers into her tight bottom, causing him to grin in anticipation.

Rand crawled forwards and tangled one hand in Moiraine's thick tresses. He stroked her hair gently as he positioned himself at her now wet and relaxed entrance. He leaned forward and kissed the side of her neck as the head of his cock knocked against her back door.

"What do you think you're doing," Moiraine demanded, glaring back at Rand in outrage.

"Learning about Arad Doman," Rand replied innocently, as he worked his way into her delightfully tight ass. "They have a long-standing rivalry with Tarabon don't they?"

"That's ... that's not what I ..." she began, her words punctuated by soft grunts. "Tarabon is ruled by ... uuuhhnn ..." Moiraine's groan of mingled pain and pleasure was followed by a long, hissing breath of satisfaction from Rand. He tightened his grip on her dark tresses as he slid all the way into her, claiming the Aes Sedai as his.

"Burn me," he swore through gritted teeth, "that feels good."

Moiraine clutched the pillows of their bed in a death grip. "I didn't say you could ... ah!" Rand tried a stroke, much harder than his slow penetration had been. He groaned in pleasure.

"Sure you did," he whispered as he began to ride her, slow and steady. "You said you would serve me, didn't you? And teach me." Still gripping her firmly by the hair, Rand reached around and clasped one of her sweet breasts in his palm, kneading it gently.

"Yeeess ..." Moiraine hissed low. "But ..."

"Tell me more about Tarabon, then." Rand scarce had a damn to give about Tarabon, his thoughts were filled with the beautiful woman snared in his arms.

"The Meridarch ... oh! ... and ... the Panarch share ..." Moiraine sucked in a deep breath before continued in a rushed gasp "governancewithtaxesandcontrolof ... oh Light!"

Rand chuckled as he quickened his pace a little, kissing Moiraine's tense shoulders.

"Rand, I can't ... while you're ..." moaned the Aes Sedai.

"Alright," he relented. "Raise your hips a little, and part your thighs; it'll help." Rand finished commandingly.

She hesitated for a long moment, biting her lip slightly. There were few things sweeter in Rand's life than that moment when she parted her creamy thighs and pressed her buttocks back against him.

"That's my girl," he teased, and saw her blush.

"You brute! How dare you take advantage of me like this," she gasped, but she still did nothing to stop him.

Rand relaxed his grip on his Aes Sedai's hair and ran his hand over her smooth belly to cup her deliciously wet sex. She let out a loud moan as he slid a finger inside her.

"I only dare do what you secretly want me to. I never dreamed you would be this naughty, Moiraine. I like it."

He began to ride his lady in earnest then, his hand rubbing her pussy as his cock moved in and out of her ass. Unconsciously, his grip upon her tit became hard, but Moiraine did not try to push him away. She was pinned helplessly in his embrace, moans of pleasure flowing freely from her wide open mouth. The lesson on hold for now.

Moiraine's reserve crumbled completely. She ground her hips back against Rand's, gasping, lost. He buggered her hard and knew she loved it. His fingers worked feverishly upon her pussy lips, soaked in her arousal. When she came, she came hard. Moiraine's whole body tensed in Rand's embrace, she threw back her head, arms held out straight like a stretching cat and her butt clamped down upon his cock almost painfully. "Oh, BURN ME!" she screamed as her juices flowed over the palm of Rand's hand, where her most intimate place now rested. It was the first time Rand had ever heard the Aes Sedai curse. He grinned, deciding there and then that he would hear it many times more. Moiraine held her intense pose for what seemed a long time; when she finally relaxed it was as though someone had cut the strings away from a puppet. She let out a long sigh, and fell limply amidst the tangled sheets and cushions of Rand's bed. Their bed now. She lay there, lax and unresisting as the grinning youth continued to have his way with her.

Rand looked down, watching Moiraine's pert bottom quiver with his thrusts. The fiery hairs on his crotch brushed against her pale cheeks each time he entered her, his Aes Sedai, his lady, his Moiraine. With that thought he felt it begin. He fell forward and took his new lover by the throat in a firm but gentle grip, turning her face towards his; he brushed her sweat-soaked locks away from her beautiful face. He kissed her lips as his pleasure built and built, then rested his head upon her shoulder and moaned her name as the dam broke and his seed burst forth.

He barely maintained enough awareness to slide out of and off the diminutive woman, before collapsing in the bed. Awash in pleasure, they lay entangled in each other's arms, thoughts drifting blissfully.

At last, Moiraine stretched and sat up. Her long dark hair shielded her from Rand's sight as she arranged the cushions of their bed to her liking and pulled the sheets over them, settling in for the night. When she leaned close he brushed her tresses away from her face to reveal a surprisingly pensive expression. It soon faded into a small smile of mingled exasperation and fondness. "What am I to do with you, Rand al'Thor?" she sighed, snuggling into the crook of his arm, her small body delightfully smooth and warm against his side.

"More of what you already have, I hope," Rand murmured drowsily. She laughed softly as he cradled her against his chest. He closed his eyes and drifted into a peaceful sleep. Almost.

"Perhaps," Moiraine allowed. "Still, are you certain that leading the Aiel into the western lands is wise? Many nations may turn against you. Surely, waiting for word from the Amyrlin would be the more prudent course."

Rand groaned. *I knew this was a bad idea*, he thought despairingly.

They were still talking long after the sun had set.

## *CHAPTER 34: To the Victor ...*



Beneath the shade of a huge jagged rock formation protruding unnaturally from an otherwise flat plain, two men danced the forms illuminated by the harsh sun. They were clad each in dark breeches and white shirts, and despite the oppressive heat of the Aiel Waste, they pushed each other relentlessly.

Rand flowed into the Red Hawk Takes a Dove, then quickly broke off and switched to Kiss the Adder. He might as well have tried to break Lan's defence with a blade of grass. The stone-faced Warder checked Rand's attack and immediately launched a blistering counter. The Cyclone Rages followed by Dandelion in the Wind, so fast Rand had to back pedal to avoid being hit. He managed to parry Lan's first few attacks but was soon overwhelmed. The Warder's practice blade slid past Rand's and scored a clean hit on the younger man's ribs. Even as he grimaced Rand couldn't help but note that Lan had managed to avoid the unhealing wound that plagued his protégé. He still had a long way to go before he could match the uncrowned king of Malkier at swordplay.

Nursing his injured side, Rand blew out a breath and said, "I'll get you one of these days, Lan."

The Warder grunted in response. He had been rather uncommunicative today, even by his standards. Rand suspected he knew why. The oaths Moiraine had given to Rand recently had shaken Lan. For all that the man had been a staunch supporter of Rand in the past, he was still a Warder and Moiraine his Aes Sedai. A slight to her was a slight to Lan.

Rand tapped the wooden blade against his calf and regarded the older man in consternation. He didn't regret the changes that had taken place between he and Moiraine in the slightest, so he could hardly apologise for any hurt feelings on the matter. Perhaps if they simply spoke about it.

"Listen, Lan," he ventured. "This thing between Moiraine and I ..."

"Don't," the Warder said, cutting Rand off. His voice was grim. Long black hair and icy blue eyes provided the only movement to cue off of. For all the expression Lan gave away on the rest of his face he might as well have been a marble statue. Rand focused on the eyes. In this, like in swordplay, it was his best bet.

"Moiraine's a grown woman," Rand said, "she makes her own decisions and they reflect only on her."

Far from mollifying the Warder, that only seemed to enrage him. Lan's eyes might almost have been ready to shoot lightning. And he was still expressionless! Rand couldn't help but smile. Smirk even. It didn't take long before he realised that would likely be taken the wrong way. But before he could explain further, the Warder took a step towards him. "I am well aware of Moiraine's age, just as I am well aware of yours," Lan gritted out. "All our decisions reflect on us." Another step, and Lan was staring Rand right in the eyes. The two men were of a height and stood nose to nose. "You and Moiraine both have plans," Lan continued quietly. "And you are both willing to make sacrifices. But which of you is enjoying your sacrifice most I wonder?"

Rand coloured and looked away. There was no denying that he was thrilled by Moiraine's efforts to seduce him. He knew better than to trust her, of course, but having her in his bed was worth the risk. A small smile played about his lips.

"That's what I thought," said Lan, grimly.

The Warder struck without warning. Rand's practice blade was knocked from his nerveless fingers, Lan's own blade was tossed aside as he attacked with hands and feet. Lan attempted to grapple but Rand broke the hold with a solid elbow to the older man's jaw. Lan's hair flew out behind him from the impact but he wasted no time flinching, instead he grasped Rand's wrist and twisted the offending arm behind his back and held it pinned there. His grip was like iron, nothing short of the One Power would remove it.

Rand disdained to resort to that, however. What was the point of learning to fight with a sword or his hands if he used channelling to win his battles? Instead he stamped his foot, trying to

catch Lan's instep. But the Warder was wise to that move and dodged easily. Lan grunted in satisfaction, as though hearing a theory confirmed.

Lan kicked Rand's feet out from under him and bore him down to the sand, the youth's arm still pinned behind him. Rand struggled to his knees but could get no further as Lan twisted his arm so far it felt like it might break. He grunted in pain.

The pain was subsumed by shock when he heard the distinctive sound of a belt being unbuckled.

Rand's heart was beating fast, and not entirely from exertion.

Rand tried in vain to see behind him as he heard cloth being pushed aside. He gasped when he felt a stranger's hard hand rest on his hip. Shook involuntarily when that hand grasped his belt and yanked downwards, exposing his smooth, pale buttocks in one rough motion.

Without preamble, something hard and hot poked at Rand's puckered butthole.

Lan paused there. The tableau held for a long moment. Rand thought of the One Power, of all the ways he could end this. Of the price to be paid for doing so, and the price to be paid for not. Lan allowed him that moment to consider. And when he hesitated too long, the Warder reached forward, grabbed him by his dark red hair, and mounted him.

A grunted duet filled the twilit air as Lan forced his way inside Rand. He was big, the younger man soon realised. Long and thick. Part of him wished he could see Lan's member but all he could see was the baked, sandy ground of his ancestral homeland. He hoped no-one was close enough to see. At the thought, his face blazed. Lan pushed forward mercilessly, until resistance waned. Soon Rand felt a pair of hairy balls resting against him and knew the Warder was completely inside him. He breathed heavily as he struggled to accommodate the giant invader.

Lan's breath came heavily as began to ride the Dragon Reborn, pulling back and pushing forwards in long, merciless strokes.

Rand tossed his head, but was unable to shake Lan's grip on his hair as the older man ravaged him. His cheeks reddened further, from shame mingled with a forbidden pleasure. And when he felt his manhood begin to stir, his cheeks burned brighter than the sun. If anyone *was* watching, they would know all.

Lan was heedless of his mount's qualms, his grip on Rand's arm remained firm as he began to quicken his pace, a loud slapping noise accompanying each hard thrust. Rand squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip to keep from crying out. His resolve broke with an embarrassing whimper when Lan quickened the pace yet more, thrusting in and out of Rand's ass feverishly.

It didn't take long at that pace. Lan's breath hissed out between gritted teeth and he bucked forward once more. Rand felt the Warder begin to spurt inside him and let out a heavy sigh. Lan sighed quietly as he took a final few slow strokes of Rand's ass, using his vanquished opponent to milk the last of his seed.

The grip on Rand's wrist and hair fell away but he did not move from his position. As he struggled to make sense of what had just happened he felt a hard hand reach around from behind and grasp his shaft. The grip lasted just long enough to ascertain that Rand was rock hard. With a knowing grunt, Lan released him, pulling his long cock out of the youth and planting a firm slap upon his reddened buttocks. Rand hung his head and blushed furiously.

He pulled up his breeches, studiously refusing to look back; he could hear Lan doing the same, and still some traitorous part of him wanted to peek. Instead, he sat on the ground and trembled involuntarily with feelings he could not decide on a name for.

Lan rose up and stood over Rand. "Now you know how Moiraine felt," he rumbled.

Rand did not look up at him. "She enjoyed it," he muttered. "I know she did."

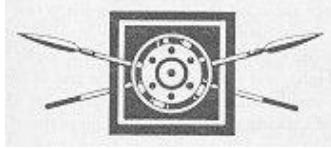
Lan snorted. "So did you."

At that Rand did glance up and caught a rare glimpse of expression on his sword master's face. A pleased smirk. Burn him! Lan turned and sauntered towards the nearby camp, leaving Rand to clean up. Showing him his back, safe in the knowledge that he couldn't, or wouldn't strike it.

Rand watched Lan go and set his jaw stubbornly. Moiraine would come to visit him tonight, to discuss his plans and try and replace them with her own. He would give her such a seeing to, he decided. He would leave her incoherent with pleasure. And when next Lan came to meet him for swordplay lessons he would fight with all he had, and they would just see what happened.

"I'll get you one of these days," he muttered. He bit his lip again, trying and failing to suppress a smile.

## CHAPTER 35: ... the Spoils



Rand's composure slowly returned, aided by a thorough survey of the surrounding land that revealed no unwanted eyes. Losing a sparring match to Lan, and being seen to do so, was not something he was ashamed of. But there was losing and there was *losing*.

At least it had been private, he told himself as he was gathering their things. He shuddered to imagine what the Maidens would have said if they'd been here. So when he rounded the rocky escarpment and began the climb up he couldn't help but give a start when a slender woman in *cadin'sor* uncoiled and stepped into his path.

Shorter than the Aiel average, with pale hair, paler eyes and a hooked nose, she somehow managed to keep her face expressionless while still looking far too knowing for Rand's comfort. Worse, he knew her. "Ani. Ah. What are you d-doing here?"

Her glance at the practice swords he was carrying showed none of the usual Aiel contempt. That didn't mean she approved, though. Ani looked at almost everything with that same, hooded disinterest.

"Standing ready to summon the others, in case you needed help." A slight smile curved her lips. "I nearly did, but..."

Rand blushed furiously. *She saw!* His throat felt too tight to speak, even if he'd been able to think of something to say. A woman of the Black Rock Shaarad, she had never been a friend to him and her discretion could absolutely not be relied on. While Ani watched him squirm, he saw a hint of enjoyment in her eyes for the first time. He suspected she was one of those who helped Celesta when it came time to ask the hard questions.

"Do you enjoy losing? Most people fight to win. But if you are fighting to lose, then we might as well give up now."

"To win. I can't afford to lose," he said, scowling. "Too many would suffer if I did." But Light ... the idea of just walking away from it all was so tempting sometimes. Ani didn't look at all moved by his declaration. "What about you? What do you fight for?"

She gave a little shrug. "It does not matter. None of it has any meaning."

"Well ... that's just crazy."

She looked on him without anger. "Do you like pulling the wings off flies?"

He looked on her with a distinct wariness. "No. Can't say that I do."

"Huh. Perhaps it will come with time. If you live long enough. Which you will not with the way you have been fighting, Couladin will kill you easily."

Couladin. Would using the One Power against him be dishonourable? Yes. Practical, but dishonourable. Could he really beat the man without it? "We'll see."

"Yes."

Lost in his thoughts, Rand barely saw the punch coming. It was a swift jab to the mouth, not enough to do real damage but enough to make him stagger back. When his hand came away bloodied, he scowled at the flat-eyed Maiden.

"Stop that."

"No." She threw a lazy kick at him, easily avoided. It would have been easy to counter, too; just grab the leg and sweep her standing one. But Rand hopped out of the way instead.

"I said stop it!"

Ani did, but only to shake her head contemptuously. "You really do want to lose. You are not even trying to learn how to fight us. If Sevanna came with knife in hand, would you just stand there and let her geld you? Attack me, coward!"

He ground his teeth. It wasn't fear it was ... it was just wrong. But perhaps if he made sure not to hurt her ... "Fine. Show me what you can do."

What she could do was to dodge the admittedly rather pitiful punches he let drift her way, then dance inside his reach and crack a solid uppercut against his jaw.

“You are not even trying.”

That was ... fair, if embarrassing. And painful. He was in danger of losing teeth at this rate. Maybe if he just restrained her. He could use his greater weight and strength to stop her from hurting him without needing to hurt her in turn.

Happy with that plan, Rand suddenly lunged forward, intending to grapple with her. It was a good plan, he thought, until he found himself cartwheeling through the air to land flat on his back. He blinked up at the short Maiden, who was standing over him, one hand on her hip.

“Burn you! That hurt, Ani! Haven’t you ever heard of the concept of pulling your punches?”

He couldn’t help but blink when she put her hand to her chest and pouted at him. “I did it because you were coming at me full force. I have to respond with equal force of my own. And if you are a man ... are you not supposed to be gentle with this delicate body of mine?”

The mockery was so thick he could have smothered in it. “Huh? Your jokes aren’t funny at all. If strength is the deciding factor, then why am I on my ass?”

She watched expressionlessly as he got up, then approached him slowly. Rand stepped back involuntarily. “Well ... I did not throw you using my strength,” she said. “It is a technique used to defend yourself against an opponent stronger than you.” Ani took a fighting stance, hands raised, her weight balanced on the balls of her feet. “If I were you, I would think about learning it.”

Rand raised his own hands, but in appeasement. “Alright already. Why don’t we just take a break?”

But Ani wasn’t interested in that. She came at him fast, fist swinging, but when he moved to block it she ducked low and tackled him instead. He wasn’t alarmed at first. He was well balanced, his legs strong; he could shrug it off.

Except he didn’t shrug it off. Somehow his feet went out from under him and he was falling, his own weight being driven into the ground. He hit hard, his breath bursting out, leaving him stunned. Ani was on top, her arms wrapped around his neck. He struggled to breathe, afraid she would start squeezing and knowing how close to death he’d be if she did.

“I surrender,” he wheezed.

“Surrender? Try to learn something first before you surrender. Learn how to use your strength and the proper way to treat women!” she said, right before the squeeze began.

“Alright! I promise,” he managed.

A rare smile curved her lips. A moment’s warmth teased into those cold grey eyes. “Oh? Do you want to learn that badly?”

He managed a nod, and she released her grip on his neck... but only so she could slide a hand down the front of his breeches and take hold of his cock instead.

Rand’s brows rose. Ani had never shown any interest at all before. And he certainly hadn’t approached her. She was pretty, true, but she was ... strange as well. “What are you doing?”

“I won. I am claiming my prize. That is how wetlanders do it, from what I saw,” she said, as he started wriggling out of the bottoms of her *cadin’sor*.

“Don’t ... You weren’t supposed to see, anything ... That isn’t ...”

She leaned in to whisper in his ear. “I liked what I saw. It takes a lot to get me excited, but that did.” Not content with words, she took his hand and pressed it to her crotch, to let him feel how wet she was.

Rand let his fingers probe her wet heat while his cock responded to her insistent groping, expanding in her grip. He had already decided to let it happen but had thought to tease her more. Ani had other ideas. As soon as she judged him stiff enough, she climbed up to straddle him and aim his cock at her pussy. A surprisingly cute flush crossed her cheeks as she took him inside, and a light moan sounded as her tight pussy slid down his length.

“How did such a worthless man get such an impressive cock?” she wondered.

Her words doused his pleasure. “That’s not very nice.”

Ani bit her lip, looking down at him mockingly as she started rolling her hips. “Yet here you are. Mine to do with as I want.”

He didn’t much like that, but was distracted by the way the muscles on her stomach were moving. She was strong, for such a slight woman. But ... soft, too. In the silky sheath that rubbed against him and ... He pushed her top up so he could touch her breasts. Yes. There. Small pink nipples pressed against his palms. She started moving faster.

"You really did enjoy watching, eh? You naughty girl..."

Her flush deepened. It made her look more alive than he'd ever seen her. Rand sat up, meaning to kiss her deeply, but Ani's hand clamped over his mouth and she pushed him back down. It stayed there as she rode him with mounting passion.

That was well enough. He liked the feel of her on him, and the way she looked just then. So he contented himself with teasing out her sensitive nub with his fingertips, and flicking it each time she moved. The sounds she was making grew more bestial, the rocking of her hips more urgent.

She was so obviously excited that it was almost unsurprising when she abruptly rose up off him and squirted all over his belly. Ani didn't scream as she came, but she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. He looked into her eyes. They were half-lidded as usual, but hazy with pleasure now rather than her usual disinterest. It was nice to see. And it was the right moment.

Ani was so stupefied by pleasure that she didn't respond when Rand rolled them over. She was limp in his arms even when he was binding her wrists with her discarded clothes. It was only when he finished tying them behind her back that she blinked herself back to awareness and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Proving a point. There are other ways to win. And I just beat you, so..." She had a cute little bottom, did Ani. It, too, was soft to the touch, as he discovered when he put her on her belly. "Now I have you right where I want you," he teased her. The way she glared back at him only made his smile broaden. He teased her drier hole with his finger, then leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Don't worry, your cute little bottom is safe today. I'd rather hear you beg for that."

"Never!"

He put his tongue to her ear and felt her shiver. "I'm going to breed you instead. Ice cold Ani, a kept woman and doting mother. Could you imagine?"

She shook her head fiercely. "Even if I gave up the spear, it would never be for you!" she spat. She might have said more but was cut off in a sudden moan when Rand thrust his cock back inside her.

"But you'll take my come, though," he whispered as he started riding her. He wrapped his arms around her chest, that his hands might cushion her from the harsh land beneath them. That it let him cup and fondle her breasts was just an added bonus. "Those were the rules of the game, weren't they? I'm going to fill that womb of yours just as if you were mine."

"There are ways—"

"I know."

"I do not like—"

"You are surprisingly cute when you're having fun." She gasped. He smiled. She looked away. "I wouldn't have expected a girl like you to be so cute. You're pretty. I like your nose, and your eyes. And this tight little body..."

Ani stayed silent as he whispered to her. And all the while he moved inside, bringing himself close and closer to release. Her bottom made a nice cushion for his hips as his larger frame engulfed hers. He spoke again when he felt it begin. "I'm going to come in you now, Ani."

"Do it," she whispered.

So he did. A pleasure built from a dozen conflicting emotions and sensations finally burst out of Rand, flowing down his shaft to flood the woman beneath him. He could feel her heart hammering in the chest he cradled. It still hadn't slowed by the time the last drop of his come had trickled into her.

Rand made himself get up, hard as that was with his limbs feeling so watery. It was hard to untie her, too, but he managed it before sitting down on the hot, sandy ground.

Ani got up and stretched a little to unlimber her arms. She voiced no complaint at the uncomfortable position she'd just been fucked in, but that didn't mean she wouldn't renew their one-sided sparring contest. Rand was in even less mood to fight her, but what he wanted hadn't much mattered before so why would it now?

But she didn't attack him. Instead, she surveyed the rock that shielded them from camp. When she was satisfied that they were still alone, a rare expression crossed her face: relief.

Rand mirrored it, trusting her eyes more than his own. "All that happened here could be our secret," he offered. "All of it."

Her eyes hooded again. "It would be more embarrassing for you than me."

"True," he allowed. "But the offer still stands."

Ani snatched up her *cadin'sor* and started dressing. She had strong legs, he noticed, in the moments before she hid them from his view. She also didn't care a whit that his come was still inside her. She pulled on her top before looking at him again. "I am not your enemy. I do not seek to shame you. That does not mean I am your ... your ..."

"Friend?"

She scowled at him, and he smiled again. What was it about teasing emotions out of unavailable women that appealed to him so? "Our secret, then?" he went on.

She nodded once. It was more of a relief than he cared to admit. To cover that, he got up and gathered his things.

"I still say you need to learn to fight properly," Ani said. "That trick would not work on a woman who really wanted to kill you."

"I'm touched that it worked on you, then," he murmured.

Again she flushed. Again he smiled. She stalked off so quickly that he would have had to lengthen his stride to catch up. He did not. Better if they reappeared in camp at different times. Even so, he hoped she would see fit to join in, the next time he was staying beneath a Roof of the Maidens. She was a bad girl, to be sure, but she was his kind of bad.

When he did arrive back at camp, Ani was nowhere to be seen. He hoped she wasn't going to start avoiding him now, the way Branwen was. Many of the Aiel were already on the march, but others were gathered around the remains of the campsite. And not just Aiel; Tam was holding *Jeade'en*'s reins near the spot where Rand's tent had once.

He looked well. The harsh sun of the Waste had tanned him but hadn't managed to wear Rand's stocky father down at all. He doubted there was anything that could, in truth. It was just a pity that he'd been avoiding him lately, too.

"Lad," he said in greeting. Aca was at his side again, but said nothing. "I heard a disturbing rumour this morning."

"A rumour?" Tam had never had much care for those.

"About Moiraine. And where she slept last night," Rand's father said quietly.

Rand had to fight to keep his shoulders from slumping. Surprise at that only added to his discomfort. "And who was spreading this rumour, I wonder."

Aca's face remained composed, but some of the other Maidens felt a sudden need to be elsewhere. Somehow they were able to feel the glares he shot at their backs, for their need to be elsewhere became pressing.

"Is it true?" At Rand's nod, Tam gave a heavy sigh. "Light, Rand. I thought you wiser than this. You have to know why she is doing it. She wants to control you."

He knew that. Knowing it hadn't made it feel any less wondrous, though, and Tam's disapproval didn't quell Rand's desire to see her again. Perhaps it should have. Perhaps he should stay as far away from Moiraine—clothed or otherwise—as possible. But ... She'd been almost sweet. And he didn't think she had faked the hunger she had for him. It had been as if there was a cold place inside that needed filling with warmth, for her as well as for him.

Admitting that was not an option. "She isn't the only one. Or the only one to resort to such tactics," he said instead, then hastened to add, "Remember Berelain? I wasn't controlled by her." Even Tam didn't know about his uneasy alliance with Lanfear, or the things he had done to maintain it. He might have understood, more than most, but it was still best to keep it secret, if only to stop him from worrying.

Tam nodded. "That girl is smarter than most think. But even she is not Moiraine. The Aes Sedai is not a woman to be trifled with. No Aes Sedai is, but especially not her. I know I said I'd keep my distance, let you till your own field, but ... I don't like this, lad. You're taking a big risk."

He sighed. "I know. Adding risk to risk. It's dumb. I hope you're not too disappointed."

Aca stirred. "Still eager to please. This is good. Rhuarc may be right about you."

While Rand was still trying to figure out what that meant, Tam quietened her with a touch to the arm. He hoped the sudden burst of jealousy he felt didn't show too plainly. If it did, Tam made no mention. "I am not at all disappointed in you. I can't imagine I ever would be. You've done well, lad. And even when you make mistakes, now or in the future, I know you'll be doing your best. I'm proud of you."

Rand smiled, feeling more boyish than he had in years. It stayed in place even while Tam admonished him to be warier of Moiraine. And it was still there when he rejoined the Aiel army marching west.

## CHAPTER 36: Weaves of the Power



To Elayne the streets looked scandalously decrepit. Her mother would surely never have allowed any district in Caemlyn to become so run down. Brick buildings five and six stories high, covered patchily with flaking white plaster, crowded together and looming above uneven pavement. Only at this time of day, with the golden sun burning overhead, did shadows vanish completely from these narrow ways. Flies buzzed everywhere. Laundry was hanging from windows, though not many of the people were outdoors at the moment, of course. There was a deep pungent miasma of decay that made her try not to breathe too deeply. Worse, though she did not want to admit it to the Shienarans, she was not sure she could find her way back to their inn. Unfortunately, every street looked alike in the Rahad.

Halting Areku with a hand on her arm, she eyed a scabrous pile of brick with dingy washing dangling from half the windows. The thin wail of a baby crying came from somewhere inside.

"I don't think we should stand staring," Areku said softly. "People are looking."

That was not quite true, just Areku worrying about her. With her hair dyed jet black she did not stick out as badly in Ebou Dar as she once had. Shirtless men in often ragged vests strutted down the street with sunlight glinting on their brass hoop earrings, and brass finger rings set with coloured glass, or slunk along like the sort of cur dog that might snarl and might bite. For that matter, so did the women, in their usually worn dresses and their jewellery of brass and glass. Everyone had a curved knife stuck through a belt, and frequently a plain work knife as well.

Areku and Rikimaru had been set against coming here, but Elayne had given their fussing only as much tolerance as it deserved. They had followed, of course, even if they had grumbled gracelessly all the way here. Rough as the place was, it was still fascinating to her. And certainly a pleasant change of scenery from the inn they had been staying in this past week. And anything had to be better than trying to persuade Nynaeve to see reason. Honestly, the woman was even more stubborn than most men. That there were more Aes Sedai in the palace than usual was a reason to make contact, not to avoid them. If there was nothing to learn there, then only Queen Tylin's usual advisor would be in residence.

Rikimaru abruptly stepped in front of her, just as a slender man with blood all over his chest and a knife in his hand came leaping out of a doorway, spinning immediately to face another man who followed; the second was taller and heavier and bleeding down the side of his face. They circled each other, eyes locked, extended blades flickering and probing. A small crowd gathered to watch as though springing from the rough pavement; none came running, but no-one passed by.

Areku took Elayne by the arm and led her to the side of the street, but they did not leave. "In the Rahad, leaving would attract attention," the Shienaran explained quietly.

Elayne nodded. Blending in meant watching, but she managed to focus beyond the two men, seeing only vague blurs of quick motion until suddenly the motion slowed. She blinked and made herself look. The man with blood on his chest was parading about, grinning and gesturing with a blade that dripped red. The bigger man lay facedown in the street, giving harsh feeble coughs, not twenty paces from her.

Elayne moved instinctively—her minuscule ability in Healing was better than none when a man was bleeding to death, and to the Pit of Doom with what anyone here thought of Aes Sedai—yet before she took a second step, another woman was kneeling at the man's side. A little older than Nynaeve perhaps, she wore a red-belted blue dress in somewhat better repair than most in the Rahad. Elayne took her for the dying man's sweetheart at first, especially when the victor in the duel grew sober. No-one moved to go; everyone watched silently as the woman turned the man onto his back.

Elayne gave a start as, far from tenderly wiping the blood from his lips, the woman pulled what seemed to be a handful of herbs from her pouch and hurriedly thrust some of them into the man's mouth. Before her hand left his face, the glow of *saidar* surrounded her, and she began to weave the flows of Healing more deftly than Elayne could have done. The man gasped hard enough to expel most of the leaves, shuddered—and lay still, half-open eyes staring at the sun.

“Too late, it seems.” Standing, the woman faced the lean fellow. “You must tell Masic’s wife you’ve killed her husband, Baris.”

“Yes, Asra,” Baris replied meekly.

Asra turned away without another glance at either man, and the thin crowd opened up before her. As she passed within a few paces of Elayne and her guards, Elayne noticed two things about her. One was her strength; Elayne felt for that on purpose. She expected to feel a fair amount, but Asra likely would never have been allowed to take the test for Accepted. Healing must have been her strongest Talent—perhaps her only one, since she must be a wilder—and very well honed from use. Maybe she even believed those herbs were necessary. The second thing Elayne noticed was the woman’s face. It was not sun-dark, as she had supposed at first. Asra was most certainly Domani. What under the Light was a Domani wilder doing in the Rahad?

Elayne might have followed the woman, except that Areku drew her the other way. “I recognize that look in your eyes, Elayne.” Areku’s eyes scanned the street as if she expected some of the passersby to be eavesdroppers. “I don’t know why you want to chase after that woman, but she seems to be respected. Peace. Accost her, and you might have more blades drawn than Rikimaru and I can handle together.”

That was simple truth, and so was the fact that finding Domani wilders was not why she had come to Ebou Dar, or why they had lingered so long. Elayne sighed. “Let us return to The Wandering Woman. Perhaps the others have heard some news.”

An explanation for why the Amyrlin Seat was angry with them was what she wanted most, but Elayne would have settled for any news at all. Ebou Dar was a churning pot of half truths and outright idiocies. They were still digesting the “rumour” that the Stone of Tear had fallen, and most of those she’d listened in on were convinced it was a lie being spread by the Illianers to make fun of their old rivals. A fine jape, all agreed. The Amyrlin would not have been moved by like nonsense, of course. If she thought Elayne an enemy now, she would have to have what she believed to be a good reason for it. But for the life of her Elayne could not imagine what it was, and why things had changed.

She pondered the problem throughout their ferry ride back over the river, as she had pondered it all week, but the answer still eluded her.

The Wandering Woman was quieter than usual, but also somehow busier. The staff were rushing about as though the inn was packed with customers demanding food and drink, rather than the bare handful who lounged in the common room. Even the young owner—more properly the owner’s daughter, from what she’d been told—was bustling rather more intently than usual.

Elayne put it out of her mind when she spotted Nynaeve and Juilin at one of the tables. Neither of them looked particularly happy, which was another reason she had wanted to go for an extended walk. Those two simply could not seem to get along. And almost inevitably it fell to her to try and smooth things over. Smoothing things over, she had come to fear, was going to be a never-ending task for her. It was small wonder the others were nowhere to be seen.

Painting a pleasant smile on her face, she went to join them, the two Shienarans tramping at her heels.

“Where did you run off to this time?” Nynaeve asked sharply. “Did you find a flea-bitten mutt to cuddle? Or are you just trying to get yourself captured?”

Try as she might, she could not maintain her smile. “You have a talent for destruction.”

Nynaeve frowned. “I heal. I don’t destroy.”

Juilin raised his hands towards them both. “To get back to the job at hand, I still say the sisters in the palace are our best source. Rumours about Tar Valon are too hard to sift any truth out of.”

Nynaeve matched the glare Elayne gave him. “I do hope you have not been speaking to any strange sisters, Master Sander,” she said.

“For your sake,” Nynaeve growled, hand going to her braid.

Juilin had the audacity to let out a long sigh of pretend sufferance. “Of course I haven’t actually spoken to them. That’s not how this is done.”

“Do not think to tell me how things are done, Sandar!” Nynaeve snapped. “I am in charge here, and don’t you forget it! If I’ve been too slack about reminding you lately, just let me know and I’ll make it my business to jog your memory.”

"I think a dozen reminders a day for several months might have been enough to drive the point home," Juilin sighed. "I need a drink. You coming, Rikimaru?"

"Gladly." The two men slunk off, mumbling something to each other about the worst jobs they'd ever taken. It was no matter; whatever past employers they had fallen out with, they were firmly tied to Nynaeve and her now. Areku hesitated for a moment before hurrying off after them. That was a pity, since the solemn soldier woman would have been better company than Nynaeve in her current mood.

Sure enough, the former Wisdom was glaring at Juilin's back. "That man could try the patience of a stone! He will make trouble. He will."

"You two will make more trouble for him than he ever could." The speaker stalked across the common room toward them, a woman with a touch of grey in her hair, a strong face and a commanding voice. She also wore a frown little short of a scowl. Despite the marriage knife hanging into her cleavage, she was too fair for an Ebou Dari. "I couldn't believe it when Caira told me. I doubt I've ever seen so much foolishness poured into just two dresses."

Elayne eyed the woman up and down. Not even as a Novice had she gotten used to being addressed in that tone. "And who might you be, my good woman?"

"I might be and am Setalle Anan, the owner of this inn, child," was the dry reply, and with that, the woman flung open a nearby door, seized them each by an arm, and hustled them through so fast Elayne thought her slippers had left the floor.

"You seem under some misapprehension, Mistress Anan," she said coolly as the woman released them to shut the door.

Nynaeve was in no mood for niceties. Holding her hand so her Great Serpent ring was plain, she said heatedly, "Now, you look here—"

"Very pretty," the woman said, and pushed each of them so hard they found themselves sitting side-by-side on a bench. Elayne's eyes popped in disbelief. This Anan woman confronted them, grim-faced, fists on her hips, for all the world like a mother about to castigate her daughters. "Flaunting that just shows how silly you are. That man will dandle you on his knee—one on each, I shouldn't wonder, if you allow—he'll take a few kisses and as much else as you're willing to give, but he won't harm you. You can harm him, though, if you keep on with this."

*Harm him?* The woman thought they—she thought he had *dandled*—she thought—Elayne did not know whether to laugh or cry, but she stood up, straightening her skirts. "As I said, Mistress Anan, you are under a misapprehension." Her voice became smoother as she went on, confusion giving way to calm. "I am Elayne Trakand, Daughter-Heir of Andor and Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. I don't know what you think—" Her eyes nearly crossed as Mistress Anan pushed a finger to the tip of her nose.

"Elayne, if that is your name, all that keeps me from dragging you down to the kitchen and washing your mouth out, yours and that other foolish girl's there, is the possibility that you actually can channel somewhat. Or are you silly enough to wear that ring when you can't even do that? I warn you, it will make no difference to the sisters over in the Tarasin Palace. Do you even know about them? If you do, frankly, you are not foolish, you're blind stupid."

Elayne's temper grew by the word. Foolish girl? Blind stupid? She would not put up with it. Dandle? Juilin Sandar? She maintained her outward composure, though, but not so Nynaeve.

She glared in a fury, and the glow of *saidar* enveloped her as she bounded to her feet. Flows of Air wrapped Mistress Anan from shoulders to ankles, crushing her skirts and petticoats against her legs, just short of tight enough to topple her. "I happen to be one of those sisters. Nynaeve al'Meara of the Yellow Ajah, to be exact. Now would you like me to carry *you* down to the kitchens? I know something of how to wash out a mouth." Elayne stepped away from the innkeeper's outstretched arm.

The woman had to feel the pressure of the flows, and even a half-wit would have known what those invisible bonds must be, yet she did not blink! Her green-flecked eyes narrowed, no more. "So one of you can channel, at least," she said calmly. "I should let you drag me downstairs, child. Whatever you do to me, you would be in the hands of real Aes Sedai by noon; I'll wager that."

"Didn't you hear me?" Nynaeve demanded. "I—!"

The Anan woman did not even pause. "You'll not only spend the next year blubbering, you will do part of it in front of anyone you told that you are Aes Sedai. Be sure, they'll make you tell. They will turn your liver to water. I should let you go blundering on your way, or else run across to

the palace as soon as you loose me. The only reason I don't is that they'll make an example of the rest of my customers nearly as much as of you, if they even suspect they've helped you. What possessed that girl of mine to let a pack of ninnies like you stay here while I was away, I can't say, but I'm back now and your games are over."

"I'm telling you—" Nynaeve tried again, but *still* the innkeeper gave her no chance to tell anything. Tied like a bundle, the woman was a boulder rolling downhill. She was the whole hillside falling, flattening whatever lay in its path.

"Trying to keep up the lie does no good, Nynaeve. You look to be, oh, twenty-one give or take a year, so you might be as much as ten years older if you've already reached the slowing. You might even have worn the shawl four or five years. Except for one thing." Her head, the only part of her she could move, swivelled toward Elayne. "You, child, aren't old enough to have slowed yet, and no woman has ever worn the shawl as young as you. Never in the history of the Tower. If you ever were in the Tower, I'll wager you wore white and squeaked every time the Mistress of Novices glanced your way. You had some goldsmith make that ring for you—there are some fool enough, I hear—or maybe Nynaeve stole it for you, if she has any right to hers. Either way, since you can't be a sister, neither can she. No Aes Sedai would travel with a woman who was pretending."

Elayne frowned, not noticing that she was chewing her lower lip. Slowed. Slowing. How did an innkeeper in Ebou Dar know those words? Maybe Setalle Anan had gone to the Tower as a girl though she would not have remained long, since she clearly could not channel. Elayne would have known even if her ability had been as small as her own mother's, and Morgase Trakand had an ability so small she would have been sent away in a matter of weeks probably, had she not been heir to a strong House.

"Release her, Nynaeve," she said, smiling. She truly did feel more well-disposed toward the woman, now. It must have been terrible to make that journey to Tar Valon only to be turned away.

"Release her?" Nynaeve yelped. "Elayne?"

"Release her. Mistress Anan, I see the only way to convince you is—"

"The Amyrlin Seat and three Sitters couldn't convince me, child." Light, did she ever let anyone finish a sentence? "Now, I don't have time for any more games. I can help the pair of you. I know those who can, anyway, some women who take in strays. You can thank the Light that I'm willing to take you to them, but I must know. Were you ever in the Tower, or are you wilders? If you were there, were you put out, or did you run away? The truth. They handle each in a different way."

Elayne shrugged. There was no reason the woman *had* to believe them. "If you won't be convinced, then that's all there is to it. Nynaeve? It is past time we were on our way."

The flows around the innkeeper vanished, and the glow around Nynaeve, too, but Nynaeve stood there watching the woman warily, hopefully. She wet her lips. "You know a group of women who can help us?"

"Nynaeve?" Elayne said. "We don't need any help. We are Aes Sedai, remember?"

With a wry glance in her direction, Mistress Anan gave her skirts a shake to straighten them and bent to smooth her exposed petticoats. Her real attention was on Nynaeve; Elayne had never felt so completely shunted aside in her life. "I know a few women who take in the occasional wilder or runaway or woman who failed her test for Accepted or the shawl. There must be at least fifty of them, altogether, though the number changes. They can help you find a life without the risk of a real sister making you wish she'd just skin you and be done. Now, don't lie to me. Were you ever in the Tower? If you've run away, you might as well decide to go back. The Tower managed to find most runaways even during the War of the Hundred Years, so you needn't think this little bother now will stop them. In truth, my suggestion then would be to go across the square and throw yourself on a sister's mercy. It will be a small mercy, I'm afraid, but you can believe me, it's more than you'll find if they have to drag you back. You won't even think of so much as leaving the Tower grounds without permission after that."

Nynaeve drew a deep breath. "We were told to leave the Tower, Mistress Anan. I will swear to that however you ask."

Elayne stared in disbelief. "Nynaeve, what are you *saying*? Mistress Anan, we *are* Aes Sedai."

The Anan woman laughed. "Child, let me talk with Nynaeve, who at least seems old enough to have sense. You tell the Circle that, and they will not take it kindly. They won't care you can

channel; they can, too, and they'll smack your bottom or toss you out in the street on your nose if you play the fool."

"Who is this *Circle*?" Elayne demanded.

"I'll keep her in hand," Nynaeve had the gall to say, all the while frowning and grimacing at Elayne as if she were the one who had gone mad.

The Anan woman merely nodded. "Good. Now take off those rings and put them away. The Circle doesn't allow that sort of pretending. They'll have them melted down to give you a start. Though by the look of your dresses, you have coin. If you stole it, don't let Reanne know. One of the first rules you'll have to learn is, don't steal even if you are starving. They don't want to draw attention."

Elayne made a fist and thrust it behind her back. And watched Nynaeve meekly slip her ring off and tuck it into her belt pouch.

"Trust me, Elayne," Nynaeve said.

Which Elayne would have had an easier time of if she had any notion what the woman was up to. Still, she did trust her. Mostly. Her pride quailed at removing her ring under that woman's scornful eye, but she did it, and tucked it into her purse. "A small sacrifice," she muttered.

"Talk to your friend, child," the Anan woman told Nynaeve impatiently. "Reanne Corly won't put up with all this sulky pouting, and if you make me waste my morning for nothing ... Come along, come along. It's lucky for you I got back before they found you."

Elayne held on to cool composure by a fingernail. Sulky pouting? Sulky pouting? When she had the chance, she was going to kick Nynaeve where it hurt!

## *CHAPTER 37: Next Door to a Weaver*



Nynaeve did want to talk to Elayne, away from the innkeeper's ears, but she did not find the chance right away. The woman marched them out of the room doing a fine imitation of a guard on prisoners. At the back of the inn a set of unrailed stone steps led down into a large hot kitchen full of baking smells, where the roundest woman Nynaeve had ever seen was wielding a large wooden spoon like a sceptre, directing three others in sliding crusty brown loaves from the ovens and replacing them with rolls of pale dough. A large pot of the coarse white porridge that was eaten for breakfast hereabout bubbled gently on one of the white-tiled stoves.

"Enid," Mistress Anan addressed the round woman, "I am going out for a little while. I need to take these two children to someone who has time to mother them properly."

Wiping broad, floury hands on a piece of white towelling, Enid studied Nynaeve and Elayne disapprovingly. Everything about her was round, her sweaty olive-skinned face, her dark eyes, all of her; she seemed made of very large balls stuffed into a dress. The marriage knife she wore hanging outside her snowy apron sparkled with a full dozen stones. "Is this the pair of barkers Caira was chattering about, Mistress?"

The innkeeper shook her head in vexation. "I told that girl to hold her tongue. I won't let that sort of rumour touch The Wandering Woman. Remind Caira for me, Enid, and use your spoon to get her attention, if need be." The gaze she turned on Nynaeve and Elayne was so disparaging that Nynaeve nearly gasped. "Would anyone with half their wits believe these two were Aes Sedai? Spent all their coin on dresses. Aes Sedai!" Giving Enid no chance to answer, she seized Nynaeve's ear with her right hand, Elayne's with her left, and in three quick steps had them out into the stableyard.

That was as long as Nynaeve's shock held. Then she pulled free, or tried to, because the woman let go at the same instant and she stumbled half a dozen paces, glaring indignantly. She had not bargained for being dragged about. Elayne's chin rose, her blue eyes so cold Nynaeve would not have been surprised to see frost forming in her curls.

Hands on hips, Mistress Anan seemed not to notice. Or perhaps she simply did not care. "I can hope no-one in there believes Caira after that," she said calmly. "If I could have been sure you had the wits to keep your mouths shut, I'd have said and done more, and made certain." She was calm, but not at all pleasant or soft; they had troubled her morning. "Now follow me and don't get lost. Or if you do, do not show your faces anywhere near my inn again, or I'll send somebody to the palace to tell Merilille and Teslyn. They are two of the real sisters, and they'll probably rip you each down the middle and share you out."

Elayne shifted her gaze from the innkeeper to Nynaeve. Not a glare, or a frown, yet a very meaning look just the same. Nynaeve wondered whether she was going to be able to go through with this.

"We won't lose ourselves, Mistress Anan," she said, striving for meekness. She thought she did fairly well, considering how foreign meekness was to her. "Thank you for helping us." Smiling at the innkeeper, she did her best to ignore Elayne, whose stare became more meaningful, hard as that was to credit. Looks or no looks, she had to make sure the woman continued to think them worth the trouble. "We are truly grateful, Mistress Anan."

Mistress Anan eyed her askance, then sniffed and shook her head. When this was done, Nynaeve decided, she was going to drag the innkeeper back to her own inn by the hair.

The stableyard was empty save for a lone boy of ten or twelve with a bucket and a sieve who sprinkled water to dampen the hard-packed ground against dust. The white plastered stable's doors were wide open, and a barrow sat in front with a dung-fork resting across it. Sounds like a huge frog being stepped on floated out; Nynaeve decided it was a man singing. Would they have to ride to reach their destination? Even a short journey would not be pleasant; they had brought neither hats nor parasols nor hooded cloaks.

Mistress Anan led them through the stableyard, however, down a narrow alleyway between the stable and a high wall that had drought-bedraggled trees poking above the top. Someone's garden, no doubt. A small gate at the end let into a dusty alley so cramped down had not completely reached it yet.

"You children keep up now, mind you," the innkeeper told them, starting away down the dim alley. "You lose yourselves, and I vow I'll go to the palace myself."

Nynaeve took a grip on her braid with both hands as she followed, to keep them from the Anan woman's throat. How she yearned for her first grey hairs. No-one took you seriously until you had at least a little grey; even an Aes Sedai's ageless face could not possibly do as well in her estimation.

Elayne was lifting her skirts out of the dust, though their slippers still kicked up little puffs that settled on the hems of their dresses. "Let me see," Elayne said softly, looking straight ahead. Softly, but coolly. Very coolly, in fact. She had a way of slashing someone to tatters without letting her tone heat that Nynaeve admired. Usually. Now, it just made her want to box the other woman's ears. "We are off on a walk of who knows what length, squinting into the sun the whole way if we keep on as we are, to visit women who feed runaways from the Tower. Myself, I don't have much interest in catching runaways this morning or any morning. But I'm sure you can explain it so I will understand. I do so want to understand Nynaeve. I would hate to think I'm going to kick you the length of the Mol Hara for nothing."

Nynaeve's eyebrows drew down. Kick her? Elayne really was becoming violent. Someone ought to slap some sense into her. "Think, Elayne. *Fifty* women who can channel, helping wilders and women put out of the Tower." She felt guilty sometimes, using the term wilders; in the mouths of most Aes Sedai, it was an insult, but she intended to make them speak it as a badge of pride one day. "And she called them 'the Circle'. That doesn't sound like a few friends to me. It sounds organized." The alley meandered between high walls and the backs of buildings, many showing bare brick through the plaster, between palace gardens and shops where an open back door revealed silversmiths or tailors or woodcarvers at work. Every so often Mistress Anan looked over her shoulder to make sure they still followed. Nynaeve gave her smiles and nods she hoped would convey eagerness.

"Nynaeve, if *two* women who could channel made a society, the Tower would fall on them like a pack of wolves. How would Mistress Anan know whether they can or not, anyway? Women who can and aren't Aes Sedai do not go about making a show of themselves, you know. Not for very long, anyway. In any case, I can't see it makes a difference." The frosty patience in Elayne's voice tightened Nynaeve's hands on her braid. How could the woman be so dense? She bared her teeth again for Mistress Anan, and managed not to scowl at the innkeeper's back when her head turned forward once more.

"Fifty women isn't two," Nynaeve whispered fiercely. "And if the Tower really is against us ..."

Elayne sighed. "Nynaeve, if the Tower is against us five hundred wilders wouldn't make a difference, never mind fifty. Even if we'd never met the remarkable Mistress Anan or been taken to this Circle, we would still be lost. I don't think even Rand could help."

Nynaeve stumbled over her own feet and let go of her braid to lift her skirts. The alley was hardly as smooth as a paved square much less a palace floor. At times, Elayne in a taking was better than Elayne thinking clearly. "Remarkable," she muttered. "I'll 'remarkable' her till her eyes cross. No-one has ever treated us this way, Elayne, not even people who doubted. Most people would step wary if a ten-year-old said she was Aes Sedai."

"Most people don't really know what an Aes Sedai's face looks like, Nynaeve. I think she went to the Tower once; she knows things she couldn't, otherwise."

Nynaeve snorted, glowering at the back of the woman striding ahead. Setalle Anan might have been to the Tower ten times, a hundred, but she was going to acknowledge Nynaeve and apologize. And learn what it was like to be hauled about by her ear, too! Mistress Anan glanced back, and Nynaeve flashed her a rigid smile, nodded as if her neck was a hinge.

The wandering alley gave way to a street, and there was no talking then to amount to anything. The sun's thin rim glared blindingly above the rooftops ahead; Elayne shaded her eyes with one hand very ostentatiously. Nynaeve refused to. It was not that bad. She barely had to squint at all, really. A clear blue sky mocked her weather sense, that still told her a storm was right on top of the city.

Brightly lacquered coaches were about in the winding streets, and a double fistful of brighter sedan chairs, two or sometimes four barefoot bearers in green-and-red striped vests to each, trotting because they carried passengers hidden behind the grilled wooden screens. Carts and wagons rumbled over the paving stones, and people filled the streets, vested apprentices hurrying on errands and men with great rolled carpets balanced on their shoulders, tumblers and jugglers and musicians performing at likely corners and hawkers with their trays of pins or ribbons or shabby fruit. The open-sided fish- and meat-markets were in full cry; all the fishmongers were women, and most of the butchers, too, except those dealing in beef.

Dodging through the crowds, past the coaches and sedan chairs and wagons that seemed to think they had no reason to slow, Mistress Anan set a fast pace to make up for interruptions. There were plenty of those. She seemed to be a well-known woman, hailed by shopkeepers and craftsmen and other innkeepers standing in their doorways. The shopkeepers and craftsmen received a few words, a pleasant nod, but she always stopped to chat a moment with the innkeepers. After the first, Nynaeve wished fervently that she would not again; after the second, she prayed for it. After the third she stared straight ahead and tried in vain not to hear. Elayne's face grew tighter and tighter, colder and colder; her chin rose till it was a wonder she could see to walk.

There was a reason, Nynaeve had to admit grudgingly. In Ebou Dar, someone wearing silk might stroll the length of a square, maybe, but no further. Everybody else in sight wore wool or linen, seldom with much embroidery, except for an occasional beggar who had acquired a cast-off silk garment, frayed on every edge and more hole than cloth. She just wished Mistress Anan had chosen some other explanation for why she was leading the pair of them through the streets. She wished she did not have to listen one more time to a tale of two flighty girls who had spent all their money on fine clothes to impress a man. A fine young fellow, this imaginary man was, if Mistress Anan had not been married, a beautiful dancer with just a touch of the rogue. All of the women laughed. Not her or Elayne, though. Not the brainless little honeykissers—that was the word she used; Nynaeve could guess what it meant!—honeykissers penniless from chasing after a man and their purses full of brass bits and tin to fool fools, witless loobies who would have been reduced to beggary or theft had Mistress Anan not known someone who might give them work in the kitchen.

"She doesn't have to stop at every inn in the city," Nynaeve growled as she stalked away from The Stranded Goose, three broad stories with an innkeeper who wore large garnets at her ears despite the humble name. Mistress Anan hardly even glanced back to see they followed, now. "Do you realize we'll never be able to show our own faces in any of those places!"

"I suspect that is exactly the point." Every word out of Elayne's mouth was chipped from ice. "Nynaeve, if you've sent us running after a wild pig ..." There was no need to complete the threat. Elayne could make her life miserable until she was satisfied.

Nynaeve flapped her hands to shoo a beggar with a horrible purple scar that obliterated one eye; she could recognize flour paste dyed with bluewort when she saw it. "They will help us. I know they will." Elayne sniffed in an offensively expressive manner.

Nynaeve lost count of the number of bridges they crossed, large and small, with barges poling beneath. The sun climbed its own height above the rooftops, then twice. The Anan woman did not follow even so straight a line as she might have—she really did seem to be going out of her way to find inns—but they continued generally east, and Nynaeve thought they must be nearing the river when the hazel-eyed woman suddenly rounded on them.

"You watch your tongues, now. Speak when you're spoken to and not else. You embarrass me, and ..." With a final frown and a mutter half under her breath that she was probably making a mistake, she jerked her head for them to follow again, to a flat-roofed house right opposite.

It was not a large house, two stories without one balcony, cracked plaster and brick showing in several places, and hardly in an agreeable location, with the loud rattling of a weaver's looms to one side and the acrid stinks of a dyer's shop to the other. A maid answered the door, though, a greying woman with a square jaw, shoulders like a blacksmith, and a steely eye unsoftened by the sweat on her face. As Nynaeve followed Mistress Anan in, she smiled. Somewhere in that house, a woman was channelling.

The square-jawed maid obviously knew Setalle Anan on sight, but her reaction was odd. She curtsied with a very real respect, yet she was plainly surprised to see her, and obviously doubtful about her being there. She almost fluttered before letting them in. Nynaeve and Elayne were greeted

with no ambivalence, though. They were shown to a sitting room one flight up, and the maid told them firmly, “Don’t stir a toe and don’t touch anything, or you’ll catch the old what-for,” then vanished.

Nynaeve looked at Elayne.

“Nynaeve, one woman channelling doesn’t mean—” The feel changed, swelling for a moment, then subsiding, lower than before. “Even two women doesn’t mean anything,” Elayne protested, but she sounded doubtful. “That was the most ill-mannered maid I’ve ever seen.” She took a tall-backed red chair, and after a moment Nynaeve sat as well, but she perched on the edge. From eagerness, not nerves. Not nerves at all.

The room was not grand, but the blue-and-white floor tiles glistened, and the pale green walls looked freshly painted. No trace of gilt showed anywhere, of course, yet fine carving covered the red chairs arrayed along the walls and several small tables of a darker blue than the tiles. The lamps hanging from sconces were clearly brass, polished till they shone. Carefully arranged evergreen branches filled the swept hearth, and the lintel above the fireplace was carved, not plain stonework. The carving seemed an odd choice—what people around Ebou Dar called the Thirteen Sins; a man with eyes that nearly filled his whole face for Envy, a fellow with his tongue hanging to his ankles for Gossip, a snarling, sharp-toothed man clutching coins to his chest for Greed, and so on—but all in all, it satisfied her very much. Whoever could afford that room could afford fresh plaster outside, and the only reason not to put it up was to keep low, avoiding notice.

The maid had left the door open, and suddenly voices coming up the hall drifted through.

“I cannot believe you brought them here.” The speaker’s tone was tight with incredulity and anger. “You know how careful we are, Setalle. You know more than you should, and you surely know that.”

“I am very sorry, Reanne,” Mistress Anan answered stiffly. “I suppose I didn’t think. I ... submit myself, both to stand surety for these girls’ behaviour and to your judgment.”

“Of course not!” Reanne’s tone was high with shock, now. “That is to say ... I mean, you shouldn’t have, but ... Setalle, I apologize for raising my voice. Say you forgive me.”

“You have no reason to apologize, Reanne.” The innkeeper managed to sound rueful and reluctant at the same time. “I did wrong to bring them.”

“No, no, Setalle. I shouldn’t have spoken to you so. Please, you must forgive me. Please do.” The Anan woman and Reanne Corly entered the sitting room, and Nynaeve blinked in surprise

From the exchange, she had expected someone younger than Setalle Anan, but Reanne had hair more grey than not and a face full of what might have been smile lines, though they were creased in worry now. Why would the older woman humble herself so to the younger, and why would the younger allow it, however halfheartedly? Customs were different here, the Light knew, some more different than she liked to think about, yet not this much, surely. Of course, she had never gone very far toward being humble with the Women’s Circle back home, but this ...

Of course, Reanne could channel—she had expected that; hoped for it, anyway—but she had not expected the strength. Reanne was not as strong as Elayne, but she easily equalled Sheriam, say. Not many women possessed so much strength, and for all she herself bettered it by a fair margin, she was surprised to find it here. The woman must be one of the wilders; the Tower would have found a way to keep its hands on a woman like this if they had to hold her in a Novice dress her whole life.

Nynaeve rose as they came through the doorway, smoothing her skirts. Not from nervousness, certainly; certainly not. Oh, but if only this came out right ...

Reanne’s sharp blue eyes studied the two of them with the air of someone who had just found a pair of pigs in her kitchen, fresh from the sty and dripping mud. She dabbed at her face with a tiny handkerchief, though the interior of the house was cooler than outside. “I suppose we’ll have to do something with them,” she murmured, “if they are what they claim.” Her voice was quite high even now, musical and almost youthful. As she finished speaking she gave a small start for some reason and eyed the innkeeper sideways, which set off another round of Mistress Anan’s reluctant apologies and Mistress Corly’s flustered attempts to deflect them. In Ebou Dar, when folk were truly being polite, apologies back and forth could flow for an hour.

Elayne had risen, too, wearing a slightly fixed smile. She raised an eyebrow at Nynaeve, cupped her elbow in one hand and laid a finger against her cheek.

Nynaeve cleared her throat. "Mistress Corly, my name is Nynaeve al'Meara, and this is Elayne Trakand. We are looking for—"

"Setalle has told me all about you," the blue-eyed woman cut in ominously. However many grey hairs on her head, Nynaeve suspected she was also hard as a stone fence. "Abide with patience, girl, and I'll deal with you directly." She turned back to Setalle, blotting her cheeks with the handkerchief. Barely suppressed diffidence once more tinged her voice. "Setalle, if you will please excuse me, I must question these girls, and—"

"Look who is returned after all these years," a short, stout woman in her middle years blurted as she barged into the room, nodding at her companion. Despite her red-belted Ebou Dari dress and a tanned face that glistened damply, her accents were pure Cairhienin. Her equally sweaty companion, in the dark, plainly cut woollens of a merchant, was a head taller, no older than Nynaeve, with dark tilted eyes, a strongly hooked nose, and a wide mouth. "It's Garenia! She—" The flow of words terminated abruptly in confusion as the stout woman realized others were present.

Reanne clasped her hands as if in prayer, or perhaps because she wanted to hit someone. "Berowin," she said with an edge, "one day you will run right off a cliff before you see it under your feet."

"I am sorry, Eld—" Blushing, the Cairhienin lowered her eyes. The Saldaean became intent on fiddling with a circle of red stones pinned at her breast.

For Nynaeve's part, she gave Elayne a triumphant look. Both newcomers could channel, and *saidar* was still being wielded somewhere in the house. Two more, and while Berowin was not very strong, Garenia stood even above Reanne; she could match Elaida or Moiraine. Not that that mattered, of course, yet this made at least five. Elayne's chin set stubbornly, but then she sighed and gave a small nod. Sometimes it took the most incredible effort to convince her of anything.

"Your name is Garenia?" Mistress Anan said slowly, frowning at the woman in question. "You look very much like someone I met once. Zarya Alkaese."

Dark tilted eyes blinked in surprise. Plucking a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her sleeve, the Saldaean merchant touched her cheeks. "That is my grandmother's sister's name," she said after a moment. "I'm told I favour her strongly. Was she well when you saw her? She forgot her family completely after she went off to become Aes Sedai."

"Your grandmother's sister." The innkeeper laughed softly. "Of course. She was well when I saw her, but that was a long time ago. I was younger than you are now."

Reanne had been hovering at her side, all but grabbing her elbow, and now she leaped in. "Setalle, I truly am sorry, but I really must ask you to excuse us. You will forgive me not showing you to the door?"

Mistress Anan made her own apologies, as if she was at fault because the other woman could not escort her down, and departed with a last, very dubious look at Nynaeve and Elayne.

"Setalle!" Garenia exclaimed as soon as the innkeeper was gone. "That was Setalle Anan? How did she—? Light of Heaven! Even after seventy years, the Tower would—"

"Garenia," Mistress Corly said in an extremely sharp tone. Her stare was sharper still, and the Saldaean's face reddened. "Since you two are here, we can make up the three for questioning. You girls stay where you are and keep silent." That last was for Nynaeve and Elayne. The other women withdrew to a corner in a huddle and began conversing in soft murmurs.

Elayne moved nearer Nynaeve. "I did not like being treated as a Novice when I was a Novice. How long do you intend to continue this farce?"

Nynaeve hissed at her for quiet. "I'm trying to listen, Elayne," she whispered.

Using the Power was out of the question, of course. The three would have known on the instant. Fortunately, their voices rose just enough.

"... said they may be wilders," Reanne said, and shock and revulsion bloomed on the other women's faces.

"Then we show them the door," Berowin said. "The back door. Wilders!"

"I still want to know who this Setalle Anan is," Garenia put in.

"If you can't keep your mind on the straight," Reanne told her, "perhaps you should spend this turn on the farm. Alise knows how to concentrate a mind wonderfully. Now ..." The words dropped back to a buzz.

Another maid appeared, a slender woman, pretty except for a sullen expression, with a rough grey woollen dress and a long white apron. Setting a green-lacquered tray on one of the small tables, she surreptitiously wiped her cheeks with a corner of her apron and began fussing with blue-glazed cups and a matching teapot. Nynaeve's eyebrows rose. This woman could channel, too, if not to any high degree. What was she doing as a servant?

Garenia glanced over her shoulder, and gave a start. "What did Derys do to earn penance? I thought fish would sing the day she cracked a rule, much less broke one."

Berowin sniffed loudly, but her reply was barely audible. "She wanted to marry. She will advance a turn and go with Keraille the day after the Feast of the Half Moon. That will settle for Master Denal."

"Perhaps you both wish to hoe the fields for Alise?" Reanne spoke dryly, and the voices fell again.

Nynaeve felt a rush of exultation. She did not care much for rules, at least for other people's rules—other people rarely saw the situation as clearly as she, and thus made stupid rules; why should that woman, Derys, not marry if she wished, for example?—but rules and penances spoke of a society. She was right. And another thing. She nudged Elayne until the other woman bent her head.

"Berowin's wearing a red belt," she whispered. That indicated a Wise Woman, one of Ebou Dar's fabled healers, their care known far and wide as the next best to being Healed by an Aes Sedai, curing just about anything. Supposedly it was all done with herbs and knowledge, but ... "How many Wise Women have we seen, Elayne? How many could channel? How many were Ebou Dari, or even Altaran?"

"Seven, counting Berowin" was the slow answer, "and only one I was sure was from here." Hah! The others plainly had not been. Elayne took a deep breath, though she went on softly. "*None* had anywhere near these women's strength, though." At least she had not suggested they were mistaken somehow; all of those Wise Women had been able. "Nynaeve, are you really suggesting that the Wise Women ... all the Wise Women ... are ...? That would be *beyond* incredible."

"Elayne, this city has a guild for the men who sweep the squares every night! I think we've just found the Ancient Muckety-muck Sisterhood of Wise Women."

The stubborn woman shook her head. "The Tower would have had a hundred sisters here years ago, Nynaeve. Two hundred. Anything of the sort would have been squashed flat in short order."

"Maybe the Tower doesn't know," Nynaeve said. "Maybe the guild keeps low enough that the Tower never thought they were worth troubling. There's no law against channelling if you aren't Aes Sedai, only against claiming to be Aes Sedai, or misusing the Power. Or bringing discredit." That meant doing anything that might possibly cast a bad light on real Aes Sedai, should anyone happen to think you were one, which was going pretty far, to her way of thinking. The real trouble, though, was that she did not believe it. The Tower seemed to know everything, and they probably would break up a quilting circle if the women in it could channel. Yet there had to be some explanation for ... Only half-aware, she felt the True Source being embraced, but suddenly she became very aware. Her mouth fell open as a flow of Air snared her braid right at the base of her skull and ran her across the room on her toes. Elayne ran right beside her, red-faced with fury. The worst of it was, they were both shielded.

The short run ended when they were allowed to settle their heels in front of Mistress Corly and the other two, all three seated against the wall in red chairs, all surrounded by the glow of *saidar*.

"You were told to be quiet," Reanne said firmly. "If we decide to help you, you will have to learn that we expect strict obedience no less than the White Tower itself." She imbued those last words with a tone of reverence. "I will tell you that you would have been treated more gently if you had not come to us in this irregular fashion." The flow gripping Nynaeve's braid vanished. Elayne tossed her head angrily as she was released.

Appalled astonishment became fiery outrage as Nynaeve realized that Berowin held her shield. Most Aes Sedai she had met stood above Berowin; nearly all. Gathering herself, she strained to reach the Source, expecting the weaves to shatter. She would at least show these women she would not be ... The weaves ... stretched. The round Cairhienin woman smiled, and Nynaeve's face darkened. The shield stretched further, further, bulging like a ball. It would not break. That was impossible. Anyone could block her from the Source if they caught her by surprise, of course, and someone weaker could hold the shield once woven, but not *this* much weaker. And a shield did not bend that far without breaking. It was impossible!

"You could burst a blood vessel if you keep at that," Berowin said, almost companionably. "We do not try to reach above our station, but skills are honed with time, and this was always nearly a Talent with me. I could hold one of the Forsaken."

Scowling, Nynaeve gave over. She could wait. Since she had no choice, she could.

Derys came bearing her tray, distributing cups of dark tea. To the three seated women. She never so much as glanced at Nynaeve or Elayne before making a perfect curtsy and returning to her table.

"We could have been drinking blueberry tea with the others, Nynaeve," Elayne said, shooting such a look at her that she came close to stepping back. Maybe it would be best not to wait too long.

"Be quiet, girl." Mistress Corly's tone might be calm, but she patted her handkerchief to her face angrily. "Our report of you says you both are foward and contentious, that you chase after men and lie. To which I add that you cannot follow simple instructions. All of which must change if you seek our help. All of it. This is most irregular. Be grateful we're willing to speak to you."

"We do seek your help," Nynaeve said. She wished Elayne would stop glaring so. It was worse than the Corly woman's hard stare. Well, as bad, anyway.

Reanne Corly broke in as if she had been standing there silent. "Usually, we know the girls brought to us beforehand, but we must make certain you are what you say. How many doors to the Tower Library may a Novice use, and which?" She took a sip of tea, waiting.

"Two." The word dripped venom from Elayne's mouth. "The main door to the east, when a sister sends her, or the small door at the southwest corner, called the Novice Door, when she goes for herself. How long, Nynaeve?"

Garenia, who held Elayne's shield, channelled another slender flow of Air, not gently. Elayne quivered, then again, and Nynaeve winced, wondering that she did not grab at the back of her skirt. "A civil tongue is another requirement," Garenia murmured wryly into her cup.

"That is the right answer," Mistress Corly said, as if nothing else had happened. Although she did eye the Saldaean woman briefly over her tea. "Now, how many bridges in the Water Garden?"

"Three," Nynaeve snapped, mainly because she knew. She had not known about the library, having never been a Novice. "We need to know—" Berowin could not spare anything to channel a flow of Air, but Mistress Corly could, and did. Barely keeping her face smooth, Nynaeve knotted her hands in her skirts to hold them still. Elayne had the gall to give her a small, chilly smile. Chilly, but satisfied.

A dozen more questions hammered at them, from how many floors the Novice quarters contained—twelve—to under what circumstances a Novice was allowed into the Hall of the Tower—to carry messages or to be expelled from the Tower for a crime; no others—hammered without Nynaeve getting in more than two words, and those two answered silently by the horrible Corly woman. She began to feel like a Novice in the Hall; they were not allowed to speak a word either. That was one of the few answers she knew, but luckily Elayne responded promptly when she did not. Nynaeve might have done better had they asked about Accepted, a little better at least, but it was what a Novice should know that interested them. She was just glad Elayne was willing to go along, though by her pale cheeks and raised chin, that could not last much longer.

"I suppose Nynaeve was really there," Reanne said finally, exchanging glances with the other two. "If Elayne taught her to pass, I think she would have done a better job. Some people live in perpetual fog." Garenia sniffed, then nodded slowly. Berowin's nod came entirely too promptly for Nynaeve's liking.

"I think your guild, your Circle, could help us," she managed to choke out, though she was far from certain she wanted their help anymore. Three suddenly stony faces stared at her.

"There is no *guild*," Mistress Corly said coolly, "only a few friends who found no place in the White Tower ..." Again, that reverential tone. "... and who are foolish enough occasionally to reach out a hand where it's needed. We do not teach vain girls to channel. We have no truck with *ter'angreal*, or *angreal*, or *sa'angreal* either. We are not Aes Sedai." "Aes Sedai" echoed with veneration as well. "In any case, you are not here to ask questions. We have more for you, to see how far you've gone, after which you will be taken to the country and given into the care of a friend. She will keep you until we decide what to do next. Until we can be sure the sisters are not looking for you. You have a new life ahead of you, a new chance, if you can only let yourself see it. Whatever held

you back in the Tower does not apply here, whether a lack of dexterity or fear or anything else. No-one will push you to learn or do what you cannot. What you are is sufficient. Now."

"Enough," Elayne said in a wintery voice. "Long enough, Nynaeve. Or do you intend to wait in the country for however long? They cannot help, Nynaeve." Removing her Great Serpent ring from her belt pouch, she thrust the circle of gold onto her finger. From the way she looked at the seated women, no-one would believe her shielded. She was a queen out of patience. She was Aes Sedai to her hair was what she was. "I am Elayne Trakand, High Seat of House Trakand. I am Daughter-Heir of Andor and Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah, and I demand you release me immediately." Nynaeve groaned.

Garenia grimaced with disgust, and Berowin's eyes widened in horror. Reanne Corly shook her head ruefully, but when she spoke, her voice was iron. "I had hoped Setalle had changed your mind concerning that particular lie. I know how hard it is, to set out proudly for the White Tower then find yourself faced with returning home to admit failure. But that is never said, even in joke!"

"I made no joke," Elayne said lightly. Snow was light.

Garenia leaned forward with a scowl, a flow of Air already forming until Mistress Corly raised her hand. "And you, Nynaeve? Do you persist in this ... madness, too?"

Nynaeve filled her lungs. "Nynaeve!" Elayne said peevishly. She was not going to let her forget this even if they did have to effect an escape. She had a way of harping on every little misstep in a manner that cut the ground right from under your feet.

"I am an Aes Sedai of the Yellow Ajah," Nynaeve said wearily.

Mistress Corly motioned for Derys, who came and took the cups, casting fearful, wide-eyed looks at Nynaeve and Elayne. When she scurried away, out of the room in fact, the three women stood slowly, standing like grim magistrates pronouncing sentence.

"I regret that you will not accept our help," Mistress Corly said coldly. "I regret this whole affair." Reaching into her pouch, she pressed three silver marks into Nynaeve's hand and another three into Elayne's. "These will take you a little way. You can also get something for those dresses, I should think, if not what you paid. Those are hardly suitable garments for a journey. By tomorrow sunrise, you will be gone from Ebou Dar."

"We aren't going anywhere," Nynaeve told her. "Please, if you know of any troubles in the Tower—" She might as well have kept silent. The measured flow of words did not slow.

"At that time we will begin circulating your descriptions, and we will make certain they reach the sisters in the Tarasin Palace. If you are seen after sunrise, we will see that the sisters know where you are, and the Whitecloaks as well. Your choice then will be to run, surrender to the sisters, or die. Go, do not return, and you should live long if you give over this repulsive and dangerous ruse. We are done with you. Berowin, see to them, please." Brushing between them, she went from the room without looking back.

Sullenly, Nynaeve let herself be herded down to the front door. A struggle would not achieve anything except maybe being thrown out bodily, but she did not like giving up. Light, she did not! Elayne marched, frozen determination to leave and be done shining in every line of her.

"The blindest are those who keep their eyes shut," Elayne quoted, not quite under her breath, when they arrived in the small entry hall.

Garenia put her face right in Elayne's. "Do you think we're fools, girl? I'll tell you this. If I had my way, we would bundle you out to the farm no matter what you say. A few months of Alise's attentions, and you'd learn to guard your tongue and be grateful for the help you spit on." Nynaeve considered hitting her on the nose; she did not need *saidar* to use her fist. She wasn't about to tolerate anyone threatening Elayne.

"Garenia," Berowin said sharply. "Apologize! We do not hold anyone against her will, and you know it well. Apologize immediately!"

And wonder of wonders, the woman who would have stood very close to the top had she been Aes Sedai looked sideways at the woman who would have stood near the bottom, and blushed crimson. "I ask forgiveness," Garenia mumbled at Elayne. "My temper gets the better of me sometimes, and I say what I have no right to. I humbly ask forgiveness." Another side-long glance a Berowin, who nodded, producing a sigh of open relief.

While Nynaeve was still gaping, the shields were released, and she and Elayne were pushed into the street, the door slamming shut behind them.

## CHAPTER 38: *The Kin*



*Incredible*, Reanne thought, watching from a window as the two strange girls vanished down the street among the tradesmen and beggars and occasional sedan chairs. She had returned to the meeting room as soon as the pair was escorted from it. She did not know what to make of them, and their persistent claims in the face of all reason were only part of her confusion.

She would have arranged for the news to reach the Tarasin Palace in the next hour if she had not given her word. And if not for the danger. Fear bubbled in her middle, the same panic that had overtaken her after one passage through the silver arches when she went to test for Accepted. Just as she had every time it had stirred in the years since, she took a fresh grip on herself; in truth, she did not realize that the fear she might run screaming again had long since conquered any possibility that she would. She prayed that those girls would abandon their insanity. She prayed that if they did not, they were caught far from Ebou Dar and either kept silent or were not believed. Precautions would have to be taken, safeguards carried out that had not been used in years. Aes Sedai were as near omnipotent as made no difference, though. That, she knew in her bones.

"Eldest, could it be possible that the older of the two really is ...? We channelled, and ..." Berowin trailed off miserably, but Reanne did not need to consider, not even setting aside the younger girl. Why would any Aes Sedai pretend to be less, so much less? Besides, any real Aes Sedai would have put them all on their knees begging mercy, not stood there so submissively.

"We did not channel in front of an Aes Sedai," she said firmly. "We broke no rule." Those rules applied to her as strictly as anyone else; the very first was that they were all one, even those set above for a time. How could it have been otherwise, when those who were above must eventually step down? Only through movement and change could they remain hidden.

"But some of the rumours do mention troubles in the Tower—"

"Rebels." Reanne put into that all the outraged disbelief she felt. That anyone should dare to rebel against the White Tower! It was hardly strange for unbelievable tales to attach to anyone like that. "Whatever the truth, Garenia, it is not our place to criticize anything Aes Sedai might do." Reanne's mouth tightened. That hardly squared with what she felt toward the rebels.

The Saldaean bent her neck in acquiescence, though, and perhaps to hide the sullen twist of her mouth. Reanne sighed. She herself had given up dreams of the Green Ajah long long ago, but there were those like Berowin who believed, secretly they thought, that somehow they might one day return to the White Tower, somehow yet become Aes Sedai. And then there were women like Garenia, almost as poor at keeping their wishes secret, though those wishes were ten times as forbidden. They actually would have accepted wilders, and even gone out to find girls who could be taught!

Garenia was not done; she always skirted the edges of discipline, and frequently stepped over. "What of this Setalle Anan, then? Those girls know about the Circle. The Anan woman must have told them, though how she knows ..." She shuddered in a way that would have been entirely too ostentatious for most others, but she had never been able to conceal her emotions. Even when she should. "Whoever betrayed us to her must be found, and her betrayal punished, too. She's an innkeeper, and she must be taught to guard her tongue!" Berowin gasped, wide-eyed with shock, and dropped into a chair so hard she nearly bounced.

"Remember who she is, Garenia," Reanne said sharply. "If Setalle had betrayed us, we would be crawling to Tar Valon, begging forgiveness the whole way." When she first came to Ebou Dar, she had been told the story of a woman made to crawl to the White Tower, and nothing she had seen since of Aes Sedai made her question it in the least. "She has kept the few secrets she knows from gratitude, and I doubt that has faded. She would have died in her first childbirth if the Kin had not helped her. What she knows comes from careless tongues, when it was thought she could not hear, and the owners of those tongues were punished more than twenty years ago." Still, she wished there was some way she could bring herself to ask Setalle to be more circumspect. She must have spoken carelessly in front of those girls.

The woman bowed her head again, but her mouth was set stubbornly. At least part of this turn, Reanne decided, Garenia would spend at the retreat, and she would have special instructions to relay with her own stubborn mouth. Alise seldom required more than a week to make a woman decide stubbornness did not pay.

Before she could inform Garenia, though, Derys was curtsying in the doorway, announcing Sarinya Vostovan. As usual, Sarinya swept right in before Reanne could say to admit her. In some ways, the strikingly handsome woman made Garenia appear supple, despite keeping the form of every rule exactly. Reanne was sure she would have worn her hair in braids and bells given the choice, and never mind how that would have looked with her red belt. But then, given the choice she would not have served even one turn with the belt.

Sarinya did curtsy at the door, of course, and kneel before her, head lowered, but fifty years had not made her forget that she would have been a woman of considerable power had she been able to make herself return home to Arafel. Curtsy and the rest all were concessions. When she spoke, in that husky, forceful voice, whether the woman would ever reconcile herself and the problem of Garenia left Reanne's mind!

"Callie is dead, Eldest Sister. Her throat was cut and she apparently had been robbed even of her stockings, but Sumeko says that it was the One Power killed her."

"That is impossible!" Berowin burst out. "No Kinswoman would do such a thing!"

"An Aes Sedai?" Garenia said, hesitant for once. "But how? The Three Oaths. Sumeko must be wrong."

Reanne raised a hand for silence. Sumeko was never wrong, not in this area. She would have been Yellow Ajah had she not broken down completely while testing for the shawl, and although it was forbidden, despite countless penances, she worked to learn more whenever she thought no-one was watching. No Aes Sedai could have done this, obviously, and no Kinswoman would have, but ... Those girls, so insistent, knowing what they should not. The Circle had lasted too long offered succour to too many women, to be destroyed now.

"This is what must be done," she told them. That flutter of fear began again, but for once she hardly noticed.

\* \* \*

Nynaeve stalked away from the small house in outrage. It was incredible! Those women did have a guild; she knew they did!

*I could have been as acquiescent as they wanted, if they'd only been willing to help, she thought irritably. They'd have thought I was a pliable old slipper! I could have ... That was a lie, and it did not take a foul, remembered taste to convince her. Given half a chance, she would have shaken every one of those women till they told her what she wanted to know. She would have given them Aes Sedai till they squeaked!*

She scowled sideways at Elayne. The other woman seemed lost in thought. Nynaeve wished she did not know what the woman was thinking about. A wasted morning, and not far short of complete humiliation. She did not like being in the wrong. She was not used to admitting she was. And now she was going to have to apologize to Elayne. She *truly* hated apologizing. Well, it would be bad enough back in their rooms. With the other women still out, it was to be hoped. She was not about to begin in the street, with who knew who streaming by. The throng had thickened, though the sun hardly seemed much higher through the wheeling clouds of seabirds that cried overhead.

Finding their way was not easy, after all those twists and turns. Nynaeve had to ask directions half a dozen times, while Elayne stared in another direction, pretending indifference. She stalked along across bridges, ducked around wagons and carts, jumped out of the way of racing sedan chairs that wove through the crowds, wished Elayne would say something. Nynaeve knew how to nurse a grudge, and the longer she herself kept silent, the worse it was when she spoke, so the longer Elayne walked without speaking, the darker became the image in her mind of how it was going to be back in their rooms. That made her furious. She had admitted she was wrong, if only to herself. Elayne had no right to make her suffer this way. She began wearing such a face that even people who did not notice their rings gave them a clear path. People who did notice usually seemed to find an urgent need to be a street away. Even some sedan-chair bearers skirted around her.

"How old did Reanne look to you?" Elayne asked suddenly. Nynaeve nearly jumped. They were almost back to Mol Hara.

"Fifty years. Maybe sixty. I don't see it matters." She ran her eyes over the crowd to see if anyone was close enough to hear. A passing hawker, her tray displaying a bitter little yellow fruit called a lemon, tried to swallow her cry in midshout when Nynaeve's gaze rested on her for a moment, with the result that she doubled over her tray coughing and choking. Nynaeve sniffed. The woman probably had been eavesdropping, if not planning to cut a purse. "They *are* a guild, Elayne. I just know they are." That was not what she had intended to say at all. If she apologized for dragging Elayne into this now, maybe it would not be so bad.

"I suppose they are," Elayne said absently. "How is it that she can have aged so?"

Nynaeve stopped dead in the middle street. After all that arguing, after getting them thrown out, she *supposed*? "Well, I suppose she aged the same way as the rest of us, a day at a time. Elayne, if you believed, why did you announce who you were like Rhiannon at the Tower?" She rather liked that; according to the story, what Queen Rhiannon got was far from what she had wanted.

The question did not seem to register with Elayne, for all her education. She pulled Nynaeve to one side as a curtained green carriage rumbled past—the street was not very wide there—over to the front of a seamstress's shop with a wide doorway showing several dressmaker's forms clothed in half-done dresses.

"They were not going to tell us anything, Nynaeve, not if you got down on your knees and begged. I do not know that they even had anything to tell, really, not concerning our current dilemma." Nynaeve opened her mouth indignantly, then snapped it shut. She had never said anything about begging. Anyway, why should she have been the only one? Elayne had a fly up her nose, though, and was not to be distracted. "Nynaeve, she must have slowed like everyone else. How old is she, to look fifty or sixty?"

"What are you talking about?" Without thinking Nynaeve noted the location in a corner of her mind; the seamstress's work looked quite good, worth closer examination. "She probably doesn't channel any more than she can help, afraid as she is of being mistaken for a sister. She wouldn't have wanted her face too smooth, after all."

"You never listened in class, did you?" Elayne murmured. She saw the plump seamstress beaming in the doorway, and drew Nynaeve toward the corner of the building. Considering the amount of lace the seamstress wore on her own dress, the bodice buried in it and paces of it drooping over her exposed petticoats, she would bear close watching if Nynaeve did order anything. "Forget clothes for one moment, Nynaeve. Who is the oldest Accepted you remember?"

She gave Elayne a very level look. The woman made it sound as if she never thought of anything else! And she had too listened. Sometimes. "Elin Warrel, I think. She's a few years older than me." Of course, the seamstress's own dress would look fine with a more modest neckline and much less lace. In green silk. Lan liked green, though she certainly was not going to choose her dresses for him. He liked blue, as well.

Elayne barked such a laugh that Nynaeve wondered whether she had spoken aloud. Colouring fiercely, she tried to explain—she was sure she could; by Bel Tine—but the other woman gave her no opportunity for a word. "Elin's sister came to visit her just before you first arrived at the Tower, Nynaeve. Her *younger* sister. The woman had grey hair. Well, some of it was. She must have been over forty, Nynaeve."

Elin Warrel was past forty? But ...! "What are you saying, Elayne?"

No-one was close enough to listen, and no-one seemed to be giving them a second glance except the still hopeful seamstress, but Elayne lowered her voice to a whisper. "We *slow*, Nynaeve. Somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, we begin aging more slowly. How much depends on how strong we are, but when doesn't. Any woman who can channel does it. Takima said she thought it was the beginning of achieving the ageless look, though I don't think anyone has ever reached that until they've worn the shawl at *least* a year or two, sometimes five or more. Think. You *know* any sister with grey hair is *old*, even if you aren't supposed to mention it. So if Reanne slowed, and she must have, how old is she?"

Nynaeve did not care how old Reanne was. She wanted to cry. No wonder everyone refused to believe her age. It explained why the Women's Circle back home had looked over her shoulder as

if unsure she was old enough to be trusted fully. Achieving a sister's ageless face was all very well, but how long before she had her grey hairs?

Blinking, she turned away angrily. And something struck her a glancing blow on the back of the head. Staggering, she rounded on Elayne in astonishment. Why had the woman hit her? Only, Elayne lay in a heap, eyes closed and a nasty purple lump rising on her temple. Groggily, Nynaeve fell to her knees and gathered her friend into her arms.

"Your friend must be taken ill," a long nosed woman said, kneeling beside them, careless of a yellow dress that showed far too much bosom even by Ebou Dari standards. "Let me help."

A tall fellow, handsome in his embroidered silk vest except for a rather oily grin, bent to take Nynaeve's shoulders. "Here, I have a carriage. We'll take you somewhere more comfortable than a paving stone."

"Go away," Nynaeve told them politely. "We don't need your help."

The man kept trying to raise her to her feet, though, to guide her toward a red carriage, where a startled-appearing woman in blue beckoned vigorously. The long-nosed woman actually tried to lift Elayne, thanking the man for his help and chattering how his carriage sounded a fine idea. A crowd of onlookers seemed to have gathered out of air in a semicircle, women murmuring sympathy about fainting from the heat, men offering to help carry the ladies. A scrawny fellow, bold as you please, reached for Nynaeve's purse almost right under her nose.

Her head still swam enough to make embracing *saidar* difficult, but if all those nattering folk had not fuelled her temper, what she saw lying in the street would have. An arrow with a blunt stone head. The one that had grazed her or the one that had struck Elayne. She channelled, and the scrawny cutpurse doubled over, clutching himself and squealing like a pig in briars. Another flow, and the long-nosed woman fell over backward with a shriek twice as high. The man in the silk vest apparently decided they did not need his help after all, because he turned and ran for the carriage, but she gave him a dose anyway. He out-bellowed any outraged bull as the woman in the carriage hauled him in by his vest.

"Thank you, but we don't need any help," Nynaeve shouted. Politely.

Few remained to hear. Once it became clear that the One Power was being used—and folk suddenly leaping about and yelling for no visible cause made it clear enough to most—they hurried elsewhere. The long-nosed woman gathered herself up and actually jumped onto the back of the red carriage, clinging precariously as the dark-vested driver whipped the horses away through the crowd, people leaping aside. Even the cutpurse hobbled off as fast as he could.

Nynaeve could not have cared less had the earth opened and swallowed the whole lot. Chest aching, she ran fine flows of Wind and Water, Earth, Fire and Spirit mixed and blended, through Elayne. It was a simple weave, no bother despite her faint dizziness, and the result let her breathe again. The bruise was not serious; the bones of Elayne's skull were unbroken. Normally, she would have redirected those same flows into much more complex weaves, the Healing she had discovered herself. At the moment, simpler weaves were all she could manage, though. With just Spirit, Wind and Water, she wove the Healing that Yellows had used since time immemorial.

Elayne's eyes shot open wide, and with a gasp that seemed to take all the air in her, she convulsed like a netted trout, slipped heels drumming on the pavement. That only lasted a moment, of course, but in that moment the bruise shrank and vanished.

Nynaeve helped her to her feet—and a woman's hand appeared, holding a pewter cup full of water. "Even an Aes Sedai might be thirsty after that," the seamstress said.

Elayne reached for it, but Nynaeve laid fingers on her wrist. "No, thank you." The woman shrugged, and as she turned away, Nynaeve added in a different tone, "Thank you." It seemed to come easier the more you said it; she was not sure she liked that.

That ocean of lace heaved as the seamstress shrugged again. "I make dresses for anyone. I can do better for your colouring than that." She vanished back into her shop. Nynaeve frowned after her.

"What happened?" Elayne demanded. "Why wouldn't you let me take a drink? I'm thirsty and hungry."

With a last frown for the seamstress, Nynaeve bent to pick up the arrow.

The other woman needed no explanations. *Saidar* shone around her in a flash. "Liandrin?"

Nynaeve shook her head; the slight wooziness seemed to be fading. She did not think the Black Ajah would have hired such bumbling footpads. She did not think so. "What about Reanne?"

she said quietly. The seamstress was back in the doorway, still hopeful. “She might want to make sure we leave. Or worse, maybe Garenia.” That was almost as chilling as Liandrin. And twice as infuriating.

Somehow Elayne managed to look pretty while scowling. “Whoever it was, we will settle them. You’ll see.” The scowl faded. “Nynaeve, if the Circle can’t or won’t answer our questions ...” She bit her lip, hesitating. “I only know one way we can learn the truth. We will have to go to the sisters in the Tarasin Palace.”

Nynaeve nodded slowly, though she would rather have eaten a handful of dirt. Today had seemed so bright for a time, but then it had spiralled into darkness, from Reanne to ... Oh, Light, how long before she had her grey hair?

“Maybe we’ll have to.”

“Maybe? If the Circle make good on their threats, and that horrible Anan woman throws us out of the inn, we will have to either flee the city or seek shelter with the Queen and her advisor. Would you rather leave? I shall not object, though it raises the question of our destination. Tear or Caemlyn could offer us sure shelter, if Tar Valon no longer does.”

Nynaeve set her jaw. “I don’t want to blunder into the palace, not knowing if the Aes Sedai there is an enemy or not. And there might still be a way we can find out what’s going on without their help. Tonight’s a meeting night, after all.”

Elayne glanced at the sky and grimaced against more than its brightness. “The Wandering Woman will not give us shelter, I fear.”

“No doubt. Horrible tyrant of an innkeeper. Marin al’Vere was ten times the woman. But then, she was a Therener.” Ignoring Elayne’s odd expression, she pressed on. “We can get a room elsewhere for the night. There has to be at least one innkeeper in this city that isn’t in the Anan woman’s pocket.”

“I wonder. The guilds here have a fair amount of influence,” Elayne said. They set off for The Wandering Woman and the allies they hoped to find there. Both women kept a wary eye on the crowds they passed through. “Still. Word spreads slowly. We should be able to find lodgings for at least one more night. Enough to see what the Wise Ones can do for us.”

Nynaeve sighed heavily. “Aes Sedai, the Circle, and the Wise Ones. Pick your poison.”

## CHAPTER 39: What Can Be Learned in Dreams



Hard and scratchy as the bed was, it proved easy enough for Nynaeve to fall asleep. This was helped by the blissful relaxation Elayne left her in. Annoying as the girl could be, she did have a strong sense of fair play. Calling Nynaeve her hero for driving off a few thugs was foolishly dramatic, of course—Nynaeve was no hero, she just took care of her people—but it had been nice to hear. Nicer still was the way she’d put her head between Nynaeve’s thighs, and the things she’d done while down there. As often as she’d done it, there was still something deliciously naughty about holding the Daughter-Heir of Andor by the curls and pulling her face against her tender sex.

But that was done with now, and Nynaeve knew better than to let such thoughts linger in her mind while in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Bad enough that she was wearing a clingy Taraboner dress. The high neck trimmed in Jaerecruz lace came right up under her chin, but pale yellow silk draped her in folds that clung revealingly. How many times had she called Taraboner gowns like this indecent when she had worn them to blend into Tanchico? It seemed that she had grown more used to them than she knew.

The effects of the ring *ter’angreal* did not startle Nynaeve anymore. She was in the place she had been thinking of when sleep closed in, the great chamber in Tear called the Heart of the Stone, within the massive fortress called the Stone of Tear. The gilded stand-lamps were unlit, but pale light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, to simply be all around her, fading into dim shadows in the distance. At least it was not hot; it never seemed hot or cold in *Tel’aran’rhiod*.

Huge redstone columns ran off in every direction, the vaulted dome far above lost in dim shadows along with more golden lamps hanging on golden chains. The pale floorstones beneath her feet were worn; the High Nobles of Tear had come to this chamber—in the waking world, of course—only when their law and custom demanded, but they had come ever since the Breaking of the World. Centred beneath the dome was *Callandor*, apparently a glittering sword made of crystal, driven half its length into the stone of the floor. Just as Rand had left it.

She did not go near *Callandor*. Rand claimed to have woven traps around it with *saidin*, traps that no woman could see. She expected they would be nasty—the best of men could be vicious when they tried to be devious—nasty and just as primed for a woman as for the men who might use that *sa’angreal*. He had meant to guard it against those in the Tower as much as the Forsaken. Aside from Rand himself, the one who touched *Callandor* might die or worse.

Giving her braid a sharp pull for the waywardness of her own mind, she left the dress as it was. The gown might not be as she wanted, but she was no flighty girl to go leaping and squealing over it. *A dress is a dress*. She would wear it when Rand arrived, with whichever of the Wise Ones accompanied him this time, and if any of them said a word ... *I did not come early to blather at myself about dresses!*

“Birgitte?” Silence answered her, and she raised her voice, though it should not have been necessary. In this place, this particular woman could hear her own name spoken on the other side of the world. “Birgitte?”

A woman stepped out from among the columns, blue eyes calm and proudly confident, her golden hair in a long braid more intricate than Nynaeve’s own. Her short white coat and voluminous yellow silk trousers, gathered at the ankles above short boots with raised heels, were garments of more than two thousand years ago that she had taken a liking to. The arrows in the quiver at her side appeared to be silver, and so did the bow she carried.

“Is Gaidal about?” Nynaeve asked. He was usually close by Birgitte, and he made Nynaeve nervous, refusing to acknowledge her existence, scowling when Birgitte spoke to her. It had been something of a shock at first to find Gaidal Cain and Birgitte—long-dead heroes linked in so many stories and legends—in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. But, as Birgitte herself had said, where better for heroes bound to the Wheel of Time to await rebirth than in a dream? A dream that had existed as long as the Wheel. It was they, Birgitte and Gaidal Cain and Rogosh Eagle-eye and Artur Hawkwing and all the others, that the Horn of Valere would summon back to fight at Tarmon Gai’don.

Birgitte's braid swung as she shook her head. "I have not seen him for some time. I think the Wheel has spun him out again. It always happens so." Expectation and concern both touched her voice.

If Birgitte was right, then somewhere in the world a boychild had been born, a mewling babe with no knowledge of who he was, yet destined for adventures that would make new legends. The Wheel wove the Heroes into the Pattern as they were needed, to shape the Pattern, and when they died they returned here to wait again. That was what it meant to be bound to the Wheel. New heroes could find themselves bound so as well, men and women whose bravery and accomplishments raised them far above the ordinary, but once bound, it was forever.

"How long do you have?" Nynaeve asked. "Years yet, surely." Birgitte was always tied to Gaidal, had been tied in story after story, in Age after Age, of adventure and a romance that even the Wheel of Time did not break. She was always born after Gaidal; a year, or five, or ten, but after.

"I do not know, Nynaeve. Time here is not like time in the waking world. I met you here last ten days gone, as it seems to me, and Elayne only a day before. What was it for you?"

"Four days and three," Nynaeve muttered. She and Elayne had been coming to speak with Birgitte as often as they could. Birgitte actually remembered the War of Power, one lifetime of it anyway, and the Forsaken. Her past lives were like books fondly remembered from long ago, the more distant dimmer than the nearer, but the Forsaken stood out. Especially Moghedien.

"You see, Nynaeve? The flow of time here can shift in larger ways, too. It might be months before I am born again, or days. Here, for me. In the waking world it could be years yet before my birth."

With an effort Nynaeve suppressed her vexation. "Then we mustn't waste what time we have. Have you seen any of them since we last met?" There was no need to say who.

"Too many. Lanfear is often in *Tel'aran'rhiad*, of course, but I have seen Rahvin and Sammael and Graendal. Be'lal. Hessalam. Demandred. And Semirhage." Birgitte's voice tightened at the last name; even Moghedien, who hated her, did not frighten her visibly, but Semirhage was another matter.

Nynaeve shivered as well—the golden-haired woman had told her too much of that one—and realized she was wearing a thick wool cloak, with a deep hood pulled up to hide her face; flushing, she made it disappear.

"None of them have seen you?" she asked anxiously. Birgitte was more vulnerable than herself in many ways, despite her knowledge of *Tel'aran'rhiad*. She had never been able to channel; any of the Forsaken could destroy her as if crushing an ant, without breaking stride. And if she were destroyed here, there would be no rebirth for her ever again.

"I am not so unskilled—or so foolish—as to allow that." Birgitte leaned on her silver bow; legend said she never missed with that bow and her silver arrows. "They are concerned with each other, not anyone else. I have seen Rahvin and Sammael, Graendal and Lanfear, each stalking the others unseen. And Demandred and Semirhage each shadowing them as well. I have not seen so much of them here since they were freed. Be'lal avoids them all, as though fearful."

"They are up to something." Nynaeve bit her lip in vexed frustration. "But what?"

"I cannot say yet, Nynaeve. In the War of the Shadow, they were always plotting, against each other as often as not, but their work has never boded well for the world, waking or dreaming."

"Try to find out, Birgitte; as much as you can safely, at any rate. Do not take any risks." The other woman's face did not change, but Nynaeve thought she was amused; the fool woman thought as little of danger as did Lan. *You are just trying to avoid what you really want to ask!* "Have you seen Moghedien?"

"No," Birgitte sighed, "but not for lack of trying. In the usual course I can find anyone who knows they are in the World of Dreams; there is a feel, like ripples spreading through the air from them. Or perhaps from their awareness; I do not know, really. I am a soldier, not a scholar. Either she has not come into *Tel'aran'rhiad* since you defeated her, or ..." She hesitated, and Nynaeve wanted to stop her from saying what she knew would come next, but Birgitte was too strong to dodge unpalatable possibilities. "Or else she knows I have been looking for her. She can hide, that one. She is not called the Spider for nothing." That was what a *moghedien* had been, in the Age of Legends; a tiny spider that spun its webs in secret places, its bite poisonous enough to kill in heartbeats.

Suddenly very much aware of feeling unseen eyes, Nynaeve shivered heavily. It was not trembling. Just a shiver, not trembling. Still, she kept the sleek Taraboner gown firmly in mind lest she abruptly find herself wearing armour. It was embarrassing enough if that sort of thing happened when she was alone, even more under the cool blue gaze of a woman valiant enough to be a match for Gaidal Cain.

“Can you find her even when she wants to remain hidden, Birgitte?” It was a very great deal to ask, if Moghedien knew she was being hunted; like searching for a lion in high grass armed only with a stick.

The other woman did not hesitate. “Perhaps. I will try.” Hefting her bow, she added, “I must go now. I do not want to risk being seen by the others when they come.”

Nynaeve put a hand on her arm to stop her. “It would be a help if you let me tell them. That way I could share what you’ve told me about the Forsaken with Dani and the Wise Ones, and they could tell Rand. Birgitte, he needs to know—”

“You promised, Nynaeve.” Those bright blue eyes were unyielding as ice. “The prescripts say that we must not let anyone know that we reside in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. I have broken many by speaking to you, much more by giving aid, because I cannot stand by and watch you battle the Shadow—I have fought that battle in more lifetimes than I can remember—but I *will* keep as many of the prescripts as I can. You must hold to your promise.”

“Of course I will,” she said indignantly, “unless you release me from it. And I *do* ask you to—”

“No.”

And Birgitte was gone. One moment Nynaeve’s hand rested on a white coatsleeve, the next on empty air. In her mind she ran through a few curses she had overheard from Juilin and the Shienarans, the sort she would have scolded Elayne for listening to, much less using. There was no point calling Birgitte’s name again. She probably would not come. Nynaeve only hoped she responded the next time she or Elayne called. “Birgitte! I will keep my promise, Birgitte!”

She would have heard that. Perhaps by their next meeting she would know something of Moghedien’s activities. Nynaeve almost hoped she would not. If she did, it meant that Moghedien really was stalking *Tel’aran’rhiod*.

*Fool woman! “If you don’t look for snakes, you cannot complain when one bites you.”* She really did want to meet Elayne’s Lini one day.

The emptiness of the vast chamber oppressed her, all those great polished columns and that sense of being watched from the dimness between. If there really was anybody there, Birgitte would have known. She was eager to be away from the Stone. Waiting for the Wise Ones to show up was a frustration, as was wondering which of Rand or Dani would be with them this time. Dani would be more help in what she needed to do this night.

They’d have to do it this night as well, for the inns in Ebou Dar had proven as organised as Elayne feared. The cheap hovel she was sleeping in at the moment had been the fifth they visited after being expelled from The Wandering Woman, and the cadaverous owner had only allowed them to stay after Elayne paid her twice the going rate. Honestly! The girl was too spoiled for anyone’s good. Sweet but spoiled.

Thankfully, Nynaeve did not have to wait very long before four people popped into being a safe distance from where *Callandor*’s hilt glittered, embedded in the floor of the Stone. Amys and Melaine were regulars, but it was a little surprising to see that both Rand and Dani had come this time.

Rand noticed her first. “Nynaeve. It’s good to see you again. What news? Have you left Ebou Dar yet?”

She sniffed. “Straight to business. Fine.” Nice to see her indeed! He hadn’t even ogled her before asking for news. Not that she’d wanted him to, of course. “I will decide whether to leave Ebou Dar or not tonight. Not that’s it any business of yours!”

He just stood there looking male and confused, as if those weren’t the same thing, so Dani stepped forward. “We left Rhuidean. The Shaido are marching on Cairhien.”

She quickly forgot to be annoyed with Rand while listening to Dani detail all that had happened that week. As detailed as her summary was, it all amounted to one terribly simple thing: War. Nynaeve had seen too much of war and its aftermath. She wished to never see it again. As well wish that no-one ever died.

“Just ... just stay safe. Both of you.”

“I see you are unconcerned for *our* safety,” Melaine said, expressionless of voice and face.

“Well, I don’t want anyone killed, obviously. Even you two. Anyway, there was something I wanted to ask you lot. Is there a way to find out what someone in the real world is thinking or planning, using this dreamworld?”

“You are not our student, and have demonstrated as little care for your own welfare as you do that of the Aiel. I will not answer.” Melaine adjusted her shawl, almost walling Nynaeve off. Amys wordlessly did the same.

Nynaeve reached for her braid, but ... “We can talk later,” Rand said quietly. He glanced at the Wise Ones. “There’s a personal matter I wanted to discuss. Concerning Elayne.”

Amys eyed him sharply. “We should have made you swear that oath. Or refused to teach you.”

“Have the reasons you didn’t changed?” he asked.

She sighed. “No. Though Daniele Rulonir did swear. And must obey.”

Dani’s fists tightened. “Would my leaving early make any difference?”

Again, Amys sighed. “No. Trouble enough have you brought us. Do not go looking for more.” She waited long enough to see Rand nod, before she and Melaine vanished from the room.

“So. What is it you want to find out?” Rand asked.

That delayed tug came at last. Asking him for help did not sit well with her at all. Despite their closeness. Perhaps because of it. To her relief, Dani saved her the need to ask.

“You can’t speak to people who aren’t dreaming themselves here. And even the ones who are just dreaming regular dreams can’t hear ... Well, they can, as long as they haven’t warded themselves against intruders, but even then it’s not very reliable. Not everyone remembers their dreams, after all. The best we could do would be to look for signs in the environment, things that have been altered to reflect changes in the real world.”

That would mean going into the lion’s den, and not just with Elayne later. So be it.

“You still haven’t told us what you are looking for,” Rand said.

“Never you mind. Shouldn’t you be off plotting a war or something?” She felt a little bad when he flinched, but not enough to put up with his butting in. “Dani and I will handle this.” Ignoring his scowls, she turned to the Domani. “Meet me in the office of Sheriam’s employer.” There, that should keep Rand out of her hair. She doubted he even knew who Sheriam was, much less where she worked.

Carefully Nynaeve formed an image in her mind of the Amyrlin’s study, just as she had envisioned the Heart of the Stone on going to sleep. Nothing happened, and she frowned. She should have been taken to the White Tower, to the room she had visualized. Trying again, she imagined a room there that she had visited much more often, if more unhappily.

The Heart of the Stone became the study of the Mistress of Novices, a compact, dark-panelled room full of plain, sturdy furnishings that had been used by generations of women who had held that office. When a Novice’s transgressions were such that extra hours of scrubbing floors or raking paths would not atone, it was here that she was sent. For an Accepted to receive that summons took a greater transgression, but still she went, on leaden feet, knowing the outcome would be just as painful, perhaps more so.

Nynaeve did not want to look at the room—Sheriam had called her wilfully stubborn on her numerous visits—but found herself staring into the mirror on the wall, where Novices and Accepted had to look at their own weeping faces while listening to Sheriam lecture about obeying the rules or showing proper respect or whatever. Obeying others’ rules and showing required respect had always tripped up Nynaeve. The faint remnants of gilt on the carved frame said it had been there since the War of the Hundred Years, if not the Breaking.

The Taraboner dress was beautiful, but anyone who saw her in it would be suspicious. Even Domani women usually dressed circumspectly when they visited the Tower, and she could not imagine anybody dreaming of herself in the Tower except on her best behaviour. Not that she was likely to meet anyone, except perhaps someone who had dreamed herself into *Tel’aran’rhiod* for a few moments; there had not been a woman in the Tower who could enter the World of Dreams unaided since Corianin Nedeal, over four hundred years ago. On the other hand, among the *ter’angreal* stolen from the Tower that were still in the hands of Liandrin and her confederates, many had last been studied by Corianin. The two others of Corianin’s study, the two that she and Dani had

used to come here tonight, both gave access to *Tel'aran'rhiod*; it was best to assume that the rest did, too. There was small chance that Liandrin or any of the others would dream themselves back to the Tower they had fled, but even that chance was too big to risk when it might mean being waylaid. For that matter, she could not really be sure that the stolen *ter'angreal* were all that Corianin had investigated. The records were often murky about *ter'angreal* no-one understood, and others could very well be in the hands of Black sisters still in the Tower.

The dress changed completely, became white wool, soft but not of a particularly fine quality, and banded at the hem with seven coloured stripes, one for each Ajah. If she saw anyone who did not vanish after a few moments, she would take herself back to Ebou Dar, and they would think she was only one of the Accepted, touching *Tel'aran'rhiod* in her dreams. No. Not the inn, but Sheriam's study. Anyone like that would have to be Black Ajah, and after all, she was supposed to be hunting them.

Completing her disguise, she gripped her suddenly red-gold braid and grimaced at Melaine's face in the mirror. Now, there was a woman she would like to hand over to Sheriam.

The study of the Mistress of Novices was near the Novices' quarters, and the wide, tiled hallways flickered with occasional motion past elaborate wall hangings and unlit stand-lamps; flashes of frightened girls all in Novice white. A good many Novice nightmares would contain Sheriam. She ignored them as she hurried by; they were not in the World of Dreams long enough to see her, or if they did they would simply think her part of their own dream.

It was only a short climb up broad stairs to the Amyrlin's study. As she approached, suddenly Elaida was in front of her, sweaty-faced in a blood-red gown, the stole of the Amyrlin Seat around her shoulders. Or almost the Amyrlin's stole; it had no blue stripe.

Those stern dark eyes focused on Nynaeve. "I am the Amyrlin Seat, girl! Do you not know how to show respect? I will have yo—" In midword, she was gone.

Nynaeve exhaled raggedly. Elaida as Amyrlin; that was a nightmare for certain. *Probably her fondest dream*, she thought wryly. *It will snow in Tear before she ever rises that high.*

The anteroom was much as she remembered it, with one wide table and a chair behind it for the Keeper of the Chronicles. A few chairs sat against the wall for Aes Sedai waiting to speak with the Amyrlin; Novices and Accepted stood. The neat array of papers on the table, bound scrolls and large parchments with seals and letters, seemed unlike Leane, though. Not that she was untidy, quite the reverse, yet Nynaeve had always thought she would put everything away at night.

She pushed open the door to the inner room, but her step slowed as she entered. No wonder she had not been able to dream herself here; the room was nothing like what she remembered. That heavily carved table and tall, thronelike chair. The vine-carved stools arranged in a perfect curve in front of the table, not one so much as an inch out of place. Siuan Sanche affected simple furnishings, as if pretending she was still only a fisherman's daughter, and she kept only one extra chair, which she did not always let visitors use. And that white vase full of red roses, rigidly arranged on a pedestal like a monument. Siuan enjoyed flowers, but she preferred a bouquet of colours, like a field of wildflowers in miniature. Above the fireplace had hung a simple drawing of fishing boats in tall reeds. Now there were two paintings, one of which Nynaeve recognized. Rand, battling the Forsaken who had called himself Ba'alzamon, in the clouds above Falme. The other, on three wooden panels, portrayed scenes that linked to nothing she could pull out of her memory.

The door opened, and Nynaeve's heart leaped into her throat. A red-haired Accepted she had never seen before stepped into the room and stared at her. She did not wink out of existence. Just as Nynaeve was preparing to leap back to Sheriam's study, the red-haired woman said, "Nynaeve, if Melaine knew you were using her face, she'd do more than put you in a child's dress." And just that suddenly she was Dani, dressed like a Maiden of the Spear.

"You nearly frightened ten years out of me," Nynaeve muttered. "So the Wise Ones have finally decided to let you come and go as you please? Or is Melaine behind you?"

"Not quite as I please, unfortunately, but they can hardly police my every action. Not when Rand is free to do whatever he wants."

She sniffed. "Too free, if you ask me. That boy is getting away with far too much. It almost makes me feel sorry for Moiraine."

Dani looked uncomfortable all of a sudden. "If you want him taken down a peg, I'm not sure Moiraine is the one to look to. Not anymore, at least. Things have changed between them. She's actually been doing what he tells her to lately."

"She *obeys* him?" she said incredulously.

Dani gave a vigorous nod. "Last night they had an argument—she's still trying to convince him not to cross the Dragonwall—and finally he told her to stand outside until she cooled down; she looked about to swallow her tongue, but she did it. She stayed out in the night for an hour, anyway."

"Men have no more business ordering women about, even if they are Aes Sedai," Nynaeve said, then had to clamp her mouth shut to keep from gaping at herself. *What do I care if he makes her dance to his tune? She has made all of us dance to hers often enough.* But it was not proper. *I do not want to be Aes Sedai, just to learn more about Healing. I want to stay who I am. Let him order her about!* Still, it was not proper.

The Domani nodded. "I wouldn't have expected it, either. And I definitely didn't expect her to spend the night in his tent..."

Nynaeve's jaw dropped. Rand ... and Moiraine!? That was wrong in so many ways that she couldn't even give her braid a proper tugging. *That ... that, utter lecher! That ... that ... man! And her! The witch!* Did she think she could steal him away from, from Elayne, with her Aes Sedai grace and impeccable looks? *I shouldn't have gone so easy on her in Tear!* She was so angry she couldn't make herself form words, despite Dani's watching her so quietly.

"But you already know he's not faithful, right?" Dani asked carefully. "Does it make a difference who it is?"

"Of course it does!" She felt her face heat, and narrowed her eyes at the other woman. "Why would it make any difference to me at all? I'm not Elayne." *What does she know? Oh, Light.* Recalling her own indiscretions was bad enough, but the thought of having other people know of them made her want to slink back to Emond's Field and never leave again.

After a moment, Dani let out a quiet sigh. "I suppose it doesn't. You know, that whole Inner Circle thing you told me about seems more and more like a good idea to me."

Sharing secrets? And what secrets would Dani have to share?

She glared at the other woman suspiciously, and Dani turned away, ostensibly to examine the room. "None of this looks like Siuan Sanche," she said. "I see why I had to come by way of my old room in the Novices' quarters."

"The woman who furnished this room doesn't look at the world the same as the woman who chose what used to be here," Nynaeve said slowly. She let her attention be drawn from the woman in her silly Maiden outfit to the room they stood in. "Look at those paintings. I don't know what the triple thing is, but I can recognize the other. It's Rand fighting Ba'alzamon at Falme. I was there."

"Artistic license to draw them in the sky, I assume."

Nynaeve barked a laugh. "Not at all, but I expect most will think so. That old fool Thom Merrilin would probably have something to say about unreliable historians if he was here, come to think of it. Do you recognise the other picture?"

Dani stared at her for a moment, before going to examine the three wooden panels. "Bonwhin, I should say," she mused. "You never did listen to the lectures. It is a triptych."

"Whatever it is, it's the other that's important." She had listened to the Yellows well enough. The rest was a pack of useless nonsense often as not. "It seems to me that the woman who hung it wants to be reminded how dangerous Rand is. If Siuan Sanche has turned against Rand for some reason ... Dani, this could be far worse than just her wanting Elayne back in the Tower."

"Perhaps," Dani said judiciously. "Maybe the papers will tell us something. You search in here. When I finish with Leane's desk, I will help you."

Nynaeve stared indignantly at Dani's back as she left. *You search in here, indeed!* Dani had no right to give her orders. She ought to march right after her and tell her so in no uncertain terms. *Then why are you standing here like a lump?* she asked herself angrily. Searching the papers was a good idea, and she might as well do so in here as out there. In fact, the Amyrlin's desk was more likely to hold something important. Grumbling to herself about what she would do to set Dani straight, she stalked to the thickly carved table, kicking her skirts with every step.

There was nothing on the table except three ornately lacquered boxes, arrayed with painful precision. Remembering the sorts of traps that could be set by someone wanting to insure privacy, she

made a long stick to push open the hinged lid of the first, a gold and green thing decorated with wading herons. It was a writing case, with pens and ink and sand. The largest box, with red roses twining through golden scrolls, held twenty or more delicate carvings of ivory and turquoise, animals and people, all laid out on pale grey velvet.

As she pushed up the lid of the third box—golden hawks fighting among white clouds in a blue sky—she noticed that the first two were closed again. Things like that happened here; everything seemed to want to remain as it was in the waking world, and on top of that, if you took your eyes away for a moment, details could be different when you looked back.

The third box did hold documents. The stick vanished, and she gingerly lifted out the top sheet of parchment. Formally signed “Joline Aes Sedai,” it was a humble request to serve a set of penances that made Nynaeve wince just scanning them rapidly. Nothing there that mattered, except to Joline. A scrawl at the bottom said “approved” in angular script. As she reached to put the parchment down, it faded away; the box was closed, too.

Sighing, she opened it again. The papers inside looked different. Holding the lid, she lifted them out one by one and read quickly. Or tried to read. Sometimes the letters and reports vanished while she was still picking them up, sometimes when she was no more than halfway down a page. If they had a salutation, it was simply, “Mother, with respect.” Some were signed by Aes Sedai, others by women with other titles, nobles, or no honorific at all. None of it seemed to bear on the matter at hand. The Marshal General of Saldaea and his army could not be found, and Queen Tenobia was refusing to cooperate; she managed to finish that report, but it assumed that the reader knew why the man was not in Saldaea and what the queen was supposed to be cooperating about. The High General of the Faithful Sons’ campaign against the rebels and Dragonsworn in Valreis was proving successful so far, an Aes Sedai wrote in much satisfaction. No report had come from any Ajah’s eyes-and-ears in Tanchico for three weeks; but she got no further than that one fact. Some trouble between Illian on one side and Altara on the other was abating, and Pedron Niall was claiming credit; even in the few lines she got she could see the writer’s teeth gnashing. The letters were all no doubt very important, those she was able to hurry through and those that faded away under her eyes, but of no use to her at all. She had just begun what seemed to be a report on a suspected—that was the word used—gathering of Blue sisters, when a wretched cry of “Oh, Light no!” came from the outer room.

Darting for the door, she made a stout wooden club appear in her hands, its head bristling with spikes. But when she dashed in expecting to find Dani defending herself, the woman was standing behind the Keeper’s table staring at nothing. With a look of horror on her face, to be sure, but still unharmed and unthreatened that Nynaeve could see.

Dani gave a start at the sight of her, then gathered herself visibly. “Nynaeve, Elaida is Amyrlin Seat.”

“Don’t be a goose,” Nynaeve scoffed. Yet the other room, so unlike Siuan Sanche ... “You’re imagining things. You must be.”

“I had a parchment in my hands, Nynaeve, signed ‘Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan, Watcher of the Seals, Flame of Tar Valon, The Amyrlin Seat,’ and sealed with the Amyrlin’s seal.”

Nynaeve’s stomach tried to flutter up into her chest. “But how? What has happened to Siuan? Dani, the Tower doesn’t depose an Amyrlin except for something serious. Only two in nearly three thousand years.”

“Maybe Rand was serious enough.” Dani’s voice was steady, though her eyes were still too wide. “Maybe she became ill with something the Yellows couldn’t Heal, or fell down the stairs and broke her neck. What matters is that Elaida is Amyrlin. I don’t think she will support Rand as Siuan did.”

“Moiraine,” Nynaeve muttered. “So sure that Siuan would put the Tower behind him.” She could not imagine Siuan Sanche dead. She had hated the woman often, been the slightest bit afraid of her on occasion—she could admit that now, to herself anyway—yet she had respected her, too. She had thought that Siuan would last forever. “Elaida. Light! She’s as mean as a snake and as cruel as a cat. There’s no telling what she might do.”

“I am afraid I have a clue.” Dani said past a clenched jaw. “It was a very short document. I managed to read it all. ‘All loyal sisters are required to report the presence of the woman Moiraine Damodred. She is to be detained if possible, by whatever means are necessary, and returned to the

White Tower for trial on charge of treason'. The same sort of language that was apparently used about Elayne."

"If Elaida wants Moiraine arrested, it must mean she knows Moiraine has been helping Rand and she does not like it." Talking was good. Talking kept her from sicking up. Treason. They Stilled women for that. She had wanted to bring Moiraine down. Now Elaida was going to do it for her. "She certainly won't support Rand."

"Exactly."

"Loyal sisters. Dani, that fits with the Macura woman's message. Whatever happened to Siuan, the Ajahs have split over Elaida as Amyrlin. It must be."

"The White Tower divided ..." Dani shook her head slowly over the impossibility of it. For three thousand years the Tower had stood, an unshakable bastion of civilisation, and a fortress against the Shadow, at least to hear the Aes Sedai tell it. That Aes Sedai might fight each other was unthinkable. But what other explanation was there?

"There's a report on Siu—on the Amyrlin's writing table about a gathering of Blues. I was just reading it when you shouted. I'll wager the Blues didn't support Elaida." The Blue and Red Ajahs had a sort of armed truce at the best of times, and came near going for each other's throats at the worst.

But when they went back into the inner room, the report was not to be found. There were plenty of documents—Joline's letter had reappeared; a brief reading made Dani's eyebrows climb nearly to her hair—but not the one that they wanted.

"Can you remember what it said?" Dani asked.

"I had just gotten a few lines when you shouted, and ... I just can't remember."

"It would be nice to know the details, but I suppose what really matters is that Elaida's Amyrlin. That changes everything. What we have to decide is who to tell. Moiraine certainly has to know, and Rand, but if everyone hears of it ... The Aiel are peculiar, about Aes Sedai no less than anything else. I think they'll follow Rand as He Who Comes With the Dawn in spite of anything, but once they learn the White Tower is against him, maybe they won't be so fervent."

"They'll learn sooner or later," Nynaeve muttered.

"Later better than sooner, Nynaeve. At the very least we should wait until we're out of the Waste." Dani rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she looked about the room. The furnishings changed every once in a while, shifting about in subtle ways. On the railed balcony beyond the windows, a small red bird was preening its feathers, but other than that there was no sign of life save they two. "We must find that gathering of Blue sisters," Dani said quietly. "If they oppose Elaida, maybe—just maybe—they will support Rand the way Siuan did. Was a town mentioned, or a village? A country, even?"

"I think ... I cannot remember." Nynaeve's face hardened. The sudden arrival of new advisors in the Tarasin Palace, and such an unusual abundance of them, had taken on a new meaning with this news. "But I think I know how to find out."

## CHAPTER 40: Confessions of the Fallen Accepted



Nynaeve disappeared out of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, saying she had to tell the others what they had learned, but Dani lingered in the office after. She wondered how they'd react. How would Pedra and the rest react, for that matter? For her part, she felt a kernel of liberation under all her worry. There was no way she could support Elaida and Rand at once. And the choice between them was not a difficult one. He was the Dragon Reborn, after all, and Elaida was Red Ajah, her enmity towards him guaranteed.

"I'm free ... as free as a bird," she said quietly. She smiled at the bird on the balcony. She had no doubt it could hear her, even through the windows. Talking to it was a lot less crazy than the idea of not being beholden to the White Tower. After all, she'd been there when Amys showed him the technique. "You're lucky I didn't tell Nynaeve you were there. She was in a mood tonight."

The bird cocked its head at her almost sheepishly, and she couldn't help but laugh. No transformation occurred; one moment there was a small red bird perched on the railing, and the next Rand was standing outside the window, rubbing at the back of his head.

Regardless of whether it was locked or open in the real world, the windows parted at his touch and the Dragon Reborn stepped into the Amyrlin Seat's study. "I noticed." He looked around, shook his head. "Elaida, huh? Well. It's not as if I was banking on support from Siuan Sanche, but ... Burn me. This might actually make things easier. At least I know where I'll stand with Elaida."

"You'd be standing in a pool of your own blood if she could see you making yourself at home in her office right now," Dani said with a grin.

"It didn't look like they had much in the way of defences, from the way you two rifled through her things. I was worried for nothing."

"Here maybe. In the real world it would have gone very differently."

He nodded, grey eyes dismissing the Amyrlin's study to focus on her. "What does this mean for you, Dani? And ... for us?"

She crossed her arms. "Elaida is Amyrlin. What do you think that means?"

Instead of answering, he stood there chewing on his lower lip while her annoyance grew. "The White Tower. Centre of the world. I guess you have to ... I mean, even if you didn't want to I would understand. Regret it, for sure, but you're Accepted, and even those who aren't do what the Tower tells them more often than not."

"I don't do what anyone tells me," she growled. Her cheeks heated up immediately, her years of training in how to prevaricate without speaking an outright lie lashing the inaccuracy of that claim. She'd obeyed many times, in the Tower. She'd had to. If she'd ever held the Oath Rod those words would not have been able to pass her lips. But she was free to do so much now, even to lie. Or ...

She looked from Rand to the Amyrlin Seat's desk and bit her lip. If seeing him here at all would have made Elaida angry, seeing him and Dani ... Light, she shouldn't. There were important decisions to be made, plans to be altered. Someone had to tell Moiraine and the others.

And yet she found herself drifting closer to him while he stood there looking all hangdog over her imagined leaving. "I'm not going anywhere," she heard herself say huskily, "and I know just how to prove it ..."

Rand's brows rose when she reached up to put her arms around his neck. "Dani," he murmured, in the moment before she pulled his lips down to hers. She kissed him thoroughly and, when her hand drifted down to feel his crotch, something thickened under her rubbing.

"The Tower wouldn't approve," she said, biting her lip. Heart racing, she knelt before him, there in the Amyrlin's study. "They definitely wouldn't approve ... of this." Undoing his belt, she reached in, freed him as well, and brought the bulbous head of his manhood to her lips. Staring up at him, she kissed it softly, and watched the thrill of pleasure tremble thought him. Without breaking eye contact she opened her mouth and took him inside. After only a brief moment to get accustomed to the strange sensation, she began to suck on him. Rand brushed her hair gently with his fingers as she

worked her magic on him. She felt him growing thicker, lengthening, until it became hard to accommodate his size.

Thoroughly excited now, she got to her feet. His arms went around her at once, his lips crashing against hers. It didn't take long to inspire his hands to close around her waist, and soon he was picking her up and depositing her on the carved table. It was hard under her bottom, and soon cold as well.

Dani opened her eyes to find herself naked. Rand was between her legs, still fully clothed, his hands and his lips busy on her body. Two could play at that game. She willed his clothes away, and away they went. If he'd been focusing—or if she had been before—he could have prevented her from doing that; but she doubted he'd mind. Her hands went to the sculpted muscles on his chest. She didn't mind either. Hands and gaze travelled downwards, to the fascinating topography of his stomach, and the pink head of that which poked upwards.

"Take me," she heard herself say, staring down. "Right here. On her desk."

Rand's grin would have fit well on his friend Mat's face. "Daniele Rulonir! What kind of Accepted would do such a thing on the Amyrlin's own desk?"

She grinned back, barely even blushing. "I was never a very good Accepted. They always said so. Might as well prove it." And since he was too busy laughing to do that, she took it on herself to guide his manhood to her entry, and then took it in herself as well.

Rand took over then, leaving her to hiss in her pleasure as she felt herself being slowly penetrated, his thick cock spreading her pussy and touching everything she wanted touched. She was so wet already; she was sure the Amyrlin's desk was stained with her juices. There was no time to check, though, for Rand was breathing heavily and the hands that held her had grown hungry.

She wrapped her arms around him and took it all, but not in silence. The empty halls of the White Tower echoed to her moans each time his cock moved within her. She couldn't help but imagine how the Aes Sedai would have reacted if they'd done this in the real White Tower rather than this dreamy reflection. Her heart was racing, her nails scraped his pale flesh, urging him on.

The hard desk was uncomfortable, and distracted her from her pleasure, so she lay back on the table, arms outstretched. Light, how furious they would be, if they saw her like that, if they saw the Dragon Reborn of all people ravaging her so passionately. Those echoes got even louder.

"You look beautiful, Dani, but just for once ... you'd look even better clothed."

She blinked at him through the haze of lust, then at herself, and the dress she was now wearing. A white dress of modest cut, banded with seven colours at hem and cuff. Dani giggled.

"You're nearly as bad as I am. Corrupting a chaste Accepted like me; for shame!"

He took hold of her legs and spread them wide, making her dress pool around her waist. "You're a bad girl alright. I think most of the Aes Sedai are. But you ... you're my kind of bad." A particularly hard thrust silenced her response. "A naughty, sexy, bad girl." Those thrusts kept coming, and she soon lost even the desire to speak. Her body felt like one giant nerve that he was playing with. She couldn't move her legs, for his arms were too strong, but her toes jerked and spasmed in the way the rest of her could not.

The orgasm was shocking in its suddenness and strength. The White Tower answered her scream as she flooded the Amyrlin's desk with her juices, obscene squelching noises sounding each time the Dragon Reborn's cock moved within her hungry pussy. Her mind went blank, and she barely saw the mess they had made of Elaida's room, the boxes and miniatures that had been thrown aside by their cavorting. She saw Rand, though, smiling down at her. He'd slowed to a gentle rocking and was watching her with a fondness she welcomed and a knowingness she did not.

Dani bit her lip and tried to compose herself, but it was a tall order in that situation. She tried to sit up and catch her breath, though neither was easy. Her attention fell on the throne-like chair that Elaida had decided better suited her. She bit her lip harder.

"You're a wicked boy. Taking advantage of me like that."

Rand's smile faded. "I ... didn't mean to ..."

Light, he was taking her seriously. Handsome he might be, but he could be such a dope sometimes. Dani refused to be put off. She pushed him away, as gently as she could, and hopped down from the table. "You deserve to be punished for that. And I know just the thing ..." She pushed him again, this time towards the chair. As soon as he plopped down onto it, she climbed on top.

"Oh!"

She shook her head. "Quiet, you. You just sit there, in Elaida's chair, while I show you both what I think of you."

What she thought of Rand was that she wanted him inside her, and that was where she put him. She wanted him in her arms, too, and that was where he rested as she started bouncing in his lap. She wanted ... she wanted so much that she couldn't have. But this she could.

Her thoughts of Elaida were distant things, in comparison.

Up and down she went, their tender parts sliding against each other with sinful joy. Around and around went her hips, caressing every part of him. She knew he was enjoying it as much as she did. She could tell from the way he fondled her breast thought the Accepted dress. Or thought she could. Dani gasped loudly when Rand suddenly grabbed the collar of her dress and ripped it asunder, exposing her coppery breasts to his sight, and her dark nipple to the mouth that closed around it. She took him by the hair, but only to pull him closer. She moved faster, too, her pleasure building once more.

Closer and closer she got, but not close enough, not before Rand clasped her bottom in a hard grip and groaned her name. A wet heat flooded her insides. Man's waters; forbidden to initiates of the White Tower. A potential pregnancy; also forbidden. Far from feeling shame, Dani rode out his orgasm, wild and free.

He looked stunned beneath her. She kissed him deeply, her tongue exploring his lax mouth.

"This is getting to be a habit," she said when she'd had her fill

"I'm not complaining," Rand breathed.

She smiled. "Me, neither." She could feel his come dripping down where they joined, to stain Elaida's chair. It was so naughtily satisfying. Knowing he'd enjoyed it for much the same reasons pleased her, too.

"So this is the Amyrlin's Seat, huh? Do they often use it for this?"

Dani laughed. "Not the actual one! And they definitely do not!"

His head lolled back and he smiled at the ceiling. "Pity. I might actually have changed my tune towards them if this was a regular thing."

She sniffed. "You and Elaida? That's a horrible thought."

"Light, no! Padan Fain would be as welcome!" His alarm faded when he looked at her.  
"You'd be more my kind of Amyrlin."

A solemnity grew in her as she looked about once more. "That would never have happened even before I got involved with you. Now? I'm not sure I'd even be welcomed back. And I *am* sure that if I was it would be with years of penance to pay before they let me test for the ring."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she said, and meant it. He was far too prone to blaming himself for things he hadn't done. "It was my decision."

"I hope so," he muttered, and for a moment she thought he was seeing someone else. "And I hope you don't end up regretting it."

He was growing soft within her, and this talk was killing the mood. Dani climbed off him and let her skirts fall. "You are not without say in whether I do or not," she pointed out.

He stood. Though naked, he loomed over her, and somehow it was she who felt exposed. "I'll do everything I can to prevent that from happening. But, unfortunately, the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills."

There wasn't much to say after that. They agreed that the news about a new Amyrlin Seat had to be shared, and parted to do just that. Dani was the last to leave. Now that her thoughts were clearer, she was a little embarrassed by the mess they'd made of the place. She wondered if the Tower really wouldn't take her back, and whether she even wanted it to. But if not that, then what could she do with her life? Sadly, and ironically, there were no answers to be found here at the centre of the world. She might not be good enough to stay here—she might flunk out of it—but only after she'd tried her very best. Come what may, she would be able to hold her head high, without shame, as a Domani should.

So she left the World of Dreams for another one. Waking up from a dream that was as clear and easily remembered as events in the real world was always disconcerting. It almost didn't feel like waking up at all, for all that she suddenly found herself in the comfortable dark of her tent, under blankets warmed by her body and that of another.

They weren't as warm as they could have been, though. She was wondering at that when she felt someone embrace *saidar* and channel a thin thread of fire. The lone lamp issued a gentle light, one that was still bright enough to make Dani squint.

"Back at last, are you? Have fun?"

"Ilyena? Why are you awake?"

"It's hard to sleep with you making those noises."

As her vision adjusted she saw Ilyena sitting cross-legged on the pallet besides her, wearing her nightdress and a face as grim as a Volsuni winter. The alarm Dani had been feeling grew stronger. "I was asleep. I can't control what I do or don't do when asleep."

"Can't you? I may not have used this *Tel'aran'rhiad*, but I've listened to the rest of you talk about it. And that isn't at all what you've said."

Dani flushed. She was caught. "Um. I mean, I can't control what my body does here while my mind is there."

"Well, what you were doing made you look like you were very excited about something," Ilyena choked out. "Burn this. Burn you! I'm tired of dancing around this. Are you fucking him?"

The question had been asked directly. Far from wanting to lie, Dani was relieved. She answered at once. "Yes. I'm sorry. I never meant for it to happen, but one thing just led to another."

Ilyena didn't look surprised. "At least it's out in the open now."

She sat up. "But I don't want this to end things between us. I love you. I always will."

Ilyena covered her eyes with her hands, but it was laughter than issued from her, not sobs, manic laughter. "Will you? We'll see. You've been a bad girl, Dani."

"I know. I hate myself for it." It was true as well. She might resent the Tower's rules on such things, but that didn't mean she shouldn't have been able to rise above the temptation.

"Don't."

"I never wanted to hurt you."

One blue eye peered from between her fingers. "I said don't."

"Is there a way to make this right, Ilyena? Tell me, please."

The hands came down, but only long enough to grasp the nightdress. Then they went right back up again. Ilyena was palely naked underneath, her nipples stiffened from the cold night air. Or perhaps from something else. Dani stared at her pillow-friend's waist, and at the familiar toy that was strapped around it, a long object of smooth horn, shaped rather like a man's sex. She remembered to breathe.

"You've been a very bad girl," Ilyena said huskily.

"I h-have ..."

"But are you his girl, or mine?"

She licked her lips. "I ... I w-want to be ..." She was not Aiel. It was not a thing that was done, unless you were Aiel. But ... "I want to be both."

Ilyena's smile was grim. "I thought as much." She crawled closer. "Spread your legs for me, then. And be mine tonight."

Dani pushed the blankets aside. She was already wet from her dream, her body crying out for what her mind alone had experienced. The sight of Ilyena naked, with that thing aimed at her, had her dripping. More, the thought that Ilyena might still want her after what she had confessed to gave her a sudden hope. So she spread her legs as commanded, and let the other girl climb between them. She watched her face rather than the toy she was positioning, and touched her cheek gently when she felt it being pushed inside.

"I do love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," Ilyena sighed right before ramming it home. "More than the Light itself."

The girl's weight hardly troubled her at all. Soft and light, she lay atop Dani as she fucked her, their breasts touching, Ilyena's long yellow hair falling down to tickle her face. The toy was colder than Rand's flesh, and Ilyena moved it awkwardly in comparison, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that it was *her*, in Dani's arms, accepting her, touching her legs, kissing her lips.

And whispering in her ear. "You're a bad girl. But I'm a bad girl, too. You deserve to be punished, but who doesn't? I already got my punishment. Do you know what it was? Do you know what I let him do?"

"W-what are you saying?"

Ilyena pushed her hair out of the way, and looked down at her. "It didn't take very much. He really is a slut. And it hurt the way I wanted it to, at first. But then ... then it started to feel good." Dani could only stare, the toy moving within her almost forgotten. "Rand's cock, I mean. When I let him fuck me in the ass."

"You didn't!"

Ilyena smirked. "I did. And why shouldn't I? I knew what you were doing. I was almost certain of it. I couldn't judge. And you shouldn't, either."

"You, and him? Why didn't you tell me?" That was a foolish question. "You let him ... Did you like it?" That was more important, that could change everything.

"Perhaps not as much as you do, you dirty girl. But I would do it again. He's an idiot, but I've seen far worse. Isn't that what you want, Dani? I hope you don't mind us being partners."

Ilyena lay atop her, fucking her, confessing to things that should have appalled her. But Dani did not even try to push her off. Instead, she clutched at her soft bottom as unquantifiable feelings boiled through her mind and body.

"Both of you?"

Ilyena kissed her. "Both of us. And perhaps even at once. Would you like that?"

The very thought of it was nearly enough to make her climax. "I'm tempted," she had to say. "Maybe some other time."

"Oh, I know you are," Ilyena whispered in her ear. "And I think I am, too. I want to see what you've been hiding from me all this time. I want to see what you're like when you're fucking him. I want to see if you like it more than this."

She started moving fast, as though to prove something. Dani tried to stop her with a gentle hand but Ilyena would not be dissuaded. And it felt good enough that she didn't make as much effort as she should. "It's not a competition," she managed to gasp. "You have nothing to prove."

It slowed then. "You won't leave me? For him or the rest?" Ilyena asked. She looked more vulnerable than Dani could readily recall seeing.

She took her lovely face between her hands. "We go together or not at all!"

Ilyena melted into her embrace. The motion of her hips became slow, gentle. She stirred Dani's pleasure while they kissed, and when at last her body found its relief there was nothing of anger in the way either woman moved.

## CHAPTER 41: Breaking the News



Rand woke alone, the need to focus on *Tel'aran'rhiad* having made him refuse all offers of company. It was well that he had, for the night's events had left him with much to think about, if not at all what he'd expected. He had wanted to talk to Elayne about what Lanfear had said, but the news of the Amyrlin Seat's change in occupant was every bit as important, if not more so. How would he need to alter his plans? It wouldn't make the hugest of differences, since he hadn't been relying on the White Tower's support, whatever Moiraine had urged.

Moiraine. She had trusted Siuan Sanche in a way Rand had not. This news would not be welcomed. He pushed the blankets aside. He was fully dressed underneath and far from comfortable; the erection his dreams of Dani had inspired needing adjustment before he could rise from the bed. Quite the woman, Dani. It was a little dismaying how quickly he'd come to trust her, given her allegiance to the Tower—he knew he should be more suspicious, that not expecting lies and betrayal from an Aes Sedai, in training or otherwise, was naive and stupid. He did. But he couldn't help it. Though a relative stranger, he felt as if he'd known her a long time. *Fool. Woolheaded fool.* He should be more practical. This talk of rebels against Elaida was interesting. If Dani was really willing to shake off the Tower's influence, then perhaps others would be, too. Or it might be a trap.

Lost in thought, Rand barely noticed the Maidens who rose from their crouches when he ducked out of the tent. Cold closed on him like an icy vise as he hurried through the camp. Only the nearest tents were really visible to him, low, shadowed shapes that could have been part of the rugged earth, save that the camp extended for miles into the mountainous land to either side. These tall jagged peaks were not the Spine of the World; that was much higher, and lay days to the west yet.

He didn't have to go far to reach Moiraine's tent, which was never far from his own. He saw a sliver of light from within, and knew that the Aes Sedai was awake. Lan lay sleeping nearby, wrapped in his Warder's cloak; except for his head and boots, the rest of him seemed part of the night. He slowed, walking softly.

The other man's breathing did not change, but something made Rand look at him again. Moonlight glinted on his eyes, open and watching him. Even as he turned his head, they closed again. Not another muscle stirred; he might never have wakened at all. He envied that awareness; he still had a long way to go. And he was glad Lan didn't try to stop him, despite the silent threat that entailed.

Kneeling beside the tent flap, he peered in. The firepit held only ashes; even the smell was gone. Moiraine sat in the light of a single lamp, and she did not look surprised to see him.

"May I come in?"

"Of course. Why have you come to me tonight?" Her face was a beautiful, expressionless mask, betraying nothing of her thoughts on why he might have come to visit her.

Rand's own face was nearly as grim. He didn't want to be the one to have to tell her this. It could easily sound like gloating, and he didn't feel at all like gloating just then. To buy time, he pulled the tent flaps closed behind him and seized *saidin* long enough to rekindle the fire.

"I have some news. You aren't going to like it." He waited but she didn't ask, so he took a deep breath and ploughed on. "Elaida has taken the Amyrlin Seat."

"How do you know?" Moiraine said quietly. "Did you learn something dreamwalking? Or has your Talent as a Dreamer finally manifested itself?"

That was what the Aes Sedai called people who could enter *Tel'aran'rhiad* without needing a *ter'angreal*. Dreamers. Women whose dreams foretold the future. Women like that had written the Prophecies of the Dragon, long ago. Moiraine had never said what she thought about a man having the same ability. If he did. He'd had some strange dreams, true, seen some things in *Tel'aran'rhiad* that he now suspected might have been prophetic. But he certainly hadn't seen the future, unfortunately.

The Wise Ones said the images had to be interpreted, and the knowledge had to come from within, which hadn't helped in the slightest. He'd dreamed of Perrin, lounging with Faile on his lap, kissing her while she played with the short-cut beard that he wore. Behind them two banners waved, a

red wolf's head and a crimson eagle. None of that was news to Rand, much less prophetic. But Aram's presence had surprised and alarmed him. He'd stood near to Perrin's shoulder, a sword strapped to his back over a bright yellow coat. Every time he moved closer to Perrin it was as if a chill of doom shot through everything. Rand didn't know why. When last he'd seen them, Aram had been following Perrin around like a puppy.

Another dream. Mat throwing dice with blood streaming down his face, the wide brim of his hat pulled low enough to hide his wound, while Thom Merrilin put his hand into a fire to draw out the small blue stone that now dangled on Moiraine's forehead. Or a dream of a storm, great dark clouds rolling without wind or rain while forked lightning bolts, every one identical, rent the earth. It could have meant something. It could have meant nothing. As Talents went, he didn't see much use in this one. If he had it.

Rand shook off such thoughts. "I visited the White Tower in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. There was an arrest warrant for you, Moiraine, signed by Elaida as Amyrlin."

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. Perhaps it will not matter so much if you take the Aiel across the Dragonwall. I doubt that Elaida has continued to approach rulers, even if she knows that Siuan was doing so."

So calm she was. So serene. Rand sat down with a small sigh. She hadn't been so serene when they were in bed together. Had it been an act? Was this? It didn't matter either way. There were words that needed saying. "I'm sorry about Siuan. I got the impression she was your friend. A trusted ally, at the least. It hurts to lose someone like that."

The Aes Sedai looked at him coolly. "I have no time for tears, Rand. The Dragonwall is not many days distant now, and the Alguenya ... Siuan and I were friends, once. In a few months it will be nineteen years since we began the search for the Dragon Reborn. Only the two of us, newly raised Aes Sedai. Sierin Vayu was raised Amyrlin shortly after, a Grey with more than a touch of Red in her. Had she learned what we intended, we would have spent the rest of our lives doing penance with Red sisters watching us even while we slept. There is a saying in Cairhien, though I have heard it as far away as Tarabon and Saldaea. 'Take what you want, and pay for it'. Siuan and I took the path we wanted, and we knew we would have to pay for it eventually."

Take what you want, and pay for it. He liked that. He liked her. But he kept himself composed. "Some of the Blue Ajah might be gathering somewhere. Nynaeve said that she was given a message about all sisters being welcome to return to the Tower."

Moiraine sighed, a soft sound. "Do you expect me to be happy that the White Tower has split apart? I am Aes Sedai, Rand. I gave my life to the Tower long before I ever suspected the Dragon would be Reborn in my lifetime. The Tower has been a bulwark against the Shadow for three thousand years. It has guided rulers to wise decisions, stopped wars before they began, halted wars that did begin. That humankind even remembers that the Dark One waits to escape, that the Last Battle will come, is because of the Tower. The Tower, whole and united. I could almost wish that every sister had sworn to Elaida, whatever happened to Siuan."

The flames were beginning to put a little warmth into the air, but Moiraine had just added her own chill. *Naive, stupid fool. Do not let such thoughts creep in.* "The Tower united. Under Elaida." He narrowed his eyes at her. "You said 'almost'."

Moiraine smiled a small smile. "You learn. Cool reason is always better than hot words. You cannot be ready for Tarmon Gai'don unless you are allowed your freedom, both to learn and to affect the world. Remember that only thirteen sisters linked can shield any man from *saidin*, and even if they do not know the trick of tying flows, fewer can hold that shield."

"I will remember." He studied her, not sure if he envied her composure or not. "What do you mean to do?"

"I mean to deal with the world as I find the world, for as long as I can. At least I no longer need try to turn you from what you want. I suppose I should be happy that you do not make me fetch your wine. You do listen most of the time, even if you seldom give any sign what you think of what I tell you."

He kept his voice low. "What I think ... Is that I want to sleep in your arms tonight."

"It is very late," she said, still as cool as ice.

"Even so."

"I would prefer to be alone with my thoughts."

He hesitated. That was more than fair, but ... How much of it was true? How cold was she? Her eyes were large and dark, and seemed larger still, what with how slight she was. *Take what you want, and pay for it.* "Even so," he whispered.

Was it anger that made her clutch her skirts so, or something else? "As you wish," she said in that calm, chiming voice.

So he got up and took her by the hand and led her to the mounded blankets that would serve them as a bed. Moiraine remained an unknowable picture of Aes Sedai elegance, even when he brushed her dark hair aside to undo the buttons that ran down the back of her dress. She wore a white slip underneath, with equally white stockings. He left them on, but he was not shy about lifting her slip long enough to ease her smallclothes over her hips and pull them down. He planted a brief kiss on her cute little bottom while he was there, before letting the shift fall again.

The Aes Sedai stood where she was as Rand began undressing. She said nothing, and did nothing, not until he had rid himself of the last of his clothes. Only then did she glance back to see what loomed behind her, her dark gaze flicking down at that hard cock that jutted towards her. She looked away again just as quickly. She made no sound when he embraced her and kissed her neck, but he could feel her pulse tapping against his lips. What made it race so? Anger, or something else?

He knelt on the bed and tugged her down with him. She managed to maintain her elegance throughout, aided by the blankets that hid the legs she spread for him. He found the idea of ruffling her composure less enticing tonight than it usually was, so he seized *saidin* for a moment and dimmed the lamp, leaving only the flicking light of the fire. He kissed her softly then, and closed his eyes, leaving her her dignity even as his hand made free with her sex.

She was aroused, he was pleased to find. He made it his business to ensure she was even more so before shifting his hips to lie atop her. The Aes Sedai who had been the driving force behind all the changes in his life, who taught him, controlled him, and now served him, lay quiet in Rand's arms as he penetrated her silky femininity. Her breath fluttered against his face as he slowly eased his way in. He could feel her nipples poking his chest through her silken shift, but she did not return his embrace.

Rand rode her slowly, his lips claiming hers whether she wanted them to or not. He held her tight, marvelling at how someone who had loomed so much in his life could feel so small and fragile in his arms. Her hair was soft and clean, and flowed through his fingers like warm water. She was more than warm, down where she did return his embrace.

He made free with her mouth, petting her, riding her, never sure if she wanted or needed comforting but determined to do it anyway. Her silence dimmed the pleasure he found in her body but he knew better than to ask what she was feeling. Moiraine would never be so open, not with him. Possibly not with anyone. Even so, he had to say something.

"You wondered what I thought," he whispered. "Of you, and what you've been telling me. I think you're a wonderful teacher. It's all important, the things you've said. You're important. I listen. And I try to remember."

He didn't expect a response, but he got one, a single pained word. "Remember." He didn't know what to make of that, but by far the better response was the way her arms wrapped around his neck.

He moved in silence after that, still keeping it slow. The heat of their bodies brought warmth even to the Waste's night, and he dared to hope it brought warmth to Moiraine's heart as well. She lay beneath him, his teacher, letting him do as he wished with her body. He stirred it, stroked it, fucked it. He brought her to the edge and pushed her over. Sound escaped her then, and her legs wrapped around him, holding him to her as her hidden heat gushed over him. Moiraine shivered in his arms, though not from cold. He pecked her lips while she was catching her breath, and combed her hair back into order as best he could.

What sounded like a soft laugh brought Rand's full attention to the Aes Sedai, though when he looked he almost thought he'd imagined it. Though flushed, her ageless face remained inscrutable. He couldn't tell if he'd made things better or worse.

"Why have you stopped?" she asked after a while.

"I was ... wondering," he admitted. "About you."

A small, mysterious smile curved her lips. "Silly boy. You will not be able to sleep if you do not finish. And neither of us can afford to be lying awake this night."

So practical. So Moiraine. He sighed into her arms, and into her body, his hips moving faster now, short quick thrusts. She let him do what he wanted, his teacher, even when what he wanted was to fill her sweet little pussy with his come. And when he did, after the waves of his pleasure had abated and his breathing had returned to normal, when he decided he wanted to stay the night in her bed, she let him do that, too.

Rand didn't know what, if anything, that night had meant to her. He seriously doubted a woman as strong and as driven as Moiraine had really needed comforting. He told himself it had been foolishness to have even entertained the possibility, as he was drifting off to sleep in the firelight. After all she had let him do, there was no surprise to be found in her choice to sleep against him, rather than turning her back or lying in the bed beside him. And if she pressed close, it was probably just to ward off the chill of the night air. Even so, as her cheek rested above his heart and her breathing slowed to the gentle cadence of sleep, he kept his arms wrapped around the little Aes Sedai. And all throughout the night, he did not let her go.

## CHAPTER 42: *Leaning on the Knife*



Climbing out of the big copper tub with a length of white towelling wrapped around her head, Nynaeve dried slowly. The plump grey-haired serving woman tried to dress her, but Nynaeve sent her away, ignoring the startled looks and protests, and did it herself, with great care, examining the dark green dress with its wide collar of pale Merada lace in the tall narrow stand-mirror. Lan's heavy gold ring lay in her pouch—best not to think of that—alongside the iron disc *ter'angreal* that allowed her access to the World of Dreams, and the Great Serpent gleamed golden around her finger. Best not to think of that either.

It was nice to just sit there and let Elayne unwrap the towel to braid her hair. Almost too nice. There shouldn't have been anything erotic about it. How many times had she let another woman braid her hair over the years, without ever feeling like she was now?

The high ceiling was quite pleasantly painted in blue sky and white clouds, and if the furnishings stood on disconcertingly large gilded lion feet and the slim bedposts and chair legs and everything else vertical had too much fluting and gilding for her taste, it was still a more comfortable room than she had stayed in for some considerable time. A pleasant room. Moderately cool. What she was trying to do was calm herself.

Elayne skilled fingers continued braiding. After a bit, she said, "Was it really wise to send Birgitte looking for Moghedien?"

Nynaeve shot the young woman a sidelong frown, but it rolled off her like water off oiled silk. "Better we find her than she finds us."

"I suppose so. But what will we do when we find her?"

She had no answer for that. But it was better to be the hunter than the hunted, however roughly it went. The Black Ajah had taught her that. Thinking of them gave her even more reason to strive for calm.

It did not work, of course. She had felt *saidar* being woven, and as soon as she stepped from her bedchamber she saw the ward against eavesdropping Keestis had made and tied off around the sitting room. Ronelle, Emara, Shimoku and Keestis were already there as well, all of them freshly scrubbed and dressed.

In what Emara claimed was a rather ordinary arrangement here, four bedchambers flanked the one sitting room, which also had a ceiling painted as sky and clouds. She and Ronelle were quite comfortable sharing one. Nynaeve was a bit less comfortable with the easy assumption that she and Elayne would share another. Such things were supposed to be private! Four tall arched windows opened onto a long balcony of white-painted wrought iron, so intricate they could peer down from it unseen at the Mol Hara Square in front of the palace. A faint breeze stirred through the windows, carrying the salt scent of the sea, and for a wonder it actually was a little cool.

Ragan, Juilin and the rest had been given rooms somewhere deep in the servants' quarters, which in truth seemed to irritate Elayne more than it did any of the men. Ragan had actually laughed. But then, he'd been doing a lot of that lately. Shimoku hadn't even bothered to blush when she attached herself to his arm as they were making their way here.

"Have some of this excellent tea," Shimoku said, laying a white napkin across gleaming blue silk skirts. Like everything else in the sitting room, her wide chair had gilded balls for feet, and more standing along the tall back above her head.

"Mint and cloudbERRIES," Ronelle added to Shimoku's offer, filling another delicate golden porcelain cup without waiting. Shimoku wore wide grey trousers and a short blue coat, in the fashion of Kaltor. All of them dressed and primped, and no-one wanted them.

The silver pitcher glistened damply, and the tea was cool and refreshing. Nynaeve admired Elayne's face as she sipped. "I must say," she muttered, "I expected a different reception."

"Did you really?" Elayne asked, taking a seat across from her. "After the way Moiraine and Alanna treated us?"

Nynaeve sighed. "Very well, then, I hoped."

Their meeting with Cavandra had not gone well. Any hopes of fooling her as they had Nataly, the advisor to Tarabon, had vanished when she greeted Emara by name. The daughter of a high-ranking noble in neighbouring Illian, she was known to Cavandra—as an Accepted, not an Aes Sedai. They had had to produce the Amyrlin's note to silence the suspicions that they were runaways, but if anything that had only made the greying woman's thin lips thin further.

And then they were dismissed with a suggestion, more in the nature of a command, that they spend several days recuperating from the rigors of their journey. Cavandra had said she was sure they wanted to freshen up, but it was a dismissal, with a choice of going like obedient Accepted or refusing like sulky children.

Nynaeve plucked her handkerchief from her sleeve and fanned her face uselessly with the lacy square. "I still think she's hiding something."

"Really, Nynaeve," Elayne said, shaking her head. "I do *not* like how we're treated any more than you, but you are trying to make a bull out of a mouse. If Cavandra wants to look for runaways, let her. Would you rather have her looking over our shoulders?"

Nynaeve still thought she was hiding things. Elayne just did not want to admit it. Cavandra's comment about runaways had been muttered so low that she was annoyed that Nynaeve heard, and when asked whether she really expected to find any, Cavandra replied just a bit too quickly that she always kept an eye out for young women who had run from the Tower. It did not make sense. Novices did run sometimes—the life was hard, especially with years of obedience to look forward to before you could even think of thinking for yourself—and an occasional Accepted who had begun to despair of ever reaching the shawl tried to slip away, yet even Nynaeve knew that few made it off the island of Tar Valon and almost all were dragged back. You could be put out at any time, for not being strong enough to go on, for refusing or failing your test for Accepted or the test for Aes Sedai, but leaving was never your decision unless you wore the shawl.

So if successful runaways were so rare, why did Cavandra think she might find any in Ebou Dar, so far from the White Tower, and why had she shut up like a mussel when asked? She was afraid she knew the answer to the last, anyway. Not tugging her braid required considerable self-control. She thought she was becoming better at that.

"Should we not tell her about the Wise Women?" Ronelle asked.

"I do have a better question: how do she not know?" Emara answered. "Those women be all over the city, and Cavandra did be advisor to Tylin's mother before became advisor to Tylin."

"It's hard to believe the White Tower knows about a group like that and doesn't take steps to destroy it," said Keestis.

"Whatever she knows, and whatever her intentions, we shall certainly not be handing the item over to her," Elayne said firmly.

As one, their eyes were drawn to the plain leather satchel lying on the table. No-one moved to open it, but all knew what hid inside, safely cushioned by rolls of spare clothes. A queer fancy took hold of Nynaeve, and she imagined she could feel the evil trying to break free. Despite the southern heat, she shivered.

"Do you mean to give it to Elaida?" Keestis asked Elayne. "You know her best, and if she is the Amyrlin now..."

Amyrlin, and the former advisor to Elayne's mother. All eyes were on Elayne, a fact that did not cause even the slightest of blushes or discomfort. Nynaeve smiled wryly as the girl steepled her fingers in thought.

"It would perhaps be safe in Elaida's keeping, for she is stern in her hatred of the Shadow, but there are other concerns. She is Red Ajah. And by that I mean that she is *very* Red Ajah. Some among them might be willing to work with the Dragon Reborn, but I cannot believe that Elaida would. Giving it to her would be a solution to our current problem, but I fear it would lead to other problems in the future. No, we must hold onto it for now, and hold our tongues beside, lest anyone learn what it is we have."

"Agreed. If any woman speaks of it where someone else can hear, I'll have her hide for a saddle," Nynaeve growled. Inside the satchel rested one of the seven seals that held that Dark One's prison shut. Losing that would be a disaster.

"There is no need to be rude," Shimoku sulked.

"I'd have thought you'd have learned to trust us by now," Keestis said with a scowl.

Elayne leapt to smooth things over, as usual. "We are all friends here. We have fought and bled and triumphed together. I am sure Nynaeve only meant to impress on us all the importance of our current charge."

She had meant to impress on them that they'd better not mess things up or she'd take a stick to them, but before the discussion could go any further, a woman with short black hair, in the livery of House Mitsobar, entered without knocking, which Nynaeve thought rude no matter what Elayne said was proper for servants. Her dress was white, the skirt sewn up to the knee on the left side to expose a green petticoat, with a snug bodice embroidered on the left breast with a green Anchor and Sword. Even the livery's narrow neckline plunged as far as Nynaeve recalled. Plump and somewhere in her middle years, the woman hesitated, then curtsied and addressed herself to everyone. "Queen Tylin wishes to see the new Aes Sedai, if it pleases them."

Nynaeve exchanged wondering looks with Elayne and the others.

"Who told you that we were Aes Sedai?" Keestis asked, a little warily. They'd been happy enough to pretend to be Aes Sedai since beginning their hunt for the Black Ajah, but Cavandra knew the truth. None of them wanted to see the explosion that would surely come of her seeing Accepted pretend to that title.

The servant looked confused. "I was directed to this apartment ... Aes Sedai." The pause was barely long enough to notice and the woman just missed turning the title into a question.

Elayne rose, smoothing her skirts. "It would not do to keep the Queen waiting. Shall we go, then? Nynaeve?"

"Oh, I would not miss it," Nynaeve told her. "It will be good to finally meet someone who thinks ..." She could not finish it with the maid there. "We should not keep the Queen waiting."

"Oh, no," the liveried woman said. "It'd be as much as my ears are worth."

However much her ears were worth, it took some time to walk through the palace corridors. As though to make up for all the white outside, the palace was full of colour. In one corridor the ceiling was painted green and the walls blue, in another the walls were yellow and the ceiling pale rose. The floor tiles were diamonds of red and black and white, or blue and yellow, or almost any combination in any shade. There were very few tapestries, usually scenes of the sea, but a good many tall vases of golden Sea Folk porcelain stood in arched niches, and also large pieces of carved crystal, statuettes and vases and bowls, that caught Elayne's eye as well as Nynaeve's.

Of course servants scurried about everywhere, the men's version of the livery entailing white breeches and a long green vest over a white shirt with wide, pleated sleeves, but before they had gone very far Nynaeve saw someone striding toward them who made her stop and catch Elayne's arm. He was unknown to her, but the red shepherd's crook that clasped his white cloak was not. She did not take her eyes off the tall greying man as he strode on past them, those cruel eyes never turning in their direction, white cloak spreading behind him. Sweat covered his face, but he ignored it as he ignored them.

"What are *they* doing here?" Nynaeve demanded.

The serving woman looked at her quizzically. "Why, the Children of the Light sent an embassy, months gone. The Queen ... Aes Sedai?" Again, that hesitation.

Elayne managed to nod graciously, but Nynaeve could not blank the asperity from her own voice. "Then we should not keep her waiting." One thing Cavandra had let slip about this Tylin was that she was a punctilious woman, stiffly formal.

The others kept as close an eye on the Whitecloak as Nynaeve did as they moved on. She noticed how Emara walked so close to Keestis of a sudden. She'd been doing that whenever she felt threatened lately, ever since learning how Temaile Kinderode had died. Even so, no sullen suspicions emanated from her pillow-friend Ronelle. That was good. If there was one thing Nynaeve would not put up with, it was women fighting over nonsense.

The serving woman left them in a large room with a pale blue ceiling and yellow walls, where a row of tall triple-arched windows gave onto a long wrought-iron balcony and let in a quite comfortable salty breeze, and before the Queen Nynaeve and the others made their curtsies, proper for Aes Sedai to ruler, a slight dip, a tiny bow of the head.

Tylin was a most impressive woman. No taller than Nynaeve, she stood with a regal bearing that Elayne would have had to strain to match on her best day. She should have replied to their

courtesies with the same, but she did not. Instead her large black eyes examined them with imperious intensity.

Nynaeve returned the favour as well as she could. Waves of glossy black hair, grey at the temples, hung well below Tylin's shoulders, framing a face that was handsome if not unlined. Shockingly, there were two scars on the woman's cheeks, fine and so old they had all but vanished. Of course, she did have one of those curved knives stuck through a belt of woven gold, with hilt and scabbard encrusted in gems, Nynaeve was sure it must be for show. Tylin's blue silk dress was certainly nothing anyone could wear fighting a duel, with falls of snowy lace that would nearly hide her fingers if she lowered her hands, and skirts drawn up above her knees in front to expose layers of green and white silk petticoats and trailing behind her a pace or more. The bodice, trimmed in the same lace, was snug enough that Nynaeve was not sure whether sitting in it or standing would be more uncomfortable. A collar of woven gold fastened around the gown's high neck, which put more lace under her chin, supported a white-sheathed marriage knife hanging hilt-down into an oval cut-out that easily equalled any of those deep necklines.

"So you are the new arrivals." Tylin took a chair carved to resemble bamboo, though covered in gilt, and arranged her skirts carefully without taking her eyes from them. Her voice was deep, melodious and commanding. "I understand there is another woman in your company. Areku?"

Nynaeve exchanged glances with Elayne. There had been no invitation for them to sit, not so much as a flicker of eyes toward a chair. "She is not Aes Sedai," Elayne began calmly.

Tylin spoke before she could say more. "And you are? You've seen eighteen winters at most." Her dark eyes fastened on Nynaeve. "And you, staring at me like a cat with its tail caught, how many have you seen? Twenty-two? Twenty-three perhaps? Stab my liver! I visited Tar Valon once, and the White Tower. I doubt any woman your age has ever worn that ring on her right hand."

"Twenty-four!" Nynaeve snapped. With a good part of the Women's Circle back in Emond's Field thinking she was too young to be Wisdom, it had become habit with her to flourish every naming day she could claim.

"And these others look no older. Yet you wear the Great Serpent ring and the Aes Sedai in the palace have not gutted you like fish yet, so you are women of the White Tower, at least. More of them, here where we rarely saw anyone but Cavandra. Why, I wonder."

"I do not think it would be appropriate for us to explain, Your Grace," Shimoku said with a small bow.

"Even when a guest in my home?" Tylin pressed. "When the Aes Sedai who counselled me from the day I took the throne, and my mother before me, abruptly announces her intention to leave for the Tower without explanation, and I then hear rumours of a Tower divided; when Dragonsworn seem to spring out of the ground; and credible tales of the Stone of Tear's fall reach my ears, when all of that has happened, you cannot expect me to be enamoured of surprises. And when Aes Sedai gather in your palace and see fit to stare murder at each other, a wise woman seeks answers."

"There are two groups?" If that was so then some of the Aes Sedai here were certain to be opposed to Elaida, just as she'd hoped. The others were looking at her. Nynaeve hoped her face did not look as sickly as she felt. Why could she not learn to hold her tongue occasionally?

"Are the rumours true, then? Aes Sedai can conceal much and well, but when even they stand so plainly opposed to each other, one could not help but wonder." Tylin shook her head, though she looked rather less horrified by the thought of the White Tower at odds with itself, and representatives of both sides in her palace, than Nynaeve would have expected.

Elayne looked impressed as well. "With Cavandra leaving for the Tower, you might be alarmed. But let me assure you that the Three Oaths still hold true. Whatever the differences they may or may not have, those Aes Sedai are no threat to Altara."

Tylin stared at her, unblinking. "I have heard no word of reassurance until yours. Not even from Cavandra." Taking a deep breath, she gestured, lace waving. "Sit, sit. All of you sit. Lean back on your knife and let your tongue go free." Her sudden smile was very close to a grin. "I don't know how you say it in Andor. Be at ease, and speak your mind as you wish."

Nynaeve was glad that Elayne's blue eyes widened in surprise, because she herself gasped aloud. This was the woman who Cavandra had claimed required ceremony carved in polished marble? Nynaeve was more than glad to take a chair. She wondered whether Tylin was trying to ... to what?

She had come to expect everyone who was not a close friend to try manipulating her. Elayne sat on the very front of her chair, and stiffly.

"I mean what I say," Tylin insisted. "Whatever you say, I will hear no insult." From the way her fingers tapped the jewelled hilt at her waist, though, silence might be heard as one.

"I am not certain where to begin," Nynaeve said carefully. She did wish Elayne had not actually nodded at that; Elayne was supposed to know how to handle kings and queens. Why did she not say something?

"With why," the Queen said impatiently. "Why do six more Aes Sedai come to Ebou Dar? Is it to bolster Elaida's embassy? Teslyn does not even call it that, but there are only her and Joline ... The others from Salidar outnumber them."

She remembered Teslyn slightly; a Red, and an unpleasant woman. But more importantly: "Salidar?" She exchanged looks with the others, but none of them knew the name.

"You did not know?" Falling back in her chair laughing, Tylin pressed the fingers of one hand to her lips. "Do you know about the Whitecloaks? Yes?" Her free hand made a slashing gesture, and her mirth began to subside in small ripples. "That for Whitecloaks! But I must listen to all who court me, Lord Inquisitors as well as the others."

"But why?" Nynaeve demanded. "I am glad you don't like Whitecloaks, but in that case, why must you listen to a word they say? They are butchers." She knew she had made another mistake. The way Elayne suddenly seemed to be studying the broad white fireplace, where the deep lintel was carved into towering waves, told her that even before the last vestige of Tylin's laughter snuffed out like a candle.

"You take me at my word," the Queen said quietly. "I said let your tongue go free, and ..." Those dark eyes went to the floor tiles, and she seemed to be gathering herself.

Nynaeve looked to Elayne, hoping for some hint of what she had done wrong, or better, how to make it right, but Elayne only gave her one sideways glance and the smallest shake of her head before returning to her study of the marble waves. Maybe she should avoid looking at Tylin, too? Yet the woman staring at the floor drew her eyes. With one hand Tylin stroked the hilt of her curved dagger, with the other fingered the smaller hilt nestled between her breasts.

The marriage dagger told quite a lot about Tylin; Nynaeve had learned a fair bit about the city during her stay. The white sheath meant the Queen was widowed and did not intend to remarry. The four pearls and one firedrop set in the gold-wrapped hilt said she had borne four sons and one daughter; the white-enamelled setting of the firedrop and the red-enamelled of three of the pearls said only one son survived. All had been at least sixteen when they died, and died in duels, or the settings would have been black. What must it be like to constantly carry a reminder of that sort! According to what she'd been told, women saw a red or white setting as a source of pride, whether her stones were pearls and firedrops or coloured glass. Apparently, many Ebou Dari women removed the stones of their children past sixteen who refused a duel, and never acknowledged them again.

At long last Tylin raised her head. Her face was pleasant, and her hand left the dagger in her belt, but she continued to finger the marriage knife absently. "I want my son to follow me on the Throne of the Winds," she said mildly. "Beslan is your age, Elayne. Were he a woman, this would be a matter of course in any other land, but it would be difficult here even if he wasn't male." She actually grinned, in apparently genuine amusement. "In the thousand years since Artur Hawkwing, only one House has held the throne for five generations, and Anarina's fall was so precipitous that to this day House Todande is a lapdog for anyone who wants them. No other House has ever had more than two rulers in succession.

"When my mother took the throne, other Houses had more of the city itself than Mitsobar. Had she stepped outside this palace without guards, she would have been sewn into a sack with rocks and tossed into the river. When she died, she gave me what I have now. Small, compared to other rulers. A man riding fresh horses could reach the end of my writ in one day's hard ride. I have not been idle, though. When news of the Dragon Reborn came, I was certain I could hand on to Beslan twice what I hold, and allies of a sort beyond that. The Stone of Tear and *Callandor* changed everything. Now I thank Pedron Niall when he arranges for Illian to take a hundred-mile swathe of Altara instead of invading. I listen to his emissary, and I do not spit in his eye, however many Altarans died in the Whitecloak War. I listen to him, and to Teslyn, and to Merilille, and I pray that I

can pass something to my son instead of being found drowned in my bath on the day Beslan meets with an accident hunting.”

Emara hung her head of the news of Illian expansion, though in worry instead of shame. She’d been trying to get in contact with her family there since arriving in Ebou Dar, but hadn’t succeeded. Wondering whether they’d gotten away from Sammael’s fief kept her up at night and put bags under her eyes that were making her look a fair bit less child-like than usual.

Tylin noticed her reaction but did not comment. Instead, she drew a long breath. The pleasant face remained, but an edge entered her voice. “Now. I have stood bare-breasted in the fishmarket for you. Answer me mine. Why do I have the honour of six more Aes Sedai?”

“We were away from the Tower on a mission. We heard about the Aes Sedai here and wanted to take counsel with them before deciding where to go next,” said Elayne. “You mentioned Salidar earlier. May I ask where that is?”

“It is a village here in Altara.”

“How many women have gathered there?”

But Tylin shook her head. “Aes Sedai never tell a word more than they absolutely must.” Once again that sudden grin flashed; it looked quite merry, though it did make her scars show as thin lines across her cheeks. “Until you, at least. May the years not change you too much. I often wish I could talk with Cavandra this way.” Standing, she motioned them to remain seated and glided across the room to tap a silver gong with an ivory mallet; it produced quite a loud chime for such a small cylinder. “I will send for cool mint tea, and we will talk.”

A goodly time passed over tea and talk, and Beslan was brought in, a soft-spoken youth who bowed respectfully and stared with beautiful black eyes that perhaps held relief when his mother said he could go. He certainly never doubted they were Aes Sedai. It wasn’t long after that the rest of them also took their leave of the queen. As they were finding their way back to their apartments through the brightly painted corridors, the Accepted clustered close.

“So there *are* rebels, and they are gathering in Salidar,” Nynaeve murmured, glancing about to make sure none of the liveried servants was close enough to hear. Tylin had known too much about them too soon. And however she grinned, she had been upset over the Aes Sedai in Salidar.

Shimoku sigh was as soft as her voice. “I can hardly believe it. That the Tower would be divided at all seems impossible. But that it would be divided now, when the world needs it most? Ragan will be so disappointed. He was sure his Lord Dragon was being overly suspicious and that the White Tower would soon declare for him.”

“We have more important things to worry about than your boyfriend’s feelings,” Ronelle scoffed. The slimmer girl’s frown moved her no more than a shove would have.

“At least we’re relatively safe here,” said Keestis. “Elaida’s embassy is small, and Tylin is friendly. Speaking of overly suspicious.”

Nynaeve glared at her. And she wasn’t about to let her hide behind that strange contraption on her face either, no matter how hard it made it get a proper look at the woman’s eyes. Suspicious! She had good reason to be suspicious. Honestly, some women just loved to complain.

And others just loved to flap their lips. With Keestis pretending she still couldn’t see right, she turned her glare on the Daughter-Heir. “Elayne, do you think it was wise to tell Tylin everything? She might decide the best way to make sure that boy gets the throne is to sell us to Elaida.”

“I know how my mother felt about Aes Sedai travelling about Andor, never letting her know what they were doing. I know how I would feel. Besides, I finally remembered being taught about that phrase—lean back on your knife and the rest. The only way to insult somebody who says that to you is to lie.”

“Well. At least it went both ways. We got our answers at last. Now we just need to decide what to do next. Which we should do in our rooms, away from any sneakers.” A lanky serving man saw her glaring at him and let the vase he’d been dusting slip from his hands. Despite his last ditch effort to catch it, the fine porcelain shattered against the hard tiles. Nynaeve winced at the sound. You could probably have bought a cottage in Emond’s Field for the price of that thing. She winced even harder when she saw the blood on the man’s hand, where a flying shard had cut him.

“Agreed. Let’s hurry back,” Keestis said.

“Go on ahead. I’ll catch up,” Nynaeve said, still looking at the man.

Elayne was smiling for some reason. “See you soon.”

The man didn't look particularly happy to be left alone with her, but Nynaeve refused to let that get to her. "Stand still and hold out your hand, you clumsy oaf," she told him kindly.

He made a strangled sound that might have been intended as a reply. Sniffing loudly, she grabbed him by the arm and embraced *saidar*, allowing the One Power to flow into her. Gathering the five elements together, she spun a healing weave that almost instantly caused his cut to close over. There was nothing she could do about the broken vase, however. The serving man shivered, but whether it was for that or for being Healed by someone he thought was an Aes Sedai she could not say. And refused to care.

"Be more careful in future," she told him.

He was still trembling. "As you say, Aaes ... Sedai."

"Aes Sedai?" a woman said behind her in a heavy Illianer accent. "If you do seek two Aes Sedai, you have found two."

The man's face did not change, or almost not. His nearly black eyes darted past her, and she was sure they tightened with worry.

Nynaeve tried to make her face as blank as Moiraine's would be before turning around.

The two women confronting her could not have been more different. One was slender, with large brown eyes and a knowing smile, wearing a green-and-gold dress that showed too much bosom. Her pretty face had the ageless quality that supposedly marked her as an experienced channeler, a quality that had been notably missing from those fools the Anan woman had introduced them to. Elayne wasn't the only one to wonder over that. The other had the agelessness, too, but seeing it took her a moment. She thought she was scowling until she realized that must be her normal expression. Her dark, almost black, dress covered her to the wrists and chin but that didn't hide that she was as scrawny as an old bramble. She looked as if she ate brambles for breakfast. It took Nynaeve only a moment to recognise her. Teslyn. One of Elaida's cronies.

"I wasn't seeking anyone," she told them. "This man cut him—" She blinked, looking down each of the corridors. Shards still littered the floor, and servants hurried by, but the man was nowhere in sight. She would not have thought he could move so fast.

"We felt you channel, Accepted," the pretty one said. "I am Joline, and this is Teslyn. And you are Nynaeve al'Meara."

Teslyn stepped closer. She was a Sitter, though what a Sitter was doing here Nynaeve could not guess. They almost never left Tar Valon. "We would be your friends if we could. You do need friends, Nynaeve." Her eyes tried to dig holes in her head.

Joline moved to flank her, laying a hand on her shoulder. Her smile was much too friendly. "You and your friends are on dangerous ground and blind to what lies beneath your feet. It is good that you came to us. Whatever reason the former Amyrlin had for letting you run loose, it is over now. You must abandon this nonsense before it is too late. Foolish children who go too far can find themselves punished quite severely."

Nynaeve wanted to back away; even Teslyn stood close enough to be almost touching her. Instead she stood as tall as she could. "You should listen to your own advice. Putting Elaida in charge, knowing the Dragon is Reborn. You'd have to be a stone-blind fool not to realise that's a recipe for disaster." Joline's smile vanished, but Teslyn replaced it with one of her own, a razored smile.

"We do know about you, Nynaeve." She looked a woman who wanted to skin something, and whoever was handy would do. "Powerful, it do be said. With dangerous associations of your own. That do be more than hearsay."

Joline's face was ice. "A young woman in your position who wished to be assured of her future could do much worse than seek the protection of the Amyrlin. You should never have left the White Tower."

Nynaeve was stronger in the Power than either woman, and she had her friends nearby besides, but none of that dented that smug Aes Sedai superiority in the slightest. She ground her teeth. Maybe if she took their test and became one herself, it would shut them all up. Abruptly she was yanked away from them so hard that she stumbled and nearly fell. A stout woman with a smooth coppery face and black hair had her by the sleeve and collar. Reflexively Teslyn seized her the same way on the other side. Nynaeve didn't recognise the newcomer in her dark green dress, but her attempt to pull away did no good at all. The woman could have rivalled Alsbet Luhhan. She and Teslyn stared at one another, chill and serene, two cats with a paw on the same mouse.

"Are you trying to tear my dress?" she growled. She was not sure they heard.

Two other Aes Sedai accompanied whichever sister it was. Nynaeve knew one of them; a snooty Andoran Yellow named Bastilla who might have looked at home in the Theren if her eyes had been brown instead of blue. She'd seen fit to approach Bastilla when she'd first gone to the Tower, and even made herself be polite about it, but all she'd gotten was a chiding about how she should not have been allowed to skip over her Novice training, not matter how strong. Nothing that had happened since had lessened the look of superiority on that long face of hers.

"Do you stoop to kidnapping girls in the halls now, Teslyn?" the other Aes Sedai said. Short and pale in lace-trimmed grey slashed with blue, she was all cool ageless elegance and confident smile. A Cairhienin accent identified her.

A man could have shaved with Teslyn's return smile. "Do no dissemble with me, Merilille. This Accepted do be of considerable interest. She should no be running loose." As if she was not standing there listening!

"I'll wager I've done more while running loose these past months than you have in all the years before. Unhand me!"

Five sets of unfriendly eyes fell on her. Neither of the Aes Sedai released her, and when she pulled a little harder, the unnamed Domani jerked back hard.

"What she needs," Joline said firmly, "is to be taken into custody. For her own protection, and more. Three *ta'veren* coming out of a single village? And one of them the Dragon Reborn? Young Nynaeve is from that same village, and tied to them."

Merilille only shook her head. "You overestimate your situation here, Joline, if you think I will simply allow you to take the girl."

"You overestimate yours, Merilille." Joline stepped closer, until she was looking down at the other woman. Her lips curved, superior and condescending. "Or do you understand that it's only a wish not to offend Tylin that keeps us from confining all of you on bread and water until you can be returned to the Tower?"

Nynaeve expected Merilille to laugh in her face, but she shifted her head slightly as if she really wanted to break away from Joline's gaze.

"I might have something to say about that, Joline," Bastilla said. Her eyes did not reflect her voice's calm.

"You can hardly expect us to go meekly," Merilille told Joline firmly, "and there are three of us."

Joline arched an eyebrow at the woman playing tug of war with Teslyn. "Careane here counts as one of us, it is true. Though barely."

The grip on her arm tightened painfully, though it was no longer Nynaeve than Careane was looking at. It was hard to tell with so many women so close, but she could still get a slight sense of their strengths and she suspected that Careane was the weakest. In the Power, anyway. Teslyn's bony fingers did not loosen their grip any more than Careane's, but she studied Joline and Merilille with an unreadable expression. There were deep currents here, and Nynaeve privately wished Elayne had not gone back to their rooms so soon.

"Well, if strength in the Power is what matters to you then you picked the wrong woman to manhandle. Get off me. I'm not a loaf of bread for you to fight over. And if you think acting otherwise will make me join your side, think again."

The Aes Sedai looked at her, all of them, but she refused to fidget; then the two groups stared at one another as if trying to see who could out-Aes Sedai who. And then they looked at her. She wondered whether anybody was going to move.

"Release her, Careane," Merilille said finally.

The woman complied with poor grace, though not so poor as Teslyn's. The grim Red still had hold of her with both hands. She peered at her, ignoring everyone else.

Merilille opened her mouth and hesitated, obviously changing what she had been going to say. "How long do you intend to stand here holding her, Teslyn? Perhaps you will explain to Tylin why you were wrestling in her hallway."

"Consider well who you do tie yourself to, Nynaeve al'Meara," Teslyn said, still looking only at her. "Wrong choices can lead to an unpleasant future. Consider well." Then she let go.

"I will," Nynaeve growled. But it would have been more accurate to say she had. She made a great show of adjusting her dress, and found that being used as a rope had all but ruined it; she'd have to get out a needle and thread later, though she doubted she could replicate the skill of the seamstress who'd made it. Careane was as responsible as Teslyn for that, and her thoughts of her and her sisters were far from warm, but they had to be better than Elaida's cronies.

Once she was done, she divided a scowl equally and fairly between them all, and then stalked off. Now all that remained was to convince Elayne and the others to see things the right way. Her way.

\* \* \*

The apartments Joline shared with Teslyn were quite spacious, including a bedchamber for each of them, plus one apiece for their maids and another that would have done quite well for Blaeric and Fen, if Teslyn could have stood to have her Warders with them. The woman saw every man as a potentially rabid wolf, and there was no gainsaying her when she truly wanted something. As inexorable as Elaida, she ground down whatever lay in her path. They stood as equals in every real way, certainly, but not many managed to prevail over Teslyn without a clear advantage. She was at the writing table in the sitting room when Joline entered, her pen making an awful *scritch-scritch*. She was always parsimonious with the ink.

Without a word, Joline swept by her and out onto the balcony, a long cage of white-painted iron. The scrollwork was so tight that the men working in the garden three stories below would have a difficult time seeing that there was anyone within. Flowers in this region ordinarily thrived in heat, wild colours to outshine the interior of the palace, but nothing bloomed down there. Gardeners moved along the gravel walks with buckets of water, yet nearly every leaf was yellow or brown. She would not have admitted it under torture, but the heat made her afraid. She had grown up in Mayene, every bit as far south as this, but the summers of her childhood had never been this hot. It could just be strange weather, it could. But with the stories coming out of Tear ... what if it was something worse? The Dark One could be touching the world, and their only hope a boy who was running wild.

"Bread and water?" Teslyn said suddenly. "Send the al'Meara girl off to the Tower? If there do be changes in what we did plan, you will please inform me before telling others."

Joline felt a touch of heat in her cheeks. "Merilille needed to be set down. She lectured when I was a Novice." So had Teslyn; a severe teacher who held her classes with an iron grip. Just the way she spoke was a reminder, a marked warning not to go against her, equal or not. Merilille, though, stood lower. "She used to make us stand in front of the class, and she would dig and dig for the answer she wanted, until we stood there in front of everyone, weeping with frustration. She pretended to sympathize, or perhaps she really did, but the more she patted us and told us not to cry, the worse it was." She cut off abruptly. She had not intended to say all that. It was Teslyn's fault, always looking at her as if she were about to be upbraided for a spot on her dress. But she should understand; Merilille had taught her, too.

"You have remembered that all this time?" Stark incredulity painted Teslyn's voice. "The sisters who did teach us did only do their duty. Sometimes I do think what Elaida did say of you do be right." The annoying *scritch-scritch* resumed.

"It ... simply came to mind when Merilille began as if she were truly an ambassador." Instead of a rebel. Joline frowned at the garden. She despised every one of those women who had broken the White Tower, and flaunted the break before all the world. Them and anyone who aided them. But Elaida had blundered too, horribly. The sisters who were rebels now could have been reconciled, with a little effort. "What did she say of me? Teslyn?" The sound of the pen continued, like fingernails scraping across a slate. Joline went back inside. "What did Elaida say?"

Teslyn laid another sheet atop her letter, either to blot or to shield it from Joline's eyes, but she did not answer immediately. She scowled at Joline—or perhaps just looked; it was difficult to say with her at times—and at last sighed. "Very well. If you must know. She did say you still do be a child."

"A child?" Joline's shock had no effect on the other woman.

"Some," Teslyn said calmly, "do change little from the day they do put on Novice white. Some do change no at all. Elaida does believe you have no grown up yet and never will."

Joline tossed her head angrily, unwilling to let herself speak. To have that said by someone whose mother had been a child when she herself gained the shawl! Elaida had been petted too much as a Novice, made over too much for her strength and the remarkable speed of her learning. Joline suspected that was why she was in such a fury about Elayne and the wilder Nynaeve because they were stronger than she, because they had spent far less time as Novices, no matter that they had been pushed ahead too fast. Why, Nynaeve had never been a Novice at all, and that was completely unheard of.

“Since you did bring it up,” Teslyn went on, “perhaps we should try to take advantage of the situation.”

“What do you mean?” Embracing the True Source, Joline channelled Air to lift the silver pitcher on the turquoise-inlaid side table and fill a silver goblet with punch. As always, the joy of embracing *saidar* thrilled her, soothing even as it exhilarated.

“It do be obvious, I should think. Elaida’s orders do still stand. Elayne and Nynaeve are to be returned to the Tower as soon as found. I did agree to wait, but perhaps we should wait no longer. The two will put us back in Elaida’s good graces, and if we can add the Cauthon boy … I do think those three will make her welcome us as if we did come with al’Thor himself.”

“Mat isn’t with them,” she said. She managed to keep her face from heating—could a child have done that?—but inside she seethed. That one of her Warders had dared to run away would be something the rest of her Ajah would never let her forget, should it ever become public knowledge that she’d bonded him. She knew he was somewhere far to the east but it was not only Elaida’s orders that kept her from pursuing him and bringing him to heel. Al’Thor ruled to the east, and Mat knew him well. She hoped never to meet the Dragon Reborn.

“How do you know?” Teslyn asked, her dark eyes intent.

She shrugged casually. “He is not a quiet boy. If he was in the city, our eyes and ears would have reported it.”

The goblet floated into Joline’s hand on Air, and she reluctantly released the Power. She had never lost the ardour she felt the first time she touched the Source. Dewmelon punch was a poor substitute for *saidar*. The worst part of her penance before leaving the Tower had been losing the right to touch *saidar*. Almost the worst part. She had set it all herself, but Elaida had made it clear that if she did not make it harsh, Elaida would. She had no doubt the result would have been much worse, then. “Her good graces? Teslyn, she humiliated us for no more reason than to show the others that she could. She sent us to this fly-ridden hole as far from everything important as she could, short of the other side of the Aryth Ocean, ambassadors to a queen with less power than a dozen of her own nobles, any one of whom could snatch the throne from her tomorrow if they could be bothered to. And you want to wheedle your way back into Elaida’s favour?”

“She do be the Amyrlin Seat.” Teslyn touched the letter with the page lying atop it, moving the sheets a bit this way then a bit that, as if framing her thoughts. “Remaining silent for a time did let her know we are no lap-dogs, but remaining silent too long could be seen as treason.”

Joline sniffed. “Ridiculous! When those girls are all returned they’ll only be punished for running away, and now for pretending to be full sisters.” Her mouth tightened. They were all guilty there, but it made a sharp difference when one of them claimed her own Ajah. By the time the Green Ajah finished with Elayne for that, it would be a very chastened young woman indeed who took the throne of Andor. Though it might be best if Elayne secured the Lion Throne first. Her training had to be completed, either way. Joline did not intend to see Elayne lost to the Tower, whatever she had done.

“And if they do join with the rebels like those others?”

“Light, Teslyn, those girls were probably scooped up without even knowing what was going on. If an Aes Sedai told them to come with her, they would do it without question. You know that. Anyway, does it really matter a whit whether they begin mucking out stalls tomorrow or next year?” That was surely as much as the Novices and Accepted with the rebels would have to face. “Even the Ajahs can wait to have them in hand, really. It is not as if they aren’t safe. They are Accepted, after all, and they certainly seem content to stay where we can reach them whenever we choose. I say, let us sit where Elaida put us, and continue to fold our hands and hold our tongues. Until she asks nicely to find out what we are doing.” She did not say that she was prepared to wait until Elaida found herself deposed as Siuan had been. The Hall surely would not put up with the bullying and bungling forever, but Teslyn was Red, after all, and would not appreciate hearing that.

"I suppose there do be no urgency," Teslyn said slowly, the unspoken "but" all but shouting itself.

Drawing a ball-footed chair to the table with another flow of Air, she settled herself to convincing her companion that silence remained the best policy. Still a child, was she? If Joline Maza had her way, Elaida would not get so much as a word out of Ebou Dar until she begged for it.

## *CHAPTER 43: A Hound of Darkness*



Liandrin guided her horse through the crowded streets of Amador, the sneer on her rosebud lips hidden by her deep, curving bonnet. She had hated to give up her multitude of braids, and hated even more the ludicrous fashions of this ludicrous land; the reddish yellow of hat and riding dress she rather liked, but not the large velvet bows on both. Still, the bonnet hid her eyes—combined with honey-yellow hair, brown eyes would have named her Taraboner in an instant—and it hid what would have been even worse to show here, an Aes Sedai's face. Safely hidden, she could smirk at the Whitecloaks, who seemed to be every fifth man in the streets. Not that the soldiers who made another fifth would have been any better. None of them ever thought to look inside the bonnet, of course. Aes Sedai were outlawed here, and that meant there were none.

Even so, she felt a little better when she turned in at the elaborate iron gates in front of Jorin Arene's house. Another fruitless trip looking for word from the White Tower; there had been nothing since she had learned that Elaida thought she was in control of the Tower, and that the Sanche woman had been disposed of. Siuan had escaped, true, but she was a useless rag now.

The gardens behind the grey stone fence were full of plants going rather brown from lack of rain, but trimmed and trained into cubes and balls, though one was shaped like a leaping horse. Only one, of course. Merchants like Arene mimicked their betters, but they dared not go too far lest someone think their conceit too high. Elaborate balconies decorated the large wooden house with its red-tiled roofs, and even a colonnade of carved columns, but unlike the lord's dwelling it was meant to copy, it stood on a stone foundation no more than ten feet tall. A childish pretence at a noble's manor.

The stringy, grey-haired man who scurried out deferentially to hold her stirrup while she dismounted, and take her reins, was clad all in black. Whatever colours a merchant chose for livery, they were sure to be some real lord's colours, and even a minor lord could cause trouble for the richest seller of goods. People in the streets called black "merchant's livery", and snickered when they said it. Liandrin despised the groom's black coat as much as she did Arene's house and Arene himself. She would have true manors, one day. Palaces. They had been promised to her, and the power that went with them.

Stripping off her riding gloves, she stalked up the ridiculous ramp that slanted along the foundations to the vine-carved front doors. The lords' fortress manors had ramps, so of course a merchant who thought well of himself could not have steps. A black-clad young serving girl took gloves and hat in the round entrance hall, with its many doors and carved and brightly painted columns and its encircling balcony. The ceiling was lacquered in imitation of a mosaic, stars within stars in gold and black. "I will have my bath in one hour," she told the woman. "It will be the proper temperature this time, yes?" The maid went pale as she curtsied, stammering agreement before scurrying away.

Amelia Arene, Jorin's wife, came through one of the doors deep in conversation with a fat balding man in a spotless white apron. Liandrin breathed contemptuously. The woman had pretensions, yet she not only spoke to the cook herself, she brought the man out of his kitchens to discuss meals. She treated the servant like—like a friend!

Fat Evon saw her first and gulped, his piggy eyes darting away immediately. She did not like men looking at her, and she had spoken sharply to him on her first day here about the way his gaze sometimes lingered. He had tried to deny it, but she knew men's vile habits. Without waiting to be dismissed by his mistress, Evon all but ran back the way he had come.

The greying merchant's wife had been a stern-faced woman when Liandrin and the others came. Now she licked her lips and smoothed her bow-draped green silk needlessly. "There is someone upstairs with the others, my lady," she said diffidently. She had thought that she could use Liandrin's name that first day. "In the front withdrawing room. From Tar Valon, I believe."

Wondering who it could be, Liandrin started for the nearest of the curving staircases. She knew few others of the Black Ajah, of course, for safety's sake; what others did not know, they could not betray. In the Tower she had known only one of the twelve who went with her when she left. Five of the twelve were dead, and she knew at whose feet to lay the blame. Nynaeve al'Meara, Elayne Trakand and their lackeys. Everything had gone so badly in Tanchico in some small part due to those upstart Accepted, despite their being fools who had twice walked tamely into traps she had set. That they had escaped each was of no consequence. The next time she found them, they would never escape anything again. She would be done with them whatever her orders.

"My lady," Amelia stammered. "My husband, my lady. Jorin. Please, will one of you help him? He did not mean it, my lady. He has learned his lesson."

Liandrin paused with one hand on the carved banister, looking back over her shoulder. "He should not have thought that his oaths to the Great Lord could be conveniently forgotten, no?"

"He *has* learned, my lady. Please. He lies beneath blankets all day—in this heat—shivering. He weeps when anyone touches him, or speaks above a whisper."

Liandrin paused as if considering, then nodded graciously. "I will ask Chesmal to see what she can do. Yet you understand that I make no promises." The woman's unsteady thanks followed her up, but she paid them no mind. Marillin had been careless. She had been Brown Ajah before becoming Black, and she still lacked focus. Chesmal said he might be able to do small tasks in a few months, so long as they were not too hard and no-one raised a voice. She had been one of the best Healers in generations among the Yellow, so she should know.

The front withdrawing room startled her when she went in. Six of the remaining seven Black sisters who had come with her stood around the room against the carved and painted panelling, though there were plenty of silk-cushioned chairs on the gold-fringed carpet. The seventh, Ispan Shefar, was handing a delicate porcelain cup of tea to a dark-haired, sturdily handsome woman in a bronze-coloured gown of unfamiliar cut. The seated woman looked vaguely familiar, though she was not Aes Sedai; she was plainly approaching her middle years, and despite smooth cheeks there was nothing of agelessness about her.

Yet the mood made Liandrin cautious. Ispan was deceptively fragile in appearance, with big, childlike brown eyes that made people trust her; those eyes appeared worried now, or uneasy, and the teacup rattled on the saucer before the other woman took it. Every face looked uneasy, except that of the oddly familiar woman. Coppery-skinned Jeaine Caide, in one of those disgusting Domani garments that she wore inside the house, had tears still glistening on her cheeks; she had been a Green, and liked flaunting herself in front of men even more than most Greens. Rianna Andomeran, once White and always a coldly arrogant killer, nervously kept touching the pale streak in her black hair above her left ear. Her arrogance had been flattened.

"What has happened here?" Liandrin demanded. "Who are you, and what—?" Suddenly the memory flashed into her head. A Darkfriend, a servant in Tanchico who had continually gotten above herself. "Gyldin!" she snapped. This servant had followed them in some fashion and obviously was trying to pass herself off as a Black courier with some dire news. "You have overstepped yourself too far this time." She reached to embrace *saidar*, yet even as she did the glow surrounded the other woman, and Liandrin's reach ran into a thick invisible wall shutting her away from the Source. It hung there like the sun, tantalizingly out of reach.

"Stop gaping, Liandrin," the woman said calmly. "You look like a fish. It is not Gyldin, but Moghedien. This tea needs more honey, Ispan." The slender, dark-skinned woman darted to take the cup, breathing heavily.

It had to be so. Who else could have so cowed the others? Liandrin looked at them standing around the walls. They seemed afraid to twitch. Why one of the Forsaken—they were not supposed to use that name, but usually did, among themselves—why Moghedien would have masqueraded as a servant, she could not understand. The woman had or could have everything that she herself wanted. Not just knowledge of the One Power beyond her dreams, but power. Power over others, power over the world. And immortality. Power for a lifetime that would never end. She and her sisters had speculated on dissension among the Forsaken; there had been orders at odds with each other, and orders given to other Darkfriends at odds with theirs. Perhaps Moghedien had been hiding from the rest of the Forsaken.

Liandrin spread her divided riding skirts as best she could in a deep curtsy. "We welcome you, Great Mistress. With the Chosen to lead us, we shall surely triumph before the Day of the Great Lord's Return."

"Nicely said," Moghedien said dryly, taking the cup back from Ispan. "Yes, this is much better." Ispan looked absurdly grateful, and relieved. What had Moghedien done?

Suddenly a thought came to Liandrin, an unwelcome one. She had treated one of the Chosen as a servant. "Great Mistress, in Tanchico I did not know that you—"

"Of course you did not," Moghedien said irritably. "What good to bide my time in the shadows if you and these others knew me?" Abruptly a small smile appeared on her lips; it touched nothing else. "Are you worried about those times you sent Gyldin to the cook to be beaten?" Sweat beaded suddenly on Liandrin's face. "Do you truly believe I would allow such a thing? The man no doubt reported to you, but he remembered what I wanted him to remember. He actually felt sorry for Gyldin, so cruelly treated by her mistress." That seemed to amuse her greatly. "He gave me some of the desserts that he made for you. It would not displease me if he still lives."

Liandrin drew a relieved breath. She would not die. "Great Mistress, there is no need to shield me. I also serve the Great Lord. I swore my oaths as a Darkfriend before ever I went to the White Tower. I sought the Black Ajah from the day that I knew that I could channel."

"So you will be the only one in this ill-ordered pack who does not need to learn who her mistress is?" Moghedien quirked an eyebrow. "I would not have thought it of you." The glow around her vanished. "I have tasks for you. For all of you. Whatever you have been doing, you will forget. You are an inept lot, as you proved in Tanchico. With my hand on the dog whip, perhaps you will hunt more successfully."

"We await orders from the Tower, Great Mistress," Liandrin said. Inept! They had almost found what they were hunting for in Tanchico, when the city exploded in riots; they had barely escaped destruction at the hands of those who had somehow wandered into the middle of their plan. Had Moghedien revealed herself, or even taken part on their behalf, they would have triumphed. If their failure was anyone's fault, it was Moghedien's herself. Liandrin reached toward the True Source, not to embrace it, but to be certain that the shield had not merely been tied off. It was gone. "We have been given great responsibilities, great works to perform, and surely we will be commanded to continue—"

Moghedien cut her off sharply. "You serve whichever of the Chosen chooses to snap you up. Whoever sends you orders from the White Tower, she takes her own from one of us now, and very likely grovels on her belly when she does. You will serve me, Liandrin. Be sure of it."

Moghedien did not know who headed the Black Ajah. It was a revelation. Moghedien did not know everything. Liandrin had always imagined the Forsaken as close to omnipotent, something far beyond ordinary mortals. Perhaps the woman truly was in flight from the other Forsaken. To hand her over to them would surely earn her a high place. She might even become one of them. She had a trick, learned in childhood. And she could touch the Source. "Great Mistress, we serve the Great Lord, as you do. We also were promised eternal life, and power, when the Great Lord re—"

"Do you think that you are my equal, little sister?" Moghedien grimaced in disgust. "Did you stand in the Pit of Doom to dedicate your soul to the Great Lord? Did you taste the sweetness of victory at Paaran Disen, or the bitter ashes at the Asar Don? You are a barely trained puppy, not the packmistress, and you will go where I point until I see fit to give you a better place. These others thought themselves more than they are, too. Do you wish to try your strength against me?"

"Of course not, Great Mistress." Not when she was forewarned and ready. "I—"

"You will do so sooner or later, and I prefer to put it out of the way now, in the beginning. Why do you think your companions look so cheerful? I have taught each of them the same lesson already today. I will not wonder when you must be taught, too. I will be done with it now. Try."

Licking her lips fearfully, Liandrin looked around at the women standing rigidly against the walls. Only Asne Zeramene so much as blinked; she shook her head ever so slightly. Asne's tilted eyes, high cheekbones and strong nose marked her Saldaean, and she had all the vaunted Saldaean boldness. If she counselled against, if her dark eyes held a tinge of fear, then it was surely best to grovel however much was needed to make Moghedien relent. And yet, there was her trick.

She went to her knees, head low, looking up at the Forsaken with a fear that was only partly feigned. Moghedien lounged in her chair, sipping the tea. "Great Mistress, I beg you to forgive me if

have presumed. I know that I am but a worm beneath your foot. I beg, as one who would be your faithful hound, for your mercy on this wretched dog.” Moghedien’s eyes dropped to her cup, and in a flash, while the words still tumbled from her mouth, Liandrin embraced the Source and channelled, seeking the crack that must be in the Forsaken’s confidence, the crack that was in everyone’s façade of strength.

Even as she lashed out, the light of *saidar* surrounded the other woman, and pain enveloped Liandrin. She crumpled to the carpet, trying to howl, but agony beyond anything she had ever known silenced her gaping mouth. Her eyes were going to burst from her head; her skin was going to peel away in strips. For an eternity she thrashed, and when it vanished as suddenly as it had begun, all she could do was lie there, shuddering and weeping open-mouthed.

“Do you begin to see?” Moghedien said calmly, handing the empty cup to Ispan with, “That was very good. But next time a little stronger.” Ispan looked as though she might faint. “You are not quick enough, Liandrin, you are not strong enough, and you do not know enough. That pitiful little thing you tried against me. Would you like to see what it is really like?” She channelled.

Liandrin gazed up at her adoringly. Crawling across the floor, she pushed words through the sobs she still could not stop. “Forgive me, Great Mistress.” This magnificent woman, like a star in the heavens, a comet, above all queens in wonder. “Forgive, please,” she begged, pressing kisses against the hem of Moghedien’s skirt as she babbled. “Forgive. I am a dog, a worm.” It shamed her to her core that she had not meant those things before. They were true. Before this woman, they were all true. “Let me serve you, Great Mistress. Allow me to serve. Please. Please.”

“I am not Graendal,” Moghedien said, pushing her away roughly with one velvet-slippered foot. Suddenly the sense of worship was gone. Lying there in a heap, weeping, Liandrin could remember it clearly, though. She stared at the Forsaken in horror. “Are you convinced yet, Liandrin?”

“Yes, Great Mistress,” she managed. She was. Convinced that she dared not even think of trying again until she was certain of success. Her trick was only the palest shadow of what Moghedien had done. Could she but learn that ...

“We shall see. I think you may be one of those who needs a second lesson. Pray it is not so, Liandrin; I make second lessons exceedingly sharp. Now take your place with the others. You will find that I have taken some of the objects of power that you had in your room, but you may keep the trinkets that remain. Am I not kind?”

“The Great Mistress is kind,” Liandrin agreed around hiccoughs and occasional sobs that she could not stifle.

Limply she staggered to her feet and went to stand beside Asne; the wall panel against her back helped to hold her upright. She saw the flows of Air being woven; only Air, but she still flinched as they bound her mouth shut and stopped sound from her ears. She certainly did not try to resist. She did not even let herself think of *saidar*. Who knew what one of the Forsaken could do? Perhaps read her thoughts. That almost made her run. No. If Moghedien knew her thoughts, she would be dead by now. Or still screaming on the floor. Or kissing Moghedien’s feet and begging to serve. Liandrin shivered uncontrollably; if that weave had not bound her mouth, her teeth would have been chattering.

Moghedien wove the same around all of them save Rianna, whom the Forsaken beckoned with an imperious finger to kneel before her. Then Rianna left, and Marillin Gemalphin was unbound and summoned.

From where she stood, Liandrin could see their faces even if their mouths moved soundlessly for her. Plainly each woman was receiving orders the others knew nothing of. The faces told little, though. Rianna merely listened, a touch of relief in her eyes, bowed her head in assent and went. Marillin looked surprised, and then eager, but she had been a Brown, and Browns could be enthusiastic over anything that allowed them a chance to unearth some mouldy bit of lost knowledge. Jeaine Caide donned a slow mask of horror, shaking her head at first and trying to cover herself and that disgustingly sheer gown, but Moghedien’s face hardened, and Jeaine nodded hurriedly and fled, if not as eagerly as Marillin, just as quickly. Falion Bhoda, long-faced and cold despite her obvious fear, showed as little expression as Rianna had. Ispan actually kissed Moghedien’s hem before she rose.

Then the flows were unwoven around Liandrin. She thought that it was her turn to be sent away on the Shadow knew what errand, until she saw the bonds dispelled around the others remaining as well.

Falion and Ispan were almost out the door when Moghedien cast a narrow eyed look at their backs. "Be sure you bring me everything in the cache, mind. Not simply what you think relevant. You savages could not tell a male *angreal* from a farmer's cookpot, and I do not want any left sitting around to be snatched up. If you must hire wagons, steal the coin and do so. There should be plenty in Whitebridge. Don't bother Compelling the drivers, I doubt you could do it properly."

Falion and Ispan dropped into low curtsies, stammering their assurances, before departing.

Moghedien's finger beckoned the remaining women peremptorily, and Liandrin knelt between Asne and Chesmal Emry, a tall, handsome woman, dark-haired and dark-eyed. Chesmal, once Yellow, could Heal or kill with equal ease, but the intensity of her gaze on Moghedien, the way her hands trembled as they clutched her skirts, said she intended only to obey.

She would have to go by such signs, Liandrin realized. Approaching one of the others with her belief that rewards could be had for handing Moghedien to the rest of the Forsaken might well be disastrous if the one she spoke to had decided that it was in her best interests to be Moghedien's lapdog. She almost whimpered at the thought of a "second lesson".

"You, I keep with me," the Forsaken said, "for the most important task. What the others do may bear sweet fruit, but to me yours will be the most important harvest. A personal harvest. There is a woman named Nynaeve al'Meara." Liandrin's head came up, and Moghedien's dark eyes sharpened. "You know of her?"

"I despise her," Liandrin replied truthfully. "She is a filthy wilder who ought never to have been allowed in the Tower." She loathed all wilders. Dreaming of being Black Ajah, she herself had begun learning to channel a full year before going to the Tower, but she was in no way a wilder.

"Very good. You are going to find her for me. I want her alive. Oh, yes, I do want her alive." Moghedien's smile made Liandrin shiver; giving Nynaeve and the others to her might be entirely suitable. "You will ..."

Liandrin listened eagerly. For this, she could be a faithful hound. For the other, she would wait patiently.

\* \* \*

Night was when Padan Fain felt most comfortable. As he padded through the tapestry-bedecked corridors of the White Tower, it seemed as though the darkness outside made a cloak to hide him from his enemies, despite the stand-lamps, gilded and mirrored, burning along his way. A false feeling, he knew; his enemies were many and everywhere. Right that moment, as in every waking hour, he could feel Rand al'Thor. Not where he was, but that he was still alive, somewhere. Still alive. It was a gift received at Shayol Ghul, in the Pit of Doom, that awareness of al'Thor.

His mind skittered away from memories of what had been done to him in the Pit. He had been distilled there, remade. But later, in Aridhol, he had been reborn. Reborn to smite old enemies and new.

He could feel something else as he stalked the empty night hallways of the Tower, a thing that was his, stolen from him. A sharper desire drew him at this moment than his longing for al'Thor's death, or the Tower's destruction, or even revenge against his ancient foe. A hunger to be whole.

The heavy panelled door had thick hinges and iron straps, and a black iron lock set in it as big as his head. Few doors in the Tower were ever locked—who would dare steal in the midst of Aes Sedai?—yet some things the Tower accounted too dangerous to be easily accessible. The most dangerous of all they kept behind this door, guarded by a stout lock.

Giggling softly, he took two thin, curved metal rods from his coat pocket, inserted them into the keyhole, probing and pressing, twisting. With a slow snap, the bolt came back. For a moment he sagged against the door, laughing hoarsely. Guarded by a stout lock. Surrounded by Aes Sedai power, and guarded by simple metal. Even the servants and Novices should be done with their chores at this hour, but someone still might be awake, might just wander by. Occasional ripples of mirth still shook him as he replaced the lockpicks in his pocket and took out a fat beeswax candle, lighting the wick at a nearby stand-lamp.

He held the candle high as he closed the door behind him, peering around. Shelves lined the walls, holding plain boxes and inlaid chests of various sizes and shapes, small figures in bone or ivory or darker material, things of metal and glass and crystal that sparkled in the candlelight. Nothing that

appeared dangerous. Dust covered everything; even the Aes Sedai came here seldom, and they allowed no-one else in. What he was seeking pulled him to it.

On a waist-high shelf stood a dark metal box. He opened it, revealing lead walls two inches thick, with just enough space inside for a curved dagger in a golden sheath, a large ruby set in its hilt. Neither the gold nor the ruby, glittering dark as blood, interested him. Hastily he spilled a little wax to hold the candle beside the box and snatched up the dagger.

He sighed as soon as he touched it, stretched languorously. He was whole again, one with what had bound him so long ago, one with what in a very real way had given him life.

Iron hinges creaked faintly, and he darted for the door, baring the curved blade. The pale young woman opening the door had only time to gape, to try to leap back, before he slashed her cheek; in the same motion he dropped the sheath and seized her arm, jerked her past him into the storeroom. Putting his head out, he peered up and down the hallway. Still empty.

He took his time about pulling his head back and shutting the door again. He knew what he would find.

The young woman lay thrashing on the stone floor, trying and failing to scream. Her hands clawed at a face already black and bloated beyond recognition, the dark swelling oozing down onto her shoulders like thick oil. Her snowy skirts, banded in colours at the hem, flailed as her feet scrabbled uselessly. He licked at a splash of blood on his hand and giggled as he picked up the sheath.

“You are a fool.”

He spun, dagger reaching, but the air around him seemed to turn solid, encasing him from his neck to the soles of his boots. He hung there, on the balls of his feet, dagger extended to stab, staring at Alviarin as she shut the door behind her and leaned against it to study him. There had been no creak this time. The soft scraping of the dying girl’s slippers on the floorstones could never have masked it. He blinked away sweat that was suddenly stinging his eyes.

“Did you really think,” the Aes Sedai went on, “that there would be no guard on this room, no watch kept? A ward was set on that lock. That young fool’s task tonight was to monitor it. Had she done as she was supposed to, you would find a dozen Warders and as many Aes Sedai outside this door now. She is paying the price of her stupidity.”

The thrashing behind him stilled, and his eyes narrowed. Alviarin was not Yellow Ajah, but even so she could have made an attempt to Heal the young woman. And she had not raised the alarm the Accepted should have, either, or she would not now be here alone. “You are Black Ajah,” he whispered.

“A dangerous accusation,” she said calmly. It was not clear to which of them it was dangerous. “Siuan Sanche tried to claim the Black Ajah was real when she was under the question. She begged to tell us of them. Elaida would not hear it, and will not. Tales of the Black Ajah are a vile slander against the Tower.”

“You are Black Ajah,” he said in a louder voice.

“You want to steal that?” She sounded as though he had not spoken. “The ruby is not worth it, Fain. Or whatever your name is. That blade is tainted so none but a fool would touch it except with tongs, or be near it for a moment longer than necessary. You can see what it did to Verine. So why did you come here and go straight to what you should not have known was here? You cannot have had time for any search.”

“I could dispose of Elaida for you. One touch of this, and even Healing will not save her.” He tried to gesture with the dagger, but could not budge it a hair; if he could have moved it, Alviarin would be dead by now. “You could be first in the Tower, not second.”

She laughed at him, cool contemptuous chimes. “Do you think I would not be first if I had wished it? Second suits me. Let Elaida claim credit for what she calls successes, and sweat for her failures, too. I know where the power lies. Now, answer my questions, or two corpses will be found here in the morning instead of one.”

There would be two in any case, whether he answered her with suitable lies or not; she did not mean to let him live. “I have seen Thakan’dar.” Saying that hurt; the memories it brought were agony. He refused to whimper, forced the words out. “The great sea of fog, rolling and crashing in silence against the black cliffs, the fires of the forges glowing red beneath, and lightning stabbing up into a sky fit to drive men mad.” He did not want to go on, but he made himself. “I have taken the path down to the belly of Shayol Ghul, down the long way with stones like fangs brushing my head, to the

shore of a lake of fire and molten rock—"No, not again!"—that holds the Great Lord of the Dark in its endless depths. The heavens above Shayol Ghul are black at noon with his breath."

Alviarin was standing upright now, eyes wide. Not fearful, but impressed. "I have heard of ..." she began softly, then shook herself and stared at him piercingly. "Who are you? Why are you here? Did one of the For—the Chosen send you? Why was I not informed?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Are the tasks given to the likes of me for the likes of you to be knowing?" The accents of his native Murandy were strong again; in a way it was his native city. "Do the Chosen confide everything in you, then?" Something inside seemed to shout that this was not the way, but he hated Aes Sedai, and that something inside him did, too. "Be careful, pretty little Aes Sedai, or they'll be giving you to a Myrddraal for its sport."

Her glare was icicles stabbing his eyes. "We shall see, Master Fain. I will clear away this mess you have made, and then we shall see which of us stands higher with the Chosen." Eyeing the dagger, she backed from the room. The air around him did not soften until she had been gone a full minute.

Silently he snarled at himself. Fool. Playing the Aes Sedai's game, grovelling for them, then one moment of anger to ruin all. Sheathing the dagger, he nicked himself, and licked the wound before sticking the weapon under his coat. He was not at all what she thought. He had been a Darkfriend once, but he was beyond that, now. Beyond it, above it. Something different. Something more. If she managed to communicate with one of the Forsaken before he could dispose of her ... Better not to try. No time to find the Horn of Valere now. There were followers awaiting him outside the city. They should still be waiting. He had put fear into them. He hoped some of the humans were still alive.

Before the sun rose he was out of the Tower, off the island of Tar Valon. Al'Thor was out there, somewhere. And he was whole again.

## CHAPTER 44: *Three-fold in Shadow*



The march itself was not so punishing for Rand, since Jeade'en was doing most of the work, but the heat of the Aiel Waste made what would have been an easy journey into an arduous one. By the end of the seventh day, he had long since come to welcome the arrival of night. He much preferred freezing to boiling. He'd prefer doing neither, of course, but choosing the lesser evil was his lot in life, and in this he'd choose the cold.

Lan and Moiraine had been a bit chilly these past days as well. He'd expected another punishment during training, the morning after breaking the news to Moiraine about the Amyrlin Seat's fall. But Lan had not battered him any more than usual, then or on the mornings since, though that last might have been due to Moiraine having returned to standoffishness afterwards.

He had time to think about such things, for the Aiel went about the business of making camp without input from their *Car'a'carn*, but inevitably there came a time when the six chiefs approached Rand. They did not come to report, of course. It was merely another step in the dance of *ji'e'toh*. Rand greeted them each in the traditional manner and they retired to Rand's tent.

Once they had arranged themselves cross-legged in a circle, *gai'shain* moved to serve them each a cup of precious water. "What news of the other clans?" Rand asked, more as a way to start a conversation than in expectation of news. It was hard to talk to these men sometimes. They were so different from what he was used to.

"Indecisive fools," Han muttered. "They are waiting for either you or Couladin to die. And who can say which of you they would sooner it was."

"All the more reason to catch Couladin quickly," Rand said, unoffended.

"To do that, we will need the treekillers to delay him for us. Shaido can run faster than any other clan." That from Bruan, deadpan, and the others tapped their fingers against their cups in the absence of spears and bucklers to rattle. Rand smiled.

"They will not," announced Rhuarc, who had travelled through Cairhien recently and fought in the Aiel War besides. "The treekillers have no hold or army that can delay the Shaido march long enough for us to catch up. Not until they reach Cairhien itself, at least." He shrugged. "And even then ..."

"I sent the Tairens into Cairhien with orders to quash the civil war. Perhaps they will reinforce the city."

"Perhaps." The Taardad chief didn't sound convinced.

"How far can you trust those Tairens?" asked Bael, fishing out his pipe. "My spears had little good to say of them, even for wetlanders."

"Neither did mine," said Jheran.

Rand took out his tabac pouch and emptied the last of it onto a cushion. He divided it into seven small piles as he spoke. "I don't trust the High Lords. There may be some among them who would keep their word, but most care nothing for such things." He took out his own pipe and filled it. "Similarly, there may be some among them who have the nerve to defy me, but most will do exactly as I ordered for fear of what would happen when I return." He picked up the cushion and passed it to Jheran. "I think they will help the Cairhienin against the Shaido, and that the Cairhienin will let them, but I can't be sure of it." Jheran passed the cushion on to Erim, reaching for his own flint as he did so.

"You can never be sure of anything, except that the dream will end one day," said Bruan. He had sad eyes, but his voice was flat and unafraid. Han grunted agreement.

They sat for a time in silence and enjoyed their smoke. Theren tabac was more popular than Rand had realised back in Emond's Field. Here in the Aiel Waste, it was something of a delicacy and the chiefs took their time to savour it. Rand wanted to do the same—it was the last of his supply after all—but his mind lingered on Cairhien. Assuming he could catch and beat the Shaido, what then? He was still chewing on the stem of his pipe long after the flame had burned out, frowning and distant.

"A good smoke," Rhuarc declared, to a chorus of grunted agreements.

The chiefs rose to leave, and Rand went with them, stepping out into the cooling air. It felt soothing on his burnt skin. That was why he lingered outside long after the chiefs had left and the sun had drifted below the horizon, glowering a warning that it would be back. Wearing even part of a *shoufa* helped, but he'd come to envy Mat his wide-brimmed hat. Not that he'd ever admit any of that.

"Do you prefer the night to the day, Rand al'Thor? I certainly do."

The moon was barely a sliver so it was hard to see, but he knew Giladin's voice well enough. He turned towards the sound, and the shadowed form that he assumed was the man in question. If Giladin was going to admit it, then he supposed the Aiel attached no shame to the confession. "I do."

"It is perfect for hunting," another man said. Mangin. "The most dangerous game comes out at night."

"The most dangerous enemies as well," a louder voice warned. Zell.

"But not the Maidens, for once," Mangin japed. He sounded glad to be free of their eyes for once. That was something Rand could well understand.

Rand smiled in the darkness. He knew all three well, and liked them. Giladin was as serious and dutiful as Perrin, while Zell's loud eagerness reminded him of poor dead Ewin Finngar. Mangin, meanwhile, had a bit of the Mat about him. But what had brought them to him? "I suppose I should say I see you, but I wouldn't want to be a liar," he drawled.

Mangin and Zell laughed, but not Giladin. "The stars will brighten soon. That is the best time," said the latter of the three.

"The best time for what?"

It was Mangin who answered. "We thought you might like to go hunting this night. I noticed you often stay awake after the sun goes down. You seemed bored."

"I did?" he said dubiously. He was anything but. If anything, the hours after dark were the most active and stressful of his days lately. There were so many to please.

"There is no need for concern. The four of us are more than a match for any predator. We know the signs of any lurkers and stingers well," Giladin said.

Rand bristled. He hadn't meant to imply he was afraid. Not that there weren't good reasons to be ... wary of wandering the Aiel Waste at night, with all the venomous creatures that lived there. But he still hadn't meant to imply it. Yet, Giladin had included him in the four. That was nice of him. Nice to cover Rand's ass, since the truth was he didn't know anything near enough to be hunting here. More likely he'd be the hunted.

"So, are you up for the hunt, Rand al'Thor?" Mangin asked.

He hesitated. It was a needless risk, but the offer was touching. There were few enough who could tolerate his company, fewer still who would seek it out. The question was whether he trusted them to cover his ass out in the dangerous wilderness instead of just in conversation. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness. He could almost see them properly. Tall Mangin with his dark red hair, Giladin and Zell seeming fairer than ever in the starlight. He had to trust these Aiel; otherwise what was the point of coming here?

It was a surprise to find that he did. It came reluctantly, that trust, creeping out like a deer at night, but it did come. "Anybody got a spare spear?" His sword was no use for hunting.

Mangin chuckled. "For you? Always."

Rand's eyes narrowed. Perhaps he shouldn't read into that. Mangin just had one of those voices, like Mat's, that constantly implied things he didn't mean to imply. He accepted the spear Mangin offered—the wood and metal one—and asked how far they thought they'd have to range, but when Mangin told him Zell had second thoughts.

"That is far from camp. What if there are Shaido watching for a chance to strike?"

"Then we will kill them," Mangin said with easy confidence.

"You cannot just say that and make it happen," Zell complained.

Mangin was unconcerned. "Then you stay here. We would not want you panicking and scaring off the game."

"What was that!?"

Rand stepped between them before more could be said, or done. "Don't take him seriously, Zell. Mangin, if we're going to go, let's hurry."

He could see Zell chewing on his lip. Few Aiel would ever show nervousness that easily, or any emotion for that matter, but Zell was different. His concern actually made Rand feel bolder. He

trusted the three of them to defend him against whatever was put there. And if there was anything too big for them to handle, then there was always *saidin*.

"It'll be fine, Zell. I know you'll watch my back."

The Aiel youth nodded. "You can trust me."

"And me," said Giladin. "But perhaps we should invite some more experienced *algai d'siswai*. For company."

"Tam told me Rhuarc seems to think you're pretty good."

"Did he say that? That is good." Though solemnly still, Giladin sounded pleased. "I am trying. Never had to fight in a war before, but ... Just seems like ... I could be a help to someone. That is what I want to be."

"Are you three going to talk all night? Our prey will have gone to sleep by the time we get there at this pace."

Mangin's words were not enough to give true speed to their feet, and even he didn't seem to intend otherwise. In truth, it was a slow pace they kept as they walked out of camp into the dark of the Aiel Waste. Rand was not about to go rushing around here, and the way the natives moved so carefully told me he was right to be wary. What further words were extended came in whispers, as the three Aiel—who made a triangle around Rand with Mangin in the lead—noted any signs of the creatures who lived and killed and died there. Dangerous as those creatures were, Rand noticed that they still fled at the sight of the Aiel.

Some fled far and fast enough, but not all. Mangin's arrow caught a large lizard Rand didn't know the name of as it was trying to reach the other side of a distant dune. They claimed that prize, but warily, moving slowly across the tortured ground, the Aiel youths keeping an eternal watch for anything, animal or plant, that might end their dreams.

Rand tried to learn from them, but there were some things that you just couldn't mimic. He wasn't sure anything other than being raised in this environment could truly make someone comfortable in it. All he could hope to be was comfortable in the company of his escort.

Which he found he was. Though far apart from the rest of the army, he felt little fear. It reminded him of other hunting trips, in a much gentler land. Younger, kinder times, just him and Mat and Perrin, far from any controlling adults and judging eyes.

The stars were shining brightly overhead. It was not enough to brighten the land, but the jagged black rock formations that reared against the sky were not so threatening as they might have been, not to Rand's eyes. There was even a kind of harsh beauty to it all. His spear hung unused at his side, but he was in no hurry to change that. So far as he was concerned, it was enough to have tagged along and watched them work. That alone was enough to refresh him.

The rocks weren't the only thing to rear against the sky. Mangin climbed atop one wide boulder to survey the area, only to pronounce it sadly bare of game.

"I must have scared them all off," Zell boasted, winning a predictable scorn that he responded to just as predictably.

While they were arguing, more loudly than they had been throughout the hunt, Giladin climbed the boulder as well. The rock was cold to the touch when Rand moved to join him but the view was worth it. Ink had been spilled all over the rugged land around him, coating it in the opposite of snow. A strange beauty indeed.

"Is there any special reason we came here?" he asked.

"There are no holds for miles around," said Mangin. "It makes for a great hunting spot."

"Sounds like you know this place pretty well," Zell said, their argument already forgotten in the way of close friends. "But we are pretty far from Jindo lands."

"I have never been one for staying close to home, or doing things in the normal way."

Rand grunted. "I've given up trying to figure out what normal is."

"Well, obviously! You are He Who Comes With the Dawn. You could not be normal if you wanted to be," Zell laughed.

He smiled glumly. For good and ill, that was true.

"If you want to find normal, you only have to look at me," said Giladin.

Rand turned a sceptical eye on him. "Ah, yes. Escorting soft wetlanders through one of the most dangerous environments in the world at night, and vowing to protect them. Just normal stuff like that. Old Bili Congar used to do that every other week."

"He has much honour, this Bili Congar. I have only done it once."

Rand couldn't help but laugh. Bili wouldn't have spared a cup of water for a stranger, never mind an escort. "You're worth twenty of him, Giladin. Don't tell yourself otherwise."

"I will try to be worthy of your words," he said solemnly.

"But are you worthy of his cock, that is the real question," said Mangin, much less solemnly.

Rand surprised himself by blushing. He'd wondered at first, but as the hunt went one he'd come to think that was all it was. When he noticed that Giladin wasn't rushing to gainsay Mangin's words, his blush deepened. He shouldn't. It was cold, and they were exposed atop this boulder. It might even be dangerous. Who knew what might be drawn to them? Yet, he found himself excited.

And Giladin was waiting patiently for an answer; again. The wrong one might hurt him. "Of course he is." Rand glanced at the others. "You all are. You are good friends." They were, too, somewhat to his surprise. He'd thought himself beyond making new friends. His old ones wanted little to do with him, after all.

Mangin's teeth shone whitely when he grinned. "Well, I can think of no better way to celebrate a successful hunt." The muscles of his chest also shone whitely, when he undid the coat of his *cadin'sor* and cast it off, careless of the icy air.

"Sooo ... What are we doing?" Zell asked nervously. "This is not a sweat tent."

Mangin shrugged. "It might as well be. No-one will see, not at this time of night."

Rand could see just fine, though. Mangin's chest and stomach were impressively muscled. So were Giladin's, who had followed suit in undressing. The starlight cast them all in monochrome, leeching colour from the world but leaving life behind still. Rand's spear no longer hung so limp.

His hands trembled slightly when they went to the buttons of his coat, and not only from the cold. That cold had had an effect on the men, he now saw, making smaller what was not, but that effect could be reversed. It was already being reversed for him. He was feeling so warm in fact that he hardly felt the cold at all when he dropped his coat on the ground and pulled his shirt up over his head. Even the dragons on his arms had no colour now; they were just dark shapes coiling around his alabaster flesh.

Zell took his disrobing for a sign to do the same. "Alright, let us get it on!" he shouted as he yanked down his trousers. His cock was already stirring, for all that he was the last to move.

Rand wasn't sure how to start it, but Giladin took matters into his own hand. Or rather, he took Rand's cock in his hand, and planted a kiss on his lips as he stroked him towards his full size. His palm was callused but his grip assured. It didn't take him long.

"Show me how worthy I am," he whispered before turning around. His back was muscular, too, and his bottom firm. He took no step to ease things, which was very Aiel, but Rand wasn't one to make things more painful than they had to be. He seized *saidin* briefly and wove Water to form a slickening around himself. In addition to the rush of holding the One Power, his vision suddenly blazed, making the darkness around them seem almost bright. There was, as Mangin had intimated, no-one to be seen for miles around. He could see Mangin and Zell, though. Both men were well on their way to hardness now. He wondered what they were going to do.

What he and Giladin were going to do was obvious. To his knees the Aielman went, asking for no cushion. His cock and balls hung between his spread legs, but it was the space above them that drew Rand's eyes. It drew his hands, too, and without much preamble, it drew his manhood.

Slickened as he was, he slid into Giladin's tight passage with relative ease. No cry escaped to taint the night, but Rand had to release *saidin* lest the amplified pleasure bring him to an embarrassingly early climax. The cold air was swiftly forgotten as the heat of Giladin's body enveloped him. The more he moved the warmer he got, so he moved faster and faster. Giladin was supporting himself with one hand now, his other busy clutching at his cock.

The other two were watching rather than doing anything with each other, though both were very obviously aroused. Rand's gaze was drawn to the shafts that jutted up in that stark light. He traced the line of Zell's attention to his rocking hips, and specifically to the back of them, and licked his lips.

"It's still cold from the other side, Zell. Why don't you come over here and warm me up."

A bright smile was his response. "Whoa! I'm with you!?"

"If you want to be."

"I do!"

Zell wasted no time getting to proving the truth of his words. Rand had already slickened himself there, too, so felt no nervousness when the other youth came to kneel behind him. Strong arms wrapped around his waist, pressing against his flat stomach. He felt something stiff and hot pressing against his back entrance and made himself relax. It was well he did, too, for Zell took no time for preparations. He went at Rand with eager vigour, ramming in as far as he could go and then rabbiting away.

He found himself smiling, not just at the pleasure of that penetration, but at the honest lust of his ... his friend. Sandwiched between them, all three rocking away, the cold was a distant thing indeed. With his body being stimulated from both sides like that, he didn't think he would last long. Zell was proving very eager. So eager that Rand's eyes started to roll back in his head. He groaned.

"Too hard?"

"No ... it's fine. Do what you want." He needed no more assurance, for his rutting intensified, the impact of his energetic hips driving Rand forward and impaling Giladin just as surely as they did Rand. It felt so good that he soon lost awareness of where he was.

It was a hand combing through his hair that brought him back. He opened his eyes to find Mangin standing tall over them. In more way than one. It was thick and long and Rand knew what he wanted to do with it. He waited until Rand opened his mouth, then smiled down at him and moved the oozing tip towards his lips.

It tasted salty. It was warm and alive, in defiance of the cold of the Waste. Rand wrapped his mouth around it and tried to share his warmth with it. He cradled Mangin's balls with his hand, trying to shield them from the cold, too. He did not suck hard, knowing how sensitive it was, but he enveloped it fully in his wetness, teasing it with his tongue as he took more and more inside, until the stiff hairs at its base were tickling his nose.

When he glanced up he saw Mangin smiling in pleasure. He redoubled his efforts, though even then they could not match the wild rocking of the man still probing Rand's sensitive butt. He moved his own hips in time with his, fucking Zell and Giladin both, albeit in very different ways. Even as he did so he kept lavishing his attention on Mangin, gently caressing his balls even as he moved his head up and down his hard shaft.

Unsurprisingly, it was Zell who came first. Surprisingly, he was relatively quiet about it. Rand wouldn't have known save for the feel of warm fluid spilling inside him, and the fact that the energetic youth finally stopped moving. He rested his cheek around Rand's back, panting as he tried to catch his breath.

Rand didn't stop moving, though. The rocking of his hips served to milk the last of Zell's come just as surely as it drove Rand into Giladin's butt and closer to his own climax.

"You are good at that," Mangin said. "I will finish soon."

That he saw fit to give a warning of that endeared him to Rand. He hadn't been sure he would. On the instant, he decided to swallow the other man's load. Instead of pulling away he intensified the bobbing of his head and the swirling of his tongue, seeking for and finding the sensitive tip on Mangin's cock. True to his word, it was not long before he started spurting, unloading a thick, salty cream that made Rand frown over the taste but did not make him pull away. He gulped it down instead, his hands busy on Mangin's cock and balls, doing all he could to make it feel as good for him as he could. Wasn't that what a leader was supposed to do?

Rand was actually sweating by the time Mangin staggered back, freeing his mouth and letting him gasp in the cold night air. The tall Aielman looked stunned, but Rand was too aroused to look long. He grabbed Giladin by the hips and started rutting every bit as hard as Zell had been.

Far from objecting, the fair-haired boy started jerking a hand up and down his own cock as he stably and wordlessly took everything Rand had to give. With his tight heat clasping against his shaft, Rand did not have to maintain that pace for long before he felt a storm brewing within. He did not fight it; he chased after it instead, like a hunter and his prey. Chased and soon caught it. He could not make himself be as quiet as the other two men had been when he came, but threw back his head and groaned at the stars above while rope after rope of his come shot into Giladin's faithful ass.

In the haze of his lust's passing, it occurred to him vaguely that he should help Giladin out, but when he reached around to do so all he succeeded in doing was holding a hand already stained with the warm cream of the young man's seed.

Zell had already pulled out, so there was nothing to sit on save for the strong thighs of the man still behind him. That was what Rand did, for he needed a moment to recover after all that. He got no resistance when he pulled Giladin with him. He would stick with him to the end, if he could.

If. It was a dangerous world out there. With his lust receding, Rand became aware once more of where they were. What had he been thinking? To do this at all ... well, that was not something he objected to. But to do it here? Anything could have snuck up on them while they were distracted with each other's bodies. Not one of them had even volunteered to take guard duty.

His face burned again, and not just from the realisation of his folly. He'd really had all three at once. He licked his lips. He could still taste Mangin's bitter seed.

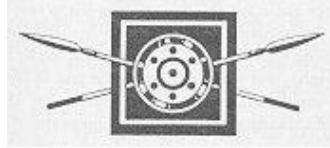
"Definitely the best way to celebrate a hunt," Mangin said. He was grinning at him in the same way that Mat used to, before all his grins turned to wariness and suspicion. "We should do this again sometime."

"I'd like that," Rand admitted. He looked about but could see little save for the monochrome bodies of the other men. "I'd like it even more if I could find my clothes afterwards, though."

Mangin wasn't the only one to laugh. Zell pulled away, while Giladin reached for something on the darkened ground. "We will help you," he said, his tight butt moving in the starlight, still shamelessly filled with Rand's seed.

He supposed they would at that. After all, that's what friends were for.

## CHAPTER 45: Heart of a Maiden



"Why have we stopped so early?" Dani asked as she dismounted beside the Aes Sedai. "It can't be for defence." The sept hold nestled amidst the rocky hills nearby was too small to house even a thousandth of the army Rand had gathered, and he could not possibly be safer within its buildings than he was sleeping at the heart of said army.

It was Moiraine's Warder that answered, though he did not look at Dani as he did. "Scouts report the Reyn clan nearby and moving fast. The chiefs wanted to discuss their intentions." His cold eyes continued to weigh the surrounding Aiel, though for what threat Dani could not say. Surely if any of these people were going to attack them it would have happened by now.

"The Shaido already have too much of a head start. We will not catch them before they do what they intend to do," said Moiraine.

Dani studied her, wondering if she'd imagined the whisper of sadness in that chiming voice. She was Cairhienin, after all. No matter how much the Tower discouraged patriotic or familial feelings, Moiraine had grown up in the capital, had known people there. It had to count for something. She would not have questioned, once. But the Aes Sedai's recent, very improper, actions, had invited a questioning of everything about her.

"You aren't going to try to get him to stop here, then? Or turn back?"

"That time has passed."

She was glad that Ilyena wasn't around just then. That one likely would have made a cutting remark, asking if Rand was really that good in bed. Dani had a bit more sympathy for the Aes Sedai's position. She hadn't intended anything that had happened, either. Besides, she knew the real reason.

"What will we do? I mean, assuming we defeat the Shaido. Elaida's orders won't take long to reach Cairhien. What then?"

She noticed Moiraine was studying her just as closely. "It is still a 'we', then. Interesting. Pedra has wondered whether you were thinking of running away from the Tower, now that you have had a taste of ... the outside world."

Her eyes narrowed, and not just for Pedra. Maybe it wasn't such a good thing Ilyena was missing. Moiraine could use a bit of teasing.

But Dani preferred to remain focused on what mattered. "You didn't answer my question. Will you follow Elaida's orders?"

No flicker of expression marred that beautiful mask. "It is on his behalf you ask, is it not? Good. He will need women like you around him. I will say only this: Rand will have nothing to fear of me, the day Elaida comes for him."

The thought alarmed her. "No-one can oppose the White Tower. He needs to avoid her."

Moiraine leaned over to put a hand on her arm, a look of affection on her face. "We cannot hold his hand forever, Daniele. He has learned to walk. He is learning to run. We can only hope he learns before his enemies catch him. And, of course, continue to advise him. To guide him when we can."

Dani hesitated to ask, but the Aes Sedai was already being more open than usual. "Moiraine, why have you started doing everything Rand tells you to? Even Nynaeve doesn't think it is right."

"She does not, does she?" Moiraine murmured. "She will be Aes Sedai yet, whatever she wishes. Why? Because I remembered how to control *saidar*."

After a moment, Dani nodded. To control *saidar*, first you had to surrender to it.

She didn't like that it was that obvious she'd worried for him. She spent far too much time worrying about him lately. Worrying about him, about Ilyena, and even about Raine, who'd gotten a bit more wolfy since that Darkhound attack. It wasn't her job to be looking after everyone.

Especially not Rand. He had plenty of others to do that for him. Plenty of Maidens, for that matter. She spied him striding off towards the sept hold with a few dozen of them prowling around him. No-one was likely to get close to him without their say so.

"He goes to meet with the Ergai sept," she heard an unfamiliar Aielman say. A big, yellow-haired man, he and his even bigger companion were staring after Rand. "The Taardad Ergai."

The other man grunted. "Rhuarc goes to Tear and brings him back. Amys teaches him dreamwalking. This Aviendha teaches him our customs. The Iron Mountain sept call him kin. Those three young spears speak to him as to a near-brother. All Taardad."

The first man nodded. "Others have seen it also. That clan is hoarding too much water."

The second one hefted his short spears, looked down at them, and frowned. "There would once have been an obvious reaction to that. These are confusing times. *Ji'e'toh* is not meant to be confusing."

When they turned their attention her way, she realised she hadn't managed to suppress her reaction. *Ji'e'toh*. Not confusing. Blood and ashes! Whether it was her snorted laughter or her being very obviously not Aiel, the men didn't look best pleased. They said nothing, of course. She was, so far as they knew, Aes Sedai. As she watched them depart, an additional worry tried to worm its way into her already crammed mind.

"It could just be a pair of malcontents," she told Moiraine, who had plainly heard them, too, "but what if it's not? Does he know to avoid favouring one clan over the others? Have you told him during your ... um ... lectures?"

Instead of blushing, Moiraine took on an expression of womanly amusement. "I have instructed him in a great many things. But Aiel politics was not one of them. I am flattered that you think me so all-knowing, however."

"Well, someone should tell him," she muttered. It wasn't so far. She could catch him if she hurried.

She had only taken a few steps before Moiraine spoke again. "He intends to stay in the local Roof of the Maidens tonight. I advise against troubling them. But you are a grown woman now, as you often insist. Take what you want, and pay for it."

Dani didn't stop. So Moiraine knew what went on there. And thought that Dani did not. Interesting. How had she found out? Not from Ilyena, or Dani's knowledge would have been a given. Had the Aes Sedai already established a network of eyes and ears among the Aiel? It beggared belief, but if anyone could do it, it would be Moiraine.

It was getting dark in the Aiel hold, with cramped rocky buildings pressing in close. Wending between the crowds slowed her pursuit of Rand. That was not usually her way, wending. She'd been a shover, as a child. Training in the White Tower had rid her of that, of course. And just as well. Shoving an Aiel would probably not have been wise.

She knew the building she needed by the Maidens crouched outside it, though it was otherwise indistinguishable from the rest.

She knew the Maiden leading the guards, too. Adelin was extremely tall for a woman, but had the physique to make it seem natural. Yellow-haired and handsome, she shot Dani a sharp smile when she saw her.

"I see you, Daniele Rulonir. What brings you to our roof this night?"

"I was hoping you'd let me pop inside. There's something I need to tell Rand."

"You are welcome among us. This should not need saying."

"Are you sure?" Adelin had been one of those who'd taken it upon themselves to teach Dani how to fight in the *Far Dareis Mai* fashion. She had not been gentle.

Enigmatic blue eyes regarded her. "More than you know."

Dani smiled. "I'd like to think that."

Another Maiden, red of hair, shorter and prettier than Adelin but less welcoming spoke then. "The *Car'a'carn* is within. You should go elsewhere. You would not like what you found here."

One of the older Maidens present, Chiarid, saw fit to giggle to herself. "Do not be so serious, Tenelca." Merry-eyed, she whispered something in the girl's ear. Dani could guess what it would be, and was no more impressed than this Tenelca looked.

"I daresay my eyes will survive the experience," she said.

Adelin gestured to the curtained alcove that served as a door, wood being too precious to waste here. "Go as you will."

As Dani stepped by, Chiarid raised her voice. "You should escort her in, Adelin. The rest of us have matters in hand here. Perhaps you could take matters in hand inside."

Adelin stood tall and gave the woman a forbidden frown, but she hesitated only briefly before taking her advice. Together they ventured under the roof of the Maidens of the Ergai sept. The first few rooms were as innocent as could be. Cramped quarters, since there were not usually anywhere near so many Maidens in a hold this small, but still standard fare. Women lounging about, eating and drinking, chatting to friends. Some occasionally performed the stretches and sparring that was a necessity for a peak fighter. It was further in that the appalling behaviour that had been hinted at her came into sight. Dani paused, and surveyed the scene.

There was barely a stitch of clothing to be seen, just naked, fit bodies entwined in various ways. Some women were just embracing casually, others were doing a lot more. Cami had a very strong stomach. It moved hypnotically as she ground her sex against the unknown woman whose legs she had split. Ayla and Lidya were taking it slower, pleasuring each other with their mouths as they each let their eyes roam at the other women. And there were many women. Only one man was allowed in, however, and he certainly didn't seem to be objecting.

Rand was upright, in more ways than one. On full display and unashamed. He was holding a leanly athletic young woman before him, but she was upside down. Her hips he cupped between his hands, her privates he raised to meet his lips. And her mouth he moved slowly up and down the thick shaft on which she was impaled. The girl's legs hung helplessly, twitching every once in a while when his tongue found a sensitive spot. All she could do was support herself against Rand's muscular thighs and trust. It was an impressive display from them both. A display of strength and control, and something more. Dani had already started heating up, but now it got worse. *I just came here to deliver my warning.*

"How long do you mean to stay with Briana?" asked a boulder-like woman before slapping Rand's bottom familiarly. "There are many frustrated women under this roof. A good *Car'a'carn* should do his duty."

Rand paused his efforts only long enough to raise an eyebrow, point out that this wasn't easy, and ask Amindha not to distract him. Then we went right back to eating Briana's pussy while he slowly fucked her mouth. She was one of Yusana's sextuplets, Dani knew. Watching them, she wondered whether she'd seduced him or the other way around.

Either way, she supposed if he was too busy for Amindha then he was too busy to listen to her message. All she could do was wait. And hope she did not become one of those frustrated women.

Adelin touched her arm. "You do not want to disturb him? Then come, sit with your spearsisters."

"They are hardly my spearsisters," Dani said as she let herself be led away. It was to a cushioned corner of the room that she led her, where half a dozen familiar women lounged. There was skinny Renay and boisterous Pamela. Muscular Amili still had her clothes on, as did Jolien. But Rhuana and Leslaya smiled naked greetings.

"Do you not wish them to be?" Adelin asked.

That was a harder question to answer in those circumstances than it would have been out on the practice yard. "I've enjoyed my time here," she hedged.

Adelin moved past her to take a seat, and just so happened to brush her hand against Dani's long black braids as she did so. "You could enjoy it more if you liked."

Dani sat down with them, face warm. It was not as if she hadn't seen a naked woman before. Light, she'd even seen several of *these* women naked. Aiel were only shy in public! But there was a tension in the air, a sense that something might happen this time. Did she want it to?

As she pondered she noticed some of the Maidens looking at her with warmth in their eyes. Friendliness perhaps. Dhael was quiet but nice when you got to know her. She'd often helped Adelin arrange Dani's training. That speculation she thought she saw in the woman's eyes was probably just her imagination. Pretty Zoe looked annoyed at the wandering attention—which was unsurprising considering where Dhael's hand was—and pushed her clear before getting up and stalking off. She had a pretty bottom, but Dhael didn't stare after it the way she might have.

Riallin and Nora were looking at Dani, too, and exchanging whispers and giggles while they did. None of that slowed the writhing of Riallin's hips as she pleasured herself upon the toy strapped to the hips of the woman beneath her. She was plump, at least by Aiel standards, and the big breasts that hung beneath her were beautiful to look at.

Dani bit her lip.

"It is pretty when you do that," said Renay.

"It's kind of you to say so."

"Kind? Kindness is not part of *ji'e'toh*. I was only being honest."

She huffed a quiet laugh. Kindness might not be part of *ji'e'toh*, but it was part of human nature and Renay had it whether she'd been taught it or not. Desire was part of human nature, too, whether it was acceptable or not ... Renay was an attractive woman as well. Not a stunner like Ilyena, but her nature shone through.

There were so many interesting Maidens. Ayla and Lidya were fierce fighters both on and off the sparring field, and she dared to think them her friends. She knew they were not exclusive, too. Lidya was fingering Ayla now, while she moaned over what the other woman was doing with her tongue. Dani couldn't muster enough delusion to claim she didn't want to know what that was like. Amindha was very much a woman, but she looked strong enough to rival any man. What would it be like to be handled by her? Su was lean and quick and had always been welcoming. Would she welcome Dani into their fun? Ani probably wouldn't. The dour, yellow-haired woman had disapproved of training wetlanders. She lingered by the doorway now, still fully clothed, looking from Dani to Rand with that flat look in her eyes. Her own attention didn't stay there long, for Amys' daughter was with her, the busty one. Now *she* was definitely a stunner—but Amys' stunner. That would be unwise ... very unwise. And very tempting.

Dani jumped when a hand brushed against her braid once more. "You have such beautiful hair. It shines in the firelight." Adelin said. It was definitely no accident this time. Dani didn't push her hand away. She could not deny the reaction of her body. If Adelin tried to touch her elsewhere, would she let her?

"Yes," she whispered.

Neither young nor shy, Adelin leaned close, a bold look in her blue eyes. "Yes?" She put a hand on Dani's thigh and squeezed, gently but firmly. "Could you say that again, Daniele Rulonir?" The hand moved upwards. Steadily upwards. "Could you say ... yes?"

When her fingers brushed against Dani's sex, she said exactly that. Excited whispers were exchanged by the women around them, but she could not take them in. The fabric of her underwear was preventing her from taking Adelin in, too, but the woman was trying her best. Hands were on her, and more than two, tugging at her clothes, playing with her hair.

"Let me help you with that, lovely," Leslaya said as she undid the buttons of Dani's dress. It was with a rather perverted combination of motherly lust that she beheld her breasts once she'd bared them. "Why you are just gorgeous, dear." There was nothing motherly about the way she took Dani's nipple in her mouth, though. Her tongue was as skilled as it was bold.

Renay was shyer, petting Dani's hair as she sat companionably by her side while other women competed to have their way with her. She'd drawn a crowd, she noticed. Women jostled each other to strip her and fondle her. Dhael was there among them, smiling. She lowered Dani's smallclothes to allow Adelin to cup her sex and slip a finger inside.

"I like that noise," Pamela said loudly. She came and wrapped her arms around Dani's neck. "But there is something else I like even more." She didn't know the woman that well, but that didn't stop her from shoving her tongue into Dani's mouth to fence with her own.

They were all around her, the Maidens. Hands were on her and in her. Tongues, too. She could barely see, they were pressed so close. Naked feminine bodies pressing their heat and pleasure into her. The fingers retreated reluctantly, and something softer and wetter replaced them, forcing Dani to moan into Pamela's mouth. Someone was licking her. Was it Dhael? Her legs spread of their own accord.

"Such beautiful darkness."

"It is everywhere. Even down there."

"Will you lick it?"

"If she allows me to."

"I will," Dani tried to say, but they words came out in a moan.

Pamela released her eventually. She immediately stole a look down, to where Dhael's face—slickened now with Dani's juices—smiled up at her. Despite her smiles, she got up at Adelin's gesture. The woman was naked now, the impressively taut muscles of her scarred body on full display. There was softness there, too, in the breasts that pressed against her in their embrace, if not now in the

nipples that crowned them. That body drew Dani's hands, as those like it had so often drawn her eye. She explored it while they kissed. Soft bottom. Strong arms. Flat, hard stomach. Silky sex.

"I knew you would be good," Adelin sighed. She bore Dani down onto the blankets and got on top of her. Her hand was soon busy between her legs, fingers fucking her wantonly. Not to be outdone, Dani took Adelin's breasts in hand and gave them a thorough fondling.

The others were still near but they left Adelin to claim her prize. Dhael slipped away, and Dani worried she was hurt, but it was hard to worry long while her body was being driven so wild. She caught sight of Rand in the midst of it all, and realised only then that he'd seen what she'd done and let be done. Her heart skipped a beat, only to start again in earnest when he grinned at her. Or maybe he was just grinning over what the mouths of Briana's sisters were doing to the cock that had so recently been fucking Briana's.

There were tongues all over him, and there would soon be tongues all over Dani, too. Quiet Dhael returned with Carolyn in tow. Another sparring partner, the red-haired woman was vocal in her admiration for the female form, though she herself was no great beauty. She and Dhael exchanged quick grins before making a beeline for Dani.

"I have *toh*," Carolyn told her spearsister, before matter-of-factly laying her hands on Dani's body. She and Adelin both frowned at the intruder, though Adelin's frown disappeared rather quickly once Dhael knelt behind her and touched her tongue between the cheeks of her bottom. Dani's frown lasted a little longer but ... the hands, the sensations, the sights.

Emboldened, others pressed back in. Rhuana pinched her nipples while Su kissed her cheek. Somehow she had a finger in either woman. Leslaya was fondling her legs, but Jolien was still clothed and didn't seem likely to change that tonight. Her hair made Dani think of Elayne. What would she think of all this? Or of what had happened with Dani and Rand? It was hard to imagine her being any warmer than Jolien.

She had no time to think of that now, however, for Carolyn's pussy was lowering towards her face and Dani had a choice to make. Adelin's fingers found a particularly sensitive spot. She told herself that that was why her tongue stretched out to meet the pink flesh above. Whatever the truth, it did not change the outcome. Emboldened yet more, the lusty Maidens pressed in on her from all sides.

It was too much. Time passed in flashes for Dani. One moment there were mouths all over her. The next she had her face between a woman's thighs and was lapping forcefully at the slick heat there. One moment she could see nothing but the breasts pressed against her face. The next she had a full view of Rand's taut bottom as he was thrusting away between the thighs of the woman he'd pressed against the far wall. Renay it was. She looked to be enjoying herself.

Dani certainly was. She'd lost track of how many times she'd come, and stopped caring about the mess they were making. No-one else seemed to, after all. Somehow she ended up between Ayla and Lidya. She did not recall how it had happened, and did not care. Lidya's body was as strong as Adelin's, or Aviendha's, and her pussy tasted so sweet. And Ayla's tongue flew as true as her arrows. Dani and Lidya both came hard, though it fell to Lidya to see to Ayla's needs afterwards. Dani was in too much demand that night.

She returned Dhael's favour of before, knelt across Amindha's knees and let those strong arms piston a finger into her, learned how soft Riallin's breasts were, embarrassed herself by confusing Nora with Osana in the middle of a clinch, and redeemed herself by paying close attention and managing to tell Briana from her siblings.

That one was still asking questions about Rand, though. Not of him, not then. He was busy making Amindha kneel, while he held her by the hips and forced from her the sounds she'd forced from Dani a while back. She could not have been more different from Briana, but he was as passionate with her as he had been this lean beauty.

A lean beauty whose questions Dani did not want to answer. And as it turned out, she had a good way of silencing them. She definitely came then, while sitting on Briana's face and rubbing two very different sets of lips together.

That face was mirrored in her sisters all around them. Pressed against Adelin's sex. Frowning as the owner stood and let a kneeling Dhael lick away at her. Smiling as a different owner's skilled fingers reddened the cheeks of a square-faced girl Dani didn't know. One was staring at Rand while she let a laughing Pamela probe her butt with one of those toys. Another was so red it was shining through the tan, and belonged to a woman who sat apart, trying to pretend she wasn't involved while

jamming a hand between her own closed thighs. It was a measure of Dani's corruption that the last one looked the weirdest to her. Another was that she was still kneeling there, panting her pleasure.

It was Su who pulled her off, sensitive to Briana's health, and Leslaya who put her face between the girl's thighs, to finish what Dani had started. For her part, she was led through the cavorting Maidens to accept a cup of water from a surprisingly short girl that Su named Elana.

Dani smiled shyly as she accepted it. Something about the girl reminded her of Raine. Pretty, short, lean, and with odd eyes. Dark in her case, and slightly hooded. But for that red hair, she might have passed for a Cairhienin.

She proved friendly, praised Dani's "performances" and slid closer when that made her cheeks flare. There was no rancour in her whispered advice to stretch before activities such as this, and no doubt what she meant when she toyed with one of Dani's braids while offering to help her.

So it was that Dani found herself on her back again, spreading her legs as wide as she could, nervously checking to see who was watching. She didn't watch long, however, for Elana knelt atop her, thigh to thigh, pushing down until Dani's knees were behind her elbows. Pushing down until their pussies kissed.

She liked the little moan Dani made, but stayed true to her intentions. She shifted about, moving her knees closer and using them to spread Dani wide. The stretching hurt a little at times, but the pleasure as Elana rubbed against her made it all worth it. Still she wasn't done. Spreading her own legs to touch Dani's ankles, she pushed her to spread and spread, she and her muscles both groaning, albeit in different ways. Eventually, Dani found herself pinned to the ground with her legs stretched out straight to either side. She was as open as a woman could be. And the woman who had made her so was rubbing their pussies together wantonly.

They kissed, and her hands roved over Elana's tightly muscled body. She pulled her close, until her pale little breasts pressed against Dani's bigger and darker ones, their stiff nipples dancing, while Su sat cross-legged nearby, unabashedly watching them do it.

"You work really hard, don't you?" Dani asked Elana. "Is there something you have to prove?"

"My mother never said, though I know what you hint of," Elana whispered in her ear. "It does not matter. Even if I am only half Aiel, I am still Aiel."

Her hips never stopped grinding. Dani's rose to meet them. What she said might be true, but that she saw fit to whisper it was a message, too. Though she was a stranger, Dani wrapped her in her arms, touched her gently, and felt close, both to Elana and to another climax. She came first, and Elana stopped to watch her do it, smiling down sweetly.

She didn't resist Su's efforts to pull her away, however. The two walked only a little way, their tight little butts moving seductively, before falling onto a pile of cushions and into each other's arms. Dani blew out a breath. How had her life come to include sights like that?

Despite how sensitive and winded that left her, she didn't even hesitate when she saw Adelin approach with one of those horn toys strapped around her waist. She just lay back, spread her legs and welcomed the woman in. Soon the toy was in, too, splitting Dani's sex and touching places no finger could reach. She wrapped her legs around the bigger woman to urge her on. It worked, or Adelin was already eager, for she fucked Dani hard that time, there in front of the rest of the Maidens.

For a time she was on her back, her moans silenced only when Adelin fed her a nipple, and then only briefly. Soon enough she was being flipped onto her hands and knees, and the woman was grabbing her hips to help aim. She hit the bullseye, and made Dani scream in pleasure.

A lingering vestige of shame drifted up through her lust addled brain then. She bit her lip hard and looked about at the people in the room. Most were engrossed in their own pleasures—little Alisha having been nearly buried by Pamela's bulk and not voicing a word of complaint—but no few were watching as Adelin had her. It was more exciting than she'd have thought.

Careen was whispering in Amili's ear while she fingered her from behind. The muscular woman was obviously enjoying it, but her attention remained fixed on Adelin and Dani and she looked almost jealous.

Carolyn had produced a toy of her own, and the stocky Maiden was giving Rhuana a rough treatment that the other, slimmer and prettier woman wasn't objecting to in the slightest. Carolyn's eyes slid between her and Dani, drinking in all the femininity on display and smirking happily.

Her excitement grew, her heart racing fit to burst, when she realised that Rand was one of those watching. He'd obviously finished what he'd been doing, for his sex-slickened cock hung limp

between his splayed thighs as he sat against the wall, a woman cuddling at either side. That Amindha would be one was no surprise, having taken his seed but recently, but Rhamys' presence made Dani stare. She was naked now, too. Had he? The fool. The lucky fool. He petted both women casually, but it was Dani he was watching. Admiring. He smiled when their eyes met. She smiled, too, but could not meet his gaze for long. When she looked down, she saw his manhood start to twitch its way upwards, thickening with the proof of his admiration. She bit her lip so hard it hurt.

The hand that smacked her bottom hurt, too. The outraged scowl she shot back only made Adelin chuckle. "So that is the way of things," the big Maiden mused. "So be it."

When she slipped the toy out of her almost painfully stimulated sex, Dani reached back and caught her hand. "Don't stop."

"Perhaps another time," Adelin said, her voice a near whisper. "You wish to belong. I know. I can tell. Here is how to make it so. Go to him. Take him in front of them all."

Her already-racing heart sped up. It wasn't just from lust, either. Adelin had helped her so much already. Now she offered to cut things short, to let Dani take a place among these strangers.

"I have *toh*," she breathed.

White teeth flashed in a tanned face. "Now you are talking like an Aiel." She got up, the toy still attached, and stood over Dani, still smiling. "A strange, but beautiful Aiel."

And with that she walked away. Dani very much did stare after her.

But she did not pursue. Instead, she got up and tottered Rand's way. He watched her come, naked admiration on his face, and admirable nakedness everywhere else. He had almost twitched his way back to fullness.

"It's one revelation after another with you."

Most of those revelations were as much a surprise to her as to him, but she didn't say that. A commanding, womanly image was what she sought to give.

It didn't come easily. All that sex had taken its toll on Dani. Her legs, normally strong, trembled such that she was barely able to lift them over Rand's lap. It was almost a relief when she felt more strange hands upon her.

"Let me help you." It was Amys' daughter. She had Dani by the hips, and her help involved aiming her sex at Rand's. *Light. What would Amys say?* She hoped never to find out. The girl was very pretty, and those breasts of hers were even more ridiculous up close. Dani took one in a shaky hand, just to test the weight, and somehow found herself squeezing it. Rhamys' smile was oddly shy.

She didn't get time to ponder that, though, for something hot and hard was pushing past her lower lips. In it went, and Dani threw back her head and howled at the pleasure that entered her with it.

The dragons twined around Rand's arms glittered while he caressed her body. The muscles beneath them were taut to the touch. Young, handsome, strong, and—just then—hers. Everyone was watching now, even those who had been pleasuring or being pleasured had paused long enough to see the two of them come together.

The Maidens watched as Dani took their chief of chiefs inside her, and she saw no scorn on their faces. No rejection. It gladdened her, and lent speed to her hips. She rode Rand hard, her breasts flying free for all to see, and a cry of pleasure flew from her each time she rose and fell. Rising and falling. It became her world. It was the world she wanted. But was *she* rising? Or falling?

## CHAPTER 46: *Memories*



“My Queen?”

Morgase looked up from the book on her lap. Sunlight slanted through the window of the sitting room next to her bedchamber. The day was already hot, with no breeze, and sweat dampened her face. It would be noon before much longer, and she had not stirred from the room. That was unlike her; she could not remember why she had decided to laze the morning away with a book. She seemed unable to concentrate on reading of late. By the golden clock on the mantel above the marble fireplace, an hour had passed since she last turned a page, and she could not recall its words. It must be the heat.

The red-coated young officer of her Guards, kneeling with one fist pressed to the red-and-gold carpet, looked vaguely familiar. Once she had known the name of every Guard assigned to the Palace. Perhaps it was all the new faces. “Tallanvor,” she said, surprising herself. He was a tall, well-made young man, but she could not tell why she remembered him in particular. Had he brought someone to her once? Long ago? “Guardsman Lieutenant Martyn Tallanvor.”

He glanced at her, startlingly rough-eyed, before putting his gaze back on the carpet. “My Queen, forgive me, but I am surprised that you remain here, given the morning’s news.”

“What news?” It would be good to learn something besides Alteima’s gossip of the Tairen court. At times she felt that there was something else she wanted to ask the woman, but all they ever did was gossip, which she could never remember doing before. Gaebrial seemed to enjoy listening to them, sitting in that tall chair in front of the fireplace with his ankles crossed, smiling contentedly. Alteima had taken to wearing rather daring dresses; Morgase would have to say something to her. Dimly she seemed to remember thinking that before. Nonsense. *If I had, I would have spoken to her already.*

She shook her head, realizing that she had drifted away from the young officer entirely, that he had begun speaking and stopped when he saw she was not listening. “Tell me again. I was distracted. And stand.”

He rose, face angry, eyes burning on her before they dropped again. She looked where he had been staring and blushed; her dress was cut extremely low. But Gaebrial liked her to wear them so. With that thought she ceased fretting about being nearly naked in front of one of her officers.

“Be brief,” she said curtly. *How dare he look at me in that manner? I should have him flogged.* “What news is so important that you think you can walk into my sitting room as if it were a tavern?” His face darkened, but whether from proper embarrassment or increased anger she could not say. *How dare he be angry with his queen! Does the man think all I have to do is listen to him?*

“Rebellion, my Queen,” he said in a flat tone, and all thought of anger and stares vanished.

“Where?”

“The Theren, my Queen. Someone has raised the old banner of Manetheren, the Red Eagle. A messenger came from Whitebridge this morning.”

Morgase drummed her fingers on the book, her thoughts coming more clearly than it seemed they had in a very long time. Something about the Theren, some spark she could not quite fan to life, tugged at her. The region was hardly part of Andor at all, and had not been for generations. She and the last three queens before her had been hard pressed to maintain a modicum of control over the miners and smelters in the Mountains of Mist. A choice between holding the mines’ gold and iron and other metals and keeping the Theren’s wool and tabac had not been difficult. But rebellion unchecked, even rebellion in a part of her realm that she ruled only on a map, could spread like wildfire, to places that were hers in fact. And Manetheren, destroyed in the Trolloc Wars, Manetheren of legend and story, still had a hold on some men’s minds. Besides, the Theren was hers. If they had been left to go their own way for far too long, they were still a part of her realm.

“Has Lord Gaebrial been informed?” Of course he had not. He would have come to her with the news, and suggestions on how to deal with it. His suggestions were always clearly right.

Suggestions? Somehow, it seemed that she could remember him telling her what to do. That was impossible, of course.

“He has, my Queen.” Tallanvor’s voice was still bland, unlike his face, where slow anger yet smouldered. “He laughed. He said the Theren seemed to throw up trouble, and he would have to do something about it one day. He said this minor annoyance would have to wait its turn behind more important matters.”

The book fell as she sprang to her feet, and she thought Tallanvor smiled in grim satisfaction as she swept by him. A serving woman told her where Gaebrial was to be found, and she marched straight to the colonnaded court, with its marble fountain, the basin full of lily pads and fish: It was cooler there, and shaded a little.

Gaebrial sat on the broad white coping of the fountain, lords and ladies gathered around him. She recognized fewer than half. Dark square-faced Jarid of House Sarand, and his shrewish honey-haired wife, Elenia. That simpering Arymilla of House Marne, melting brown eyes always so wide in feigned interest, and bony, goat-faced Nasin of House Caeren, who would tumble any woman he could corner despite his thin white hair. Naean of House Arawn, as usual with a sneer marring her pale beauty, and Lir of House Baryn, a whip of a man, wearing a sword of all things, and Karind of House Anshar, with the same flat-eyed stare that some said had put three husbands under the ground. The others she did not know at all, which was strange enough, but these she never allowed into the Palace except on state occasions. Every one had opposed her during the Succession. Elenia and Naean had wanted the Lion Throne for themselves. What could Gaebrial be thinking to actually bring them here?

“... the size of our estates in Cairhien, my lord,” Arymilla was saying, leaning over Gaebrial, as Morgase approached. None of them more than glanced at her. As if she were a servant with the wine!

“I want to speak with you concerning the Theren, Gaebrial. In private.”

“It has been dealt with, my dear,” he said idly, dabbling his fingers in the water. “Other matters concern me now. I thought you were going to read during the heat of the day. You should return to your room until the evening’s coolness, such as it is.”

My dear. He had called her “my dear” in front of these interlopers! As much as she thrilled to hear that on his lips when they were alone ... Elenia was hiding her mouth. “I think not, Lord Gaebrial,” Morgase said coldly. “You will come with me now. And these others will be out of the Palace before I return, or I will exile them from Caemlyn completely.”

Suddenly he was on his feet, a big man, towering over her. She seemed unable to look at anything but his dark eyes; her skin tingled as if an icy wind were blowing through the courtyard. “You will go and wait for me, Morgase.” His voice was a distant roar filling her ears. “I have dealt with all that needs dealing with. I will come to you this evening. You will go now. You will go.”

She had one hand lifted to open the door of her sitting room before she realized where she was. And what had happened. He had told her to go, and she had gone. Staring at the door in horror, she could see the smirks on the men’s faces, open laughter on some of the women’s. *What has happened to me? How could I become so besotted with any man?* She still felt the urge to enter, and wait for him.

Dazed, she forced herself to turn and walk away. It was an effort. Inside, she cringed at the idea of Gaebrial’s disappointment in her when he did not find her where he expected, and cringed further at recognizing the fawning thought.

At first she had no notion of where she was going or why, only that she would not wait obediently, not for Gaebrial, not for any man or woman in the world. The fountained courtyard kept repeating in her head, him telling her to go, and those hateful, amused faces watching. Her mind still seemed fogged. She could not comprehend how or why she could have let it happen. She had to think of something that she could understand, something she could deal with. Jarid Sarand and the others.

When she assumed the throne she had pardoned them for everything they had done during the Succession, as she had pardoned everyone who opposed her. It had seemed best to bury all animosities before they could fester into the sort of plotting and scheming that infected so many lands. The Game of Houses it was called—*Daes Dae’mar*—or the Great Game, and it led to endless, tangled feuds between Houses, to the toppling of rulers; the Game was at the heart of the civil war in Cairhien, and no doubt had done its part in the turmoil enveloping Arad Doman and Valreis. The pardons had

had to go to all to stop *Daes Dae'mar* being born in Andor, but could she have left any unsigned, they would have been the parchments with those seven's names.

Gaebrial knew that. Publicly she had shown no disfavour, but in private she had been willing to speak of her distrust. They had had to pry their jaws open to swear fealty, and she could hear the lie on their tongues. Any one would leap at a chance to pull her down, and all seven together ...

There was only one conclusion she could reach. Gaebrial must be plotting against her. It could not be to put Elenia or Naean on the throne. *Not when he has me already*, she thought bitterly, *behaving like his lapdog*. He must mean to supplant her himself. To become the first king that Andor had ever had. And she still felt the desire to return to her book and wait for him. She still ached for his touch.

It was not until she saw the aged faces in the hallway around her, the creased cheeks and often bent backs, that she became aware of where she was. The Pensioners' Quarters. Some servants returned to their families when they grew old, but others had been so long in the Palace that they could think of no other life. Here they had their own small apartments, their own shaded garden and a spacious courtyard. Like every queen before her, she supplemented their pensions by letting them buy food through the Palace kitchens for less than its cost, and the infirmary treated their ills. Creaky bows and unsteady curtsies followed her, and murmurs of "The Light shine upon you, my Queen," and "The Light bless you, my Queen," and "The Light protect you, my Queen." She acknowledged them absently. She knew where she was going now.

Lini's door was like all the others along the green-tiled corridor, unadorned save for a carving of the rearing Lion of Andor. She never thought of knocking before entering; she was the Queen, and this was her Palace. Her old nurse was not there, though a teakettle steaming over a small fire in the brick fireplace said she would not be long.

The two snug rooms were neatly furnished, the bed made to perfection, the two chairs precisely aligned at the table, where a blue vase in the exact centre held a small fan of greenery. Lini had always been a great one for neatness. Morgase was willing to wager that within the wardrobe in the bedchamber every dress was arranged just so with every other, and the same for pots in the cupboard beside the fireplace in the other room.

Six painted ivory miniatures in small wooden stands made a line on the mantelpiece. How Lini could have afforded them on a nurse's stipend was more than Morgase had ever been able to imagine; she could not ask such a question, of course. In pairs, they showed three young women and the same three as babes. Elayne was there, and herself. Taking down the portrait of herself at fourteen, a slender filly of a girl, she could not believe that she had ever looked so innocent. She had worn that ivory silk dress the day she had gone to the White Tower, never dreaming at the time that she would be Queen, only harbouring the vain hope that she might become Aes Sedai.

Absentmindedly she thumbed the Great Serpent ring on her left hand. She had not earned that precisely; women who could not channel were not awarded the ring. But short of her sixteenth nameday she had returned to contest the Rose Crown in the name of House Trakand, and when she won the throne nearly two years later, the ring had been presented to her. By tradition, the Daughter-Heir of Andor always trained in the Tower, and in recognition of Andor's long support of the Tower was given the ring whether or not she could channel. She had only been the heir to House Trakand in the Tower, but they gave it to her anyway once the Rose Crown was on her head.

Replacing her own portrait, she took down her mother's, taken at perhaps two years older. Lini had been nurse to three generations of Trakand women. Maighdin Trakand had been beautiful. Morgase could remember that smile, when it had become a mother's loving beam. It was Maighdin who should have had the Lion Throne. But a fever had carried her away, and a young girl had found herself High Seat of House Trakand, in the middle of a struggle for the throne with no more support in the beginning than her House retainers and the House bard. *I won the Lion Throne. I will not give it up, and I will not see a man take it. For a thousand years a queen has ruled Andor, and I will not let that end now!*

"Meddling in my things again, are you, child?"

That voice triggered long-forgotten reflexes. Morgase had the miniature hidden behind her back before she knew it. With a rueful shake of her head she put the portrait back on its stand. "I am not a girl in the nursery any longer, Lini. You must remember that, or one day you will say something where I must do something about it."

"My neck is scrawny and old," Lini said, setting a net bag of carrots and turnips on the table. She looked frail in her neat grey dress, her white hair drawn back in a bun from a narrow face with skin like thin parchment, but her back was straight, her voice clear and steady, and her dark eyes as sharp as ever. "If you want to give it to hangman or headsman, I am almost done with it anyway. 'A gnarled old branch dulls the blade that severs a sapling'."

Morgase sighed. Lini would never change. She would not curtsey if the entire court were watching. "You do grow tougher as you grow older. I am not certain a headsman could find an axe sharp enough for your neck."

"You've not been to see me in some time, so I suppose there's something you need to work out in your mind. When you were in the nursery—and later—you always used to come to me when you couldn't work matters out. Shall I make a pot of tea?"

"Some time, Lini? I visit you every week, and a wonder I do, given how you speak to me. I would exile the highest lady in Andor if she said half what you do."

Lini gave her a level look. "You have not darkened my doorway since the spring. And I talk as I always have; I'm too old to change now. Do you want tea?"

"No." Morgase put a hand to her head in confusion. She *did* visit Lini every week. She could remember ... She could not remember. Gaebrial had filled her hours so completely that sometimes it was hard to remember anything other than him. "No, I do not want tea. I do not know why I came. You cannot help me with the problem I have."

Her old nurse snorted, though somehow she made it a delicate sound. "Your trouble is with Gaebrial, isn't it? Only now you're ashamed to tell me. Girl, I changed you in your cradle, tended you when you were sick and heaving your stomach up, and told you what you needed to know about men. You have never been too shamed to discuss anything with me, and now is no time to begin."

"Gaebrial?" Morgase's eyes widened. "You know? But how?"

"Oh, child," Lini said sadly, "everyone knows, though no-one's had the courage to tell you. I might have, if you hadn't stayed away, but it is hardly something I could go running to you with, now is it? It is the kind of thing a woman won't believe until she finds out for herself."

"What are you talking about?" Morgase demanded. "It was your duty to come to me if you knew, Lini. It was everyone's duty! Light, I am the last to know, and now it may be too late to stop it!"

"Too late?" Lini said incredulously. "Why should it be too late? You bundle Gaebrial out of the Palace, out of Andor, and Alteima and the others with him, and it is done with. Too late, indeed."

For a moment Morgase could not speak. "Alteima," she said finally, "and ... the others?"

Lini stared at her, then shook her head in disgust. "I am an old fool; my wits are dryrooted. Well, you know now. 'When the honey's out of the comb, there's no putting it back'." Her voice became gentler and at the same time brisk, the voice she had used for telling Morgase that her pony had broken a leg and had to be put down. "Gaebrial spends most of his nights with you, but Alteima has nearly as much of his time. He spreads himself thin with the other six. Five have rooms in the Palace. One, a big-eyed young thing, he sneaks in and out for some reason all swathed in a cloak, even in this heat. Perhaps she has a husband. I'm sorry, girl, but truth is truth. 'Better to face the bear than run from it'."

Morgase's knees sagged, and if Lini had not hurriedly pulled a chair from the table to shove under her, she would have sat down on the floor. Alteima she already knew of, but ... Him watching the two of them as they gossiped took on a new image, now. A man fondly watching two of his pet cats at play. And six others! Rage boiled up in her, a rage that had been lacking when she only thought he was after her throne. That she had considered coldly, clearly; as clearly as she could consider anything recently. That was a danger that had to be looked at with cold reason. But this! The man had ensconced his jades in her palace. He had made her just another of his trulls. She wanted his head. She wanted him flayed alive. The Light help her, she wanted his touch. *I must be going mad!*

"That will be solved along with everything else," she said coldly. Much depended on who was in Caemlyn, and who on their country estates. "Where is Lord Pelivar? Lady Abella? Lady Arathelle?" They led strong Houses, and many retainers.

"Exiled," Lini said slowly, giving her an odd look. "You exiled them from the city last spring." Morgase stared back. She remembered none of that. Except that now, dim and distant, she did.

"Lady Ellorien?" she said slowly. "Lady Aemlyn, and Lord Luan?" More strong Houses. More Houses that had been behind her before she gained the throne.

"Exiled," Lini replied just as slowly. "You had Ellorien flogged for demanding to know why." She bent to brush Morgase's hair back, gnarled fingers lingering on her cheek as they had when she checked for fever. "Are you well, girl?"

Morgase nodded dully, but it was because she was remembering, in a shadowy way. Ellorien, screaming in outrage as her gown was ripped down the back. House Traeman had been the very first to throw its support to Trakand, brought by a plumply pretty woman only a few years older than Morgase. Brought by Ellorien, now one of her closest friends. At least, she had been. Elayne had been named after Ellorien's grandmother. Vaguely she could recall others leaving the city; distancing themselves from her, it seemed obvious now. And those who remained? Houses too weak to be of any use, or else sycophants. She seemed to recall signing numerous documents Gaebrial had laid in front of her, creating new titles. Gaebrial's toadeaters and her enemies; they were all she could count on being strong in Caemlyn.

"I do not care what you say," Lini said firmly. "You have no fever, but there's something wrong. You need an Aes Sedai Healer is what you need."

"No Aes Sedai." Morgase's voice was even harder. She fingered her ring again, briefly. She knew that her animosity toward the Tower had grown recently beyond what some might say was reasonable, yet she could no longer make herself trust a White Tower that seemed to be trying to hide her daughter from her. Her letter to the new Amyrlin demanding Elayne's return—no-one demanded anything of an Amyrlin Seat, but she had—that letter was yet unanswered. It had barely had time to reach Tar Valon. In any case, she knew for cold fact that she would not have an Aes Sedai near her. And yet, right alongside that, she could not think of Elayne without a swell of pride. Raised Accepted after so short a time. Elayne might well be the first woman to sit on the throne of Andor as full Aes Sedai, not just Tower trained. It made no sense that she could feel both things at once, but very little made any sense just now. And her daughter would never have the Lion Throne if Morgase did not secure it for her.

"I said no Aes Sedai, Lini, so you might as well stop looking at me like that. This is one time you will not make me take bad-tasting medicine. Besides which, I doubt there is an Aes Sedai of any stripe to be found in Caemlyn." Her old supporters gone, exiled by her own signature, and maybe her enemies for good over what she had done to Ellorien. New lords and ladies in their places in the Palace. New faces in the Guards. What loyalty remained there? "Would you recognize a Guardsman Lieutenant named Tallanvor, Lini?" At the other woman's quick nod, she went on. "Find him for me, and bring him here. But do not let him know you are bringing him to me. In fact, tell everyone in the Pensioners' Quarters that, should anyone ask, I am not here."

"There is more to this than Gaebrial and his women, isn't there?"

"Just go, Lini. And hurry. There is not much time." By the shadows she could see in the tree-filled garden through the window, the sun had passed its height. Evening would be there all too soon. Evening, when Gaebrial would be looking for her.

When Lini left, Morgase remained in the chair, sitting rigidly. She dared not stand; her knees were stronger now, but she feared that if she began moving she would not stop until she was back in her sitting room, waiting for Gaebrial. The urge was that strong, especially now that she was alone. And once he looked at her, once he touched her, she had no doubt that she would forgive him everything. Forget everything, maybe, based on how fuzzy and incomplete her memories were. Had she not known better, she could have thought that he had used the One Power on her in some way, but no man who could channel survived to his age.

Lini had often told her that there was always one man in the world for whom a woman would find herself behaving a brainless fool, but she had never believed that she could succumb. Still, her choices in men had never been good, however right they seemed at the time.

Taringail Damodred she had wed for political reasons. He had been married to Tigraine, the Daughter-Heir whose disappearance had set off the Succession when Mordrellen died. Marrying him had made a link with the old queen, smoothing the doubts of most of her opponents, and more importantly, had maintained the alliance that had ended the ceaseless wars with Cairhien. In such ways did queens choose their husbands. Taringail had been a cold, distant man, and there was never love, despite two wonderful children; it had been almost a relief when he died in a hunting accident.

Thomdril Merrilin, House bard and then Court-bard, had been a joy at first, intelligent and witty, a laughing man who used the tricks of the Game of Houses to aid her to the throne and help

strengthen Andor once she had it. He had been twice her age then, yet she might have married him—marriages with commoners were not unheard of in Andor—but he vanished without a word, and her temper got the better of her. She never had learned why he had gone, but it did not matter. When he finally returned she would surely have rescinded the arrest order, but for once instead of softly turning her anger aside he had met her harsh word for harsh word, saying things she could never forgive. Her ears still burned to remember being called a spoiled child and a puppet of Tar Valon. He had actually shaken her, his queen!

Then there had been Gareth Bryne, strong and capable, as bluff as his face and as stubborn as she; he had turned out to be a treasonous fool. He was well out of her life. It seemed years since she had seen him instead of little more than half of one.

And finally Gaebrial. The crown to her list of bad choices. At least the others had not tried to supplant her.

Not so many men for one woman's life, but in another way, too many. Another thing that Lini sometimes said was that men were only good for three things, though very good for those. She had been on the throne before Lini had thought her old enough to tell what the three things were. *Perhaps if I'd kept just to the dancing, she thought wryly, I'd not have so much trouble with them.*

The shadows in the garden beyond the window had shifted an hour's worth before Lini returned with young Tallanvor, who went to one knee while she was still shutting the door. "He didn't want to come with me at first," she said. "Fifty years ago I suppose I could have shown what you are displaying to the world, and he'd have followed quick enough, but now I must needs use sweet reason."

Tallanvor turned his head to look up at her sourly. "You threatened to harry me here with a stick if I did not come. You are lucky I wondered what was so important to you, instead of having somebody drag you to the infirmary." Her stern sniff did not faze him. His acrid gaze turned angry as it shifted to Morgase. "I see your meeting with Gaebrial did not go well, my Queen. I had hoped for ... more."

He was looking straight at her eyes, but Lini's comment had made her aware of her dress again. She felt as though glowing arrows were pointing to her exposed bosom. It was an effort to keep her hands calmly in her lap. "You are a sharp lad, Tallanvor. And loyal, I believe, else you would not have come to me with the news of the Theren."

"I am not a boy," he snapped, jerking upright where he knelt. "I am a man who has sworn his life in service to his queen."

She let her temper flare right back at him. "If you are a man, behave as one. Stand, and answer your queen's questions truthfully. And remember that I am your queen, young Tallanvor. Whatever you think may have happened, I am Queen of Andor."

"Forgive me, my Queen. I hear and obey." The words were properly said, if not exactly contrite but he stood, head high, staring at her as defiantly as ever. Light, the man was as stubborn as Gareth Bryne had ever been.

"How many loyal men are there among the Guards in the Palace? How many will obey their oaths and follow me?"

"I will," he said quietly, and suddenly all of his anger was gone, though he still stared intently at her face. "For the rest ... If you wish to find loyal men, you must look to the outlying garrisons, perhaps as far as Whitebridge. Some who were in Caemlyn were sent to Cairhien with the levies, but the rest in the city are Gaebrial's to a man. Their new ... Their new oath is to throne and law, not the Queen."

It was worse than she had hoped for, but no more than she had expected, really. Whatever he was, Gaebrial was no fool. "Then I must go elsewhere to begin re-establishing my rule." The Houses would be difficult to rally after the exiles, after Ellorien, but it had to be done. "Gaebrial may try to stop me leaving the Palace"—she found a faint memory of trying to leave, twice, and being halted by Gaebrial—"so you will procure two horses and wait in the street behind the south stables. I will meet you there, dressed for riding."

"Too public," he said. "And too close. Gaebrial's men might recognize you, however you disguised yourself. I know a man ... Could you find an inn called The Queen's Blessing, in the western part of the New City?" The New City was new only in comparison with the Inner City it surrounded.

"I can." She did not like being opposed, even when it made sense. Bryne had done that, too. I would be a pleasure to show this young man just how well she could disguise herself. It was her habit once a year, though she realized that she had not done it so far this year, to dress as a commoner and walk the streets to feel the pulse of the people. No-one had ever recognized her. "But can this man be trusted, young Tallanvor?"

"Basel Gill is as loyal to you as I am myself." He hesitated, anguish crossing his face then being replaced by anger once more. "Why have you waited so long? You must have known, you must have seen, yet you have waited while Gaebrial tightened his hands around Andor's neck. Why have you waited?"

So. His anger was honestly come by, and it deserved an honest answer. Only she had no answer, certainly not one she could tell him. "It is not your place to question your Queen, young man," she said with a gentle firmness. "A loyal man, as I know that you are loyal, serves without question."

He let out a long breath. "I will await you in the stable of The Queen's Blessing, my Queen." And with a bow suitable for a state audience, he was gone.

"Why do you keep calling him young?" Lini demanded once the door closed. "It puts his back up. 'A fool puts a burr under the saddle before she rides'."

"He *is* young, Lini. Young enough to be my son."

Lini snorted, and this time there was nothing delicate about it. "He has a few years on Galad and Galad is too old to be yours. You were playing with dolls when Tallanvor was born, and thinking babes came the same way as dolls."

Sighing, Morgase wondered if the woman had treated her mother like this. Probably. And if Lini lived long enough to see Elayne on the throne—which somehow she did not doubt, Lini would last forever—she would probably treat Elayne no differently. That was assuming that a throne remained for Elayne to inherit. "The question is, is he as loyal as he seems, Lini? One faithful Guardsman when every other loyal man in the Palace has been sent away. Suddenly it seems too good to be true."

"He swore the new oath." Morgase opened her mouth, but Lini forestalled her. "I saw him afterwards, alone behind the stables. That's how I knew who you meant; I found out his name. He did not see me. He was on his knees, tears streaming down his face. He alternated apologizing to you and repeating the old oath. Not just to 'the Queen of Andor', but to 'Queen Morgase of Andor'. He swore in the old way, on his sword, slicing his arm to show he would shed his last drop before breaking it. I know a thing or two of men, girl. That one will follow you against an army with nothing but his bare hands."

That was good to know. If she could not trust him, she would have to doubt Lini next. No, never Lini. He had sworn in the old way? That was something for stories, now. And she was letting her thoughts drift again. Surely Gaebrial's clouding of her mind was finished now, with all she knew. Then why did a part of her still want to go back to her sitting room and wait? She had to concentrate. "I will need a simple dress, Lini. One that does not fit too well. A little soot from the fireplace, and..."

Lini insisted on coming, too. Morgase would have had to tie her to a chair to leave her behind, and she was not certain that the old woman would have let herself be tied; she had always seemed frail, and had always been far stronger than she seemed.

When she slipped out of the Pensioner's Quarter, Morgase did not look very much like herself. A bit of soot had darkened her red-gold hair, taken its sheen away and made it lank. Sweat rolling down her face helped, as well. No-one believed that queens sweated. A shapeless dress of rough—very rough—grey wool, with divided skirts, completed her disguise. Even her shift and stockings were coarse wool. She looked a farmwoman who had ridden the carthorse to market and now wanted to see a little of the city. Lini parted from her briefly, to fetch the supplies they would need for their journey.

Wishing she could scratch, Morgase also wished that the other woman had not taken her so to heart about the dress not fitting very well. Stuffing the low-necked gown away under the bed, her old nurse had muttered some saying about displaying wares you did not mean to sell, and when Morgase claimed she had just made it up, her reply was: *At my age, if I make it up, it's still an old saying.*

Morgase more than half-suspected that her itchy, ill-draped dress was punishment for that gown.

Even so, she welcomed it when she caught sight of Alteima while making her way to the postern gate where Lini was to meet her. Despite the anger that flared in her, Morgase hunched her shoulders and turned her face away. To hide from that trull in her own palace was beyond galling, but she forced herself to swallow her pride.

Alteima swayed on by, perhaps on her way to see Gaebrol. She had seen a lot, as had Morgase. She almost choked when she recalled the depth of the depravity Alteima had seen her in.

And then Alteima stopped. And looked back. And saw her.

There was no-one else there. No Lini and no Tallanvor, but none of Gaebrol's guards, either. "Morgase. Why are you dressed like that?" A sudden smile split her pretty face. "Are you going to be the servant again tonight? You do make a most enjoyable servant. That tongue of yours ..."

The smile was too knowing, too familiar. More memories drifted out of Morgase's tortured mind. She hadn't. She had. Why!? What was wrong with her!?

"Never again!" she snarled.

Alteima's brows rose. "Does Gaebrol know you think that?"

Morgase had a temper, but she knew how to control it. Usually. Even through her anger she was able to read Alteima's face and know what her decision would be. She made a decision of her own, coldly and deliberately, and stepped towards her. "Why don't we go to him and find out?"

"That would be for the best. Come," Alteima said, gesturing expectantly. A small thing, but it rid her of any regret. The Tairen was still smiling that smug little smile, certain of compliance, when Morgase stepped close and slipped her dagger into the woman's side.

Her sudden gasp turned to a brief scream before Morgase's hand clamped over her mouth. Alteima's knees gave out and she went to the marbled ground of the palace, her weight pulling her free of Morgase's weapon. Her blood was flowing fast, staining the white tiles red.

"Never again," Morgase told her, coldly now.

"Help! Someone help me!" Alteima cried.

There were footsteps coming from far away, but Morgase's alarm was slow to grow. It was her palace. What had she to fear from an alarm? Except that she might well have something to fear, now. Shaking herself, she hurried away; Alteima's cries growing weaker as she bled out.

She hurried to the end of the corridor and turned towards her destination ... Only to stop dead in her tracks. Gaebrol was there, tall and strong, dark of skin and darker of eye; striding her way. He frowned to see her in the state she was, and frowned harder when he drew close and noticed Alteima lying on the floor. "What have you done, you stupid woman?"

Stupid? She slapped him. She hadn't intended to, but her hand demanded the right to fly and fly she let it. She could usually control her temper, but being called stupid by a man whom she'd let do the things Gaebrol had done ... it was too much. Gaebrol looked surprised, the whites of his eyes showing to match those wings in his hair. His surprise very quickly became an anger to match his own.

"You dare strike me?"

"I dare more than that. I name you traitor. I accuse you of conspiring against your rightful queen. How do you plead?"

He glowered at her. "Plead? To you? Don't be absurd," he sneered. "Be grateful you still have use. I have killed better women than you for less than this."

He was still looking at Alteima, whose cries had ceased. She was no longer moving. Whatever he had been to her, Gaebrol had made no effort to save her. He hadn't even gone to hold her as she died. What had Morgase been thinking? Why had she involved herself with such a man? It hurt her more than knowing he'd betrayed her, the realisation that she'd been such a fool. She'd always thought herself better than that. Wiser, smarter.

And perhaps she'd been wrong, but she was still smart enough to see an opportunity when it was right in front of her. There was one sure and certain way to end a conspiracy. And when the head conspirator was standing right beside her, seemingly unconcerned for his safety ... Just as it had with Alteima, her knife flashed out and plunged into Gaebrol's side. Some mad part of her still screamed in grief at the idea, but the greater part of her won out.

Gaebrol blinked at her in surprise, but not in pain. It was mere annoyance with which he beheld her. She tried again, only for her knife to bounce off that same invisible something it had the first time. "What is going on?" she whispered.

Gaebrol tutted. "Nothing. You saw nothing. Say it."

Morgase almost did. The words gathered behind her lips like a rushing river, ready and eager to burst forth. Her mind felt fuzzy again but a horrible realisation fought through that fuzz, one that reshaped her understanding of all that had happened lately.

Horror, anger and her own innate stubbornness gave her strength. She opened her mouth but the words that came out were her own, nor Gaebrial's. "You can channel! You are a false Dragon!"

Her accusation amused him. "Hardly that."

She bared her teeth. She would have buried them in his throat if she could. "Monster! You did something to me. You must have. I would never have involved myself with a man as vile as you otherwise. No woman would!"

That he didn't like. "They queue for days for the chance at my company. All of them hunger for me, though they try to deny it."

She sneered. "Is that what you tell yourself? If you used the Power on them then you are nothing more than a common rapist. A vile, unlovable little man who must resort to force to live out his fantasies. We geld rapists in my realm."

"Geld. Geld! You dare threaten me, you worthless slut? Do you think I need you? I do not need anyone."

He could channel, she was almost certain of it. That was a thing of nightmare, and perhaps she should have been afraid. But Morgase stood tall and defiant before him. "You do not frighten me."

His sneer grew uglier. "Then you are even more stupid than most women."

Something hit her. It was not Gaebrial, who did not raise his hands. Something invisible struck her and sent her flying through the air to slam into the wall of her palace. Pain spiked through her. She knew the horrible moment when her skull broke, felt the unnatural softness of it as she slid down to the ground. Her vision began to fade. She felt cold, as cold as Alteima must have. Gaebrial watched her, unsurprised by what had happened. He had done it. With the One Power. He had killed her.

Instead of being horrified, Morgase felt a strange relief. She had not disgraced herself. She had not betrayed her friends and her nation for a man's touch. That madness, that weakness, had come not from within her but from the man, no, the creature, before her. Her last thoughts sighed out with her breath. *Thank the Light.* She hoped Elayne would understand why, too, when the White Tower came to bring Gaebrial down.

## CHAPTER 47: No Secret



"I do not understand this," Elayne protested. She had not been offered a chair; in fact, when she started to sit, she had been told curtly to remain standing. Three sets of eyes were focused on her, three women with set, grim faces. "You are behaving as if we've done something terrible." Elayne wondered how Nynaeve was getting on with the weekly meeting. Better than herself, she hoped.

"You have endangered a secret kept close by every woman to wear the shawl for over two thousand years." Merilille sat stiff-backed, serenity almost abandoned on the tight-lipped brink of apoplexy. "You must have been insane! Only madness could excuse this!"

"What secret?" Elayne demanded.

Merilille adjusted gold-slashed skirts of silvery grey irritably and said, "Time enough for that when you've been properly raised, child. I thought you had some sense."

"The child cannot be faulted for revealing a secret she did not know," Careane Fransi said from Elayne's left, shifting her bulk in her green-and-gilt armchair. She was not stout, but almost, with shoulders as wide and arms as thick as most men.

"Tower law does not allow for excuses," Bastilla put in quickly, in somewhat self-important tones, her blue eyes stern. "Once mere excuses are allowed, inevitably lesser and lesser excuses will become acceptable, until law itself is gone." Her high-backed chair stood to the right. Merilille's sitting room had been arranged as a court, though no-one called it that. So far, no-one had. Merilille confronted Elayne like a judge, Bastilla's chair was placed where the Seat of Rebuke would be, and Careane's the Seat of Pardon, but the Domani Green who would have been her defender nodded thoughtfully as the Andoran Yellow who would have been her prosecutor continued. "She has admitted guilt from her own mouth. I recommend that the child be confined to the palace until we leave, with some good hard work to occupy her mind and her hands. I also recommend a firm dose of the slipper at regular intervals to remind her not to go behind sisters' backs. And the same for Nynaeve, as soon as she can be found."

Elayne swallowed. Confined? Perhaps they did not need to name this a trial for it to be one. Like the others, Bastilla had the ageless face of an Aes Sedai. The weight of the other women's years pressed at Elayne. Merilille's hair was glossy black, yet Elayne would not have been surprised to learn she had worn the shawl as long or longer than most women not Aes Sedai lived. For that matter, Careane might have, as well. Not one of them approached her own strength in the Power, but ... All that experience as Aes Sedai, all that knowledge. All that ... authority. A heavy reminder that she was only seventeen and had been in Novice white a year ago.

Careane made no move to rebut Bastilla's suggestions. Perhaps she best go on defending herself. When they had summoned her, she had thought they wanted to push for her to join with the rebels against Elaida, but it had been her meeting with Reanne that they'd referenced. And very sharply at that. "Plainly this secret you speak of has something to do with the Circle, but—"

"The Kin are no concern of yours, child," Merilille broke in sharply.

Elayne was shocked. It went against everything she thought she knew of the Tower's attitude towards other channelers, but ... "Do you mean to tell me the Tower has known of the Circle—these Kin, as you call them—all along?" Poor Reanne and her hopes to avoid Aes Sedai notice.

"As near as they could make themselves come to sisters, I suppose," Bastilla said. "Even during the Trolloc Wars, women failed their tests, or lacked the strength, or were sent away from the Tower for any of the usual reasons. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a number feared to go off into the world alone, nor that they might flee to Barashta, as the city that existed here then was called. Though the main part of Barashta was, of course, where the Rahad now stands. Not that a stone of Barashta remains. The Trolloc Wars did not truly envelope Eharon until late, but in the end, Barashta fell as completely as Barsine, or Shaemal, or ..."

"The Kin ..." Careane broke in. "If you are going to tell her, then at least tell it right."

Bastilla did not quite scowl at the Green. "... The Kin persisted even after Barashta fell, in the same way they had before, taking in wilders and women put out of the Tower." Elayne frowned; Mistress Anan had said the Kin took in wilders, too, but Reanne's biggest anxiety had seemed to be making her and Nynaeve prove they were not.

"None ever remained long," Sareitha added. "Five years, perhaps ten; then, I suppose, as now. Once they realize that their little group is no replacement for the White Tower, they go off and become village Healers or Wisdoms or the like, or sometimes simply forget the Power, stop channelling, and take up a craft or trade. In any case, they vanish, so to speak." Elayne wondered how anyone could forget the One Power that way; the urge to channel, the temptation of the Source, was always there, once you learned how. Aes Sedai did seem to believe some women could just put it behind them, though, once they found out they would not be Aes Sedai.

"The Tower has known of the Kin from nearly the beginning, perhaps from the very beginning. At first, no doubt, the Wars took precedence. And despite calling themselves the Kin, they have done just what we want such women to do. They remain hidden, even the fact that they can channel, draw no attention whatsoever to themselves. Over the years, they have even passed along word—secretly, of course; carefully—when one of them found a woman falsely claiming the shawl. You wish to say something?"

She did. "That doesn't explain why. Why is knowledge of them such a deep secret? Why haven't they been scattered long ago?"

"Why, the runaways, of course." Bastilla made it sound the most obvious thing in the world. "It is a fact that other gatherings have been broken up as soon as found—the last about two hundred years ago—but the Kin do keep themselves small, and quiet. That last group called themselves the Daughters of Silence, yet they were hardly silent. Only twenty-three of them altogether, wilders gathered and trained after a fashion by a pair of former Accepted, but they—"

"Runaways," Careane prompted with a small smile.

Bastilla blinked, and pulled herself back to the topic. "The Kin help runaways. They always have two or three women in Tar Valon keeping watch. For one thing, they approach almost every woman put out, in a very circumspect way, and for another, they manage to find every runaway, whether Novice or Accepted. At least, none has made it off the island without their help since the Trolloc Wars."

Merilille nodded bleakly. "If anyone does manage to escape, why, we know right where to look, and she nearly always ends up back in the Tower wishing her feet had never itched. As long as the Kin don't know we know, anyway. Once that happens, it will be back to the days before the Kin, when a woman running from the Tower might go in any direction. The numbers were larger then—Aes Sedai, Accepted, Novices and runaways—and some years two out of three escaped clean, others three out of four. Using the Kin, we retake at least nine of ten. You can see why the Tower has preserved the Kin and their secret like precious jewels."

Elayne could. A woman was not done with the White Tower until it was done with her. Besides, it could not hurt the Tower's reputation for infallibility that it always caught runaways. Almost always. Well, now she knew.

"I fail to see what harm we caused. The Kin took us for runaways and ushered us straight out the door. They know no more now than they did before we met them."

"That is not for you to judge," Merilille said. Drawing a deep breath, she smoothed her skirts. "I propose to pass sentence," she went on in a cold voice.

"I concur, and defer to your decision," Bastilla said.

"I concur and defer. But I agree with the Seat of Rebuke." Careane's look might have contained a sliver of sympathy. Maybe a sliver.

It was quite aggravating. All that they had done to thwart the Black Ajah, and these women still treated her like a child. Merilille opened her mouth to pass sentence, but Elayne spoke first. "I wonder would the Amyrlin Seat approve of your taking this authority on yourselves. Can someone who stands in defiance of the White Tower still invoke Tower law?"

Merilille's lips thinned. "Elaida ... is a harsher woman than most. She would punish your infractions to the fullest extent of Tower law."

"I know," Elayne said dryly. "I've known her all my life."

The three Aes Sedai exchanged looks. "Then surely you know why she cannot be allowed to sit the Amyrlin Seat," said Merilille.

She did. But they did not need to know that. It would be entirely natural for them to think her inclined to support Elaida. Which was to her advantage just then. "A strong leader is what we need, in these trying times."

Merilille drummed her fingers briefly. "Perhaps it would be best if your punishment was carried out in Salidar, instead of here."

Salidar. She knew the place. "A long journey. And a difficult one. To a place other than the one Elaida orders we return. Will you leave Teslyn and Joline to work on Tylin while you escort us under constant watch?"

"Do you imply there is another option?"

She shrugged casually. "My friends and I have travelled far in recent times. I am sure we could manage the trip on our own. It can be hoped the sisters there will be less harsh than Elaida."

Merilille sniffed. "You still have a long way to go. But there is potential there. Doubtless they will know how to bring it out of you ... in Salidar. You and your friends will leave as soon as possible."

Elayne curtsied smoothly. "As you wish. I shall go and begin packing, then, shall I?"

Another sniff. "Do so."

## CHAPTER 48: From Wisdom to Aes Sedai



The red dress looked good on her but she willed it away even so. She didn't want to give Rand the wrong idea. He'd been presumptuous enough to ask her to meet him later when she'd traded news with the Wise Ones earlier; she couldn't be certain he wouldn't presume to think she intended to do something now. Which she certainly didn't. Of course. The dress returned of its own will. It was quite pretty really. Annoyingly low in the front. She'd get rid of it later. For now she needed to make sure they were alone.

The White Tower still seemed unnaturally empty here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. The real Tower might not hold as many women as it had been built to, but it had always been a bustle of activity when she was there. Here was only the eerie echo of her own shoes on the coloured tiles.

Even that was preferable to the meeting with the Wise Ones, though. They had looked very much like ghosts, and so had Rand and Dani. The two Wise Ones who had come had seemed ... misty, almost, and Dani and Rand were very nearly transparent.

"What's the matter with you? Why do you look that way?" Nynaeve had demanded to know.

"You try entering *Tel'aran'rhiod* while half-asleep in a saddle," Dani had said dryly. She seemed to flicker. "It is night in the Three-fold Land, but we are still on the move. I had to talk Amys into letting me come at all, but I was afraid you would be worried."

"We have to catch the Shaido," Rand said stubbornly. "Every moment we delay means more death."

"It is a difficult enough task without the horse," Amys said, "sleeping shallowly when you wish to be awake. Our students have not learned it entirely yet."

"I will," Dani said with an irritated determination. Rand had said nothing then, just studied her in a way that had made her blush. That wasn't why she'd agreed to meet up again later, of course. There were just some things they shouldn't talk about in front of the Wise Ones was all.

Nynaeve frowned. But why had he asked to meet her in Tar Valon? Even if there were no Aes Sedai here, it was still not a safe place for him. It was barely safe for her, with the way the sisters in Ebou Dar were behaving!

The room she'd arrived in belonged to the Mistress of Novices. She had no idea why she kept appearing here every time she wanted to explore the dreamworld's reflection of the White Tower. It certainly wouldn't help Rand to find her. He'd never been to Tar Valon before, and certainly not to this room. Yet he'd said to meet him in the Amyrlin's office. The fool must have been exploring it in the dreamworld without her.

It was disturbing how quickly *Tel'aran'rhiod* forgot. None of the furnishings that Leane and Siuan had kept could be seen anymore. The building itself remained eternal, but the internal decor of the Keeper's office was completely taken over by Alviarin now. She did not doubt the Amyrlin's office would be Elaida's, too. There was a moment's alarm when she heard voices coming from within, but she recognised Rand's quiet timber along with a woman's even quieter one.

Nynaeve strode in, forgetting to change her dress again, only to stop in her tracks when she saw the woman he was commiserating with. It was not Dani. That sculpted face showed no alarm at the strangeness of the dreamworld, though Nynaeve was sure she had never been there before. She was all cool composure, there in her rich dress of blue silk. Her high-necked dress of blue silk. A single dark brow rose almost far enough to touch her hairline. Nynaeve read judgement in that look, and could not stop herself from blushing.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Rand answered for her. "Moiraine wanted to see proof of what happened here. Siuan's fall, and Elaida's rise, I mean."

"Dani gave her her *ter'angreal*?" A horrible thought. She liked Dani, and didn't mind meeting her each week. Meeting Moiraine was a much different prospect. *Elayne will have to handle that!*

Rand rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "No. She just left her mind unguarded. I brought her into the dream. Seana showed me how."

Moiraine raised that brow at him, too. "And cautioned against it, I see."

She expected Rand to bristle, as he always bristled when he thought she was digging at him. But he laughed instead, an easy sound that had grown all too rare to hear from him these days. Nynaeve didn't much like that Moiraine had caused it.

"Well, aren't you two cosy?"

For an instant Moiraine stood naked in the Amyrlin's study, her small beasts and pale slenderness exposed for all to see. She was no less beautiful without the silk, burn her. She didn't seem to realise what had happened, but Rand certainly did. He took in her beauty with a certain lack of shock. *He can't really have done it, whatever Dani said. Not Moiraine, of all women.*

"Are you not glad that we have set aside our differences, Nynaeve?" Moiraine asked, clothes and composure quickly returning.

"How far aside did you set them?"

That little smile. That cat-like little smile. Nynaeve had her hand on her braid and was marching across the room before she knew it. "You didn't. Rand, tell me you didn't."

He at least had the grace to blush. "Moiraine promised to stop trying to undermine me. She swore to follow instead. To help and, and t-to obey. I ... tested that."

"Oh, I'll bet you did!" Nynaeve shouted, her own colour flaring high.

Moiraine was the only one staying cool. "I will hear no judgements from you, Nynaeve al'Meara, given your own affairs."

"You ... you mind your tongue."

That little smile returned. "A poor choice of words. You really must do better, if you are to be Aes Sedai. I will not be able to give you any more lessons going forward."

"I am quite done with your lessons!" she said. It was only when she noticed the way they were both looking that she uncrossed her arms. That bloody dress! She should never have worn it.

"What is all this?" Rand asked suspiciously.

"It's women's business! Women's Circle business, and you would do well to stay out of it if you value your hide, Rand al'Thor."

Moiraine chuckled. "I rather doubt that is an accurate description of what goes on at your circle, Nynaeve. And young Rand has little to worry about with them now, let neither of us doubt it."

That puffed him up like no-one's business. What was the woman doing? She'd been intent on keeping him humble back in Tear. Now she sang his praises? Surely being diddled had not addled her brains, not Moiraine.

"You two have always been at odds," Rand said slowly, "but sometimes that can lead to strange places ... Lan's been angry at me lately."

"I know," Moiraine said.

"He has? What did you do?" It wasn't like Lan to be angry over anything. Rand must have been even more annoying than usual to have managed to annoy him. Whatever it was had Rand looking very embarrassed.

He dared to silk a lock of Moiraine's hair through his fingers. "Partially what. And partially with whom."

"Oh."

"Yes." He stared at his free hand for a moment, then turned his stricken gaze on her. "I worry what might happen if ... when ..."

"Don't. I will deal with that." It was a problem of her making, after all.

Moiraine sniffed. "As suspected. You are not as proper as you like to tell yourself, Wisdom."

"Neither are you!" Nynaeve snapped.

"No. I suppose I am not at that," Moiraine mused. "I never was. Siuan showed me that. But it's too late to change the past. It's too late to change anything. Of all times to discover passion ..."

She didn't like the way Rand was looking at the Aes Sedai. How quickly he went from suspicious of everything about her to puppy eyes. Men! They really didn't have any brains at all. "Please. You haven't changed at all. You just changed tactics. I should take a slipper to you and make you confess it. Don't think I couldn't!"

"Nynaeve there's no need for—"

Moiraine cut him off. "Did you not learn anything from last time? Such crass violence proves nothing."

"Oh, not when I do it, but it's fine for you!"

"The how and the why are as important as the what."

Rand butted in in what he probably imagined was a commanding voice. "I don't know what you mean, but no-one should be hurting anyone. Let's all calm down."

"Stay out of it! This is between me and her," she snapped. She rounded on Moiraine. "I'll wipe that mocking look off your face. You don't know *Tel'aran'rhiad* the way I do." So saying she focusing her will on the Aes Sedai. Sure enough, the blue dress disappeared again, but this time it did not flicker back into existence.

It took a moment for Moiraine to notice. When she did, she annoyed Nynaeve by not leaping to cover herself the way a woman should. "A child's game. Think you I have never been naked before?"

"I know you have! I was just getting warmed up, that's all." *Witch!*

Rand cleared his throat. "Um ... this isn't a new thing, is it?"

"I told you already: mind your business!" She gave him a good glare to go with it this time.

But her hottest glare she reserved for that damnable Blue. When that had no effect, she embraced *saidar*, shielded her, and dragged her forwards on ropes of Air.

"This is not behaviour fit for an Aes Sedai, Accepted," Moiraine said.

Her cool disdain just annoyed Nynaeve more. "Well, an Aes Sedai should be able to free herself from these bonds, shouldn't she? Where is all your cool superiority now, hmm? Why don't you break this shield, push me around some more, put your hands on me and do whatever you want? You can't, that's why!" Nynaeve stepped closer, to look Moiraine right in those big dark eyes of hers. "But I could. I could do whatever I wanted to you. And I might, too. Unless you apologise."

Had they widened slightly, those eyes? Was Moiraine nervous? It was hard to tell, but the Aes Sedai held her silence for a long moment before responding. "I am sorry ... that your stubbornness made it necessary for me to take steps to guide you down the path that you were always meant to walk."

Fury engulfed Nynaeve's mind. Her hand snapped out to seize a handful of Moiraine's hair. "Oh, you utter witch. I have had it with you!"

Still surrounded by the nimbus of a woman holding *saidar*, she dragged Moiraine across the room by her hair, ignoring her hiss of outrage as much as she did Rand's feeble mutterings about not hurting anyone. Moiraine didn't even make much noise when Nynaeve threw her to the ground. Even when Nynaeve stood over her naked form, fully clothed with her fists planted on her hips, those ageless cheeks did not colour. Moiraine simply lay there, staring coolly up at her. There was a way, though, a scandalous technique that snooty and nowhere near as innocent as she looked Elayne had shown her. When half a dozen flows of Air began to knot together intricately in the space in front of Nynaeve's crotch, and Moiraine beheld what she was spinning there, a gasp was finally forced from the Aes Sedai's lips. That construct of Air was greily opaque, long and thick.

"You can't!" Moiraine declared, as she tried to scrabble away.

Nynaeve seized her by the ankle, not with the Power this time, but with her bare hands. "Oh, yes I can. You've had this coming for a long time." A sharp tug brought Moiraine back to earth, her bare breasts thudding against the cold tiles. Nynaeve knelt behind her and took hold of her hair again. "Say 'please don't, Mistress. I'm very sorry for being an evil Aes Sedai witch, and I won't do it ever again'. Say it, and I might let you go." She leaned forward under her mouth was close to Moiraine's ear, and lowered her voice. "Say it, unless you're a dirty little girl-whore who secretly wants this."

"This" was the phallic construct attached to her hips, the construct that she now pressed between Moiraine's parted legs. Moiraine gritted her teeth when she felt its cold touch. "I will say no such thing," she managed to get out, before her words were cut off by the angry thrust of Nynaeve's hips. Her fake cock parted the lips of Moiraine's pussy, and surged deep inside in a way that forced a humiliating yelp from her. Loving that sound, Nynaeve give her much time to adjust, for she went all the way to the hilt on that first rough thrust.

"Take that!" she said, as she lay atop the smaller woman. She pulled on Moiraine's hair, forcing her head back so she could look at her face as she fucked her. "Who's in charge now, hmm? Who's the big woman, throwing her weight around, hurting whoever she pleases? Not you." She

began riding Moiraine, fucking her with short, sharp movements of her hips. “Who likes being tied up and taken advantage of? Who deserves it?” Her free hand snaked around to clutch at Moiraine’s breast, and pinch her stiffened nipple. Nynaeve sniffed knowingly, and her thrusting intensified. “I’m going to make you come. You’ll come all over this floor, and then we’ll both know what a dirty, wicked girl you are, under that haughty, oh-so-superior mask.”

Moiraine didn’t struggle against it. She just lay there, breathing deeply as she took what Nynaeve had to give. She wasn’t sure what to make of that acceptance. Was she sorry for what she’d done? Was she ... enjoying this? She wasn’t allowed to! That would just make things too confusing.

“How does it feel?” Nynaeve asked as she rode her. But it wasn’t the construct she was using to ravage Moiraine’s body to which she referred. “How does it feel knowing they like me more? Lan wants to shed your bond and marry me. Rand trusts me in a way he never will you. Even your own niece comes to me for advice instead of you. What does all of that say about you?”

“It says that they do not see the bigger picture,” Moiraine growled, flushing in a way being fucked did not cause. “That they refuse to see how much I have done for them and the Light, or appreciate my sacrifices, is a fault in them, not in me!”

“Who never learn,” Nynaeve said grimly. “Well, here’s an extra special lesson for you.” She seized Moiraine by the hips and yanked her up into a kneeling position. She endured the indignity in silence, until she felt a second object Nynaeve wove into being press against her now-exposed butthole.

“Nynaeve, wait!” she cried.

“Too late for that, witch. You had your chance to repent,” Nynaeve said, just before she thrust forward once more, this time shoving both of her Power-wrought cocks into Moiraine unprepared flesh. Moiraine screamed in pain and surprise at that initial penetration, but Nynaeve heard the exact moment when the naughty pleasure of it struck her.

She couldn’t help but look at Rand then, and remember. He was leaning against the Amyrlin Seat’s desk, gaping silently at them, his cheeks red and a very noticeable bulge in his breeches.

Nynaeve’s heart raced. Her mind raced, too, away from memory. But her hips and her wrist raced most of all, as she used them to probe Moiraine’s dirty holes there in front of him. Her relentless pace soon had her gasping almost as badly as Moiraine was. The Aes Sedai’s self-control had failed. Sweat misted her pale skin, pink suffused her cheeks, sure signs of the unwelcome pleasure building steadily within her.

She kept fighting all the way to the bitter end, though; Nynaeve had to give her that. Moiraine tried to hide it, but half a whimper escaped before she clamped her jaws, and that sudden stiffening of her whole body told the tale to Nynaeve’s no longer inexperienced eyes. She gave the Aes Sedai a sharp slap across her backside as punishment for that failure.

“I told you so! A slutty little witch, that’s what you are,” she said, in a voice of deepest satisfaction. She didn’t pull her fake cocks out of Moiraine, she simply unravelled the threads they had been formed from and allowed them to dissipate, leaving her holes gaping shamefully. Freed of those intruding rods, Moiraine fell onto her side.

There was satisfaction in seeing her old enemy so thoroughly put in her place, but a strange kind of shame, too. A proper Wisdom would never have done those things. And she certainly wouldn’t have gotten so excited by it that she struggled not to squirm. The toys hadn’t done much to stimulate her body, but she knew something that could be relied on to. Maybe she should stop. The point was made, the scales balanced and then some. And what Moiraine had said wasn’t entirely unfair. She had helped, too.

But ... the squirming. Nynaeve was naked when she came to stand with one foot on either side of Moiraine’s head. She didn’t know at what point her clothes had disappeared, or at which of the women Rand had stared most as they were doing what they’d done. She did know that she needed release, though. Pleasure had hazed Moiraine’s eyes, but not so much that she didn’t gasp when Nynaeve’s pussy filled first her vision and then her mouth.

“Lick me,” Nynaeve demanded as she knelt atop her.

Moiraine’s face heated. Her hands went to Nynaeve’s bare ass, but instead of pushing her away they gave it a little squeeze, before her tongue went to work between those tender folds.

Each passage of that tongue sent a new thrill through Nynaeve's body. She flushed at that, and even more so when footsteps heralded Rand's arrival. He loomed over her, but there was nothing of judgement in the way he looked down at the two of them.

"She's really good with her lips, isn't she?"

It was hard to scowl properly while in the position she was in, but Nynaeve tried. What a thing to say! "Better than me?" she heard herself say, rather than the rebuke she should have given him.

Rand didn't look nearly as surprised as he should. He leaned down, smiling. "I didn't say that ..." he breathed as his lips came close.

Nynaeve threw her arms around his shoulders and yanked him to her. She gave him as thorough a kissing as any man had ever had; surely a far better one than Moiraine could ever have managed. Only the need to breathe made her release his lips at last.

She knew it for a mistake when he scooped her up and carried her towards the heavy desk. It was all too easy to imagine what he wanted to do. And far too embarrassing. She couldn't. Not in front of Moiraine. Nynaeve struggled in his arms, and Rand set her down, surprise and hurt on his face.

"You looked worked up. I thought you might like to ..." He cleared his throat. "I'm told those things are a bit one-sided when it comes to, to pleasure."

"Told by who? Never mind! Don't tell me!"

Soft laughter sounded. "Still at odds with reality, Nynaeve? Such delusions cannot be tolerated," Moiraine said as she rose to her feet, wincing slightly.

Nynaeve sighed. "What does it take to shut you up?"

"Death," Moiraine said, cold as ice.

They stared at each other, clothes of various cuts and hues flickering into being and then flickering away again. Rand scrubbed a hand through his hair as he looked between them.

"Well, if you won't let me help that way ..." He chewed on his lip, and had a look in his eyes that reminded her far too much of Mat. "Neither of you knows *Tel'aran'rhiad* the way I do."

A strange chill ran through Nynaeve, almost like a Healing though far gentler. When she looked down to check herself for injuries, shock froze her in place. She was naked, her breasts standing proud and free, her waist and hips there for anyone who cared to stare. But it was not at those that she, and Moiraine, were staring. It was at the unfamiliar manhood that was intruding upon the place of her femininity. Dark thatch rested above it, and a pair of strange orbs dangled below. When she shifted, they brushed against her thighs and sent strange sensations shooting through her body. The felt the fleshiest part twitch.

Moiraine's gasp outran her own. "What have you done to yourself, woman?"

Nynaeve stared at the Aes Sedai's huge dark eyes. Off to the side she saw Rand wink. How had he—? Where had he learned to—? And why, for that matter!? Why he had done it was easier to answer. The fool thought he was helping. Helping her to, to ... Nynaeve swallowed. The intruding thing hadn't stopped twitching. She stared down at it as it twitched its way upwards, inching towards the, the ready position.

She heard Moiraine swallow, too. Those stiff little nipples of hers cried out to be touched. "You liked it," Nynaeve whispered, as some utterly debauched thoughts rioted through her mind. "And there's something else you want in you ..." Even stepping closer felt strange. She could feel the, the cock connected to her bouncing. Yet, when she did step close, Moiraine reached out to touch it, a light experimental touch that made Nynaeve shiver.

There was nothing experimental in the way they kissed, however. Those lips were hot under hers, and hungry. Their breasts clashed, soft against soft, but when their sexes touched it was not with the same familiar softness.

"Push her down on the bed, and spread her legs," Rand urged. "She likes that."

*What bed?* she almost asked, but there it was, right in middle of the office where no bed belonged. Nynaeve blushed. A lot of things were appearing where they didn't belong tonight. And going. She gave Moiraine a firm shove and sent her back to bounce on the soft mattress, making her breasts jiggle prettily and a supercilious censorship mar her face. It did a good job against Nynaeve's uncertainty.

Rand's support helped, too. He had decided to help *her*, not Moiraine. Perhaps he wasn't as far under her thumb as she'd feared. The thought of him watching as she did what she intended to do to Moiraine was more exciting than she'd ever imagined. When she took Moiraine by the knees and parted her legs, she saw that she was not the only one getting excited.

"You dirty, dirty girl. You want this, don't you? You want me to f—to, to f-fuck you?" Nynaeve's cheeks flared as her efforts at tough talked failed.

Moiraine didn't mock her the way she'd expected, though. She was too busy staring at the huge thing sticking out between them. "Yes..."

It felt good to touch it herself, if not as much as she'd imagined. Touching her real sex felt better, though that was hidden at the moment. Nynaeve braced herself for disappointment, up until the moment she touched the tip to Moiraine wet pussy. A loud gasp escaped her, and several more followed as she let desire and instinct take over. In it went, slowly, inch by inch, parting the Aes Sedai's folds, probing her intimacy, forcing matching gasps from her. She tried to look away but Nynaeve captured her face between her hands. She looked right into those dark eyes as she entered, and only when she was all the way inside did she capture her mouth as well, and push her tongue down with her own.

*So that's what it's like*, she thought. Her weight came to rest upon Moiraine as she savoured the pleasure. When she came up for air she realised her hips had been grinding away of their own will. It felt good. She grinded harder. That felt even better. Soon she was pushing herself up, breasts hanging free as her hips slapped against Moiraine's, driving that new cock of hers into the Aes Sedai. Her face was hot with more than exertion.

Moiraine wasn't struggling against her the way she'd half-imagined. Graceful fingers pinched at her nipple. She sent her free hand around back, to grasp Nynaeve's soft bottom and pull her in. That exited her even more than the struggles of before, and she started fucking the woman in earnest.

"Light. Look at you two," she heard Rand breathe.

It was all so very strange, so very exciting. Too exciting. She felt like she was about to burst. In fact, there was a ... a rushing ... "Oh Light!"

Raw pleasure crashed over Nynaeve. She fell gasping into Moiraine's arms. Something was flowing down that unfamiliar shaft, spurting out of her and into the Aes Sedai. The Aes Sedai she found herself hugging to her. The realisation that she was coming floated up past the numbing pleasure. Coming like a man. The realisation that it had only been a few minutes since they started soon followed, and reddened her cheeks yet more. Rand had never finished so quickly.

When she at last dared to look, she found that damned eyebrow being arched at her again.

"You still have a long way to go, Wisdom."

"Hey. Be nice," Rand said from behind. "Everybody pops quickly when they start." She felt a hand pat her bottom comfortingly. "Don't worry about it, Nynaeve."

She rested her head on Moiraine's shoulder. What had become of her life? What had led her here? Less than two years ago she had been back in Emond's Field, setting broken bones and mixing a few potent herbs into the medicine of anyone who needed a warning to behave themselves. Now? She hadn't even the words for now. Could madness be contagious?

"How very cosy," Moiraine said dryly. "I wonder. Can you think of a way to ... reignite her?"

That hand returned to her bottom. And it wasn't being comforting. "Oh. I can think of a way."

No. Not while Moiraine was watching. She should ... she should ... He took her by the hips and pulled her up into a kneeling position and somehow, somehow all the things she should say went unsaid. They came out instead in a loud wail when she felt him enter her dripping wet pussy. He went deep, until she felt his familiar balls press up against her own very *unfamiliar* balls. She bit her lip hard, and saw Moiraine doing the same.

Rand rode her hard and steady, making her breasts shake for Moiraine's lewd gaze. That gaze went from her to him and back again and did not change at all. Those graceful hands of hers grasped Nynaeve's head with a distinct lack of grace. "Kiss me, Wisdom," she gasped as she pulled her down, down towards her pink lips, the ones between her legs.

She should have refused that, too, and yet, her mind addled by what Rand was stirring in her, she let the Aes Sedai push her pussy against her face and she, she licked. A musical sigh tickled her ears, hands held her firmly by hip and head. She could taste her own salty come, mixed with

Moiraine's arousal. And she could feel her new cock ache its way back to hardness in time with her building pleasure.

"She's good at that, too, I take it," Rand said as he watched Moiraine writhe on the bed.

"Oh, very good. Very good," she moaned.

She knew he liked that, for he started fucking her harder, every thrust of his cock sending pleasure spiking into her and cranked her own up more. Moiraine's stiff nipples were straining for the ceiling. Nynaeve gave her a taste of the finger and made them strain even harder. Incensed, she found her special nub and went to work on it. She wanted her to lose control. She wanted her to be seen, as Nynaeve had been.

And she soon got her wish. Moiraine's Aes Sedai calm was nowhere to be seen when she came in Nynaeve's face that night. She screamed and writhed, hands flailing, sudden sweat and an indecorous flush marring her pale skin.

Instead of being driven wild—the way that Nynaeve certainly would not have!—Rand stopped to watch. When she raised her head and glanced back over her shoulder, he was smiling. He looked very pretty back there, even if only half of his sculpted body was visible above her hips.

Moiraine certainly thought so. She hadn't even caught her breath properly before she slid from the bed and moved around to embrace him. She kissed his lips, and when her hands found his bottom she made him start moving inside Nynaeve once more. She tried not to moan, but it felt so good.

Her cheek shook under a light slap. "That's no sound a proper woman should be making."

"You made louder!" she growled.

Moiraine laughed lightly. She felt a dainty finger touching her other hole. "I wonder, Rand. Exactly how far has the Wisdom fallen? Tell me."

But Rand shook his head firmly. "That's hers to say, not mine."

"I cannot fault that," she said, before kissing him again. "But I would like to see it ..."

"Definitely not!" Nynaeve said.

Moiraine turned slightly to look at her. She had her arms around Rand's neck, and her beauty was undeniable. "You do not commit, Nynaeve. You struggle and deny. It will not serve. Here it has no consequence, but out there it could doom us all. If our cause is to succeed, we must be unwavering. Let me show you."

She whispered something in Rand's ear, and to her great disappointment he allowed her to separate them with only the slightest of pushes. His impressive shaft sprang free, her juices making it glisten almost as much as the tattoos on his forearms.

Moiraine sat on the bed and took him in hand. She pushed her dark tresses back out of the way and, as Nynaeve stared, lowered her lips to kiss the head of it. A little sigh of pleasure issued from Rand. A much bigger one followed when Moiraine opened her mouth and took him deep inside. A large hand came to rest atop her head as it bobbed up and down.

Moiraine was, was sucking off a Theren man. Nynaeve felt lightheaded. And jealous, though of what she could not say.

She sat on the bed and watched them, very conscious of the all-too revealing way that her new cock was jutting up from between her thighs. Rand noticed it, but didn't look anywhere near as discomfited by it as she was. But then, he'd put it there, burn him.

"Would you like to know what it's like?" he asked. "You'd do it, wouldn't you Moiraine? If I asked you to."

The Aes Sedai had a hand between her legs. Nynaeve was starting to suspect she'd do it whether he wanted it or not. She also had a mouth full of cock and was in no position to answer. Nynaeve's gaze was drawn to the woman's shapely hips. She crawled over and began to caress them. It didn't take much to get Moiraine to raise them higher. It didn't take much at all.

Moiraine's pussy looked welcoming. She sidled up, eager to feel it again. Her cock throbbed in her hand as she aimed it. Moiraine's moan made her throat throb around Rand's member when she felt herself penetrated from the other side as well. Nynaeve grinned at the way his eyes rolled back in his head. She grabbed Moiraine's hips and started giving her a good seeing to.

Her breasts shook intensely. Rand stared, smiled, reached out his hand. She took it and squeezed. They held on as they spitted Moiraine between them. Nynaeve lasted longer this time. So long, in fact, that she was feeling pretty winded by the time she felt that thunder rumbling on the

horizon again. She grabbed Moiraine's butt and rubbed it inside. Hot and soft. It felt so good. She tensed up, threw back her head, and moaned as that strange flow began again.

When the flow became a trickle, Nynaeve fell back onto her heels, pulling free of Moiraine's body as she did so. Rand smiled down at her slumped form. He was moving his hips slowly, his cock moving in and out of Moiraine's mouth. Fucking her face. It was so wrong, yet Nynaeve could not look away. She was still staring when Rand, too, tensed up. She saw his manhood swell, heard the small choking sounds Moiraine made, and watched as a creamy white fluid trickled down the Aes Sedai's chin.

Soon after, Rand slumped, too, slipping free of her mouth to lean against the edge of the bed. He wasn't breathing hard or sweating, but still looked exhausted. She thought she understood now. Moiraine knelt between them, thoroughly used yet the only one with a straight back. Nynaeve shook her head.

"I almost miss the days when the most shocking thing I ever saw was a Trolloc."

"I suspect you will see worse still before the end," Moiraine said.

"It's hard to believe, but it seems we both will."

Moiraine said nothing.

Rand was just sitting there, smiling dumbly at them. She cleared her throat and gestured surreptitiously to the now soft intruder between her legs. It had admittedly been fun while it lasted, but she'd much rather be herself. It took a moment but Rand blinked his way back to a semblance of awareness and focused his attention on her waist. Nothing happened exactly, there was no twisting or sense of otherness. One moment it was there, and the next she was, well, she again. Nynaeve sighed, and fell back on the bed.

"What did we come here for again?"

"This. What could matter more?" Rand said.

Moiraine shook her head. "I remember. But it doesn't matter now. This was ... fun. I remember fun. I will remember."

## CHAPTER 49: *The Last Hold*



The Reyn's arrival had done much to bolster Rand's forces, and his confidence. Their chief, Dheanic, had professed his loyalty openly and the return of proven fighters like Urien and Tuandha was more than welcome. Their arrival at Sunset Hold was welcome, too. They were close now. Close to Cairhien. Rand could only hope they were not too far behind Couladin. He had no doubt the man's intentions for the Cairhienin were dark.

But then, who among the Aiel had benign thoughts of Cairhienin? Sunset Hold was the westernmost of the Aiel forts, built into both sides of a narrow canyon in the foothills of the Spine of the World. He wondered if the name was connected to their neighbours beyond the mountains, whose flag showed a rising sun. Not that it mattered. The past was the past. He just had to ensure the Aiel followed his orders. If they did that, the Cairhienin would be safe. If not ...

He looked for Moiraine as he paced the narrow streets of the hold but could not see her. The usual lessons had lasted all throughout the day's march, but it seemed their other lessons were not to be continued tonight. Pity. She'd been growing more passionate lately, especially after that meeting with Nynaeve. The things they had done ... He would never have imagined it. He was almost tempted to admit his fears to her, no matter how disturbingly they dovetailed with her earlier cautions.

"Why do you bite your lip so, Rand al'Thor? Whose eye do you try to catch?"

"I'm not—?" He stopped himself before finishing the lie. Aiel wouldn't shrug that off the way normal folk would. He gave Pamela a good glare instead, one that slid off her like water off a duck's back.

A dozen Maidens shielded him from the residents of Sunset Hold. Said residents had shown no signs of hostility, but neither had Uno or Raine, and the Maidens had tried to ward them off earlier, too. Rand had put a stop to that, and wondered now if that was a habit he'd have to get into. The Maidens were getting a bit possessive.

It was hard to maintain his annoyance with a bunch of giggling women, though. Especially when he'd been intimate with so many of them. So he took a different approach. "I could answer that, but I wouldn't want to make anyone jealous."

Laughter grew louder, spears were drummed against bucklers, and Tuandha and Amili got into a friendly shoving match. Pamela seemed to see the funny side, as did the flaxen-haired young Reyn, Carahuin, but Celesta's long face remained solemn.

"We do not grow jealous of our spearsisters," she said. "It is not to be tolerated."

"Uh, sure. I try not to get jealous, too."

"Try?" chuckled Zie, another of the newly arrived Reyn. "No. It is not tolerated."

Zie was a big, broad-shouldered woman, and the wary looks that Carahuin and Tuandha gave her made him suspicious. He looked at Celesta out of the corner of his eye. He'd heard things about her. How little tolerance was shown such? And what steps were taken to correct it?

The local Roof of the Maidens lay ahead, an indistinct building made distinct by the number of armed women loitering outside. Rand's steps slowed. There was much he should be doing. His steps slowed further when he saw how hotly one of the Maidens ahead was glaring at him. Darkly tanned and red-haired, she was gripping the hilt of her long knife tightly.

When none of his guards stepped between them, he took the precaution of seizing *saidin*. Relief flooded him alongside the Power and the taint. He hadn't channelled in ages. A grimace followed as soon as he recognised the thought. With such glee would a drunk greet his first drink of the day.

The Maidens might not have seen fit to protect him from the woman's hostility, but that was not to say they didn't notice it.

"That is Carwe, of the Cumo Shiande. She joined us during the run," Rondha told him.

"Shiande? Just her." Rondha nodded but it hadn't been a question. A lone Maiden might go unnoticed. If the whole clan had decided to take a side, Rhuarc would have told him.

Or maybe they *had* chosen. Maybe this Carwe was here to declare it. In a sharp fashion. He approached steadily, showed no fear, but *saidin* was boiling within him.

"I see you, Elindha. I see you, Nici," he said to some of the more familiar faces in the gathering. Codarra and Shaido. A neutral clan and a hostile one, and standing with Carwe. He refused to let himself read too much into it. He knew both women intimately. He marked Nici's downturned mouth, but deep in the void he could feel no guilt over the coldness in his voice. "And I see you, Carwe of the Cumo Shiande. Well met. Do you have a message for me from your chief?"

"Janwin has no words for you, wetlander. I came on my own," she said. "I want to know about my first-brother."

"Who is your brother?" Wait. Her hair was the same colour as his. Could Janduin ...? "Do you mean me?"

The girl recoiled as if slapped. "Huh? Do not kid around."

Renay, who was also among the crowd, stepped close and lowered her voice. She was Shiande, too, but had stayed with Rand instead of returning to her clan. "She speaks of Atswe."

Rand stared. He had to wrack his brain for a moment, but it came to him eventually. One of the Aiel who had tracked him to Emond's Field. He had died during the Trollocs' big push. Carwe's glare had gotten even hotter. He flushed, knowing she'd seen his confusion.

"He was very brave. He died fighting the Shadowspawn."

"I know that much! Tell me everything you know about him," Carwe demanded.

Rand stood stiffly. Many of the women present had seen him naked, but he'd rarely felt so exposed among them. The truth was, he didn't know much about the man. He'd been young, and had seemed eager to prove himself. He'd taken on a Myrddraal, and died as a result. Saying that felt wrong, though. "Many of the folk back home probably owe him their lives," he said instead.

"Did he die with honour?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"I ..." Where was Aviendha when he needed her? What did it mean for an Aiel to die with honour? "Of course. He killed many Trollocs, and came close to killing the Myrddraal that got him."

"We should go inside. It is getting dark, and we are close to the lands of the Treekillers," said Pamela.

Carwe turned her glare from Rand to her spearsister. "I didn't ask for your opinion!"

Though normally cheerful, there was a dangerously flat look on Pamela's face when she stepped up to the newcomer. Pamela was tall and heavy. The Shiande girl was neither. "He is going inside. You can stay here if you want," she said quietly.

She pushed Rand towards the curtained entry, and for some reason he found himself not resisting. There were more familiar faces waiting when he ducked inside. Rhuana smiled to see him, but Agirin limited herself to a solemn nod. Ani didn't even go that far but he was glad to see her even so. Dina rose at once from where she'd been lounging with friends, but it was not to Rand that she came.

"Has there been trouble?" she asked Pamela.

"No. Just some unvented grief," was the quiet answer. Not all of the Maidens had followed him inside, but Carwe was one of them. She flushed darkly at Pamela's words. Elindha touched her shoulder briefly as she filed in, but Tuandha studied her carefully with her one good eye.

Curiosity reigned among most of the Maidens, but while most were asking friends for news and drama, Agirin approached Rand and seized his hand. "Come."

He said nothing. She was plainly in the mood to be serviced, and the thought of doing so was already lending speed to his pulse. A handsome woman, her dark tan made her golden hair shine all the brighter. He followed where she led.

She passed several smaller rooms, all of which were occupied, sometimes by Maidens involved in their affairs. It required more than a tug on the arm to get Rand to move past the room where Carolyn was pounding away at a kneeling Anfia with one of those toys the Maidens liked but the unwelcoming look Carolyn gave him soon lent speed to his feet.

Eventually, Agirin found an empty room, deep within the rock that the building had been carved into. It was pleasantly cool, though the air tasted stale. Larger than most, there were ropes attached to rings on the ceiling, and disturbing instruments hanging from hooks on the wall, but

colourful rugs on the floor and soft cushions scattered about. If it had been used for anything nefarious once, it was obviously not being used so now.

The light from the corridor was soon bolstered by the single lamp that Agirin lit. She turned from it to look at him, then began to take off her *cadin'sor*. The breasts she revealed were not large, and the sun had touched them often. He wanted to do the same.

"Do you want to have me?" she asked.

"You know I do."

A slight smile, as much as she'd ever shown him, curved her lips. "Then take me."

Rand's coat hit the ground, his shirt soon followed, and then she was in his arms, her breasts giving way to his fingers and her lips opening before his. She let him rid her of her trousers and parted her slender legs to let him kiss her sex. He was already hard by then, though, and did not kiss her long. Down onto the pillows they went. She lay before him with her legs spread, waiting as he hastily unbuckled his belt and rid himself of boots and breeches. She reached for him when his cock sprang free, and he descended into her arms.

Agirin's wetness welcomed him, and he took a moment to savour it, moving slowly. But then he remembered that she didn't like it slow. She liked it hard and rough. So that was what he gave her, thrusting deep and winning a hissed "Yesss," from her. More followed when he seized her by the legs, held them apart and started pounding.

As much as she enjoyed that, Agirin wanted more. After a while, she grabbed him by his tattooed forearm and pulled his hand to her throat. "Squeeze," she moaned.

"What?"

"Do it."

Rand leaned back. "I can't. I would never hurt you. Hurt any woman."

"It is not the same," she insisted. "Just a little. Hold me tight." He made to pull away again, but her legs closed behind his back. "Do not be strange. Just squeeze."

He gaped down at her. It was far from the first time someone had called him strange, but he could not comprehend how it could be true in this case. Then again, he had never been able to understand how it had been true in the other cases, either. And if it was what she wanted ... He did like to take care of people. To please them. His hand crept back to Agirin's throat, and he gently closed his fingers.

"Harder," she said. He did as she wanted, and she bit her lip in response. "Fuck me." He did that, too, but more carefully this time, always watching for signs that his grip was too tight. If anything, it seemed to be the opposite. Agirin held his hand in hers, but not to pull away, to tighten. "Slap me," she urged.

But Rand shook his head. That was an impossibility. She made a disappointed sound but it was soon replaced with familiar moans as the rocking of his hips drove her towards her climax. Her tanned face was darker than ever by the time she tensed up. Wanting to drown out that disappointed noise, he tighten his grip just a little bit more, slammed his hips against hers just a little bit harder. Agirin shook violently as her orgasm wracked her.

She was still shaking when a voice rang out sternly from behind. "Well, well. You have been a very bad boy, Rand al'Thor."

His hands sprang away from Agirin and he jumped guiltily, the cock still lodged within her making her groan once more. "It's not what—" They were standing inside the doorway, a dozen of them, arms crossed. No veils had been raised but they still had their weapons to hand. Chill eyes of blue and green and grey looked him over, and knew his sin.

It was Celesta who had spoken, imperious in her judgement, but it was hard to spot any mercy in the rest, either. Zie and Carahuin hardly knew him, and Carwe had good reason not to like him. Rondha and Liah had always been distant. Ani, Rhuana, Elindha and Someryn had enjoyed his body but didn't seem interested in his heart. Tuandha, though? Pamela and Amili? They'd shared some good times together. They had to know him better than that!

"What is going on?" an unfamiliar voice asked. A golden-haired girl peeked from behind Pamela. Desora of the Musara Reyn had never stayed under a Roof of the Maidens while Rand was there before, and from how hotly she blushed when she saw what was happening, and how swiftly she marched for the exit, he doubted she would again.

Celesta looked after her, then pointed to the dark curtain. "Seal the entry," she said coolly. "Who will stand watch?"

No-one rushed to volunteer. "I will do it," Rondha said after a while. He looked at her beseethingly, hoping that reluctance meant she understood. And yet, all she did was sigh regretfully, step outside and pull the heavy curtain closed behind her.

Rand swallowed. Freeing himself from Agirin, he got to his feet. "Now hold on. I did—"

"This happens often?" Zie asked Celesta.

She shrugged. "He is the son of Shaiel. An exception was made. Some of our spearsisters ... saw an opportunity."

Zie's gaze travelled down his torso. "Understandable. Better than the horn ones."

Carwe shivered in what he assumed was disgust but, despite that, a flicker of pride managed to worm its way past Rand's guilt. "I'm not a toy," he muttered, snatching for his breeches.

They ignored him. "I have not seen him do this before, however," Celesta went on.

"He does a lot of things most men would not," said Ani.

Elindha nodded. "Indeed. I saw that when I first arrived in Rhuidean."

Carahuin's blue eyes widened. "Is that so?"

Zie nodded. "His type, I know it too well."

"Now hold on," Rand said, standing behind the thin shield of his dangling breeches. "I didn't mean to ..." Aiel had no time for excuses. "I ... I have *toh*."

Celesta arched a brow at him. "And how will you meet it?"

He looked to the heavy curtain, vainly hoping Aviendha would happen by to help. But she avoided these roofs as much as she could now, ever since the Wise Ones had made her leave the society. He'd have to muddle through as best he could. "I will do whatever I must, so long as it doesn't endanger my mission," he said.

Celesta smiled like the cat that had got the cream, but Tuandha let out a quiet sigh. He jumped when something patted his bottom, but it was just Agirin. She strolled by, shaking her head over something, her *cadin'sor* draped casually over one arm. She looked none the worse for wear, thank the Light. "Do not be cruel," she told the others as she passed, then let herself out of the room, utterly unashamed to show her flushed nudity to whoever was out there.

Rand wished he had a tenth that much composure.

Celesta was still smiling. "Now what am I to do with such a bad boy?"

"She was asking for it," he started, then cleared his throat and hastened on. "I mean, she wanted me to ... She enjoys it."

Celesta nodded knowingly. "She is a bad girl that way."

"It does not stop her from being a strong Maiden, though," said Zie.

Several of the others nodded agreement, but Ani stepped towards Rand, her eyes cold. "Can you be as strong? Or would it break you, I wonder."

"That can be interesting, too," said Elindha. She and Celesta exchanged strange looks.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You will see. You will do whatever we say, yes? Good," Ani said. She pointed at his breeches. "Start by dropping those."

*Is that all? Burn me, I thought it was going to be spears at dawn or something.* He was hardly a stranger to performing sexual favours for people. Why had they tried to frighten him like that? They'd almost succeeded, too. It was with no small amount of relief that he dropped the breeches. He'd gone flaccid in the midst of all that but, with so many attractive women around, he was sure that wouldn't last.

Indeed, he started to stir again as soon as Ani touched his cock. Unfriendly as she was, he felt oddly drawn to her. And she was certainly pretty, despite that rather wicked smile on her face. Why was—?

Rand cried out and grabbed her arm instinctively when the Maiden's hand closed hard around his sensitive balls. Hunching over, he tried to push her away but she held on to him. The others closed in fast, coming to his defence. He knew Ani had a mean streak, but this was uncalled for. He had no idea what they'd do about her.

And yet ... Pamela, friendly Pamela, strode right by her and delivered a stinging slap to Rand's naked backside. "You said you would do what you are told. Stop fighting and take your punishment."

While he was staring at her incredulously, Zie and Amili took an arm each and twisted them behind his back. He stared at the latter woman. They weren't the closest, but she'd been a regular in these orgies. She had to understand he hadn't meant to harm anyone! Ani squeezed him again, enough to hurt but not enough to make him collapse. Pamela touched his butt again, but gently this time, a soft caress. The juxtaposition made him shiver.

Rhuana smiled at him over Ani's head. She had a wicked look in her eye.

"Are his nipples sensitive?" Zie asked.

"Let me check." What Liah considered checking was to lean in and bite down on one of them.

"Stop that!" he demanded. It didn't hurt that much, since the answer to Zie's question was no, but even so. You don't just go around biting someone's nipples!

Liah stopped, but didn't look at all chastened. She grinned at him and did an odd little bounce. Ani's grip tightened again, so he glared at her.

"You are slow to learn, Rand al'Thor," claimed Celesta. "I think this will be a long lesson."

Some of the women chuckled over that, but Zie and Amili released his arms. Rand moved to push Ani away again, only to find that he could not. His hands were tied together behind his back.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Rhuana walked over and put her hands on his chest. He saw the shove coming, but his efforts to counter were thwarted by Zie's outstretched leg. Back he went, to land hard on the rug. "We are helping you to meet your *toh*," Rhuana said, still smiling that wicked smile. "And taking you at your word. You are a man of your word, are you not?"

"Of course, I ..." When had he agreed to this? Had he? He'd said some things, they'd implied some other things, but agree? Some of the Maidens were stripping. He'd seen Rhuana unclothed before, but breasts that large on a woman that slender never ceased to draw his eye. Zie was similarly eye-catching. A yellow-haired woman in her late thirties, she was so muscular that her breasts almost looked small. It was only on a closer look that he realised they were just out of proportion to her frame. The others were stripping, too. His heart was racing.

He was so busy staring that he only realised he hadn't finished answering when Ani knelt down beside him, flat grey eyes staring into his. There was still a dull ache in his balls from her previous attentions. "I—" he started, but never got any further. Instead of squeezing him, she leaned over and took his flaccid cock in her mouth. Without breaking eye contact, she started to swirl it around in there. The hot, soft wetness had an immediate effect.

She was soon joined by another. Kneeling at his other side, a smiling Rhuana leant over and pressed her breasts to his face. "Suck on these, you naughty boy." When he did, her smile turned even more wicked. "I suspected you would be willing to do something more extreme. I should have said something earlier." He wasn't sure what she meant, but with Ani sucking on his cock and those big breasts of hers engulfing his face, it was hard to think. It became harder still when those breasts were replaced with her red-furred pussy. *He* became harder still.

Maybe he had agreed to it. And it wasn't so bad, really. Instead of arguing more, Rand stuck out his tongue and gave her what she wanted. The way his hands were bound made it impossible to get comfortable, but he ignored that as best he could.

He could see little, and for a while he heard even less. Just Rhuana's heavy breathing. Then Ani's mouth left him and Carahuin's light voice broke the silence.

"I see you."

"Quite the specimen indeed," said Zie.

"That, and also rich, tall and famous; in addition to being super-handsome? It is far-fetched," Carwe sulked. "And it does not make him less of a *sorda*."

"Stop staring, Zie. Here are the bindings," Celesta said.

He felt something being wrapped around his cock and balls, something that the Maidens tightened rather uncomfortably. His efforts to question them were thwarted by Rhuana, who tightened her thighs against his head and pushed her pussy down so hard that it was a struggle to breathe.

"Get that tongue in deeper," she commanded. "Learn your place."

He did as she said, and almost didn't regret it when he felt something hot and tight slide down his abused manhood. He knew a pussy when he felt it, but whose? Whoever it was, they were moving fast. He found himself matching their pace with his tongue. Perhaps if he got Rhuana off quickly he could catch his breath.

It took longer than he'd hoped, but he got there eventually. By the time she rolled off to lie laughing on the rug, his face was covered in her juices and his cock felt ready to explode. While he was gasping for breath, his eyes beheld a pale ass moving up and down, still at the fierce pace it had maintained throughout. Ani looked back over her shoulder at him without interrupting her squats. Her cheeks were flushed, in marked contrast to those chilly eyes. As steady as her pace had been, when she saw him watching she flushed even redder, tensed up and slammed herself down on him one more time.

Ani slid off him to lie on the rug with her hands folded behind her head. He watched the muscles on her stomach rise and fall as she caught her breath. Small wonder she'd managed to keep going so long, with a stomach like that. She was a strong woman. He was surrounded by them, strong, demanding women, and his hands were literally tied.

If they weren't he would have used them on himself. He'd already wanted to come so bad. Seeing Ani do it had made that want a desperation. But nothing was coming out. It felt so strange. He was on the brink but could not finish. Looking down, he saw a thin black rope knotted around his member. Was it the cause? Celesta abruptly appeared, standing over him. "You will not come unless I allow it," she said. She was naked, too. Pale, thin, nowhere near as muscular as the others, yet ... there was something about her. That blood-red hair and snow-white skin. The way she always looked as if she knew everything about you, and was unimpressed. She looked down at her *Car'a'carn* and slapped a dark something against her open palm. It was a whip. "Tonight, you are, in fact, our toy. And we will do whatever we want with you."

Rand stared, transfixed by the confidence in her eyes. He had to gulp several times to clear the dryness from his throat. Celesta placed her foot atop his chest. "Say it. Or I will not let you come at all."

The thought was horrifying. "You can do whatever you want."

The whip slapped against her palm again. "Mistress!"

"What?"

"That is what you must call me."

Rand blinked. He'd been calling every woman older than him mistress for as long as he could remember. At least the Therener ones. A lot had changed since leaving home. He hadn't known the Aiel even followed such courtesies, but ... "Yes, Mistress."

"This is going to be a night to remember," said Elindha. She was naked, too, and beautiful as ever. They were all naked now, red-haired Amili rivalling Zie for visible muscle, while Pamela's comparable strength was hidden behind more padding than most Aiel showed. Dark-haired Liah and fair Carahuin were leaner and more conventionally attractive, and carried themselves in a way that said they knew it. Someryn was lean as well, and wore more expression now than she had all throughout the single tryst they'd shared. That expression alarmed him almost as much as the worried frown on Tuandha's face.

Yet, to his surprise, it was Carwe who stepped forward. To his greater surprise she was as naked as the rest. Her tan didn't go all the way down, but her foot went all the way into his ribs before he could do more than get a glimpse of her.

Tuandha was there in a blink. "Do not kill him." She was standing so close that Carwe couldn't help but see every detail of that scar of hers, and there was danger in the air.

"I know," Carwe said, as if it should never have been in doubt.

Rand, who was craning his head to see if the wound Ba'alzamon had given him at Falme had broken open again, had enough doubt for the two of them.

Tuandha less so. She stepped aside with a shrug, and let Carwe do as she pleased. Just as Rand had promised to. *Oh Light.*

Carwe put her foot on him, too. Celesta studied her for a moment before stepping away. "You may play with my pet for a while, but do not get above yourself. Be a good girl, or I might have to punish you, too," she said. As she strolled by, she lightly cracked her whip across Carwe's buttocks. The girl quivered from pain or outrage, but said nothing.

Not to Celesta, at least. She directed that pain and outrage at Rand instead. The foot that she'd placed on his chest moved to his cock instead, and she pressed down hard. "This should do. Alright, tell me about Atswe."

"I didn't know him that well. He died fighting a Myrddraal," he said through gritted teeth.

"And you forgot about him."

"I didn't forget."

He barely stopped himself from crying out when she increased the pressure. "Liar!"

"If I was lying, how would I even know how he died!?"

The foot eased off, but only so she could lean down and slap him across the face. "To remember later does not mean you did not forget before. You will remember this, though." She slapped him backhanded this time.

Rand glared up her, cheeks stinging. "Stop that! Binding my hands does not prevent me from channelling."

She scowled back at him. "Quit playing around. You cannot take it back now, after all that has been said and done."

"Says the girl who calls me a liar to my face." That hit the mark; he could tell from the slight sulk trying to sneak past her anger. He made his voice softer. "Look. I am sorry about your brother, truly. He died a hero. If there was anything I could do to bring him back, or to comfort you, I would."

Far from moved, she grunted, got down, and wrapped her hand around his throat. "You sure know how to spit convenient words. Let us test your theory. See if it would really make me feel better, huh!?" She got on top of him then, and her free hand closed around his cock. Something else soon closed around it, too, but that angry look never left her face, and all the while a pair of amber eyes bored hotly into his. She took his cock all the way it, and then slapped him across the face again. "How is that?" Up she went, only to slam back down. "And that? And that!? Take that!" Again and again she took him, and each time her waist slapped down her hand slapped his face, leaving it red with more than just shame.

Carahuin tutted. "That is a bit too much. You are spoiling the fun."

It only won her a scowl from Carwe. "Do not interfere. He asked for this."

As she went on, Carwe's grip on his throat got tighter, until it became a struggle to get a proper breath. She was young and well made, but seeing any kind of beauty in her was a struggle, too, just then. And no matter how energetically she rode him, his body still refused to grant him release.

Rand's vision darkened. He could hear his pulse pounding in his ears but his thoughts were growing hazy. What was happening? Why was he letting an angry stranger do whatever she wanted to him? Her grip loosened, and he instinctively sucked in a huge breath.

It took him a moment to realise he wasn't the only one panting. Carwe had stopped moving. She just knelt there, looking a little cross-eyed.

"Huh. You're actually pretty, when you don't look like you want to murder someone," he croaked. He felt bruised all over.

All his compliment did was make her scowl reappear. "You bastard. Let me make this clear. No amount of fucking is going to make me feel better. There would be a blood-debt between us if you were not ..." He gaze went to the tattoos on his arms, or as much as could be seen of them with his hands tied behind his back. Abruptly, Carwe stood up, her heat abandoning his tortured cock.

Unlike Agirin, she stalked from the room, and not before hastily pulling her *cadin'sor* back on. Rand didn't know if she intended to return to her clan now that she'd gotten her answers. If she did, he doubted she would be speaking well of him to them.

Elindha sighed softly. "She will grow out of it."

"I did," said Amili.

Pamela grinned at her. "You did? When did that happen?"

Their giggles were comforting in a way. No more anger. Well, if he'd had *toh* to Carwe, perhaps it was paid. If only Aviendha was here. She could have helped him understand, and would doubtless have prevented anything like this from happening. That one had no time at all for such shenanigans. But she was not there, so he had to rely on the others. "Could one of you untie me, please?"

Rhuana sat up, looking incredulous. "Untie? After we have been so patient? No."

"Outrageous," Celesta declared. "This deserves a special punishment. To the hooks with him."

Amili grabbed his feet while Pamela and Zie took him by the arms. Between the three of them, they hoisted his bulk easily. Elindha, meanwhile, was getting a boost from Liah. It put her crotch close to the other woman's face, and he stared, waiting to see what would happen. Nothing did, and it was not until Elindha hopped down, and stopped jiggling, that he realised what she'd been doing. There was a long rope attached to one of the rings in the ceiling now. She examined the knots carefully, pulled on it hard, and nodded her satisfaction.

"Get his hands," Amili said.

Liah and Tuandha leapt to obey. Rand's shoulders tingled their relief when the women unbound his hands, but he did not stay free for long. To one end of the rope did they tie his wrists. Amili set his feet down, but only so she could go and help the others haul on the other end of the rope. It pulled his arms upwards, but Rand stubbornly resisted. They were strong, those women, but he wasn't exactly weak, either.

"Oh, you are in trouble now, you bad, bad boy," Rhuana said.

But she walked away rather than help the others. It was Pamela and Zie who defeated his efforts. He was strong, but resisting either one of them would have strained him. Resisting both proved impossible. Rand was left standing there naked with his arms stretched above him in surrender, scowling at his so-called guards as Liah and Someryn used shorter ropes to tie his feet to a pair of metal rings driven into the floor.

"Do not sulk, Rand al'Thor. You look cuter without it," Carahuin said.

He ground his teeth. "I was not sulking."

Zie slapped his butt. "The little girl is right. And so was Celesta. You will need a lot of disciplining, darling."

"Oh, he will get it. By the time this night is done, he will be the most disciplined man in the world," said a smirking Celesta. She looked to Rhuana. "Look what we have for you."

"That is what I like to see. A ready and willing toy to play with. All tied up. At my mercy." Rhuana strutted towards and around him, smiling confidently. Her hand on his cock was a gentle relief. The slap she gave his ass the exact opposite. "I have a toy for you as well. A very special toy."

He had no idea what she was talking about, for there was nothing in her hands. She didn't go to fetch one, either, casting instead a critical eye over his manhood, and the ropes that squeezed it. "Your balls are almost purple." It was not a statement of concern. Her smile was as gleeful. "That is what I like to see. Do you like being my bitch?" She stroked his cock gently, only to then slap the sensitive tip. His hiss made her laugh softly. "I think you like it."

His heart was pounding, and he could not deny the excitement. But he told himself that was just because it was such a new experience, and so very inappropriate. Light send it was so.

Rhuana wasn't about to have mercy on him. "Yes. You like it. Look at how hard it makes you."

Rand shook his head fiercely. He was surrounded by attractive, naked women. Several of them had already given him a taste of their bodies. But those damn ropes were denying him the pleasure that screamed to be released. How could he not be hard? It didn't mean that what she was saying was true. It didn't!

"I have a gift for you," Rhuana said. She crouched down, bringing her red-haired head level with his cock, and hope drove the questions from his mind. Could he have relief at last? "Say please."

"Please," he said, with embarrassing swiftness.

She liked her smiling lips. A long moment passed. And then she got right back up again, leaving him untouched. She took one full breast in hand, and made sure he got a good look as she massaged it, then strutted around him once more. Her soft laughter teased his ears.

"Mistress," Celesta said.

He blinked at her. "What?"

She slapped the handle of her whip against her hand. "It should have been 'please, Mistress'."

"She never said—"

The rest of her whip slapped even harder, right across Rand's buttocks, making him flinch. "Do you have to be told everything?" It cracked again, and he was barely able to hold in his response. She hit him across the back, and across the thighs, but she kept coming back to his butt. He flinched each time but, even without seeing, he knew she was not hitting hard enough to draw blood.

"Aww. He is all marked. Pity. He was a nice bottom," said Carahuin.

"I think it looks nicer this way," said Liah, doing another of those odd hops.

"It is pretty," he was surprised to hear Ani say from somewhere behind, "Pretty enough to deserve one of these."

"You would dare?" Carahuin gasped. She wasn't the only Maiden sounding shocked.

"Now there is a thought. Would he allow it?" Amili whispered.

"Does he look at all innocent to you?" Ani asked.

Amili didn't answer. Another spoke instead, for the first time that night. "Who cares what he wants. He is ours to use." Thin, tanned, naked, and expressionless; Someryn's dark blue eyes were like stones.

Rand didn't like the quiet agreements he was hearing. And he especially didn't like hearing Someryn approve. She gave him a bad feeling sometimes. He didn't think he trusted her.

Whatever she was up to, it wasn't Ani who strutted into view, but Rhuana. She had a large metal hook in her hands, to which was tied the other end of the rope that Zie and Pamela were holding. Rand's eyes widened. They wouldn't! That was far too dangerous. He breathed relief when he saw that the hook had not been forged properly. The metal was polished smooth, but the end had not been tapered or sharpened. It was just a curved bit of thick, blunt metal.

"Is that anticipation I see? You like my toy that much? You really are a bad boy," she teased. Around she went again, while Celesta went to meet her, carrying a jar of some kind.

A gentle hand trailed across his whip-stung flesh. Carahuin appeared, smiling, to trace his muscles with her fingertips. He'd only met her recently but he liked her. She was less serious than most Maidens, and nice. Or so he'd thought. Alas, she was obviously not nice enough to free him from this torment.

"It looks like I have been missing out on a lot of fun. This is not what I imagined the *Car'a'carn* to be like. I thought you would be flexing your muscles, boasting of the enemies you have killed, demanding women suck your cock. You know, like most warriors." She sat down on her heels, and spent a moment chewing sexily on one full lip. "It is a nice one, though. Do you want me to suck it?"

"I do," he whispered. His whisper turned to a gasp when he felt something cold touch his bottom. Not the cheek, the hole. Forgetting Carahuin, he strained against the ropes that bound his wrists and ankles, but only succeeded at twisting on the spot.

"Look at you, helping to work it in. You little slut," Rhuana said. And in it went indeed, whatever it was. Only when his twisting scraped the now taut rope against his back did Rand realise what it was. The metal hook. That hard, cold intruder spread his most improper place, and it did it there in front of all those Maidens. He didn't think it possible for his face to get any redder, but he was wrong. "Now you are not going anywhere. You are mine," she finished.

"This wasn't what I agreed—" Except it was. Fool that he was, he'd agreed to let them do whatever they pleased.

"For lying," said Amili, and shoved him forward. With his feet bound he could not balance, so all he could do was hang onto the other end of the rope. And that pulled the hook all the way in. Rand could not stop himself from crying out, in pain and forbidden pleasure.

Carahuin was grinning up at him. "Does the mighty *Car'a'carn* like having his butthole played with? What would people say if they knew?" When she giggled, he could almost hear the sound being echoed by a thousand women all across the land.

He struggled upright again, but Amili just shoved him a second time, making the hook move once more. He salvaged some pride by keeping himself silence that time. Stubbornly, he tried again.

Rhuana shook her head disgustedly. "You are totally hopeless. And totally helpless. Is that hook feeling nice in your tight ass?"

When he remained silent for too long, Celesta's whip cracked the air once more. "Answer her!"

His wordless despair was not answer enough, for she cracked the whip again. So he shouted his confession. "Yes, burn you!"

Rhuana chuckled, unsurprised. "But I think I know something that would feel even better than this, little bitch. Little cock toy."

She looked at Carahuin, who was kneeling there naked, her blue eyes twinkling with mischief. "Do not keep me waiting," she said, and licked her lips. She wasn't close enough, though. He had to strain towards her, stretch. And the more he stretched the more the hook moved. Yet stretch he did.

"Light you are a slut. Dirty little bitch. I cannot believe how horny you get," Rhuana said. They stung, those humiliating words. Yet he humiliated himself even further by straining towards Carahuin's pretty mouth, no matter how deeply his straining dug the hook into his ass.

"Stop playing with yourself, Elindha. You will get your turn," he heard Celesta say.

But Rand only had eyes for Carahuin. He couldn't reach her. She was too far away. But the giggling, flaxen-haired girl abruptly leant in and wrapped her lips around the head of his cock. Blissful relief made him moan loudly. He'd have come right then and there, and never mind how embarrassing he'd usually have found such a lack of control, yet still the bindings denied him. He'd been right about her. She was a good girl, Carahuin. She was good in other ways, too. That tongue ...

Rhuana was less impressed. "If you are not going to do it properly, you should have gone elsewhere."

Carahuin took him out of her mouth long enough to smirk up at the older woman. "It sounds like I am doing it very properly. Do not be jealous."

That won her a hiss of outrage. And Rand a hard slap across the face.

He could only stare. "I didn't say it!" She slapped him again. "Why me?"

He got no answer. But then, he never got an answer to that question, no matter how often he asked it. All he could do was soldier on. Then again, if soldiering on involved more of what Carahuin was doing, he expected he'd be able to endure.

Flesh was slapped, and mewling protests made. After all that had happened, it took Rand a while to realise the sounds weren't coming from him. Even so, he still gaped when he saw Elindha being thrown face down on the pillows not far away. Her hands were tied tight to ropes wrapped around her thighs. As he stared, Celesta kicked the yellow-haired beauty's legs spread, and placed a carved bit of wood between them. She and Zie tied that in place, too, leaving Elindha unable to close her legs, or move much at all. She was left bound there, with her privates on display for all to see.

Celesta seized a handful of her hair. "If you must act like a slut instead of showing the discipline of a Maiden, then I will treat you like a slut."

"I am sorry, Mistress," Elindha moaned. But Rand's brows shot up. She didn't sound very sorry at all.

"Not yet, you are not," Celesta said. She snapped her fingers, and Liah hastened over with a bundle of straps in her hands. It was dark like the whip but ... *Oh*. He'd seen that before. Elindha was going to get it. And Rand, Light forgive him, was going to watch every moment.

"You really are a dirty boy," Rhuana said, as if she'd read his mind. With a loud sniff, she strutted off, as if she could not be bothered with him anymore.

From some women that might have hurt, but after all he'd seen and done with her and hers he did not think she had much room to judge. When he looked down he saw that Carahuin had her eyes closed, and was busily fingering herself while she sucked his cock. The only ones who could judge him were the chaste ones, like Aviendha or Enaila. Carahuin went still, save for a shiver that was running through her. He knew that look. She certainly wasn't one to judge. Not that he would have judged much. Or at all, if she'd only untie that rope and let him come. She didn't, though, just abandoned him and lay smiling on the pillows.

Celesta had strapped on her toy by then. She took a hard grip of Elindha's hair and made her turn her head around, so she could look her right in the eye as she rammed the toy into her wet pussy. Elindha's sigh was not one of regret, though the little yelps she let out when the lean woman started slapping her bottom were another story.

Copious amounts of warm flesh pressed up against his back. "It is just some fun. Do not worry," Pamela whispered. "You will be fine when we let you go. Well, perhaps not fine. A bit bruised, drained, bow-legged. But alive. And probably in one piece."

"You are all heart," he drawled.

"I am!" she agreed, as her warmth left him. As if to prove her words, she eased the metal hook out of his abused butt.

She returned soon after, and he relaxed against her, trying to absorb her warmth with his skin. It was so much better when there was kindness behind it. Affection. Trust.

"You are too tall. That will not do," Ani said coldly. He craned around, wondering where Pamela had gone, and saw her off with Zie and Amili, holding the rope. He only saw them for a moment, though, for Ani kicked the back of his knee and brought him to the ground.

He turned his head and glared at her, but only for the briefest of moments. There she stood, pale of hair and eye, with her hooked nose and muscular body, looking down at him with hand on hip. She wore a smirk ... and she wore a toy that was twin to Celesta's.

Rand didn't think his eyes had even been wider. "No."

Her smirk widened. "Yes."

Amili and the others had already passed the rope through the hook on the roof and started attaching it to another on the floor instead when he jerked at it. They resisted his resistance, and Liah and Someryn soon jumped in to help them, Liah laughing, Someryn not. Tuandha sat cross-legged on a pillow, watching all, but doing nothing.

The Maidens seemed to find wrestling Rand into place to be fine sport, from the way they were giggling once they'd gotten him down and attached the ropes.

"You'll pay for this," he growled.

"Aww. Is the poor baby upset?" Pamela mocked. She took one prodigious pap in hand and offered him the nipple. "Would you like something to suck on?"

He set his jaw and turned his face away, but that just made her laugh harder. "He is cranky tonight, the poor darling. He needs his sleep," said Zie.

Rand was one of the few not to laugh. Ani was another. She knelt beside him, making sure he got a good look at what was tied around her waist. Dark horn, polished and varnished. Thoughtfully oiled. Her work? He wasn't sure. She confused him sometimes.

"I am going to take off the bindings now," she said. She must have seen the relief in his eyes, for she shook her head. "Those on your private parts. Not the rest. Your ass is mine this time." As if to prove it, she grabbed his cheek and squeezed. "But do you know what would be even sweeter? To make you come from it."

Come. He'd wanted to for so long. But while she was—? In front of—? His tremble made her smile again. She put her hands on his back and quickly moved into position.

"I will get the bindings," said Zie. "The knots are complex."

The big woman had a surprisingly gentle touch when she wanted to. There was no pain when she released him, save for the prickling of numbed flesh returning to life. He dared to hope. "Zie. That's enough. Untie the other ones, too. Please."

"And so polite. Maybe I should keep a more careful eye on you. But no, darling. You are going nowhere. You will simply have to take your punishment like a man." She grinned. "Or, like a woman, rather."

"For the Light's sake! This wasn't what I expected."

Her grin only widened. A strong but gentle hand briefly stroked his cock, sending shivers down his spine. "Oh, you will rise to the occasion, Rand al'Thor. I am sure of it."

She left him then, and less gentle hands grabbed his hips. "Were you shaking it for me? Good boy."

"I wasn't—Ugh!"

Ani's thrust drove the toy past his outer ring, spreading the sensitive flesh of his ass. Rand bit his lip in a vain effort to be silent as she penetrated him, pushing ever deeper inside. Kneeling in a similar position not far from him, he could see Elindha getting the same treatment. He prayed he did not look as lost to forbidden lust as she did. With Celesta otherwise occupied, the other Maidens were not keeping that discipline she so valued. Pamela, Zie, Amili, Liah. Even Someryn. They had all let their hands drift downwards. Even Tuandha had taken one pale breast in hand as she watched Rand being mounted by her spearsister.

His face was red as a beet when the slow penetration ended and he felt Ani pressing against his backside. She was breathing heavy, though certainly not from exertion. That realisation was thrilling, in a very, very strange way.

"Fuck him," Pamela urged as she played with herself.

Ani obliged her. Rand couldn't stop himself from peeking back. He could see her stomach muscles moving each time she thrust her toy into him. He could see her breasts shake, the nipples so stiff. He saw the flush on her face, too, and, if not a warmth, a lack of coldness in her eyes. There

were so many feelings inside him that he thought he might burst. A horrible thought. He set himself to resisting it with all his will.

Liah stepped towards him abruptly, her eyes hot, but Zie seized her by the arm. "It is not your turn, darling," she said. Hissing out her frustration, Liah rushed to a box in the corner, rumbled around briefly, and came away with a toy similar to Ani's, but without the attachments. Without preamble, Liah thrust it past the thick dark hair of her pussy, pushing it deep inside. She groaned in satisfaction.

Rand found himself smiling. He doubted Liah was used to not getting her way, or delaying gratification. Back home, where dark hair was the most common, the gleemen often sang of golden-haired girls and the princes who loved them. Here, where golden hair was common and dark hair was very rare, it was the other way around. Rarity equalled value, but rarity, and therefore value, varied from place to place.

"Look at that smile," Pamela said, shaking her head. "There is no line he will not cross, is there?"

Rand sighed deeply and bowed his head. She was surely right. There was no propriety left in him, if indeed there had ever been any. It was even starting to feel good, kneeling there in front of the watching women, letting Ani fuck his ass. Too good. He had to concentrate. Didn't he? Why? What was he holding on to? Dignity? That would not win Tarmon Gai'don.

He could see Celesta's breasts shaking, her soft little bottom clenching and unclenching as she thrust against Elindha. Lacking the muscles and tightness of a man's, it looked ... cute. Did Ani's look the same, each time she fucked him? He couldn't help but recall how beautiful Nynaeve had looked the other night, while she was riding Moiraine. That had been a dream come true. This, this was a nightmare. Wasn't it? There was a storm building inside him. He should resist.

He did not.

It rumbled through him, that long-delayed pleasure, tightening every muscle and firing every nerve. He roared wordlessly as fiery hot come shot out of his cock. Ani's unceasing attentions made it bounce wildly, so he sprayed all over the place. No-one could have failed to see the evidence of his depravity. It was hard to care. Relief, blessed relief followed in the wake of that mind-numbing pleasure.

"Light. That is so ..." Ani didn't finish that, but seemed intent on finishing him. She was no longer thrusting, just rubbing the thing inside him. Rubbing herself against it, too, and squeezing her eyes shut. It was only when she started making some depraved noises of her own that he realised exactly how much she had enjoyed doing that to him.

She'd enjoyed it so much, in fact, that her strength flowed out of her with her juices. She collapsed to the rug, pulling him down with her. They lay there, struggling to catch their breaths. Rand enjoyed the sudden softness on that usually-hard, hook-nosed face.

The softness disappeared as soon as Ani came back to herself enough to realise he was watching. She pulled the toy out and shifted away from him. "Do not see more than there is," she told him. "I am the little girl who used to pull the wings off insects. You should know better than to look at me like that."

He didn't understand. She had fucked him. People who liked you always wanted to fuck you, didn't they? And if you liked someone, you should fuck them. He'd learned that long, long ago. He rubbed at his eyes. No, that was the old him. Not all of it was good. Not everyone who touched you was good. There was darkness everywhere. Even inside the best of them. Inside him ... While he was still trying to make sense of it, Rhuana reappeared, standing over them.

"You are a whiner. For that, I am going to show you what really hurts," she said. She touched her toe to the toy Ani had left behind, making him wince. "Light, it gets me so hot. Seeing a big, strong man like this, totally at my will. I can do whatever I fucking want. And knowing it turns you on so much, having this toy up your ass. It is such fun. Torturing a man like this." He hadn't needed her confession. Her nipples had revealed it all long ago.

He watched in dread as she strode to the box, though his dread was diminished somewhat by how much he liked the way her cheeks moved. It came back in force when she turned around, holding another two of those strapon toys. One was significantly bigger than the other.

"I saw you watching. You want me. But it does not really matter what you want. You know that, right? It only matters what I want. Hmm. Big or little?" She laughed. "Never mind. You do not

get a choice.” She tossed the smaller one back into the box, and held the bigger up near her face. Her short red hair and sharp smile gave her a very fox-like look. “Guess where this is going.”

Ani didn’t even hesitate. She pulled out, got up and walked away, undoing the ties of her strap-on toy as she went. Rand was oddly hurt.

“You like to ogle women, I can tell,” said Rhuana. “Even while taking your punishment you have been staring. Well, I will not let you stare anymore. You will see only what I want you to see.” Which was nothing, for used a discarded veil to blindfold his eyes. “And you will feel only what I want you to feel.”

A sudden but protracted pain made him groan. “Do you like that?” Rhuana asked. “Do you like having your balls squeezed and pulled?” He refused to answer but that did not give her pause. “I can see how hard that makes your cock, fucking slut.” She squeezed again, yanking down hard. He moved with her to lessen the pain, but she saw something else. “You want it bad. I knew you would.” She pulled his cheeks apart and fingered his hole. “You like being exposed.” Shaking his head only made her laugh. “You like it. You like having your asscheeks spread by your owner. But I think your ass really wants something more than my fingers inside it.”

“Do you mean that monster?”

She laughed. “You are a smart little slut. Bend over. Spread it. I want to see if you can take it.” There was a jingling sound as she prepared. “I bet you come right away, when you feel this monster spreading your ass.” With his vision gone, her every word shivered into him. His focus clung to each touch, amplifying the sensations. Even those caused by the thick thing that slapped across his rump and back. “Do you know what I am going to do? I am going to make you my little ass-slut.” He felt something pressing against his hole. His heart was racing and he was panting for breath. “You better relax that ass. This is going in whether you are relaxed or not.”

Rand tried, but it wasn’t made easy by the way she kept slapping his ass and balls. Which he suspected was the point of doing it. Even so, she managed to push it past his outer ring, and laughed softly to herself when she did.

“Aww. Look at that. Taking it like a *gai’shain*. Can you take it all? Never mind. You do not have a choice, because you are mine. You are completely helpless and I am going to do whatever I want with you. Do you understand me?”

He nodded his head.

“And one of my very favourite things to do with a little slut like you, is to put on my strapon, spread you open, and slowly push my cock inside you. And you are going to take it. You are going to take it all. Do you understand me?”

He nodded again.

“Alright. You are a good little bitch now.” As a reward, she slowly pushed that huge thing all the way in, making him grunt in pain. She spanked him hard for that, saying, “You think that hurts? Little bitch. You are a whiny little bitch, are you not?” When he didn’t answer she started fucking him harder. “You are my bitch, whether you admit it or not.”

Rand felt so full, both of cock and of shame. All he could hear were her mocking words, and all he could feel was that shaft of hers, shattering his defences, raining a terrible pain upon his cheeks, and an even more terrible pleasure. Rhuana’s hands were busy, too, pinching, slapping.

He wasn’t sure how long it went on for, or why it ended, he only knew that sometime later the pounding abruptly stopped.

“I can do whatever I want with you … I can even share you with my friends,” Rhuana said. She undid the blindfold. Rand had barely adjusted to the light when he found skinny Someryn kneeling nearby, a disturbing look in her eye. She sat on the rug and spread her legs wordlessly, her pussy inches away from Rand’s face.

“Get in there, like a good little slut,” Rhuana continued. Not waiting to see if he would, she pushed his head down.

The smell and taste were no strangers to Rand, but the situation was discomfiting. Warmth was nowhere to be seen. Rhuana’s thrusting intensified as he lapped at Someryn’s slit. Thighs tightened against his face, an arm tightened around his neck. It was getting hard to breathe. He could see their faces. Rhuana was lost in the moment, grinding her way to who knew what. Someryn was expressionless still, not even seeming to enjoy what he was doing to her most sensitive spot. He tried to push her thighs away but he was pinned in place. If she saw his distress, she did not care.

Tuandha saw, however. And she cared.

Knuckles rapped sharply against Someryn's head, causing an expression to appear at last. Annoyance. "Ease off. Let him breath," Tuandha told her coldly. "Now."

Wisely, Someryn did as she was told. "How is that worse than what the others did? Or what Rhuana is doing?" Someryn asked. Tuandha didn't answer, just gave her that one-eyed stare that so many struggled to hold.

A heavy sigh tickled his senses. "I love fucking the ass of a man like that. Such a good little bitch," Rhuana said. The intruder retreated from his bowels as slowly as it had entered. Rand could only imagine the state it must have left him in. He tried to hide his shame but his legs were still securely bound. Rhuana's laughter taunted him, but at least that laughter was moving farther away.

He sat down with a sigh. Whatever *toh* he'd had, surely it had to be gone by now. A lot of the women were looking pretty finished, as well as just plain pretty. Someryn hadn't climaxed but was dressing to leave even so. No-one moved to stop her, least of all Rand.

Tuandha stood there naked, watching over him so diligently that she didn't notice the small smile that spread across his face. He'd gotten used to not trusting people, but he felt he could trust her with his life. She hadn't taken part in his punishment but her little pink nipples had stiffened. She'd enjoyed at her least part of what she'd seen. The hair that dusted the slender girl's sex glistened with more than just their natural gold.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

A blue eye, her lone remaining, met his, but only for a moment. They'd never spoken of it, but he was sure those scars weighed heavily on her mind. Why else was she staring at the floor now? Touching her legs didn't change that, nor did running his hands up them and over her slender hips. Squeezing her soft bottom did make her shift her stance, though, parting her legs.

Rand smiled as he brought his mouth to her sex. He'd have smiled wider over the sound she made, but he was too busy running his tongue up and down her slit. He squeezed her bottom as he licked her, and the dual assault soon had her moaning. She tangled her fingers in his hair, but did not push his face into her sex the way the other Maidens present would have. That was why he licked her harder. He watched her face all throughout, both the scarred and the unscarred sides. Whatever she thought of herself, she was pretty to him.

Tuandha looked at him at last. Her eye went wide, and her face flushed. He held her gaze as he redoubled his efforts, and soon tasted her pleasure on his tongue. Her legs trembled but he did not doubt she could have stayed on her feet if she'd wanted, yet she fell into his lap, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him deeply.

Afterwards, she pressed the unscarred side of her face to his, and whispered "Thank you" in his ear.

"You and Carahuin are terrible at this," Pamela said. She was standing with her arms crossed under her prodigious breasts. "Liah, you have had enough fun. Give me that thing, and come help." Zie whispered something in her ear, and Pamela smirked at him before responding.

Rand got a bad feeling. At least Celesta seemed to have worn herself out after thoroughly reddening Elindha's bottom; something that the other Maiden didn't look very upset about.

Tuandha got up and left him when Zie and Liah approached. Rand didn't resist this time when they pushed him down and shortened the give on the ropes tied to his wrists. Pamela unbinding his ankles confused him, and her lifting his legs confused him even more. It was only when she propped his butt against her waist and started aiming the toy that Liah had thoroughly wetted that he realised her intent.

"Hey! Get that away from me!"

Pamela just grinned at him. "No. You must be a good boy and hold on to it for me with that cute little hole of yours." She pushed it down and it, making his cheeks redden. "Rhuana has not broken you completely, has she? Get a good grip and hold it steady."

It was worrying how quickly he found himself obeying. While Zie and Liah needlessly held him down, Pamela turned around, holding him by the ankles and positioning her hips over his, and sank down. He watched the other end of the toy part her pink pussy, and listened to the relieved sound she made as it sank inside.

"Good boy. Hold still now."

She moved, up and down, slowly at first, until she became assured of his steadiness. Then she started bouncing more earnestly, pursuing her pleasure with abandon. There was nothing comfortable about the position Rand found himself in. His neck felt sore, and the toy installed in his butt hurt. Yet, each time Pamela moved a thrill of pleasure fought through the pain. And he had promised them. So he lay there with his feet in the air, staring up at her big bottom as it rose and fell, watching as the toy they shared slid in and out of her dripping pussy.

"He is getting hard again," Zie told her.

Pamela looked down at him, grinning. "Enjoying it? That is what I like to hear." She sped up, driving it in each time her flesh slapped against his. The way her ass shook, and what she was doing to make it so, had him biting his lip to keep from crying out.

It was easy to know when she came. Pamela had never been the quietest of Maidens. His discomfort increased when she sank down, using him as an impromptu chair, but he was distracted from that by the strange sensation of her hot juices flowing over his ass and trickling down his back.

Pamela let him drop to the ground and stretched languorously. She wandered off to take a seat with Ani, Amili and Carahuin, the latter two of which were fingering each other.

"Well. That just leaves you. Are you going to get this game over with?" he asked Zie.

She didn't look pleased. "Darling, I do not play games. And apparently neither do you." She patted him on the shoulder comfortingly. "The restraints, are they too tight?"

"I ... would like to be rid of them. And done with this," he said humbly. He Who Comes With the Dawn. Blood and ashes. They might rename him He Who Comes With a Spanking at this rate.

"Not ... quite ... yet, I think. Rand al'Thor, I have a ... confession to make. Ever since we met I have had a certain ... fondness for you. You are so pretty. When my spearsisters told me of the games they had played with you. Well, let me just say that it was not coincidence that brought me here tonight." Liah had gone off with Rhuana, so it was just the two of them. Zie started untying the ropes from his legs. "It is a shame to see such a fine specimen restrained like this. I am tempted to set you free."

"I would appreciate it," he whispered. She was very close. And quite good looking, age and bulk be damned.

"Yes. I will let you go," Zie said. But then she smiled an apologetic smile. "In a moment."

She threw a thick thigh over him, and knelt above, hands on his shoulders.

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. Relax, darling. But not too much."

There was no need to hold him down, for his wrists were still bound. He couldn't have pushed her off if he'd wanted to. And he wasn't at all sure he did. As abused as he felt, his body had responded to all the stimulation. And Zie was an impressive specimen herself. Her hand was callused but it did not take much for her to have him swelling to his full size.

She laughed softly, well pleased. "And I thought I would have to work harder."

"Beautiful women have that effect on me."

That won him a smile, but only a brief one. "Shh. Good. Now, no more talking."

If Zie had wanted to be as rough as some others, she could probably have hurt him. But she didn't. Oh, she was an energetic woman. Her tight pussy clenched him hard as she rode him, and she wasn't shy about wrapping her strong arms around him, hugging his head to her chest, and giving him a nipple to suck on. But there was no slapping, no mockery, just a good rough fuck. After all that had happened, it was quite the relief.

It was during one of those breast-sucking occasions that he felt her pussy fluttering around him as her pleased gasps grew louder. She didn't stop, though, only rested for a while. Soon she was bouncing on, rearing back to let him see her full glory, the strength that years of fighting had given her, the small scars that marked the battles she'd survived. The feminine parts that slipped up and down his member, demanding he grant her tribute.

Rand had given in to many demands that night, but that was the one he regretted least. His body shook in relief at the normalcy of their coupling, and he let out a shuddering moan as he spurted his seed into Zie's body. She grinned when she felt his heat, and rolled her hips until the last drops had been milked from him.

While he lay there basking dumbly, she kissed him on the cheek. "You see? That was not so bad. I think we will have a good working relationship, yes?"

It occurred to him that a saner man might have had stern words for a woman who had tied him up and taken advantage of him. Rand's sanity was not much boasted of, though.

"I can think of a lot of people I'd trust less at my back," he said instead. "Could you untie me now?"

Zie rolled off him. "I undid the restraints a while ago; you were just too busy holding on to the cushions to notice. Quite flattering really." He was tempted to flatter her more, but contented himself with staring at the ass she showed him as she went to join her thoroughly sated spearsisters.

As she'd said, the ropes were all gone. No smirking woman was moving to accost him. This was his chance. Rand swiftly crawled over to his discarded clothes and pulled on his underwear. He couldn't help but wince, but hurried on. Breeches, shirt, boots. He snatched up his coat as he stood, jaw set defiantly. Oddly enough, none of the Maidens were moving to stop him, not even Celesta. She smirked at him, and lazily tapped that whip of hers against her palm, but she did nothing more than that.

*It is done, he thought, in a flood of relief. They must have decided I've met my toh. Blood and ashes, no wonder they are so careful to avoid earning any.* He promised himself he would pay more attention to Aviendha's lectures from then on, and hastened to the doorway.

There was a Maiden standing on the other side of the heavy curtain when he pushed it aside. Several, in fact. He avoided their eyes and made to step past, but a hand on his chest stopped him. It was not Rondha's, but Dina's. The yellow-haired beauty stood high among the Maidens, but she was a head shorter than him. That didn't lessen the sharpness with which she looked from him to the room behind him and back again.

"So she did not exaggerate," she said. He followed the flick of her eyes to Someryn, but had to travel past several other Maidens to get to her.

*I really don't like that girl, he thought, gritting his teeth. Then why did you have sex with her?* a quiet voice asked. Rand had no answer for it.

He was getting some odd looks from the Maidens with Dina. Iona was there. Beralna, too. And a young Reyn girl he'd never spoken to. Safana, he'd heard her called. Dark gold hair, big blue eyes, a round face, a girl of few words. She was the image of shy innocence. What was she doing with this crowd?

"I was just about to leave," he said stiffly.

"I think not," said Dina. "We have scales to balance, you and I." Rand went silent, eyes wide as he recalled how sweet her ass had felt around his cock. Her ass. His ass. *Oh Light.* He staggered back into that dungeon when she shoved him, and just stood there staring in horror as she held out her hand to Rhuana. "Give me that thing."

## *CHAPTER 50: A Truer Devotion*



It was very, very late when Rand left the Roof of the Maidens. They'd expected him to sleep inside, but he could not face it, not after all that had happened. He walked stiffly past the guards outside, avoiding even Renay's eyes. He walked stiffly full stop. Navigating the carved steps as he descended to the valley floor made him glad of the darkness. At least no-one could see his hitching gait, and wonder. Carrying his boots helped to silence his steps, too. He didn't care how cold it was, he needed to be elsewhere.

The steps of the girl who followed him down were already silent. He only knew she was there when she spoke. "What is your problem?"

"Nici. I'm fine. There is no problem," he lied.

"You? Of course you are fine, that is not what I meant." He couldn't see her properly, but she sounded annoyed.

"What's the matter?"

"You know, you really got one thick head. The matter is that you never asked me. Asked me to come visit you. It has been weeks!"

The darkness hid other things, too, he was relieved to find. "But you said you didn't want anyone to know. We're in the middle of an army. No-one doesn't have people sleeping a few feet away each night. Privacy is very much not an option. If it was I'd be trying to pull you into dark rooms all the time."

"Really!? Well, of course you would. But I do not want you chasing after me when others might see, Rand," she went on sternly. "You go on to your blankets now. I have to get back to my duty."

"But you approa—Never mind. Sleep well and wake, Nici."

His army's tents were tightly packed together. He navigated between them, while avoiding the scattered fires. The Jangai Pass was close. They would press ahead tomorrow, and he needed to be well rested for that. His tent was near the middle of the cluster, surrounded by the tents of the other wetlanders. He moved even more carefully while passing those, and stopped altogether when he heard footsteps coming the other way.

Starlight and flickering flames were not enough to show him who it was that gasped lightly and halted when they saw him. He could see her white dress, though. And there was only one person in camp who was so dark of skin that she'd blend into the night like that.

"Mayam. Nice night," he said. He made an effort to walk normally as he padded past her.

"Yes. Nice night," she said stiffly. She moved on, and he almost put the strange way she was walking down to the fact that she was carrying her shoes instead of wearing them. Except so was he.

It was understandable. She was an attractive woman, Mayam. It was natural that she would be popular. Which was a good reason for him to steer clear of her. The less avoidable conflict and drama, the better. He had more than enough unavoidable ones. And more than enough distractions.

Rand sucked in a deep breath of chill air. It cleared his mind. Why was he spending so much time with strangers, or people who didn't really care about him? When was the last time he had spoken to Izana and the rest of the Shienarans who had been with him for so long? Worse, when was the last time he had been alone with Merile or Raine? Tam might want to avoid him, but Rand could force the matter if he wanted.

It was one thing to build bridges with the Aiel—he would need to do that in order to lead them—it was quite another to let the bridges he'd already built crumble behind him.

His tent wasn't far, but he didn't go to it. Instead, he searched among the others for hints of who rested within. He found her by the recently cleaned green dress hanging without. There he paused. Was he allowed to go in? She could be mad at him. She'd have good reason to be.

It took him a while to work up the nerve to duck into the tent. He crouched there, shivering from more than the cold for a long moment before he whispered her name.

She let out a loud breath. "Rand? Is that you? Light, I nearly blasted you."

Once more the dark saved him. She would not be able to see him blush. She no longer embraced the Way of the Leaf, and knew how to channel *saidar* now. He was lucky she hadn't torched him for sneaking into her tent in the middle of the night.

"I'm sorry for startling you, Merile. I didn't think. It's a bad habit of mine."

"That's alright. I shouldn't be so violent. My former parents would be horrified."

"You? Violent? I wouldn't say being ready to defend yourself from a big idiot lumbering into your tent makes you violent."

"I guess not. Um, is everyone else busy? Why did you come to me?"

Rand hung his head. "It's not like that, Merile. I haven't been very good to you, have I?"

"Of course you have!"

"No I haven't. I know it. And I'm sorry. That was why I came. Don't worry, I'm not here to take advantage of you."

"Oh. Damn."

He raised his brows in the darkness. Then crept closer. "Do you mind if I sleep here tonight?"

The blankets rustled as she pushed them hastily aside. "Not at all!"

He dropped his boots but left the rest of his clothes on. A thorough patting was required to find the pallet Merile slept on, but he found her eventually and pulled the blankets over himself. He hesitated to put his arms around her, until he felt her shuffle a little closer. It was then that he found her for real. He smiled in the darkness when she embraced him back.

They lay there for a while, sharing their warmth. Rand was tired but could tell from her breathing that Merile was not. He held her close and pushed his sleepiness aside. "How are the lessons with Dani going? Is she being nice to you?"

She snuggled in. "She is. I like her, and I'm learning so much. Moiraine came by yesterday, and I thought she was going to scold me again, but she actually helped with the lessons instead."

"Really? Huh. She's changed."

"Yes, all of us have. Raine said ..."

They lay in bed for some time, while she chatted about her day and all the other days he'd missed. The anger and resentment he'd been expected was nowhere to be found. That was humbling, and far more than he deserved. Sometimes she'd ask about what he'd been up to, but he kept his answers vague. Some of the things he'd been up to were a bit on the unspeakable side. Tomorrow would be busy. Too busy for Lan, but he'd have to make time for a lesson with Asmodean. Mastering *saidin* was a priority. Sleep could have been as well, but he stayed awake into the small hours, listening to Merile and holding her close. She knew of what happened with him and the Maidens—some, but not all; thank the Light—and knew other things about them that he did not. It seemed Elindha and Linsay were among those who were curious enough about the Way of the Leaf to speak to her repeatedly. Merile thought it quite lovely that they hadn't even insulted her once. Rand thought she should have higher standards, in that and in him.

"I've missed this," she said at last. Gentle hands carefully sought his face. Gentle lips soon followed. "I've missed you."

She was pressing close but his body did not respond. He was too worn out for that just then. Which did not matter in the slightest.

"I've missed you, too," he said. He kissed her lips. When he touched her slender legs, they parted at once. He caressed the inside of her thigh as she lay there, working his way up. Her heat pulsed through her underwear, and the dampness of the cloth told a tale. A gentle tug was enough to have her raising her hips. Down they slid, just far enough to let him touch her sex. He kept it gentle, savouring the little gasps that escaped into the night.

His fingers were wet, and got wetter still when he slipped them inside her. He scissored them up and down, circled them around her heat, and curled them in search of her pleasure. His palm he rubbed against her mound, and when he kissed her neck he felt the effect it was having in her racing pulse. Merile clutched him as he pleasured her, which was all Rand needed just then.

It did not end quickly, but it did not end quietly, either. She squealed when she came, kicking the sheets away as she lost control. The chill was nothing. Her happiness everything. This was what he should be focusing on, the people who knew him best and who cared about him despite that

knowing. He kissed her cheeks and forehead while she was panting for breath, then used his cramped and very wet hand to pull the blankets back up.

Merile mumbled something as he was settling in at her side. She started pawing at him, too, and it was only then that he was able to make sense of her words. "You can do whatever you want with me. I'm your girl."

He caught her wrist before she reached his crotch. She might take offense if she realised he was still soft after all that. "I just want to fall asleep in your arms, and wake up the same way."

"Really?"

He found her lips and kissed them gently. "Really."

"Oh. Um. That ... that would be nice, too." She wrapped her arms around his neck instead, and snuggled in. "That's the kind of thing wives do with their husbands."

A silent alarm rang, driving back his desire for sleep. He spoke carefully. "It is. I could wish my life was different. If I wasn't what I am, I would have liked to have married you."

"You still could. I don't care what you are. I care about you. I don't even mind about the others. I mean, look at Bael and Melaine. Wasn't that romantic?"

"You thought so?"

The head that rested under his trembling hand nodded at once. "You could even put a baby in me if you like. I wouldn't mind at all." For a moment, Rand dared to imagine it. His arms tightened around her of their own accord. It was a sweet dream. But it was one he knew he had to push away.

"I do love you, Merile," he said apologetically.

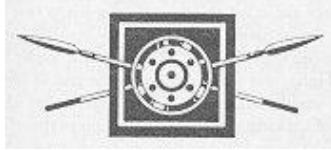
"Good. I love you, too."

Despite those alarming ideas, and what had happened earlier, Rand slept peacefully that night. He woke with the dawn, as was his habit. When Merile saw him in the dim light, she was aghast at his bruises. He was happy to let her Heal them. They hurt less than many injuries he'd taken, but explaining where he'd gotten them was something he was very reluctant to do. She made free with her hands while she was fixing him up, and he didn't stop her. Rest had helped in that regard as well.

Despite knowing he should be getting up, when she gave him a taste of those big green eyes, and tugged him back to the bed, he did not resist. He gave her his everything that morning, while thinking of all she'd said the night before. It could never happen. It should never happen. But if it did ... if ... Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Rand let himself go for a time. He stopped trying to control his life, and left it all up to chance. It felt like hope.

## CHAPTER 51: Jangai Pass



Under the looming Spine of the World, Rand guided Jeade'en up the stony slope from the foothills that began the foot of Jangai Pass. The Dragonwall pierced the sky, dwarfing all other mountains, its snowcapped peaks defying the baking afternoon sun. The tallest thrust well above clouds that mocked the Waste with promises of rain that had never come. It was said that men who had tried to scale these heights turned back, overcome with fear and unable to breathe. He could well believe that a man might grow too afraid to breathe, attempting to climb so high.

"... yet though the Cairhienin are consumed with the Game of Houses," Moiraine was saying at his shoulder, "they will follow you so long as they know that you are strong. Be firm with them, but I would ask you to be fair also. A ruler who gives true justice..."

He tried to ignore her, as he did the other riders, and the creak and rumble of Kadere's wagons, making heavy going further back. The broken gorges and gullies of the Waste were behind them, but these rugged rising hills, nearly as barren, were little better for wagons. No-one had travelled this path in over twenty years.

Moiraine talked at him that way from daybreak to sunset whenever he let her. Her lectures could be on small things—details of court behaviour, say, in Cairhien or Saldaea or somewhere else—or on large: the political influence of the Whitecloaks, or perhaps the effects of trade on rulers' decisions to go to war. It was as if she meant to see him educated, as a noble would be, or should be, before he reached the other side of the mountains. It was surprising how often what she said reflected what anyone back in Emond's Field would have called simple common sense. And also how often it did not.

Occasionally she came out with something startling; for instance, that he should trust no woman of the Tower except herself, Elayne and Nynaeve. She hadn't answered when he asked if she should be as suspicious of the Wise Ones. He wished he could make them swear Moiraine's oath; they interfered between him and the chiefs continually, as if they wanted him to go through them to reach the chiefs.

Right that minute he did not want to think about Elaida or the Wise Ones, or listen to Moiraine. Now he wanted to study the pass ahead, a deep gap in the mountains that twisted as though a blunt axe had tried to chop through again and again, never quite succeeding. A few minutes' hard ride, and he could be in it.

On one side of the pass mouth a sheer cliff had been smoothed over a three hundred feet width and carved, a wind-weathered snake entwining a staff a good thousand feet or more high; monument or marker or ruler's sigil, it surely dated from some lost nation before Artur Hawkwing, perhaps even before the Trolloc Wars. He had seen remnants before from nations long vanished; often even Moiraine did not know their source.

High on the other side, so far up that he was not sure he was seeing what he thought, just below the snow line, stood something even stranger. Something that made the first monument of a few thousand years a commonplace. He could have sworn it was the remnants of shattered buildings, shining grey against the darker mountain, and stranger still, what appeared to be a dock of the same material, as for ships, slanting drunkenly down the mountain. If he was not imagining it, that had to date from before the Breaking. The face of the world had been changed utterly in those years. This could well have been an ocean's floor, before. He would have to ask Asmodean. Even if he had had the time, he did not think he would want to try reaching that altitude to find out for himself.

At the foot of the huge snake lay Taien, a high-walled town of moderate size, a remnant itself of the time when Cairhien had been allowed to send caravans across the Three-fold Land, and wealth had flowed from Kigali along the Silk Path. There appeared to be birds above the town, and dark blotches at regular intervals along the grey stone walls. Mat stood in Pips' stirrups, shading his eyes with that broad-brimmed hat to peer up the pass, frowning. Lan's hard face wore no expression at all, yet he appeared just as intent; a gust of wind, a little cooler here, whipped his colour-shifting cloak

around him, and for a moment all of him from shoulders to boots seemed to blend into the rocky hills and sparse thornbushes.

"Are you listening to me?" Moiraine said suddenly, reining her white mare closer. "You must —!" She took a deep breath. "Please, Rand. There is so much that I must tell you, so much that you need to know."

The hint of pleading in her tone made him glance at her. He could remember when he had been overawed by her presence. Now she seemed quite small, for all her regal manner. A fool thing, that he should feel protective of her. "There is plenty of time ahead of us, Moiraine," he said gently. "I don't pretend to think I know as much of the world as you. I mean to keep you close from now on." He barely realized how great a change that was from when she was keeping him close. "But I have something else on my mind right now."

"Of course." She sighed. "As you wish. We have plenty of time yet."

Rand heeled the dappled grey stallion to a trot, and the others followed. The wagons quickened, too, though they could not keep up on the slope. Asmodean's—Jasin Natael's—patch-covered gleeman's cloak rippled behind him like the banner he carried at his stirrup, brilliant red with the white-and-black symbol of the ancient Aes Sedai at its centre. His face wore a sullen glower; he had not been best pleased at having to be the bannerman. Under that sign he would conquer, the Prophecy of Rhuidean said, and perhaps it would not frighten the world so much as the Dragon Banner, Lews Therin's banner, that he had left flying over the Stone of Tear. Few would know this sign.

The blotches on the walls of Taien were bodies, contorted in their final agonies, bloated in the sun and hanging by their necks in a row that seemed to encircle the town. The birds were glossy black ravens, and vultures with their heads and necks befouled. Some ravens perched on corpses, gorging, unconcerned for the new arrivals. The sickly sweet stench of corruption hung in the dry air, and the acrid smell of char. Iron-strapped gates stood gaping open on an expanse of ruin, soot-streaked stone houses and collapsed roofs. Nothing moved except the birds.

*Like Mar Ruois.* He tried to shake the thought away, but in his head he could see that great city after it was retaken, immense towers blackened and collapsing, the remains of great bonfires at every street crossing, where those who had refused to swear to the Shadow had been bound and thrown alive to the flames. He knew whose memory it had to be, though he had not discussed it with Moiraine. *I am Rand al'Thor. Lews Therin Telamon is dead three thousand years. I am myself!*

That was one battle he meant to win. If he did have to die at Shayol Ghul, he would die as himself. He made himself think of something else.

Half a month since he had left Rhuidean. Half a month, though the Aiel had set a pace afoot from sunup to sundown that wearied the horses. But Couladin had been moving this way a week before he learned of it. If they had not managed to close any ground, he would have that long to ravage Cairhien before Rand could reach it. Longer, before the Shaido could be brought to bay. Not a much happier thought.

"There's someone watching us from those rocks to the left," Lan said quietly. He seemed to be completely engrossed in studying what remained of Taien. "Not Aiel, or I doubt I would have seen a glimmer."

A wordless gesture from Uno had his armsmen array themselves to that side. Tam didn't move. He was staring at the bodies. He looked sad, but unsurprised.

Rand was glad that he had made Aviendha stay with the Wise Ones and the rest of the Aiel. The town gave him a new reason, but the watcher fit in with his original plan, when he had hoped that Taien had escaped. Aiel would not have been very welcome in Taien. They were even less likely to be welcome among the survivors.

He looked back at the wagons drawing to a halt a short distance downslope. Mutters drifted up from the drivers now that they could see the town clearly, and the wall's decorations. Kadere, his bulk all in white again today, mopped at his hawk-nosed face with a large kerchief; he appeared unperturbed, merely pursing his lips thoughtfully. Sitting on the back of another wagonbed, guarding the items strapped there at Moiraine's request, Loial had slumped so heavily that he seemed to be making up for Kadere's indifference.

Rand expected that Moiraine would have to find more guards and new drivers once they were through the pass. Kadere and his crew would likely flee as soon as they had the chance. And he would

have to let them go. It was not right—it was not justice—but it was necessary to protect Asmodean. How long now had he been doing what was necessary instead of what was right? In a fair world, they would be one and the same. That made him laugh, a hoarse wheeze. He was far from the village boy he had been, but sometimes that boy sneaked up on him. The others looked at him, and he fought the urge to tell them that he was not mad yet.

He wasn't sure they would have believed him if he had. Of the Accepted, only Dani looked relaxed as she peered at him from under that dark hat. Raine and Merile weren't alarmed, either, but their trust was not quite born of reason. That Dani looked at him so gave him strength.

Long minutes passed before two coatless men and a woman emerged from the rocks, all three ragged and dirty and barefoot. They approached hesitantly, heads tilted uneasily, eyes darting from rider to rider, to the wagons and back, as though they might take flight at a shout. Gaunt cheeks and wavering steps spoke of hunger.

"Thank the Light," one of the men said finally. He was grey-haired—none of the three was young—his face deeply creased. His eyes lingered a moment on Asmodean, with falls of lace at collar and cuffs, but the leader of this train would not be riding a mule and carrying a banner. It was Rand's stirrup that he clutched anxiously. "The Light be praised that you came out of those terrible lands alive, my lord." That might have been Rand's blue silk coat, embroidered in gold on the shoulders, or the banner, or simple flattery. The man certainly had no reason to think them other than merchants, if well dressed for it. "Those murdering savages have risen again. It is another Aiel War. They were over the wall in the night before anybody knew, killing everyone who raised a hand, stealing everything not mortared in place."

"In the night?" Mat said sharply. Hat pulled low, he was still studying the ruined town. "Were your sentries asleep? You did have sentries this close to your enemies? Even Aiel would have a hard time coming at you if you kept a good watch." Lan gave him an appraising look.

"No, my lord." The grey-haired man blinked at Mat, then gave his answer to Rand. Mat's green coat was fine enough for a lord, but it hung open and looked slept in. "We ... We had only a watchman at each gate. It has been long since any have even seen one of the savages. But this time ... Whatever they did not steal, they burned, and drove us out to starve. Filthy animals! Thank the Light you have come to save us, my lord, or we would all have died here. I am Tal Nethin. I am—I was—a saddlemaker. A good one, my lord. This is my sister Aril, and her husband, Ander Corl. He makes fine boots."

"They stole people, too, my lord," the woman said, her voice raw. Somewhat younger than her brother, she might have been handsome once, but haggard worry had etched lines in her face that Rand suspected would never entirely go away. Her husband had a lost look in his eyes, as if not exactly sure where he was. "My daughter, my lord, and my son. They took all the young ones they could find, everyone above sixteen, and some twice that or more. Said they were guy-something, and stripped them naked right in the street and herded them off. My lord, can you ...?" She trailed off, eyes squeezing shut as the impossibility overwhelmed her, swaying. Small odds that she would ever see her children again.

Moiraine was out of her saddle in an instant and by Aril's side. The haggard woman gave a loud gasp as soon as the Aes Sedai's hands touched her, shivering to her toenails. Her wondering look turned to Moiraine questioningly, but Moiraine only held her as if supporting her.

The woman's husband suddenly gaped, staring at Rand's gilded belt buckle, the gift from Aviendha. "His arms were marked like that. Like that. All twined around, like the cliff snake."

Tal looked up at Rand uncertainly. "The savages' leader, my lord. He—had markings like that on his arms. He wore those strange clothes they all do, but he had his coatsleeves cut off, and he made sure everybody saw."

"A gift I received in the Waste," Rand said. He made sure to keep his hands still on his pommel; his coatsleeves hid his own Dragons, except for the heads; they would be visible on the backs of his hands to anyone who looked closely. Aril had forgotten about wondering what Moiraine had actually done, and all three looked on the point of running. "How long since they left?"

"Six days, my lord," Tal said uneasily. "They did what they did in a night and a day and were gone the next. We would have gone, too, but what if we met them coming back? Surely they were turned back at Selean?" That was the town at the other end of the pass. Rand doubted that Selean was in any better condition than Taien by this time.

“How many survivors are there besides you three?”

“Maybe a hundred, my lord. Maybe more. Nobody has counted.”

Abruptly anger flared in him, though he tried to hold it down. “A hundred of you?” His voice was icy iron. “And six days? Then why are your dead left for the ravens? Why do corpses still decorate your town walls? Those are your people filling your nostrils with their stink!” Huddling together, the three backed away from his horse.

“We were afraid, my lord,” Tal said hoarsely. “They went, but they could come back. And he told us ... The one with the markings on his arms told us not to touch anything.”

“A message,” Ander said in a dull voice. “He chose them out to hang, just pulling them out until he had enough to line the wall. Men, women, he did not care.” His eyes were fixed on Rand’s buckle. “He said they were a message for some man who would be following him. He said he wanted this man to know ... know what they were going to do on the other side of the Spine. He said ... He said he would do worse to this man.”

Raine growled. Aril’s eyes widened suddenly, but it was not at her he looked. The three stared beyond Rand for a moment, gaping. Then, screaming, they turned and ran. Black-veiled Aiel rose from the rocks they had come from, and they darted off in another direction. Veiled Aiel appeared there, too, and they collapsed to the ground, sobbing and holding each other as they were surrounded. Moiraine’s face was cool and composed, but her eyes were not serene.

Rand twisted in his saddle. Rhuarc and Dheanic were coming up the slope, unveiling themselves and unwrapping the *shoufa* from around their heads. Dheanic was thicker than Rhuarc, with a prominent nose and paler streaks through his golden hair.

Timolan and his Miagoma had been paralleling them to the north for three days, exchanging occasional messengers but giving no clue to his intentions. The Codarra and the Shiande and the Daryne were still somewhere to the east; following, so Amys and the others said from dreamtalking to their Wise Ones, but slowly. Those Wise Ones had no more idea of their clan chiefs’ aims than Rand did of Timolan’s. He’d tried again to get Carwe to talk, but last night’s antics had not softened her to him. At least she hadn’t left yet.

“Was that necessary?” he said as the two chiefs came up to him. He had frightened the people first, but for cause, and had not made them think that they were going to die.

Rhuarc simply shrugged, and Dheanic said, “We put spears in place around this hold unseen, as you wished, and there seemed no reason to wait since no-one remained here to dance spears. Besides, they are only treekillers.”

Rand drew a deep breath. He had known this might be as large a problem as Couladin, in its own way. Nearly five hundred years ago the Aiel had presented Cairhien with a sapling, a cutting from *Avendesora*, and with it a right granted to no other nation, to trade across the Three-fold Land to Kigali. They had given no reason—they did not like wetlanders very much at the best—but to the Aiel it had been required by *ji'e'toh*. During the long years of journey that had brought them to the Waste, only one people had not attacked them, only one had allowed them water uncontested when the world grew parched. And finally they had found the descendants of those people. The Cairhienin.

For five hundred years riches had flowed into Cairhien with the silk and the ivory. Five hundred years, and *Avendoraldera* grew in Cairhien. And then Queen Laina had had the tree cut down to make a throne. The nations knew why the Aiel had crossed the Spine of the World twenty years ago—Laina’s Sin, they called it, and Laina’s Pride—but few knew that to the Aiel it had not been a war. Four clans had come to find an oathbreaker, and when they had killed her, they returned to the Three-fold Land. But their contempt for the treekillers, the oathbreakers, had never died. Moiraine being Aes Sedai offset her being Cairhienin, but Rand was never sure how much.

“These folk broke no oaths,” he told them. “Find the others; the saddlemaker says there are about a hundred. And be gentle with them. If any of them were watching, they’re probably running away into the mountains by now.” The two Aiel started to turn away, and he added, “Did you hear what they told me? What do you think of what Couladin did here?”

“They killed more than they had to,” Dheanic said with a disgusted shake of his head. “Like black ferrets falling on rockhens’ nests in a gully.” Killing was as easy as dying, so the Aiel said; any fool could do either.

“And the other thing? Taking prisoners. *Gai'shain*.”

Rhuarc and Dheanic exchanged looks, and Dheanic's mouth tightened. Clearly they had heard and it made them uncomfortable. It took a great deal to make an Aiel uncomfortable.

"It cannot be so," Rhuarc said at last. "If it is ... *Gai'shain* is a thing of *ji'e'toh*. No-one can be made *gai'shain* who does not follow *ji'e'toh*, else they are only human animals, such as the Kigali keep."

"Couladin has abandoned *ji'e'toh*." Dheanic sounded as though he were saying stones had grown wings.

Mat guided Pips closer, using his knees. He had never been more than an indifferent rider, but sometimes, when he was thinking of something else, he rode as though born on a horse's back. "That surprises you?" he said. "After everything he has done already? The man would cheat at dice with his mother."

They gave him flat-eyed stares, like blue stones. In many ways, Aiel were *ji'e'toh*. And whatever else Couladin was, he was still Aiel in their eyes. Sept before clan, clan before outsiders, but Aiel before wetlanders.

Some of the Maidens joined them, Enaila and Nerise, Jolien and Adelin, Ani, Reyla ... and Nici. The Shaido girl was stone-faced, and looked suddenly older. Wiry, white-haired Sulin who had been chosen roofmistress of the Roof of the Maidens in Rhuidean, was with them. She had told the Maidens who stayed to choose another, and now she led the Maidens here. They sensed the mood, and said nothing, only grounded their spearpoints patiently. An Aiel who wanted to could make the rocks look hasty.

Lan broke the silence. "If Couladin expects you to be following him, he may have left a surprise somewhere in the pass. A hundred men could hold some of those narrows against an army. A thousand ..."

"We will camp here, then," Rand said, "and send scouts ahead to make sure the way is clear. *Duadhe Mahdi'in?*"

"Water Seekers," Dheanic agreed, sounding pleased. That had been his society before he became clan chief. Foragers by specialty, they were still as dangerous as any Aiel.

Sulin and the other Maidens gave Rand flat stares as the Reyn chief walked away downslope. He had chosen scouts from other societies for the last three days, when he had begun to fear what he might find here, and he had the feeling they knew he was not just giving the others their turns. He tried to ignore their looks. Sulin's was especially difficult; the woman could have driven nails with those pale blue eyes.

"Rhuarc, once the survivors are found, see that they're fed. And well treated. We will take them with us." His gaze was drawn to the town wall. Some Aiel were already using their curved horn bows to kill ravens. Sometimes Shadowspawn used ravens and other animals that fed on death as spies; Shadoweyes, the Aiel called them. These barely paused in the frenzied feeding until they fell transfixed with an arrow, but a wise man did not take chances with ravens or rats. "And see that the dead are buried." At least in that, right and necessity were the same.

"It is right that you bury them," Nici said quietly, once Rhuarc had departed. "This is not the way."

Merile perked up. "The Way? It is the opposite of the Way! This is why we do no violence ... or didn't do any ... or ..." She slumped in her saddle with a sigh.

A more typical anger animated Nici's face. "I did not mean that, Lost One!"

Reyla put a calming hand on her shoulder. "You are right, spearsister. This is not how you should treat a captured hold. This was ... cruel."

Rand grunted. He hadn't expected that from Reyla. She'd been one of the most unwelcoming of the idea of wetlanders in the Waste. But then, there was Nici, speaking against her clan to outsiders. Not to mention speaking at all to a Tinker. The other Maidens looked more predictably taciturn. Ani's expression didn't even change when she noticed him watching. He almost expected her to smirk, but she didn't even do that.

"Cruel it might be, but it is not stupid," said Nerise. "If you want to make sure the enemy stays down, without killing them all, this is the way to do it. Consider the way those treekillers reacted when they saw us."

She spoke thoughtfully, but Rand was unable to keep from growling. It struck too close to the things he'd been asked to do himself, in hopes of getting to and winning Tarmon Gai'don. "Can any cause be worth such barbarism? Worth lowering yourself to this?"

Nerise was neither intimidated nor offended. "For me alone? No. Life is a dream from which we all must wake before we dream again. What was done here was not honourable. And death must always come before dishonour. If it is only your death. But what if it is the death of your people? Your world? Then it might be different."

"Couladin's world is not the one in danger."

Her dark eyes were quite penetrating. "Can you see how he might think it was? Aiel ruled by one who is not Aiel, born of a clan that is opposed to his own."

Rand looked to the hanging bodies, and set his jaw. "My desire to understand him has ended."

Nerise nodded, and hefted a spear. "We will end him soon enough."

He studied her for a moment. Fiery-haired and pretty, she was about Nynaeve's age but carried herself like a woman older. He found himself regretting her habitual absence from any roof he was staying under. Then he shook himself and looked away. *For the Light's sake, al'Thor. Put it away and focus on the job for once.*

Sulin had listened in silence, but he saw her lean close to Adelin and say, "That one will go far." She said it quietly, but not so quietly that Nerise did not hear. She stood straighter.

A sudden scream had him jerking Jeade'en's reins. One of the villagers he'd ordered the Aiel to round up had broken free of the cordon and was making a run for it. Aiel pursued, unveiled Aiel, but still Aiel, and too terrifying to calm things.

He gave his horse a kick, and saw some others do the same with theirs. The Maidens were running with him. That wouldn't help.

"*Far Dareis Mai! Halt!*" he shouted. And, wonder of wonders, they actually did.

There was no doubt the Aiel could have caught the runaway, but when they saw Rand coming, and the hand he raised to them, they ceased their pursuit. He galloped after the Cairhienin himself, his dappled stallion covering the ground with an impressive burst of speed. They'd assured him that Jeade'en was among the best of the Tairen bloodstock but he'd not really had a chance to test that claim in his travels. Just then, he could believe it.

Well-trained, too. A tug on the reins was all it took to bring him to a sudden stop across the runaway's path. They skidded to a halt. A girl, he saw, in worn blue trousers. It reminded him of Min, and a sudden longing filled him. He hadn't seen her in so long. That was for the best, though. She was better off without him. This girl had darker hair than Min's, a different skin tone, and her eyes were slightly hooded. They were also filled with none of the friendly warmth his old friend's often showed.

"Aww, burn me. Don't you guys ever quit? Go fight someone bigger, why don'tcha? No fair always pickin' on me." She gaped up at him, which was a long way to gape. She was very short, though young enough that she might yet eke out a few extra inches. "Wait. You're dressed pretty funny for a savage."

Dani and Ilyena had slowed to a canter. The Domani's lips tightened when she heard what was said. "Some might say you are dressed pretty funny for a girl, even a stupid one."

Whatever retort she'd had was quickly swallowed when she got a good look at the pair. Her confusion was plain as she took in the approaching wetlanders, in all their disparity.

"Who are you guys? Why are you picking on me?"

"No-one is picking on you. We are here to help," Dani said.

"With Aiel!?"

"I'm not an Aiel. Not really. I grew up in the wetlands," he explained. "You don't have to be afraid. These Aiel follow me. I've ordered them not to hurt anyone."

"Aiel follow you? Why?" she asked warily.

Rand sat in silence. Telling her he was the Dragon Reborn was ... unlikely to calm her nerves. He looked to the others for support, only to watch in horror as a sharp smile bloomed on Ilyena's face.

"Have you never heard of the spoiled princes that languish in the Sun Palace? Did you not think Aiel had the same? Soft and coddled they are. Lazy, dim, selfish—"

"Cunning, treacherous, unforgiving," Moiraine added as she caught up, Lan looming beside her on Mandarb's back. Ilyena was unable to hold her stare this time.

"You're Cairhienin. A Lady? Thank the Light!"

Rand smiled wryly. So much for his efforts to calm things. Moiraine was the saviour she looked to, not him. The Aes Sedai dismounted smoothly and spoke to the girl in her supremely assured, chiming voice. Her name, it turned out, was Jubes. Her tale was a grim one, slowly told. Rand listened in silence, not feeling he had the right to speak. Both her parents were on that wall; what was left of them. He met Tam's sad eyes as Moiraine drew out the girl's story. The tears she'd been holding back won free by the end, and the Aes Sedai surprising him by offering the girl the use of her shoulder.

"How could anyone do something so awful to another human being?" Jubes asked.

Rand had no answer. Only a need to stop it, and the fear that he was already too late.

## CHAPTER 52: *The Gift of a Blade*



The camp began to go up quickly, in the mouth of Jangai Pass, if away from Taien, and spreading over the hills around the approaches, among the scattered thornbushes, and even onto the slopes of the mountains. Not that anything was very visible except what was inside the pass; Aiel tents blended into the stony soil so well that you could miss them even when you knew what you were looking for and where. In the hills the Aiel camped by clan, but those in the pass itself grouped themselves by society. They were mostly Maidens, but the men's societies sent their representatives, too, some fifty each, spreading tents well above the ruins of Taien in slightly separated camps. Everyone understood, or thought they did, about the Maidens carrying Rand's honour, but all societies wanted to guard the *Car'a'carn*.

Moiraine—and Lan, of course—went to get Kadere's wagons settled, just below the town; the Aes Sedai fussed over what was in those wagons nearly as much as she did over Rand. The drivers muttered and cursed about the town's smell, and avoided watching the Aiel cut bodies down from the wall, but after their months in the Waste, they seemed to like being close even to the wreckage of what they saw as civilization. That Jubes girl had shown no interest in going back to Taien. She'd been all but stuck to Moiraine when last he'd seen them.

*Gai'shain* were erecting the Wise Ones' tents—those of the dreamwalkers—below the town, astride the faded track that led up out of the hills. Rand was sure they would say they had chosen the spot to be available to him as well as to the countless dozens of Wise Ones below, but he thought it no coincidence that anyone coming up from the hills to him would have to go through or around their camp to reach him. He was a little surprised to see Melaine directing the white-robed figures. Only three nights before, she had married Bael, in a ceremony that made her his wife and first-sister to his other wife, Dorindha. That part had been just as important as the marriage, apparently; Aviendha had been shocked at his surprise, or maybe angry.

The work of removing the hanging corpses had barely begun. Most of the ravens lay dead, bundles of black feathers littering the ground, and the rest had flown, but vultures too gorged to flap aloft still waddled through the ashes inside the walls.

Dismounting, he led Jeade'en in search of Asmodean, who seemed to have wandered off. After so many days in the saddle, it was good to walk. Various clusters of tents were springing up along the pass; the mountain slopes and cliffs made formidable barriers, but the Aiel still arranged themselves as if they could expect attack from them. He had tried walking with the Aiel, but half a day was enough to put him back on the horse. It was hard enough to keep up with them mounted; they could wear out horses when they pressed.

Mat was down, too, squatting with his reins in one hand and that black-hafted spear across his knees, peering at the gaping gates, studying the town and muttering to himself while Pips tried to nibble at a thornbush. Mat was studying, not just staring. Where had that remark about sentries come from? Mat said odd things at times now, since their first visit to Rhuidean. Rand wished that he were willing to talk about what had happened, but he still denied that anything had, despite the foxhead medallion, the spear, and that scar around his neck. Melindhra, the Shaido Maiden that Mat had taken up with, was off to one side, watching Mat, until Sulin came and chased her away on some errand. Rand wondered if Mat knew the Maidens were laying bets on whether Melindhra would give up the spear for him. And on whether she would teach him to sing, too, though they only laughed when Rand asked what that meant.

The sound of music drew him to Asmodean, seated by himself on a granite outcrop with his harp on his knee. The crimson banner's staff had been twisted into the rocky soil, and the mule tethered to it. "You see, my Lord Dragon," he said cheerfully, "your bannerman keeps loyally to his duties." His voice and expression changed, and he said, "If you must have this thing, why not let Mat carry it, or Lan? Or Moiraine, for that matter? She would be glad to carry your banner, and clean your

boots. Be careful of her. She is a devious woman. When a woman says she will obey you, of her own will, it is time to sleep lightly and watch your back.”

“You carry it because you were chosen, Master Jasin Natael.” Asmodean gave a start and looked around, though everyone else was too far away, and too busy, to be listening. None but they two would have understood, anyway. “What do you know about those ruins up near the snow line? They must come from the Age of Legends.”

Asmodean did not even glance up the mountain. “This world is very changed from the world I ... went to sleep in.” He sounded weary, and he shivered slightly. “What I know of what lies where, I have learned since waking.” The mournful sounds of “The March of Death” rose from his harp. “That could be what is left of the city where I was born, for all I know. Shorelle was a port.”

The sun had maybe an hour before the Spine of the World hid it; this close to high mountains, night came early. “I am too tired for one of our discussions tonight.” That was what they called Asmodean’s lessons in public, even when no-one was around. Added to practice sessions with Lan or Rhuarc, those lessons had left him little time for sleep since leaving Rhuidean. “You take to your tent when you’re ready, and I will see you in the morning. With the banner.” There was no-one else to carry the bloody thing. Maybe he could find somebody in Cairhien.

As he was turning away, Asmodean plucked something discordant and said, “No burning nets woven around my tent tonight? Do you finally begin to trust me?”

Rand looked back over his shoulder. “I trust you like a brother. Until the day you betray me. You have a parole for what you’ve done, in return for your teaching, and a better bargain than you deserve, but the day you turn against me, I will tear it up and bury it with you.” Asmodean opened his mouth, but Rand forestalled him. “That is me talking, Natael. Rand al’Thor. Theren folk don’t like people who try to stab them in the back.”

Irritably, he pulled at the dapple’s reins and went on before the other man could say anything. He was not sure whether Asmodean had any inkling that a dead man was trying to take him over, but he should not let himself give the man hints. Asmodean was sure enough already that his was a helpless cause; if he began to think that Rand was not in full control of his own mind, perhaps that he was going mad, the Forsaken would abandon him in a heartbeat, and there was too much Rand had to learn yet.

White-robed *gai’shain* were erecting his tent under Aviendha’s direction, well into the pass mouth, with that huge carved snake looming above. The *gai’shain* had their own tents, but those would be the last erected, of course. The bloated corpses hanging nearby did not trouble Aviendha, nor had he expected them to. She had seen death often enough, and dealt it out, too, and her face remained expressionless.

Similarly unconcerned were Adelin and the dozen or so Maidens squatted nearby, watching, waiting to guard his sleep. Even with over a thousand Maidens encamped around him every night, they still put a guard on his tent.

Before approaching, he reached out through the *angreal* in his coat pocket to seize *saidin*. There was no need to actually touch the carving of the fat little man with a sword, of course. Mingled filth and sweetness filled him, that raging river of fire, that crushing avalanche of ice. Channelling as he had done every night since leaving Rhuidean, he set wards around the entire encampment, not only what was in the pass but every tent in the hills below as well, and on the slopes of the mountains. He needed the *angreal* to set wardings so large, but only just. He had thought that he was strong before, but Asmodean’s teachings were making him stronger. No human or animal crossing the line of that ward would notice anything, but Shadowspawn that touched it would sound a warning that everyone in the tents would hear. Had he done this in Rhuidean, the Darkhounds could never have entered without him knowing.

The Aiel themselves would have to keep watch for human enemies. Wardings were complex weaves, if tenuous, and trying to make them do more than one thing could render them useless, in practicality. He could have made this one to kill Shadowspawn instead of merely giving warning, but that would have been like a beacon to any male Forsaken who might be searching, and to Myrddraal, too. No need to bring his enemies down on him when they might not know where he was. This, even one of the Forsaken would not know until he was close, and a Myrddraal not until it was too late.

Letting go of *saidin* was an exercise in self-control, despite the foulness of the taint, despite the way the Power tried to scour him away like sand on a riverbed, to burn him, obliterate him. He

floated in the vast emptiness of the void, yet he could feel the air stirring against each hair on his head, see the weave of the *gai'shain*'s robes, smell Aviendha's warm scent. He wanted more. But he could smell the ashes of Taien, too, smell the dead who had been burned, the corruption of those who had not, even the ones already buried, mingled with the dry soil of their graves. That helped. For a while after *saidin* was gone, all he did was take deep breaths of hot, arid air; compared to before, the whiff of death seemed absent, and the air itself pure and wonderful.

"Look what was here before us," Aviendha said as he let a meek-faced white-robed woman take Jeade'en. She held up a brown snake, dead, but as thick as his forearm and nearly nine feet long. The bloodsnake took its name from the effect of its bite, turning the blood to jelly in minutes. Unless he missed his guess, the neat wound behind its head had come from her belt knife. Adelin and the other Maidens looked approving.

"Did you ever for one minute think that it could have bitten you?" he said. "Did you ever think of using the Power instead of a bloody belt knife? Why didn't you kiss it first? You had to be close enough."

She drew herself up, and her big green eyes should have brought on the night's chill early. "The Wise Ones say it is not good to use the Power too often." The clipped words were as cold as her eyes. "They say it is possible to draw too much and harm yourself." Frowning slightly, she added, more to herself than him, "Though I have not come near what I can hold yet. I am sure of it."

Shaking his head, he ducked into the tent. The woman would not listen to reason.

No sooner had he settled himself against a silk cushion near the still unlit fire than she followed him. Without the bloodsnake, thankfully, but gingerly carrying something long wrapped in thick layers of grey-striped blanket. "You were worried for me," she said in a flat voice. There was no expression at all on her face.

"Of course not," he lied. *Fool woman. She'll get herself killed yet because she doesn't have the sense to be careful when it's needed.* "I'd have been as worried for anyone. I would not want anyone bitten by a bloodsnake."

For a moment she eyed him doubtfully, then gave a quick nod. "Good. So long as you do not presume toward me." Tossing the bundled blanket at his feet, she sat on her heels across the firepit from him. "You would not accept the buckle as cancelling debt between us ..."

"Aviendha, there is no debt." He thought that she had forgotten about that. She went on as if he had not spoken.

"... but perhaps that will cancel it."

Sighing, he unwrapped the striped blanket—warily, since she had held it far more uneasily than she had the snake; she had held the bloody snake as if it were a piece of cloth—unwrapped it, and gasped. What lay inside was a sword, the scabbard so encrusted with rubies and moonstones that it was hard to see the gold except where a rising sun of many rays had been inset. The ivory hilt, long enough for two hands, had another inlaid rising sun in gold; the pommel was thick with rubies and moonstones, and still more made a solid mass along the quillons. This had never been made to use, only to be seen. To be stared at.

"This must have cost ... Aviendha, how could you pay for it?"

"It cost little," she said, so defensively that she might as well have added that she lied.

"A sword. How did you ever come by a sword? How did any Aiel come by a sword? Don't tell me Kadere had this hidden in his wagons."

"I carried it in a blanket." She sounded even more touchy now than she had about the price. "Even Bair said that would make it all right, so long as I did not actually touch it." She shrugged uncomfortably, shifting and reshifting her shawl. "It was the treekiller's sword. Laina's. It was taken from her body as proof that she was dead, because her head could not be brought back so far. Since then it has passed from hand to hand, young men or fool Maidens who wanted to own the proof of her death. Only, each began to think of what it was, and soon sold it to another fool. The price has come down very far since it first was sold. No Aiel would lay hand to it even to remove the stones."

"Well, it is very beautiful," he said, as tactfully as he could manage. *Only a buffoon would carry something this gaudy. And that ivory hilt would twist in a hand slippery with sweat or blood.* "But I cannot let you ..." He trailed off as he bared a few inches of the blade, out of habit, to examine the edge. Etched into the shining steel stood a heron, symbol of a blademaster. He had carried a sword marked like that once. Suddenly he was ready to bet that this blade was like it, like the raven-marked

blade on Mat's spear, metal made with Power that would never break and never need sharpening. Most blademasters' swords were only copies of those. Lan could tell him for certain, but he was sure already in his own mind.

Pulling the scabbard off, he leaned across the firepit to place it in front of her. "I will take the blade to cancel the debt, Aviendha." It was long and slightly curved, with a single edge. "Just the blade. You can have the hilt back, too." He could have a new hilt and scabbard made in Cairhien. Maybe one of Taien's survivors was a decent bladesmith.

She stared wide-eyed from the scabbard to him and back, mouth open, stunned for the first time that he had ever seen. "But those gems are worth much, much more than I—You are trying to put me in your debt again, Rand al'Thor."

"Not so." If this blade had lain untouched, and untarnished, in its scabbard for over twenty years, it had to be what he thought. "I did not accept the scabbard, so it has been yours all along." Tossing one of the silk cushions into the air, he executed the seated version of the form called Low Wind Rising; feathers rained down as the blade sliced neatly through. "And I don't accept the hilt, either, so that's yours, too. If you have made a profit, it's your own doing."

Instead of looking happy at her good fortune—he suspected she had given everything that she had for the sword, and likely gotten back a hundred times as much or more in the scabbard alone—instead of seeming glad, or thanking him, she glared through the feathers as indignantly as any goodwife in the Theren seeing her floor littered. Stiffly, she clapped, and one of the *gai'shain*, Sil, appeared, immediately going to her knees to begin cleaning up the mess.

"It is my tent," he said pointedly. Aviendha sniffed at him.

While Sil was rummaging for feathers, Rand rummaged in his bags. What he sought was buried deep down, under clothes and books and other things. Down in his roots. He smiled when he touched it, and his smile widened as he pulled it out. The black scabbard showed the heron in bronze. The hilt with its braided quillons did the same, and part of another could just about be seen on the melted stub of the blade he pulled out. He held the two swords together, compared them while his heart raced. They were of similar size, similar make. *It should fit.*

Aviendha was watching, calm and composed. Not angry at all. "You've given me back my father's sword," he said in awe. "Thank you."

Her eyes widened for a moment, only for a sudden scowl to snap into place. "Stop that!"

"What? Thanking you?"

"Yes!"

He shook his head. There was just no understanding her. But then, after this she could be as strange as she wanted. He would always be in her debt. "I never thought I'd be able to fix it. I wonder what Tam will say. Will he want it back?"

"I do not know what Tam al'Thor would want," Aviendha said, though he hadn't really been asking her. No matter. He really shouldn't be arguing with her so much. She wasn't that bad. She wasn't that bad at all.

Supper, when it came at full dark, consisted of the usual flat pale bread, and a spicy stew of dried peppers and beans with chunks of nearly white meat. He only grinned at her when he learned that it was the bloodsnake; he had eaten snake and worse since coming to the Waste. *Gara*—the poisonous lizard—was the worst in his estimation; not for the taste, which was rather like chicken, but because it was lizard. It sometimes seemed that there must be more poisonous things—snakes, lizards, spiders, plants—in the Waste than in the rest of the world combined.

Aviendha appeared disappointed that he did not spit the stew out in disgust, though sometimes it was difficult to tell what she was feeling. At times she seemed to take great pleasure in discomfiting him. Had he been trying to pretend that he was Aiel, he would have thought she was trying to prove he was not.

Tired and eager for sleep, he only took off his coat and boots before crawling into his blankets and turning his back to Aviendha. He tried not to listen to the rustle of her undressing beneath her own blankets. At least she had that much modesty, but he kept his back turned anyway, just in case.

She claimed she was supposed to sleep there to continue his lessons on Aiel ways and customs, since he spent so much of his days with the chiefs. They both knew that was a lie, though what the Wise Ones thought she could find out this way, he could not imagine. She gave little grunts every now and then as she tugged at something, and muttered to herself.

To cover the sounds, and stop himself thinking of what they must mean, he said, "Melaine's wedding was impressive. Did Bael really know nothing about it until Melaine and Dorindha told him?"

"Of course not," she replied scornfully, pausing for what he thought was a stocking coming off. "Why should he know before Melaine laid the bridal wreath at his feet and asked him?" Abruptly she laughed. "Melaine nearly drove herself and Dorindha to distraction finding *segade* blossoms for the wreath. Few grow so close to the Dragonwall."

"Does that mean something special? *Segade* blossoms?" That was what he had sent her, the flowers she had never acknowledged.

"That she has a prickly nature and means to keep it." Another pause, broken by mutters. "Had she used leaves or flowers from sweetroot, it would have meant she claimed a sweet nature. Morning drop would mean she would be submissive, and ... There are too many to list. It would take me days to teach all the combinations to you, and you do not need to know them. You will not have an Aiel wife. You belong to Elayne."

He nearly looked at her when she said "submissive". A word less likely to describe any Aiel woman he could not conceive. *Probably means she gives warning before she stabs you.*

There had been more of a muffled sound to her voice at the end. Pulling her blouse over her head, he realized. He wished the lamps were out. No, that would have made it worse. But then, he had been through this on many nights since Rhuidean, and every single night it was worse. He had to put an end to it. The woman was going to sleep with the Wise Ones, where she belonged, from now on; he would learn what he could from her as he could. He had thought exactly the same thing too many times by then to believe it.

Trying to chase the pictures out of his head, he said, "That bit at the end. After the vows were said." No sooner had half a dozen Wise Ones pronounced their blessings than a hundred of Melaine's blood kin had rushed in to surround her, all carrying their spears. A hundred of Bael's kin had rallied to him, and he had fought his way to her. No-one had been veiled, of course—it was all part of custom—but blood had still been shed on both sides. "A few minutes before, Melaine was vowing that she loved him, but when he reached her, she fought like a cornered ridgecat." If Dorindha had not punched her in the shortribs, he did not think Bael would ever have gotten her over his shoulder to carry off. "He still has the limp and the black eye she gave him."

"Should she have been a weakling?" Aviendha said sleepily. "He had to know the worth of her. She was not a trinket for him to put in his pouch." She yawned, and he heard her nestling deeper into her blankets.

"What does 'teaching a man to sing' mean?" Aielmen did not sing, not once they were old enough to take up a spear, except for battle chants and laments for the dead.

"You are thinking of Mat Cauthon?" She actually giggled. "Sometimes, a man gives up the spear for a Maiden."

"You're making that up. I never heard of anything like that."

"Well, it is not really giving up the spear." Her voice held a thick muzziness. "Sometimes a man desires a Maiden who will not give up the spear for him, and he arranges to be taken *gai'shain* by her. He is a fool, of course. No Maiden would look at *gai'shain* as he hopes. He is worked hard and kept strictly to his place, and the first thing that is done is to make him learn to sing, to entertain the spear-sisters while they eat. 'She is going to teach him to sing'. That is what Maidens say when a man makes a fool of himself over one of the spear-sisters." A very peculiar people.

"Aviendha?" He had said he was not going to ask her this again. Lan said it was Kaltori work, a pattern called snowflakes. Probably loot from some raid up north. "Who gave you that necklace?"

"A friend, Rand al'Thor. We came far today, and you will start us early tomorrow. Sleep well and wake, Rand al'Thor." Only an Aiel would wish you a good night by hoping you did not die in your sleep.

He channelled the lamps out and tried to sleep. A friend. The Reyn came from the north. But she had had the necklace in Rhuidean. Why did he care? Aviendha's slow breathing seemed loud in his ears until he fell asleep, and then he dreamed a confused dream of Min and Elayne helping him throw Aviendha, wearing nothing but that necklace, over his shoulder, while she beat him over the head with a wreath of *segade* blossoms.

## CHAPTER 53: Birdcalls by Night



Lying facedown on his blankets with his eyes closed, Mat luxuriated in the feel of Melindhra's thumbs kneading their way down his spine. There was nothing quite as good as a massage after a long day in the saddle. Well, some things were, but right then, he was willing to settle for her thumbs.

"You are well muscled for such a short man, Matrim Cauthon."

He opened one eye and glanced back at her, kneeling astride his hips. She had built the fire up twice as high as needed, and sweat trickled down her body. She shone in the firelight, soft breasts and hard muscles clearly outlined. Her fine golden hair, close-cut except for that Aiel tail at the nape of her neck, clung to her scalp. "If I'm too short, you can always find somebody else."

"You are not too short for my taste," she laughed, ruffling his hair. It was longer than hers. "And you are cute. Relax. This does no good if you tense."

Grunting, he closed his eyes again. *Cute? Light!* And short. Only Aiel could call him short. In every other land he had been in, he was taller than most men, if not always by much. He could remember being tall. Taller than Rand, when he rode against Artur Hawkwing. And a hand shorter than he was now when he fought beside Maecine against the Aelgari. He had spoken to Lan, claiming he had overheard some names; the Warder said Maecine had been a king of Eharon, one of the Ten Nations—that much Mat already knew—some four or five hundred years before the Trolloc Wars. Lan doubted that even the Brown Ajah knew more; much had been lost in the Trolloc Wars, and more in the War of the Hundred Years. Those were the earliest and latest of the memories that had been planted in his skull. Nothing after Artur Paendrag Tanreall, and nothing before Maecine of Eharon.

"Are you cold?" Melindhra said incredulously. "You shivered." She scrambled off him, and he heard her add wood to the fire; there was enough scrub here for burning. She slapped his bottom hard as she climbed back on, murmuring, "Good muscle."

"If you keep on like that," he muttered, "I'll think you mean to spit me for supper, like a Trolloc." It was not that he did not enjoy Melindhra—as long as she refrained from pointing out that she was taller, anyway—but the situation made him uncomfortable.

"No spits for you, Matrim Cauthon." Her thumbs dug hard into his shoulder. "That is it. Relax." He supposed that he would marry someday, settle down. That was what you did. A woman, a house, a family. Shackled to one spot for the rest of his life. *I never heard of a wife yet that liked her husband having a drink or a gamble.* And there was what those folk on the other side of the doorframe ter'angreal had said. That he was fated "to marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons". *A man has to marry sooner or later, I suppose.* But he certainly did not mean to take an Aiel wife. He wanted to dance with as many women as he could, while he could.

"You are not made for spits, but for great honour, I think," Melindhra said softly.

"Sounds fine to me." Only now he could not get another woman to look at him, not the Maidens or the others. The Maidens had even taken to keeping Isendre away from him the same way they'd been keeping her from Rand. It was as if Melindhra had hung a sign on him saying OWNED BY MELINDHRA OF THE JUMAI SHAIDO. Well, she would not have put that last bit on, not here. Then again, who knew what an Aiel would do, especially a Maiden of the Spear? Women did not think the same as men, and Aielwomen did not think like anybody else in the world.

"It is strange that you efface yourself so."

"Efface myself?" he mumbled. Her hands did feel good; knots were coming out that he had not known were there. "How?" He wondered if it had something to do with that necklace. Melindhra seemed to set great store by it, or by receiving it, anyway. She never wore the thing, of course. Maidens did not. But she carried it in her pouch, and showed it to every woman who asked. A lot of them seemed to.

"You put yourself in the shadow of Rand al'Thor."

"I'm not in anybody's shadow," he said absently. It could not be the necklace. He had given jewellery to other women, Maidens and others; he liked giving things to pretty women, even if all he

got in return was a smile. He never expected more. If a woman did not enjoy a kiss and a cuddle as much as he did, what was the point?

"Of course, there is honour of a sort in being in the shadow of the *Car'a'carn*. To be near the mighty, you must stand in their shade."

"Shade," Mat agreed, not really hearing. Sometimes the women accepted and sometimes not, but none had decided they owned him. That was what rankled, really. He was not about to be owned by any woman, however pretty she was. And no matter how good her hands were at loosening knotted muscles.

"Your scars should be scars of honour, earned in your own name, as a chief, not this." One finger traced along the hanging scar on his neck. "Did you earn this serving the *Car'a'carn*?"

Shrugging her hand away, he pushed up on his elbows and twisted to look at her. "Are you sure 'Daughter of the Nine Moons' doesn't mean anything to you?"

"I have told you it does not. Lie down."

"If you are lying to me, I swear I'll welt your rump."

Hands on hips, she looked down at him dangerously. "Do you think that you can ... welt my rump, Mat Cauthon?"

"I'll give it my best try." She would probably put a spear through his ribs. "Do you swear you've never heard of the Daughter of the Nine Moons?"

"I never have," she said slowly. "Who is she? Or what? Lie down, and let me—"

A blackbird called, seemingly everywhere in the tent and outside as well, and a moment later, a redwing. Good Theren birds. Rand had chosen his warnings from what he knew, birds not found in the Waste.

Melindhra was off him in an instant, wrapping her *shoufa* around her head, veiling herself as she snatched up spears and bucklers. She darted from the tent like that.

"Blood and bloody ashes!" Mat muttered as he struggled into his breeches. A redwing meant the south. He and Melindhra had put up their tent to the south, with the Chareen, as far from Rand as they could get and stay in the encampment. But he was not going outside in those thornbushes naked, the way Melindhra had. The blackbird meant north, where the Shaarad were camped; they were coming from two sides at once.

Stamping his feet in his boots as best he could in the low tent, he looked at the silver foxhead lying beside his blankets. Shouts were rising outside, the clash of metal on metal. He had finally figured out that that medallion had somehow kept Moiraine from Healing him on her first try. So long as he had been touching it, her channelling had not affected him. He had never heard of Shadowspawn able to channel, but there was always the Black Ajah—so Rand said, and he believed it—and always the chance that one of the Forsaken had finally come after Rand. Pulling the leather thong over his head so the medallion hung on his chest, he snatched up his raven-marked spear and ducked out into cold moonlight.

He had no time to feel the icy chill. Before he was completely out of the tent, he almost lost his head to a scythe-curved Trolloc sword. The blade brushed his hair as he threw himself into a low dive, rolling to his feet with the spear ready.

At first glance in the darkness, the Trolloc might have been a bulky man, though half again as tall as any Aiel man, garbed all in black mail with spikes at elbows and shoulders, and a helmet with goat's horns attached. But these horns grew out of that too human head, and below the eyes a goat's muzzle thrust out.

Snarling, the Trolloc lunged at him, and howled in a harsh language never meant for a human tongue. Mat spun his spear like a quarterstaff, knocking the heavy, curved blade to one side, and thrust his long spearpoint into the creature's middle, mail parting for that Power-made steel as easily as the flesh beneath. The goat-snouted Trolloc folded over with a harsh cry, and Mat pulled his weapon free, dodging aside as it fell.

All around him Aiel, some unclothed or only half but all black-veiled, fought Trollocs with tusked boars' snouts or wolves' muzzles or eagles' beaks, some with heads horned or crested with feathers, wielding those oddly curved swords and spiked axes, hooked tridents and spears. Here and there one used a huge bow to shoot barbed arrows the size of small spears. Men fought alongside the Trollocs, too, in rough coats, with swords, shouting desperately as they died among the thornbushes.

"Sammael!"

“Sammael and the Golden Bees!”

The Darkfriends were dying, most as soon as they engaged an Aiel, but the Trollocs died harder. “I am no bloody hero!” Mat shouted to no-one in particular as he battled a Trolloc with a bear’s muzzle and hairy ears, his third. The creature carried a long-handled axe, with half a dozen sharp spikes and a flaring blade big enough to split a tree, throwing it about like a toy in those great hairy hands. It was being near Rand that got Mat into these things. All he wanted from life was some good wine, a game of dice, and a pretty girl or three. “I don’t want to be mixed up in this!” Especially not if Sammael was around. He’d barely escaped him last time. “Do you hear me?”

The Trolloc went down with a ruined throat, and he found himself facing a Myrddraal, just as it finished killing two Aiel who had come at it together. The Halfman looked like a man, pasty pale, armoured in black overlapping scales like a snake’s. It moved like a snake, too, boneless and fluid and quick, night-black cloak hanging still however it darted. And it had no eyes. Just a dead-white sweep of skin where eyes should be.

That eyeless gaze turned on him, and he shivered, fear oozing along his bones. “The look of the Eyeless is fear,” they said in the Borderlands, where they should know, and even Aiel admitted that a Myrddraal’s stare sent chills through the marrow. That was the creature’s first weapon. The Halfman came at him in a flowing run.

With a roar, Mat rushed to meet it, spear spinning like a quarterstaff, thrusting, ever moving. The thing carried a blade as dark as its cloak, a sword hammered at the forges of Thakan’dar, and if that cut him, he was as good as dead unless Moiraine appeared quickly with her Healing. But there was only one sure way to take down a Fade. All-out attack; you had to overwhelm it before it overwhelmed you, and a thought for defence could be a good way to die. He could not even spare a glance for the battle raging around him in the night.

The Myrddraal’s blade flickered like a serpent’s tongue, darted like black lightning, but to counter Mat’s attack. When raven-marked Power-wrought steel met Thakan’dar-made metal, blue light flashed around them, a crackle of sheet lightning.

Suddenly Mat’s slashing attack struck flesh. Black sword and pale hand flew away, and the reverse stroke sliced open the Myrddraal’s throat, but Mat did not stop. Thrust through the heart, cut to one hamstring, then the other, all in rapid succession. Only then did he step away from the thing still thrashing on the ground, flailing about with its good hand and severed stump, wounds spilling inky blood. Halfmen took a long time to admit that they were dead; they did not die completely except with a setting sun.

Looking around, Mat realized that the attack was over. Whatever Darkfriends or Trollocs were not dead, had fled; at least, he saw none standing except Aiel. Some of them were down, too. He plucked a kerchief from the neck of a Darkfriend corpse to wipe the Myrddraal’s black blood from his spearpoint. It would etch the metal if left too long.

This night assault made no sense. By the bodies he could see in the moonlight, Trolloc and human, none had made it much past the first line of tents. And without far greater numbers, they could not have hoped for more.

“What was that you called out? *Carai* something. The Old Tongue?”

He turned to look at Melindhra. She had unveiled, but she still wore not a stitch more than her *shoufa*. There were other Maidens about, and men, wearing as little, and showing as little concern, though most did seem to be heading back to their tents without lingering. They had no modesty, that was it. No modesty at all. She did not even seem to feel the cold, though her breath made wisps of mist. He was as sweaty as she, and freezing now that he had no fight for his life to occupy his mind.

“Something I heard once,” he told her. “I liked the sound of it.” *Carai an Caldazar!* For the honour of the Red Eagle. The battle cry of Manetheren. Most of his memories were from Manetheren. Some of those he had had before the twisted doorway. Moiraine said it was the Old Blood coming out. Just as long as it did not come out of his veins.

She put an arm around his shoulders as he started back toward their tent. “I saw you with the Nightrunner, Mat Cauthon.” That was one of the Aiel names for Myrddraal. “You are as tall as a man needs to be.”

Grinning, he slipped his arm around her waist, but he could not get the attack out of his head. He wanted to—his thoughts were too snarled in his borrowed memories—but he could not. Why had

anyone launched such a hopeless assault? No-one but a fool attacked overwhelming force without a reason. That was the thought he could not pry out of his head. No-one attacked without a reason.

\* \* \*

The birdcalls pulled Rand awake immediately, and he seized *saidin* as he tossed the blankets aside and ran out, coatless, in his stocking feet. The night was cold and moonlit, faint sounds of battle drifting up from the hills below the pass. Around him, Aiel stirred like scurrying ants, rushing into the night to where an attack might come here in the pass. The wards would signal again—Shadowspawn in the pass would cause a winterfinch to call—until he unravelled them in the morning, but there was no point in taking foolish chances.

From a far off tent, Merile's voice called out in the night. "Everyone! We're about to be attacked!" No-one bothered responding, not even Rand. It was nice that she'd tried to help, though.

Soon the pass was still again, the *gai'shain* in their tents, forbidden weapons even now, the other Aiel off at the places that might need defending. Even Adelin and the other Maidens had gone, as if they knew he would have held them back if they waited. He could hear a few mutters from the wagons near the town walls, but neither the drivers nor Kadere showed themselves; he did not expect them to. The faint sounds of battle—men shouting, screaming, dying—came from two directions. Both below, well away from him. People were out around the Wise Ones' tents, too; staring toward the fighting, it seemed.

An attack down there made no sense. It was not the Miagoma, not unless Timolan had taken Shadowspawn into his clan, and that was as likely as Whitecloaks recruiting Trollocs. He turned back toward his tent, and even enclosed in the void he gave a start.

Aviendha had come out into the moonlight, a blanket wrapped around her. Just beyond her stood a tall man shrouded in a dark cloak; moonshadows drifted over a gaunt face that was too pale, with eyes too large. A crooning rose, and the cloak opened into wide, leathery wings like those of a bat. Moving as in a dream, Aviendha drifted toward the waiting embrace.

Rand channelled, and finger-thin Balefire burned past her, an arrow of solid light, to take the Draghkar in the head. The effect of that narrower stream was slower, but no less sure than with the Darkhounds. The creature's colours reversed, black to white, white to black, and it became sparkling motes that melted in air.

Aviendha shook herself as the crooning ended, stared at the last particles as they vanished, and turned to Rand, gathering the blanket closer. Her hand came up, and a stream of fire as thick as his head roared toward him.

Startled even inside the emptiness, never thinking of the Power, he threw himself to the ground beneath the billowing flames. They died in an instant.

"What are you doing?" he barked, so angry, so shocked, that the void cracked and *saidin* vanished from him. He scrambled to his feet, stalking toward her. "This tops any ingratitude I ever heard of!" He was going to shake her until her teeth rattled. "I just saved your life, in case you failed to notice, and if I offended some bloody Aiel custom, I don't give a—!"

"The next time," she snapped back, "I will leave the great *Car'a'carn* to deal with matters by himself!" Awkwardly clutching the blanket close, she ducked stiff-backed into the tent.

For the first time, he looked behind him. At another Draghkar, crumpled on the ground in flames. He had been so angry that he had not heard the crackling and popping as it burned, had not smelled the odour of burning grease. He had not even sensed the evil of it. A Draghkar killed by first sucking the soul away, and then life. It had to be close, touching, but this one lay no more than two paces from where he had been standing. He was not certain how effective a Draghkar's crooning embrace was against someone filled with *saidin*, but he was glad he had not found out.

Drawing a deep breath, he knelt beside the tent flap. "Aviendha?" He could not go in. A lamp was lit in there, and she could be sitting there naked for all he knew, mentally ripping him up and down the way he deserved. "Aviendha, I am sorry. I apologize. I was a fool to speak as I did without asking why. I should know that you wouldn't harm me, and I ... I ... I'm a fool," he finished weakly.

"A great deal you know, Rand al'Thor," came a muffled reply. "You *are* a fool!"

How did Aiel apologize? He had never asked her that. Considering *ji'e'toh*, teaching men to sing, and wedding customs, he did not think he would. "Yes, I am. And I apologize." There was no answer this time. "Are you in your blankets?" Silence.

Muttering to himself, he stood, working his stocking toes on the icy ground. He was going to have to remain out here until he was sure she was decently covered. Without boots or coat. He seized hold of *saidin*, taint and all, just to be distanced from the bone-grinding cold, inside the void.

The Wise One dreamwalkers came running, of course, and Dani, all staring at the burning Draghkar as they skirted it, drawing their shawls around them with almost the same motion.

"Only one," Amys said. "I thank the Light, but I am surprised."

"There were two," Rand told her. "I ... destroyed the other." Why should he be hesitant just because Moiraine had warned him against Balefire? It was a weapon like any other. "If Aviendha had not killed this one, it might have gotten me."

"The feel of her channelling drew us," Dani said, looking him up and down. At first he thought she was checking for injuries, but she paid special attention to his stocking feet, then glanced at the tent, where a crack in the tent flap showed lamplight. "You've upset her again, haven't you? Men!" With a disgusted shake of her head, she brushed past him and into the tent. He heard faint voices, but could not make out what was being said.

Melaine gave a hitch to her shawl. "If you do not need us, then we must see what is happening below." She hurried off without waiting for the others.

Bair cackled as she followed. "A wager on who she will check on first? My amethyst necklace that you like so much against that sapphire bracelet of yours?"

"Done. I choose Dorindha," said Amys.

The older Wise One cackled again. "Her eyes are still full of Bael. A first-sister is a first-sister, but a new husband ..."

His aunt Dana lingered behind. "Where are the Maidens?" she asked.

"They went to join the fighting I think."

She didn't respond to his explanation, simply walked off, calm but hard-faced.

Seana lingered longest. "Again they send small groups to attack. Again they fail. I think they will not do this much longer. They must know now that a greater force is needed, one that can match your strength in the Power. The Forsaken must come against you soon, Rand al'Thor. Watch for them, and tell us at once if you see any signs."

She had been good to him, and taught him much. He trusted her, as much as he trusted any Wise One. But he did not trust anyone enough to tell them about Asmodean or Lanfear. The vague promises he gave didn't seem to assuage her, for the lines on her face sat deeper when she left.

Once they had all moved out of earshot, he bent toward the tent flap. He still could not hear what they were saying, not unless he stuck his ear to the crack, and he was not about to do that. Surely Aviendha had covered herself with Dani in there. Then again, the way Dani had taken to Aiel ways, it was just as likely she had peeled out of her clothes instead.

The soft sound of slippers announced Moiraine and Lan, and Rand straightened, hastily banishing thoughts of Aviendha and Dani naked together. Though he could hear both of them breathing, the Warder's steps still made barely an audible noise. Moiraine's hair hung about her face, and she held a dark robe around her, the silk shining with the moon. Lan was fully dressed, booted and armed, wrapped in that cloak that made him part of the night. Of course. The clamour of fighting was dying down in the hills below.

"I am surprised you were not here sooner, Moiraine." His voice sounded cold, but better his voice than him. He held onto *saidin*, fought it, and the night's icy chill remained something far off. He was aware of it, aware of each hair on his arms stirring with cold beneath his shirtsleeves, but it did not touch him. "You usually come looking for me as soon as you sense trouble."

"I have never explained all that I do or do not do." Her voice was as coolly mysterious as it had ever been, yet even in the moonlight Rand was certain that she was blushing. Lan looked troubled, though with him it was difficult to tell. "I cannot hold your hand forever. Eventually, you must walk alone."

"I did that tonight, didn't I?" Embarrassment slid across the void—that sounded as though he had done everything himself—and he added, "Aviendha all but took that one off my back." The flames on the Draghkar were burning low.

"As well she was here, then," Moiraine said calmly. "You did not need me."

She had not been afraid, of that he was sure. He had seen her rush into the midst of Shadowspawn, wielding the Power as skilfully as Lan did his sword, seen it too often to believe fear in her. So why had she not come when she sensed the Draghkar? She could have, and Lan as well; that was one of the gifts a Warder received from the bond between him and an Aes Sedai. He could make her tell, catch her between her oath to him and her inability to lie straight out. No, he could not. Or would not. He would not do that to someone who was trying to help him. Not to someone he ...

"At least now we know what the attack below was about," he said. "To make me think something important was happening there while the Draghkar slipped in on me. They tried that at Cold Rocks Hold, and it did not work there either." Only, maybe it almost had, this time. If that *had* been the intent. "You would think they would try something different." Couladin ahead of him; the Forsaken everywhere, it seemed. Why could he not face one enemy at a time?

"Do not make the mistake of thinking the Forsaken simple," Moiraine said. "That could easily be fatal." She shifted her robe as though wishing it were thicker. "The hour is late. If you have no further need of me ...?"

Aviendha was within. As much as he would have liked to have warmed her, he shook his head. Aiel began to drift back as she and the Warder left. Some exclaimed over the Draghkar, and roused some of the *gai'shain* to drag it away, but most simply looked at it before going to their tents. They seemed to expect such things of him now. Merile came to check on him, too, but after making sure he needed no Healing, she swiftly became distracted by the Draghkar's corpse.

"That is no man. It's some kind of ... tainted beast!" she exclaimed as she circled it, not daring to touch even when the *gai'shain* arrived to dispose of it. She went with them, though, still staring. Most of the white-robed Aiel answered her questions with as few words as possible, wary in a way few Aiel ever were, but Sil chatted with her amiably.

When Adelin and the Maidens appeared, their soft-booted feet dragged. They stared at the Draghkar being hauled away by the *gai'shain*, and exchanged long looks before approaching Rand.

"There was nothing here," Adelin said slowly. "The attack was all below, Darkfriends and Trollocs."

"Shouting 'Sammael and the Golden Bees', I heard," another added. With her head wrapped in a *shoufa*, Rand could not make out who she was. She sounded young; some of the Maidens were no more than sixteen.

Taking a deep breath, Adelin held out one of her spears, horizontally, in front of him, rock-steady. The others did the same, one spear each. "We—I—failed," Adelin said. "We should have been here when the Draghkar came. Instead we ran like children to dance the spears."

"What am I supposed to do with those?" Rand asked, and Adelin replied without hesitation. "Whatever you wish, *Car'a'carn*. We stand ready, and will not resist."

Rand shook his head. Bloody Aiel and their bloody *ji'e'toh*. "You take those and go back to guarding my tent. Well? Go." Looks passed between them before they began to obey, as reluctantly as they had approached him in the first place. "And one of you tell Aviendha that I will be coming in when I return," he added. He was not going to spend the entire night outside wondering whether it was safe. He stalked away, the stony ground hard under his feet.

Asmodean's tent was not very far from his. There had not been a sound out of it. He whipped open the flap and ducked in. Asmodean was sitting in the dark, chewing his lip. He flinched when Rand appeared, and gave him no chance to speak.

"You did not expect me to take a hand, did you? I felt the Draghkar, but you could deal with those; you did. I have never liked Draghkar; we should never have made them. They have fewer brains than a Trolloc. Give them an order, and they still sometimes kill whatever is closest. If I had come out, if I had done something ... What if someone noticed? What if they realized it could not be you channelling? I—"

"Well for you that you didn't," Rand cut him off, sitting cross-legged in the dark. "If I had felt you full of *saidin* out there tonight, I might have killed you."

The other man's laugh was shaky. "I thought of that, too."

"It was Sammael who sent the attack tonight. The Trollocs and Darkfriends, anyway."

"It is not like Sammael to throw men away," Asmodean said slowly. "But he'll see ten thousand dead, or ten times that, if it gains him what he thinks is worth the cost. Maybe one of the

others wants you to think it was him. Even if the Aiel took prisoners ... Trollocs do not think of much besides killing, and Darkfriends believe what they are told.”

“It was him. He tried to bait me into attacking him once in the same way, at Serendahar.” *Oh, Light!* The thought drifted across the surface of the void. *I said “me”.* He did not know where Serendahar had been, or anything but what he had said. The words had just come out.

After a long silence, Asmodean said quietly, “I never knew that.”

“What I want to know is, why?” Rand chose his words carefully, hoping that they were all his. He remembered Sammael’s face, a man—*Not mine. Not my memory*—a compact man with a short yellow beard. Asmodean had described all the Forsaken, but he knew this image was not made from that description. Sammael had always wanted to be taller, and resented it that the Power could not make him so. Asmodean had never told him that. “From what you’ve told me, he is not likely to want to face me unless he is sure of victory, and maybe not then. You said he’d likely leave me to the Dark One, if he could. So why is he sure he’ll win now, if I decide to go after him?”

They discussed it in the dark for hours without coming to any conclusion. Asmodean held to the opinion that it had been one of the others, hoping to send Rand against Sammael and thus get rid of one or both; at least, Asmodean said that he did. Rand could feel the man’s dark eyes on him, wondering. That slip had been too big to cover.

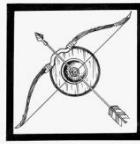
When he finally returned to his own tent, Adelin and the dozen Maidens all sprang to their feet, all of them at once telling him that Dani was gone and Aviendha long asleep, that she was angry with him, they both were. They gave so many different pieces of advice on handling the two women’s anger, all at the same time, that he could understand none of it. Finally they fell silent, looks passing between them, and Adelin spoke alone.

“We must speak of tonight. Of what we did, and what we failed to do. We—”

“It was nothing,” he told her, “and if it was something, it’s forgiven and forgotten. I would like to have a few hours’ sleep for once. If you want to discuss it go talk to Amys or Bair. I am sure they’ll understand what you’re after more than I do.” That shut them up, surprisingly, and let him get inside.

Aviendha was in her blankets, with one slim, bare leg sticking out. He tried not to look at it, or her. She had left a lamp lit. He climbed into his own blankets gratefully and channelled the lamp out before releasing *saidin*. This time he dreamed of Aviendha hurling fire, only she was not hurling it at a Draghkar, and Sammael was sitting at her side, laughing.

## CHAPTER 54: *The Ice Maiden*



They moved slower while wending their way through the pass, due to the need to scout ahead for any Shaido ambushers. The delay was frustrating but Rand understood the necessity. The craggy rock faces looming to either side pressed quite close at times, placing anyone walking below within easy arrow range. He understood why Aviendha had chosen to march with the Wise Ones, too, and liked it almost as little. Each time he thought of the gaudy new sword strapped to his saddle—or more accurately what he meant to have done with it—he felt a stab of guilt. Adelin and her Maidens had also been gone by the time he woke up. A new, larger group of Maidens had replaced them, every one grim-faced.

Moiraine and Lan rode close by Rand. The girl from Taien, Jubes, did the same with Moiraine on her borrowed horse. She seemed intent on attaching herself to the Aes Sedai whether she wanted it or not. The rest of the survivors had clustered around Kadere's wagons near the back of the column, finding comfort in the presence of secret Darkfriends rather than that of the Aiel following Rand into their land.

His father wasn't far, though, and looked grim. Doubt birthed a boyish desire to ask his father's opinion of what they were doing, to seek his reassurance and approval. Rand squashed it firmly. He was what he was. The decision was his to make, and the guilt his to bear.

He kneed his horse closer even so. Uno and his men rode with Tam, as they often did. Rand was pleased to know his father was safe, but less pleased by his reaction to news of what Aviendha had made possible.

"Keep it," Tam said, with barely a moment's hesitation. "You will probably have more need of it than I. Though, the Light willing, neither of us will."

"But it's your sword. I broke it while borrowing it, but I can give it back now."

Tam remained as immovable as a boulder. "I never missed it, lad. I never missed the time of my life it represented. You keep it, if you want. Or throw it away. That might be for the best."

Aca was the only Maiden to react with hurt to his last words, and what looking at them as he said it implied. Rand tried not to react, either. It was his decision. Tam himself had made a point of teaching him so.

"I'll keep it." He touched the tender scar at his waist. That hurt, too.

"It was a handsome weapon. It will be good to see you wearing it again," Izana said. The smile that was owed him proved beyond Rand to give.

Uno was glowering at House Damodred's blade with his one good eye. "Better than that bloody thing," he muttered. "What goat-kissing idiot would carry that into a flaming battle? Did she shit in a golden pot as well?"

Tam's lips twitched. "I never met her, but I knew people who did. And I wouldn't be surprised."

Rand knew one, too. Moiraine had given the thing no more than a raised eyebrow when she'd first seen it. "A relic of an unlamented time," she'd called it. When Rand had asked whether the other Damodreds would feel the same, she had smiled, told him he was learning well, and advised that he finish dismantling it before they reached the City.

He watched her as they rode, and wondered if there would be time for more lessons that night. To part her legs, enfold her in his arms, take a hard grip of her hair and drive her towards a shaking climax was fast becoming one of his favourite things in the world.

"You should walk."

He glanced down at the Maiden marching alongside Jeade'en. She was watching ahead rather than looking at him, but who else could she have been speaking to? Admitting that trying to keep their pace had left him aching didn't seem like something a *Car'a'carn* should do.

"Almost everyone on the other side of this pass rides horses, Tenelca" he said instead. "It's traditional."

"Weak traditions should not be preserved. But that is not what I meant, Rand al'Thor. The beast leaves you high and exposed. It will be harder to block the arrows."

"She is correct, *Duadhe Mahdi'in* will have done their duty, but the possibility of a single Shaido evading them exists," said Dina. Her face was a match for Tenelca's in solemn beauty. Neither had ever so much as hinted at the things that had passed between them in private when not under a roof. A fact for which Rand was significantly more grateful these days.

He swung down from the saddle wordlessly and gathered the reins. He was only able to lead his own horse for a few steps, however, before Izana rode closer and offered to take the reins from him. Smiling wryly, Rand quashed the urge to refuse to hand them over, just on the general principle of it, and let him take charge of Jeade'en.

Approving nods could be seen over the top of Tenelca's head as he walked with them. Not many of the men back home would have been able to see, though, for if she wasn't a full six feet in height she could not have been far from it. He didn't bother asking her about Timolan again. If she knew anything of his intentions, she would have told him.

"Are you looking forward to seeing the wetlands?"

She gave him the briefest of glances before returning to her watch. "No."

He grunted. "They are nothing like what you've seen in the Three-fold Land."

"Yes."

"They aren't that bad, though. The things the Aiel say about them, and the things that wetlanders say about the Aiel—it's all exaggerated. I think we can learn to get along."

Silence.

He tried again a while later. "What is the craziest thing you ever heard told of the wetlands? I'll tell you if it's true."

"That they speak with words when scouting."

Rand tried not to wince. "I expect you will be able to resist that urge."

"That should not be difficult. My people do not speak unnecessarily."

"I've noticed."

Gravel crunched under his boots as they wended their way through the pass. Wordlessly. At least for a time. Eventually it started to feel impolite, just walking there not acknowledging someone.

"What did you think of the fighting last night?"

"It was adequate."

"Adelin seemed upset about what happened."

"That is between them and the Wise Ones."

Rand sighed. He should probably stop. But the sound drew her quizzical attention. "I would never abandon my post. You need not worry; you have my loyalty. Do you still question it after ..."

"No, not at all," he said hastily. "I was just chatting, is all. Making friends."

That just confused her more. "Friends. Wetlanders say strange things. Accepted. And now we are friends."

Rand was not quite as clueless of their customs as he had been back in Tear. He narrowed his eyes and said, "Is that anything like near-brothers?"

"Do not be ridiculous!"

He laughed softly. "That's what I thought. I take it you won't be calling me 'Rand' anytime soon."

She shook her head at once. "I choose to honour you by using your complete name."

They continued on in near silence, watching all around, but the attack they had worried over never materialised. It got dark in the pass before the sun had even set but Rand made them press ahead despite Rhuarc's advice. He needed to catch Couladin. He didn't dare press ahead too long, though. The risk of ambushers was not a figment of the Maidens' imaginations.

"You are in danger," Tenelca said in the dark.

Rand sighed. "I know." He raised his voice and called a halt, gave the order to set up camp. Voices echoed his command up and down the column. The *gai'shain* moved quickly to set up Rand's tent, on a spot near the centre of the pass at Aviendha's direction. Rand hesitated to approach, and was right to, for she lingered only long enough to finish her task before stalking off. Perhaps he should buy her a necklace, too. Then again, she might kill him if he did.

Tenelca wasn't stalking away, though. Even in the growing dark he could see her beauty. "I might still be in danger in my tent," he said quietly. "Would you like to join me there?"

"Very well."

Rand was smiling when he ducked into the lamplit tent, but Tenelca was not when she followed. She walked right by him, spear in hand, to poke around at his bedding and belongings. His smile turned quizzical until she turned and said, "There are no threats here."

*Light!* "Um, thanks for that. Would you like to stay a while?"

She cocked her head at him. "Why?"

Blood and ashes. He'd have to say it right out. "Because you are so beautiful, and I enjoy your company." She still looked a bit confused. "I'd enjoy it even more if you were naked in my bed." He didn't really like being so blunt, and felt his face heat.

Hers did not. "Ah. You wish to do that again. Very well. I will allow you to satisfy yourself."

Anticipation warred with disgruntlement as he watched her shed her weapons and clothes. She didn't have to do it, and if she was going to she definitely didn't have to make it sound like a sacrifice! The two people should want it equally as much. She was even more beautiful naked. And as coolly composed as ever. He could back out. Or he could do his best to melt that icy facade.

Rand unbuttoned his coat slowly. Kicked out of his boots. Pulled off his shirt. Unbuckled his belt and let his breeches drop. Tenelca remained composed. Even when he stepped close and touched her cheek, turning her face towards his, she showed little reaction. So he did not kiss her, simply took her by the hand and led her to the pallet.

She came willingly when he pulled her down to him, and did not object to his touching her thigh. Her breasts, too, she allowed him free reign over. He took his time with her, savouring her body with his hands for some time before daring to slide a hand up towards her core.

He smiled when he found her wet. "You feel ready."

Tenelca nodded firmly. "I am ready for anything."

Taking her by the waist and lifting her up, he showed her the shaft that the sight and feel of her had inspired. "Are you ready for this?"

She parted her legs obligingly, but remained defiantly unmoved. "I am."

"I remember last time well. You were a very naughty girl. Which hole is most ready, I wonder?" he teased.

That didn't sway her either. "You may choose," she said calmly.

He did. He chose to position her pretty pink pussy above his cock, and pull her down onto it, parting her lips and sliding deep into her heat. He sighed in satisfaction as they joined. She remained quiet. Perhaps it should not have mattered, but Rand couldn't help but feel that a challenge had been made. A duel demanded.

Lifting her up and down for a time and then stopping did not inspire her to take up the slack and start bouncing herself, despite the hot wetness he could feel trickling down his member. So he put her on her back and took charge of it himself. He fucked her hard but he fucked her steady, wanting to make sure it lasted. All throughout he was sure to bring his hands into play as well, caressing stiff nipples and squeezing her bottom. She allowed it all, but the closest he got to a confession of passion was the heart he could feel thudding against his own when he held her tight.

Eventually he reared up, to kneel between her thighs. Her legs he held open as he thrust, the better to feast on the sight of her athletic beauty. There had been no reluctance to meet his eyes before, but there was one now. Daring to dream, he sucked his thumb long enough to get it nice and wet before bringing it be bear against her. Tenelca tensed up as he rubbed her pussy. Her breath was coming faster, her eyes were squeezed shut, her hands had a white knuckled grip on the bedsheets.

She tried her best to hide her orgasm from him, the stubborn girl, but Rand saw the signs. And he definitely felt the sudden wildness inside her. He grinned in satisfaction.

"That's my girl. Come for me," he teased.

At last he got his reaction, a furious blush. It was very cute, and opened all the floodgates.

An hour later he was still tormenting her. She was very flushed and sweaty by then, on her hands and knees while the tenth orgasm of the night ripped through her. It was not silent. The silence had ended some time ago, to his great satisfaction. When she collapsed onto her belly, he went with her, but the rocking of his hips continued.

It wasn't just how good the sex felt that inspired him, it was the way her attitude had changed.

“Do not stop yet,” Tenelca gasped.

He didn’t. He fucked her hard and deep until she started trembling, her legs and ass shaking wildly while number eleven raced by.

It was a pretty little ass that was shaking, but not so pretty that he balked at slapping it. Sensitive in her gasping pleasure, she yelled in surprise.

“Ah, aha. An interesting sensation.”

“That’s what you get for acting like you didn’t want this,” he said. Or gasped rather. He’d have been boasting even more wildly than Mat if he’d claimed that getting her to this state had not been a challenge. His body glistened with sweat in the lamplight. But that challenge just made victory all the sweeter.

And yet, even as the last ripples passed through her, Tenelca shook her red head in denial. Rand leaned down to kiss her neck and feel the racing pulse under her silky skin. “You still deny it? Well, there’s more where that came from.”

She groaned loudly. “No. I cannot. I ... I have no more water left in me. I am your—your faithful Maiden.” She turned her face to his and kissed him for the first time, and it was no mere peck on the lips. When the need for air drove them apart, she looked him in the eyes and said, “Let me show you.”

Intrigued, and secretly exhausted, Rand slipped his over-stimulated cock out of her heat and rolled off her to sprawl on the bed. Tenelca came to sit on her heels beside him, and reached for his member, only to stop short.

“May I touch your eggs?” she asked politely.

Rand wasn’t able to resist laughing. “I’d be deeply disappointed if you didn’t.”

“I see.” Whether she really did or not, she definitely touched them. She was gentle, too. He’d half braced himself for a crushing grip, but her massage had him groaning in relief. It grew louder when she lowered her proud head and took him into her mouth.

It was beyond sweet, the way her head bobbed against him; the things her tongue was doing while he was in there. He did nothing for a time, and just let it happen. Breathing heavy, heart racing, he allowed himself to relax and just be happy. A smile tugged at his lips. Any man could be happy with a woman like her at his side. If she ever decided to give up the spear, there would be some extremely lucky Aielman out there.

He opened his eyes a crack when her sweet wetness left him, and found her looking up at him. “Give me your water, *Car'a'carn*,” she said.

“Call me Rand.”

Grey eyes, so similar to his own, blinked rapidly. “I ... cannot. That would not be proper,” claimed the girl who had once let him bugger her silly in front of her friends.

*As well try and understand the stars.* “Just this once, Tenelca. It would be our secret.”

She bit her lip cutely, thought it over, and nodded. “Very well. Rand. I wish you to come in my mouth, Rand.”

Blushing more furiously than ever, she showed him the back of her head and went back to sucking on his member, now with increased insistence. Rand did nothing to resist the feelings she inspired in him. While her hands stroked and her tongue licked, he fondled the hips and ass his Maiden showed. And when a new set of floodgates stood threatened, he did nothing to defend them.

Down his shaft and into her mouth his waters flowed. It surely could not have been buckets worth, but it felt like it was. He, too, was not silent in his climax. She milked him well, and allowed nary a drop to spill, like a proper Aiel woman. Even after he began to go soft, she was still sucking away, making sure nothing escaped her.

He was warring with sleep when she finally stopped and came to lie beside him. “I do not know why you wanted to do this, Rand al’Thor. But I am glad.”

Even shaking his head was difficult. “You’re a strange girl, Tenelca. But I like you.”

She frowned. “I am not strange. I am Aiel.”

It could not hurt to let his eyes rest, just for a moment. “That’s true as well. It all is,” he said between deep breaths.

## CHAPTER 55: Training Hard



Even on the march the work never really ended for Rand. Moiraine was almost always there during the day, nattering in his ear. Then there was swordplay with Lan in the morning; he hadn't felt the need to punish Rand for his treatment of Moiraine since that first time. That should not have been disappointing. Tam's absence from the training sessions certainly was. Even now that Rand was leading an Aiel army back into the wetlands, he remained committed to his vow of non-interference.

If he really did want Rand to get closer to the Aiel, he must have been secretly pleased. The sparring sessions that followed Lan's departure were never as quiet as the swordplay ones. While the rest of the army pressed on, many men and Maidens lingered to show Rand some moves, watch him fight, or simply to toss him around like a ragdoll.

His uncle Jecht preferred that last option, much to the amusement of men like Arcaval, Bast and Jarasai. The laughter didn't trouble Rand. He was focused on improvement. The real challenges would come later. Their disappointment at his lack of reaction did not move him, either, not while he was wrapped in the void. Similarly, he did not crow the way they might expect the first time he powered through his cousin Rovan's defence and slammed him to the ground.

Rovan took it in good stead, and accepted his offered hand with a grin. Jecht's claim that he must have been half-asleep to lose to Rand wiped the grin away, and the two exchanged hot words until Rhuard stepped in to calm things down.

Even when all of that was done, the training wasn't over. There were still Maidens to spar with, old and new. Tuandha had brought some of her fellow Reyn to join the sessions. He wasn't surprised that the grim Fusha pushed him relentlessly, but it was a little embarrassing to get downed so often by Lys, who seemed more clueless than Rhamys when she wasn't punching you.

But Rand persevered in that, too. And dared to think he was getting better.

Lidya seemed to agree. "You should attack her as you did Rovan," she urged. "You might even win, for once."

Ayla, the woman he should supposedly be attacking, circled around him. "Ah, yes. I heard you gave him quite a thrashing. Do you think you could handle him in a real fight?"

"I don't care for boasting," Rand said.

Ayla smiled sharply. "Ah, a man of action. Very well."

And that was how he ended up limping his way back to Jeade'en that day. It was also why he cut his lesson with Asmodean short, since he didn't like the way the Forsaken looked at him when he was plainly injured. The man was a betrayal waiting to happen, but one that Rand had to allow, since every sliver of knowledge he could squeeze from him was precious.

All of that meant that he had to spend a good part of the day's march at a fast trot, in order to catch up to the marching Aiel and resume his place near the front of the column.

Even hours later, when the sun was starting to set, he still felt bruised. He gave the horse a grateful pat, and interrupted Moiraine's latest lecture as politely as he could before slumping into his tent and onto the welcoming pallets. Then he groaned. There was more. He'd almost forgotten that he had a session in *Tel'aran'rhiad* scheduled for that night.

*At least I won't have difficulty sleeping.*

He was still in the pass when he got up, but it was not the same. The tents were nowhere to be seen, not even his own. To be reflected in *Tel'aran'rhiad* required a degree of permanence. The hard ground was cold under his back, but that wasn't a problem. He willed a woollen coat onto his person as he stood. Travel was much simpler here, too. All he had to do was picture the destination in his mind and suddenly he was there.

It was not in the Stone of Tear or Rhuidean or anywhere else he might frequent that they staged these lessons. His teacher wanted to ensure there was no chance of their being interrupted. She was already waiting on the mountaintop when he arrived, standing at the sheer edge and staring out at the setting sun. It shone through her long brown hair, and twinkled off the bracelets and necklaces she

wore. There were fewer of them now than in the real world. But then, the smiling, youthful face she showed him when she turned was not one he had ever seen there either.

Rand smiled, too, but wryly. There was no way Seana did not know how good she looked posing in such a spot. She was as far from naive as any woman he had ever met.

“I see you, Rand al’Thor.”

“And I definitely see you.”

She laughed lightly. “You like this form?”

“I like all your forms, as I’m sure you know.”

“You have proven that, it is true. But it is knowledge you came here for, not this memory of what was.”

“That’s true.” He grinned. “The memory I’ll have later.”

Seana tossed her hair, the hair she’d been so proud of when it was not grey. “You are overly bold, boy. I should leave you to imagine it, on principle alone.”

He nodded solemnly. “You should. I wonder if you will ...”

“Enough! Have you been practicing changing form? Show me, become someone else, and remain so until I say otherwise.”

Rand’s first thought was to take on Lan’s appearance, but that would be too easy—they were much the same size. Something different, something challenging. Ah ha! Closing his eyes and centring himself, he pictured his true person contained within a clear crystal cube, held at his heart. That which moved around him he allowed to drift away, to become mouldable. And mould it he did, becoming taller, thicker, dark of hair, long of ear, broad of face. It was not merely a disguising of appearance, he could feel the slower thudding of his heart, and when he sucked in a breath his lungs expanded far more than what felt natural.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself looking down at Seana from an even higher vantage than usual. “How about this?” he rumbled. It still needed work; the voice didn’t sound right.

Seana didn’t agree. “Excellent. You mimic the Ogier as if he was right here to see.”

Rand shrugged Loial’s shoulders. “I’ve always had a good memory for faces.”

“The form chosen is interesting as well. It raises questions in my mind.”

He cleared his throat loudly. “Well, rid yourself of them. It would have to be a different Ogier. I wouldn’t feel comfortable using a friend like that.”

“Such deceptions are against *ji’e’toh*. You are learning well. Try other forms.”

So he did, switching to one he knew well, in Mat, and then one he barely knew at all, in Asmodean. Seana asked who the old man was not long after, leaving Rand to frown at his own hands. Long fingers, dark skin, a ring he almost ... He squeezed his eyes shut and pushed it all away. He hadn’t realised he’d switched from Asmodean. He had to stay in control. It was a stranger form he chose next, if one that was yet familiar to him.

His weight shifted, growing heavier in the hips and in the chest. He lost a few inches in height, gained a great many in hair. When he moved his limbs, he noticed a certain lack of tautness to them. A lack of muscle. He didn’t let his hands wander anywhere they shouldn’t, but he knew there would be a certain lacking elsewhere, too. He remained himself, of course. Perhaps he always had, all those times he’d glimpsed the lives and loves and losses of the girl called Raye al’Thor.

“Who is this? Is there a woman of the people that has caught your interest? It is understandable. She is quite beautiful.”

Rand felt Raye’s fair cheeks grow hot. He smiled with her lips. “No. She is ... just a memory, of a, a different time,” he said, as he toyed with her long red braid.

Seana cast a critical eye over him. “You act the coy girl surprisingly well, Rand al’Thor.”

He grunted. It wasn’t a very deep sound, but better than the alternative. There was no way he was going to detail to her how many times he had found himself a passenger in this very body. “Do I pass the test, then?”

“You do.”

Taking a deep breath, he shattered the crystal cube within and allowed his true form to snap into being once more. Seana didn’t follow suit, but remained as young in appearance as him. She chewed one full lip for a moment, watching him, then said, “You have come far, but there is more to learn. Now that we know each other, I think I will trust you with a special trick of mine.”

“Colour me intrigued.”

"Wetlanders say such strange things. For this, there must be trust. Or the dreamwalker would have to be dealing with someone who is innocent of *Tel'aran 'rhiod*'s ways, in which case it must not be done at all. It requires a surrender of control, a willing removal of defences." It wasn't only defences she was removing. Seana stripped as she spoke, revealing a pert young body with smooth skin and ripe curves. She did not blush under his hungry eyes, but spoke on. "I will do so now, and allow you to influence my body."

Rand licked his lips. "And what should I do with it?"

"You must make me orgasm."

"Gladly." Grinning, he willed his clothes away and came to her, arms wide.

Seana raised her hand in warding. "No. Not that way. Without touching me."

He halted, confused. "Without? How could I ..." There was that trick with the tentacles ...

"By focusing your will upon my body, by imagining the pleasure you want me to feel and demanding I do so. By this means, you can control someone."

"Ah. Interesting," he murmured. He stared at her sex, imagining the hot trickling that should be running through her, tickling, thrilling. Dark hair sheltered her from his sight, but not his thoughts. If not for her pale eyes, she could have been a Theren woman. An Aiel that looked like a Therener. The home of his blood and the home of his heart made one. The wild wet rivers of home, crashing over rocks and making swamps from which grew the far trees. Welcoming places, in which he longed to delve. He had been happy there. Anyone would be. He wanted her to be happy, too.

It was an almost pained sound that signalled Seana's coming. Her hands snapped to her breasts, kneading them as her juices flowed down her inner thighs. She pressed her knees together in an effort to remain standing. The sight was thrilling. Knowing he had caused it more so.

"It's that easy?" He tried again, focusing his will on her pleasure. She cried out, and pinched her nipples hard. As soon as she slowed, a third made her fall to her knees. He experimented more with the fourth attempt, imaging a rolling thunderstorm of pleasure inside her, rumbling non-stop. Seana shook and moaned for long moments, then rose up, legs spread wide and back arched almost painfully. Rand could only stare as a veritable fountain of clear fluid shot out of her pussy. She collapsed to her back on the hard rock of the mountain.

"Blood and ashes," he whispered as he went to gather her up. To do all that, just by looking ... It was unfair. The work he would have to do in real life to have even half that effect.

Seana hung limp in his arms. "Well ... done ..." she said, though even speaking seemed to strain her. "I ... saw ... how much you ... enjoyed it ..." A shaking hand traced his cheek. "You may ... but ... be quick ... I need to rest ..."

She had been quite the beauty in her youth. And he was tempted. But he just stood there, holding her in his arms as he looked out at a sunset that hadn't changed at all, yet seemed so different to his eyes. "There is no need. I will wake hard anyway. And this is fine and good."

"You have ... learned very well indeed. From a naughty boy, to a naughty man."

Rand laughed loudly. "I am only as good as my teacher."

## CHAPTER 56: “*The Fifth, I Give You*”



Reining Brightwind around on a grassy hilltop, Dani watched the streams of Aiel coming down from the Jangai Pass. The saddle had pushed her skirts above her knees again. Not for the first time she entertained the idea of adopting men’s fashion. Trousers were so much more convenient. If that mouthy Cairhienin girl, Jubes, could do it, then why couldn’t she?

In trotting columns the Aiel flowed by below her, arranged by clan and sept and society. Thousands upon thousands, with their packhorses and mules, the *gai’shain* who would tend the camps while the rest fought, spreading a mile wide, and more still in the pass or already out of sight ahead. Even without families, it seemed a nation on the march. The Silk Path had been a road here, at least one hundred and fifty paces wide and paved with broad white stones, slicing straight through hills carved to make a level. Only occasionally was it visible through the mass of Aiel, although they seemed to prefer running on the grass, but many of the paving stones had lifted up at a corner or sunk down at one end. More than twenty years had gone by since this road had carried more than local farmers’ carts and a handful of wagons.

It was startling to see trees again, real trees, towering oaks and leatherleaf in actual thickets rather than an occasional wind-twisted, stunted shape, and tall grass waving in the breeze across the hills. There was real forest to the north, and clouds in the sky, thin and high, yet clouds. The air seemed blessedly cool after the Waste, and moist, though brown leaves and large brown swaths through the grass told her that in reality it might be hotter and drier than usual for the time of year. Still, the countryside of Cairhien was a lush paradise compared to the other side of the Dragonwall.

A small stream meandered south beneath a nearly flat bridge, bordered by the dried clay of a broader bed; the River Gaelin lay not too many miles away in that direction. She wondered what the Aiel would make of that river; she had seen Aiel near a river once before. The shrunken band of water marked a definite break in the steady flow of people, as men and Maidens paused to stare in amazement before leaping across.

Kadere’s wagons rumbled by on the road, the long mule teams working hard, but still losing ground to the Aiel. It had taken four days to traverse the twists and turns of the pass, and Rand apparently intended to go as far into Cairhien as he could in the few hours of daylight remaining. Moiraine and Lan rode with the wagons; not ahead of them, or even with Kadere’s boxlike little white house on wheels, but alongside the second wagon, where the canvas-covered shape of the doorframe *ter’angreal* made a hump above the rest of the load. Some of the load was wrapped carefully or packed in boxes or barrels that Kadere had brought into the Waste full of his goods, and some was simply stuck in wherever it would fit, odd shapes of metal and glass, a red crystal chair, two child-sized statues of a nude man and woman, rods of bone and ivory and strange black materials in varying lengths and thicknesses. All sorts of things, including some Dani could hardly begin to describe. Moiraine had used every inch of space she could.

Dani wished that she knew why the Aes Sedai was so concerned with that particular wagon; perhaps no-one else had noticed that Moiraine paid it more attention than all the others combined, but she had. Not that she was likely to find out any time soon.

A hundred or so Taillard *Far Dareis Mai* went trotting by on her side of the road, moving easily, veils hanging but ready to be donned, full quivers at hips. Some carried their curved horn bows, arrows nocked, while others had their bows cased on their backs, spears and bucklers swinging rhythmically as they ran. At their rear a dozen *gai’shain* in their white robes leading pack mules struggled to keep up. One wore black, not white; Isendre laboured hardest of all. Dani could pick Adelin out, and two or three others who had been guarding Rand’s tent the night of the attack. Each clutched a doll in addition to her weapons, a rough-made doll clothed in full skirts and white blouse; they looked even more stone-faced than usual, trying to pretend that they held no such thing.

The Maidens who stood that guard had come in a group to see Bair and Amys when their stint was done, and had spent a long time with them. The next morning, while camp was still breaking in

the greyness before dawn, they had begun making those dolls. She had not asked, of course, but she had commented on it to one, a red-haired Tomanelle of the Serai sept named Maira, and the woman said it was to remind her that she was not a child. Her tone made it clear that she did not want to talk. One of the Maidens carrying a doll was no more than sixteen, yet Maira was at least as old as Adelin. It was a strange kind of punishment for their dereliction, but she supposed it made sense in a way. Shame was worse than pain, to the Aiel, and what grown woman wanted to be seen playing with dolls?

Despite herself, her eyes were drawn back to the mouth of the pass. The row of stakes was still there, just visible, stretching from steep mountain slope to steep mountain slope except where Aiel had kicked some of them down. Couladin had left another message, men and women impaled across their path, standing there seven days dead. The tall grey walls of Selean clung to the hills at the right of the pass, nothing showing above them. Moiraine said it had held only a shadow of its one-time glory, yet it had still been a considerable town, much larger than Taien; no more remained of it, however. No survivors, either—except whoever the Shaido had carried off—although here some had probably run for places they thought safe. There had been farms on these hills; most of eastern Cairhien had been abandoned after the Aiel War, but a town needed farms for food. Now soot-streaked chimneys thrust up from blackened stone farmhouse walls; here a few charred rafters remained above a stone barn, there barn and farmhouse had collapsed from the heat. The hill where she sat Brightwind's saddle had been sheep pasture; near the fence at the foot of the hill, flies still buzzed over the refuse of butchering. Not an animal remained in any pasture, not a chicken scratching in a barnyard. The crop fields were burned stubble.

Couladin and the Shaido were Aiel. But so were Aviendha, and Bair and Amys and Melaine and Rhuarc, who said she reminded him of one of his daughters. They had been disgusted at the impalements, yet even they seemed to think it little more than the treekillers deserved. Perhaps the only way to truly know the Aiel was to be born Aiel.

Casting a last glance at the destroyed town, she rode slowly down to the rough stone fence and let herself out at the gate, leaning down to refasten the rawhide thong out of habit. The irony was that Moiraine had said that Selean might actually go over to Couladin. In the shifting currents of *Daes Dae'mar*, in balancing an Aiel invader against a man who had sent Tairens into Cairhien, for whatever reason, the decision could have tipped either way, had Couladin given them a chance to choose.

She rode along the broad road until she caught up with Rand, in his red coat today, and joined Aviendha and Amys and thirty or more Wise Ones she barely knew besides the other dreamwalkers, all following at a short distance. A few she recognised, such as the delightfully witty Jay or the overly serious Aeron. Long-faced Leta was the Wise One of Mainde Cut, Han's personal dreamwalker, and nearly as slow to smile as her chief. She was a ray of sunshine compared to Sorelia, of course. That one she could not have forgotten is she'd wanted to. One of the newly arrived Reyn had made a place in her memory, too, and not just because she was regally beautiful. Samara had brought three of her daughters to war with her, and all three could channel almost as strongly as their mother. None were apprentices, either, but Wise Ones in their own right. The pretty, golden-haired girl that hovered ever at Samara's back was most definitely an apprentice, however, and as well behaved as any Dani had ever seen. Samara had never raised her voice in her hearing, but the other Wise Ones listened closely when she spoke. None of them acknowledged Dani's arrival.

Yusana didn't even look at the daughter who was whispering a report in her ear. The Maiden in question caught Dani's eye when she was done, though, and caused a sudden wave of dizziness. Which one of the sextuplets was it? Had they done anything together? More importantly, how in the Light had she gotten into a position where she wasn't sure if she'd had sex with someone or not!? Dani's mother would have slapped her face if she knew, and she'd have been right to.

They were not in the Aiel Waste anymore. As a more familiar kind of countryside embraced her, old thoughts and feelings, eagerly set aside, began to resurface. She wondered if it was so for Rand, then cursed herself for a fool: he'd been that way long before coming to the Waste.

Mat, wearing a hat that matched her own and carrying his black-hafted spear, plainly-dressed Tam, and Jasin Natael with his leather-cased harp slung on his back and crimson banner rippling in the breeze, were all riding, but hurrying Aiel passed the party by on both sides, because Rand led his dapple stallion, talking with the clan chiefs. Skirts or no skirts, the Wise Ones would have made a

good job of keeping up with the passing columns if they were not sticking to Rand like pine sap. They barely glanced at Dani, their eyes and ears focused on him and the seven chiefs.

"... and whoever comes through after Timolan," Rand was saying in a firm voice, "has to be told the same thing." Stone Dogs left to watch at Taien had returned to report the Miagoma entering the pass a day behind. "I've come to stop Couladin despoiling this land, not to loot it."

"A hard message," Bael said, "for us as well, if you mean we cannot take the fifth." Han and the rest, even Rhuarc, nodded.

"The fifth, I give you." Rand did not raise his voice, yet suddenly his words were driven nails "But no part of that is to be food. We will live on what can be found wild or hunted or bought—if there is anyone with food to sell—until I can have the Tairens increase what they're bringing up from Tear. If any man takes a penny more than the fifth, or a loaf of bread without payment, if he burns so much as a hut because it belongs to a treekiller, or kills a man who is not trying to kill him, that man will I hang, whoever he is."

"Dark to tell the clans this," Dheanic said, almost as stony. "I came to follow He Who Come With the Dawn, not to coddle oathbreakers." Bael and Jheran opened their mouths as if to agree, but each saw the other and snapped his teeth shut again.

"Mark what I said, Dheanic," Rand said. "I came to save this land, not ruin it further. What I say stands for every clan, including the Miagoma and any more who follow. Every clan. You mark me well." This time no-one spoke, and he swung back into Jeade'en's saddle, letting the stallion walk on among the chiefs. Those Aiel faces showed no expression.

Dani stared. Those men were all old enough to be his father and more, leaders of their people as surely as kings for all they disclaimed it, hardened leaders in battle. Yet he spoke his demands and threats unflinchingly. It was impressive. She'd knock him down every peg there was if he ever spoke to her that way, but it was still impressive. There were other things her mother would be appalled by, but ... *Light, what am I thinking?*

Wanting to talk, she kicked a foot free of its stirrup and held a hand down for Aviendha, but the Aiel woman shook her head. She really did not like to ride. And maybe all those Wise Ones striding in a pack made her reluctant, too. Some of them would not have ridden had both their legs been broken. Dani climbed down, leading Brightwind by the reins as she settled her skirt. The soft, knee-high Aiel boots she wore looked comfortable and were, but not for walking very far on that hard, uneven pavement.

"He truly is in command," she said.

Aviendha barely shifted her eyes from Rand's back. "I do not know him. I cannot know him. Look at the thing he carries."

She meant the sword, of course. Rand did not precisely carry it; it hung at the pommel of his saddle, in a black scabbard marked with a bronze heron. The long hilt was black as well, and showed a second heron, while the bronze quillons were worked to look like a Theren woman's braids. Or Dani's. He had had a man from Taien put it together for him, on the journey through the pass. Dani hadn't found out why until days later, and then from his father. The downside to involving yourself with a man who did such impressive things was that he was often busy.

"You gave it to him, Aviendha."

Her friend scowled. "He tries to make me accept the hilt, too. He used it; it is his. Used it in front of me, as if to mock me with a sword in his hand."

"You are not angry about the sword." She did not think Aviendha was; she had not said a word about it, that night in Rand's tent. "You are still upset over how he spoke to you, and I understand. He can be a jerk sometimes, but I know he is sorry. If you would only let him apologize—"

"I do not want his apologies," Aviendha muttered. "I do not want ... I can bear this no more. I cannot sleep in his tent any longer." Suddenly she took Dani's arm, and if Dani had not known better, she would have thought her on the brink of tears. "You must speak to them for me. To the Wise Ones. They will listen to you. You are Aes Sedai. They must let me return to their tents. They must!"

"Who must do what?" Sorilea said, dropping back from the others to walk alongside them. The Wise One of Shende Hold had thin white hair and a face like leather drawn tight over her skull. And clear green eyes that could knock a horse down at ten paces. That was the way she normally

looked at anyone. When Sorilea was angry, other Wise Ones sat quietly and clan chiefs made excuses to leave.

Melaine and the greying Black Water Nakai, Aeron, started to join them, too, until Sorilea turned those eyes on them. "If you were not so busy thinking of that new husband, Melaine you would know Amys wants to talk with you. You, also, Aeron." Melaine flushed bright red, and scurried back to the others, but the older woman got there first. Sorilea watched them go, then put her full attention on Aviendha. "Now we can have a quiet talk. So you do not want to do something. Something you were told to do, of course. And you think this child Aes Sedai can get you out of doing it."

"Sorilea, I—" Aviendha got no further.

"In my day, girls jumped when a Wise One said jump, and continued jumping until they were told to stop. As I am still alive, it is still my day. Need I make myself clearer?"

Aviendha took a deep breath. "No, Sorilea," she said meekly.

The old woman's eyes came to rest on Dani. "And you? Do you think you are going to beg her off?"

"No, Sorilea." Dani felt as if she was back in the White Tower.

"Good," Sorilea said, not sounding satisfied, just as if it was what she had expected. It almost certainly was. "Now I can speak to you of what I really want to know. I hear the *Car'a'carn* has given you an interest gift like no other ever heard of, rubies and moonstones."

Aviendha jumped as if a mouse had run up her leg. Well, she probably would not, but it was the way Dani would have jumped in that circumstance. The Aiel explained about Laina's sword and the scabbard so hastily that her words tripped over one another.

Sorilea shifted her shawl, muttering about girls touching swords, even wrapped in blankets, and about having a sharp word with "young Bair." "So he has not captured your eye. A pity. It would bind him to us; he sees too many people as his, now." For a moment she eyed Aviendha up and down. "I will have Feran look at you. His greatfather is my sister-son. You have other duties to the people than learning to be a Wise One. Those hips were made for babes."

Aviendha stumbled over an upraised paving stone and just caught herself short of falling. "I ... I will think on him, when there is time," she said breathlessly. "I have much to learn yet, of being a Wise One; and Feran is *Seia Doon*, and the Black Eyes have vowed not to sleep beneath roof or tent until Couladin is dead." Couladin was *Seia Doon*.

The leathery-faced Wise One nodded as though everything had been settled. "You, young Aes Sedai. You know the *Car'a'carn* well, it is said. Will he do as he has threatened? Hang even a clan chief?"

"I think ... that he will." Dani said, "But you might be able to persuade him against it. Maybe Moiraine could help." Dani would not—what he had said sounded only just—but she knew some would argue that justice would do him no good if he found the others turning against him as well as the Shaido. Practical and good were not always the same thing, to her sorrow.

Sorilea glanced at her in surprise, then turned a gaze on the chiefs around Rand's horse that should have knocked the lot of them flat. "You mistake me. He must show that mangy pack of wolves that he is the chief wolf. A chief must be harder than other men, young Aes Sedai, and the *Car'a'carn* harder than other chiefs. Every day a few more men, and even Maidens, are taken by the bleakness, but they are the soft outer bark of the ironwood. What remains is the hard inner core, and he must be hard to lead them." Dani noticed that she did not include herself or the other Wise Ones among those who would be led. Muttering to herself about "mangy wolves," Sorilea strode ahead, and soon had all the Wise Ones listening as they walked. Whatever she was saying, it did not carry.

"Who is this Feran?" Dani asked. "I've never heard you speak of him. What does he look like?"

Frowning at Sorilea's back, more than half hidden by the women clustered around her, Aviendha spoke absently. "He looks much like Rhuarc, only younger, taller and more handsome, with much redder hair. For over a year he has been trying to attract Enaila's interest, but I think she will teach him to sing before she gives up the spear."

"I don't understand. Do you mean to share him with Enaila?" It still felt odd, speaking so casually of that.

Aviendha stumbled again, and stared at her. "Share him? I want no part of him. His face is beautiful, but he laughs like a braying mule and picks at his ears."

“But from the way you talked to Sorilea, I thought you ... liked him. Why didn’t you tell her what you just told me?”

The other woman’s low laugh sounded pained. “Dani, if she thought I was trying to balk in this, she would make the bridal wreath herself and drag both Feran and me by the neck to be wed. Have you ever seen anyone say ‘no’ to Sorilea? Could you?”

Dani opened her mouth to say that of course she could, and promptly closed it again. Scrawny old woman that she was, Sorilea reminded her far too much of Siuan Sanche. As far as she’d come, she still hadn’t come far enough for that.

To change the subject, she said, “I will speak to Amys and the others for you.” Not that she really thought it would do much good now. The right time had been before it began. At least Aviendha saw the impropriety of the situation finally. Perhaps ... “If we go to them together, I am sure they will listen.”

“No, Dani. I must obey the Wise Ones. *Ji'e'toh* requires it.” Just as if she had not been asking for intercession a moment earlier. Just as if she had not all but begged the Wise Ones not to make her sleep in Rand’s tent. “But why is my duty to the people never what I wish? Why must it be what would rather die before doing?”

“Aviendha, no-one is going to make you marry, or have babies. Not even Sorilea.” Dani wished she had sounded a bit less limp on that last.

“You do not understand,” the other woman said softly, “and I cannot explain it to you.” She gathered her shawl around her and would not speak of it further. She was willing to discuss their lessons, or whether Couladin would turn and give battle, or how marriage had affected Melaine—who seemed to have to work at being prickly now—or anything at all except what it was that she could not, or would not, explain.

Eventually the lack of answers grew as frustrating for her as the questions were for Aviendha, so Dani dropped back in the column, falling in with the Maidens and leaving the Wise Ones and chiefs to their planning.

She spotted Raine among them, Aiel in colouring but little else, and went at once to join her. She occupied a strange place among them, from what Dani had heard. A slayer of Shadowspawn, loyal to their *Car'a'carn*, but still a scrawny wetlander who did not follow their ways. The Maidens didn’t know what to make of her. Dani did. She smiled in greeting, and got a shyer smile in return. Raine didn’t want people to know about their relationship, but she was part of the reason Dani was never lonely, no matter how busy Rand got.

After brief nods of greeting, they continued their discussion. “You mistake and insult us, Raine Cinclare. This is not part of *ji'e'toh*,” said Branwen, pointing a spear at the burned farmstead they passed. The best that could be hoped for the farmers was that they had fled in time. “A killing arm is but the claw of a beast without pride and honour to guide it.”

“A beast wouldn’t do this, either,” Raine growled. Dani recalled the look of relief on her face when they’d returned to the wetlands, the way she’d stared to the north as if listening to things that only she could hear.

She knew the reason. She knew most of the Maidens that trotted near their horses, too, but some better than others. Ayla and Lidya had been among the first Maidens she’d ever met, and she’d long since come to think of them as friends. They were as close as she and Ilyena, but it still made her feel odd to see Ayla smile at Raine so. “I like your fire. You are correct. There is honour hidden in the wild things. You would make a fierce Maiden, if you were Aiel. Let us hunt together sometime.”

Raine perked up at once, her golden eyes turning north once more. “I would like that.”

“Rand did say that we needed to forage more,” Dani told them. “He has forbidden taking anything from the Cairhienin without paying.”

Branwen frowned. “Even the fifth?”

“No, no. That is allowed, so long as none of it is food.”

While the Maidens talked that over, Raine and Ayla drew Dani aside. “Do you want to come hunting with us? I haven’t done it in so long.”

It probably wasn’t wise to go too far from the column, not with the Shaido lurking about. And her horse wasn’t suited to wending through the woods. She did miss it, though.

When she voiced what she thought were very sensible cautions, Ayla curled her lip. “You are not afraid, are you? Of animals? Come back when you find your spine.”

"Hey! Don't talk to her like that!" Raine said.

Maybe friend had been the wrong word. "I didn't say I wasn't coming."

Ayla smiled that sharp smile of hers. "Good. We had best run. The game will have moved far from this many spears."

She set off at a steady jog, while Dani and Raine trotted behind. Long after they'd left the main column they were still encountering Aiel, warriors and scouts busy screening against attack. They left farmland for woods and hills, and only then did Raine halt and dismount. Dani did the same, while Ayla looked back impatiently.

"We will not have to go any farther," Raine whispered. "I asked my friends to herd them towards us."

"Isn't that cheating? Naughty girl!"

Raine giggled. "Hunting isn't a game; you can't cheat, silly."

Dani raised her voice and called out to Ayla. "Our quarry shall be along soon. You need only wait."

"How do you know?" she called back.

She did her best to smile the way Moiraine would have. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, my child."

Saying nothing, the Maiden turned and stalked off into the woods. As soon as she had passed beyond sight, Raine burst out laughing. "Dani! That wasn't very nice."

"She started it." Dani took off her hat to fan herself. After so long in the Waste, it felt strange being able to do that without feeling her skull start to cook. Strange, and very welcome.

"I envy you your hair, Dani," said Raine, whose short red locks were tightly curled.

Dani had always been proud of her glossy black hair, but she tried not to preen as she toyed with one braid. "You never had to wash or comb it, kiddo. This can be a real pain when it gets tangled."

Raine took her at her word, the sweet thing. "Could you not cut it, then?"

She laughed as she mussed the shorter girl's hair. "And look like you?"

"Hey! You'll pay for that," Raine sulked. She looked to the woods for a moment, her golden eyes unfocused, then said, "It might be a while before they arrive. Do you want to play a real game while we wait?"

Returning to a place with cool air, green grass and actual trees had definitely improved Raine's mood. She was glad to see her so chipper. And intrigued by her meaning.

"What kind of game did you have in mind?"

"Hide and seek! We can hunt each other before we chase the rabbits," she said at once.

Dani hid her mouth behind her hand. "Ah. Yes. That could be fun." *Blood and ashes.*

"Okay, I'll be 'it'. Once I get to a hundred I'll start the chase." While Raine took the reins of their horses and began tying them to the nearest tree, Dani gathered her skirts and set off. She was well away by the time the wolfsister began to count out loud, but found little comfort in that. Raine's senses were so much sharper than a normal girl's; she would have to use every trick she knew to try and escape her. *Water first. I have to mask my scent.* She ran downhill, looking for the greenest places, hoping for a stream of some kind.

Fortune was with her. The stream she found was barely wide enough to merit the name, so narrow she was able to cross it in two steps, but that was all she needed. Wet boots were a small price to pay for evading Raine's nose. She saw Ayla as she was running, but the Maiden was more interested in staring at the water and greenery than in asking what Dani was about.

By the time she found a nice copse of trees to hide in, Dani was feeling a lot better about her chances of evading the wolfsister who by now must be hot on her heels. She crouched down, hiding behind low branches while she peered back the way she had come. Her breathing slowly steadied, her heart almost returned to its normal pace.

Then, from behind there came a sound. "Boo!"

A scream escaped her before she could clamp her teeth shut. She rounded on Raine in a mix of fury and embarrassment.

The little witch looked very pleased with herself. "Oh! You should see your face, you look fit to bust!"

"Burn me, Raine, what're you doing sneaking up on me like that!?"

She cocked her head to the side. “I’m supposed to. I was ‘it’.”

Dani blew out her breath “Supposed to find me, not scare me half to death!”

Raine looked hurt “Don’t be angry, Dani. It’s only a game.”

She couldn’t help it, though, and not just because of embarrassment. “Not if my fear had triggered my power! I could have channelled to defend myself! I could have hurt you, Raine, badly!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any harm.” The wolfsister rushed off before she could respond, running in an odd, half-hunched way.

Dani sighed loudly, and tried to gather herself. Rand wasn’t the only one who could be a jerk when he was upset. She left the copse at a slow walk, trying to think of what she could say to Raine to make it better.

She was still searching for words when the peace of the woods was disturbing by cracking branches and loud growls, yips, snarls ... and somewhere in the middle of it all, a woman’s scream.

## CHAPTER 57: *Life in the Shadow of Death*



She knew she should be saying something, imparting some important lessons, yet only raw desire flowed from her open mouth. The rough wooden wall of the cabin shook against her silk-clad back each time he moved. Strong hands clasped her bottom, holding her firmly in place as a hot shaft pierced her core, releasing things she'd never imagined were caged within her.

Moiraine clung to Rand with arms and legs. The fleeting realisation that she would have to let go soon only made her tighten her grip. It shocked her how quickly a necessary sacrifice had become this. She'd only meant to make him listen to her, to steer him on the right path. She hadn't wanted to know all that she'd sacrificed in her years in the Tower and the longer years after, in obedience to their ways. This was not what she'd searched for in those years. The boy, yes; but not like this. His passion she had inspired deliberately. Her own had been a mistake. A terrible, mind-blowing mistake.

She could feel another on the horizon.

The way her body responded to his touch was beyond her control. He had moulded her to his shape, such that her sex now gave a glad cry at every moment of his passage. Her mind, though, her heart—they were still her own. He could not keep them. She could not give them. But Light, the desire ...

Rand didn't notice her come. She should be ashamed of that. The sounds she'd been making blended one with the other. Instead she hung there, panting and shaking as he ravaged her more. There was such heat in it, such animal passion. Her lungs and heart cried out without words for life, sweet beautiful life. Why had this had to happen now, when the work called so loudly and demanded so much of her? Of them both.

She touched his sweat-dampened hair, pulled him closer. She should not have done this. Would not have done it. But she'd had to. He had to learn. If only she could make the lesson less painful. The Pattern was cruel sometimes, to taunt people with what they could never have.

He was so much younger than her; more than half her age. He looked it, too. Such a pretty boy, with his fair skin and red hair. When he'd shown her his lust earlier, it had risen tower-like from a base of fire. The sight of his hard, rippling stomach, the lines of his hips drawing her gaze down to that base, from which rose what no Aes Sedai should ever see, much less touch, had woken her body with a speed she would never have thought possible. She had meant to draw it out, to tell him about the houses of Cairhien, great and small, while she held him in place by the reins of his hunger for her. Instead, she had barely kicked free of her own underwear before she was reaching up for him, calling his lips down to hers in an embarrassingly girlish way.

Why? Why was the control she had perfected over decades of training and experience failing her now when it mattered most? He had been alone in the dark when she wove her way through the incipient camp and found him, solemnly examining the remains of the nearest farmhouse. She could tell at a glance that the owners had not fled in time. Too much of what remained inside would have been needed on the road. Any farmwoman with a brain would have taken a few minutes to bundle it up before leaving. Rand was not as foolish as some men. He saw it, too, and it smote him.

The role she had played before Rhuidean would have called for her to calmly explain what they had to do next. The role she'd felt obliged to take up since had her taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. Sad grey eyes. A strong hand that yet brushed her cheek gently. It should have taken more than that, but it hadn't.

Now here she was. Getting fucked by her own student and ward. He didn't think of himself so, of course, but it was nonetheless true. Getting fucked while she pawed at his tight ass to urge him on. Wanting ... wanting ... wanting him to pump life into her in the midst of the final war, with death looming on the horizon.

"Come in me, Rand," she heard herself say. Ageless cheeks blazed, yet she would not have taken the words back if she could.

He cursed disbelievingly, his grip on her bottom tightened, his thrusts intensified. It became almost painful but she welcomed that, too. Pain was life as surely as pleasure. And she wanted it, she wanted what she had so long denied herself.

*Fool, fool, fool woman.* She rained kisses on his cheek between lamentations, not sure whether it was what she had let happen to her, or how long she had waited before exploring it that had her eyes stinging so.

He sighed out her name, the sound tickling her ear even as she felt his hot seed spurt deep into her womb. He tried to look into her eyes as he was filling her, too, brushing dark strands away from her face. But she couldn't allow it. That much she could hide from him. He kissed her forehead instead of her lips as he stood there, the pumping of his hips replaced with a different kind of pumping,

Moiraine Damodred had not been born for a simple life. A Lady of Cairhien, almost a princess, and blessed with the ability to channel, she had always been meant for important things. Thoughts of how else she might have lived had never concerned her before. Yet, in that simple farmhouse, with her man's arms around her, and his heat filling her with life, thoughts of other paths could not help but ghost into her mind. It would not have been so bad really. It would not have been so bad at all.

Unwelcome reality came crashing back, in the form of a loud banging against the wooden door. Rand's arms tightened around her, and he growled low. "Go away!" he called.

"My Lord Dragon? Something's happened," Izana uncertainly said.

Moiraine put her hands to Rand's broad chest and pushed him away, gently but firmly, as she knew she must. There was only one path. "Set me down, Rand. Duty calls."

He did as she told him, for once, reluctance in his touch and in his eyes. "Sometimes I think duty was invented by the Shadow."

Such nonsense he spoke, yet she met it with a gentle smile instead of the stern lecture she once would have. "Quite the opposite. Duty is how we will defeat the Shadow. Go. Leave me."

When he stood tall and set his face like that, he seemed a man despite his youthful beauty. "Never."

She said nothing. Bending to snatch her underwear from the ground hid Moiraine's face from him. Slipping into another room and putting her back to the wall hid the Aes Sedai's disgrace from whoever lurked beyond that door. Rand fixed himself and strode out in his shirtsleeves, curtly demanding to know what the problem was, leaving Moiraine to wrestle alone with a heart that refused to accept what her mind already had.

## CHAPTER 58: Huntress



The angry voices ahead did not cause Rand to put on speed—he was already moving at a sprint. What Izana had told him was enough. “Move!” he called, and shoved aside any Aiel who did not comply fast enough. Whether the frowns he got came from total strangers or familiar faces like Jarasai could not concern him just then. He burst past the crowd to find Raine and Merile on the ground, being confronted by a gang of Maidens. Some were veiled, all were armed. Dani stood between them, looking angry, with Ilyena at her side.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Rand shouted.

Everyone started speaking at once. Merile thought people were being mean to Raine. Beralna spoke of traitors, Branwen of infection, Reyla of revenge. Sulin wanted Rand to explain. Ilyena saw fools everywhere. Lidya was demanding help.

“ENOUGH! Everyone be quiet. Dani, what happened?”

“Hard to answer that while being quiet,” she muttered in the sudden silence, but she went on without waiting for him to dig himself out of the hole. “We went hunting. There was an ... incident, with Ayla and Raine.”

He followed her gaze to where a group of Maidens were huddled around almost as closely as Merile was clutching Raine. The Maidens saw his approach, and even moved aside to let him see. Lidya had her arms around Ayla, who was sitting on the ground, clutching at her head, with none of her usual fierce pride to be seen.

“I do not know how to help her, *Car'a'carn*,” Lidya reported formally. The expectation that *he* should settled on Rand’s shoulders.

“Ayla? Are you injured?” It was a foolish question. Ilyena and Merile could both Heal. If that was all it was, the problem would already have been solved.

“Yes,” she said. “I cannot push them out of my head.” Some of the Maidens growled low, but Ayla’s growl drowned them all out. “Why will they not be quiet?” she demanded, raising her head to the sky. He saw her eyes then. They had been grey once. Now they shone with a burnished, golden light.

“Wolfsister,” he whispered before he could stop himself.

Ayla’s new eyes met his, and went very wide. “Shadowkiller. The first of firsts.” She moved to her knees, clutching at his coat.

Rand stepped hastily back. “No. Stop that. Get a hold of yourself, Ayla. You are a Maiden of the Spear, remember?”

It took a visible effort for her not to pursue. “Yes. *Far Dareis Mai*. Like my mother. Not ... not ... That is not my name!”

While the dismaying Maidens did what they could, Rand strode over to Dani, trying not to hear what the rest of the watching Aiel were muttering. “Wolves?” he whispered.

She nodded, and kept her own voice low. “They came when we were hunting. She didn’t mean it. She was as surprised as I was when Ayla began to change.”

He sighed. “Blood and ashes. Just when everyone was starting to get along.” Raine’s gaze was fixed on the dirt. She looked as miserable as he’d ever seen her. “Just when she was starting to be more confident.”

Dani touched his arm, right there in front of Ilyena. He dared to look at the icy Volsuni, but her face was a mask. She nodded to Raine. “You going to mope, then, or try to salvage things?” Ilyena said. “I don’t know why we waste our time with you sometimes.”

We? Dani’s face was a mask, too. She gave him a light shove, not so much away from her as towards Raine. Rand went, wondering.

“Thank the Light you’re here,” Merile greeted him. “I didn’t want to have to fight them.”

He crouched down. “You’d do that to defend her?”

“Yes. It’s terribly violent, but I would have pushed them away.”

He touched her cheek briefly but asked no more of her. "Raine? Did anyone hurt you?"

She shook her head without looking up. "Did it myself. Usual. Idiot. Stupid dog-girl!"

"Stop that," he said firmly. He was far from an expert on the topic but, "No-one turned Perrin into one, did they?" he went on in a whisper. "That isn't how it works. So you didn't cause this."

Raine said nothing, but Merile had heard. "Is it like an infection, then? I can stop those!" She was up and running before he could stop her.

He stayed with Raine, touched her shoulder and kept his voice low. "It is not an infection, either. And you didn't spread it."

She shook her head. "Brought wolves, they told her. No wolves, she stays a woman. Not an animal. Me. Stupid me."

That left him at a loss. It was a logical conclusion. All he could do was sigh and tighten his grip on her.

"Does anyone know why nothing seems to be happening?" he heard Merile ask.

"That is not a thing that can be Healed," Dani told her.

"If it was, do you not think I would have done it?" Ilyena added less gently. "What is that look? After all I showed you, you think I would not have!? Ingrate!"

Raine sniffed but he saw no tears on her cheeks. "So much anger. Everyone hates me now," she whispered. "I should just die."

They were in public. It didn't matter. "I don't hate you. I love you," he said firmly. "And if you die on me, I will find you in the next life and spank you like your daddy should have."

Raine buried her red face between her knees. No amount of prodding would get her to raise it, or to speak again, so he went right ahead and picked her up. It was easy; she was a skinny little thing, her weight barely slowing him as he cradled her in his arms and strode off.

"Ayla, come. We need to talk," he said.

She rose at once, the Maiden with eyes like no Maiden had ever had, and heeled him obediently. That was troubling, if more to Rand than to the Aiel. They might think *ji'e'toh* drove her, but he knew that there was something else involved. Lidya and some others came, too, leaving him with a dilemma. Should he tell them of the wolfkin? It wasn't really his secret to share. Merile and Ilyena would have come as well, but Dani kept them back. As he passed through the throng of Aiel, he heard Ilyena demanding answers that Dani refused to give.

Privacy was required, and he knew where to find it. The farmhouse was as empty as he'd first found it, so dark and depressing that he almost turned back. But better than in the middle of the tent city the army raised each night. He briefly wondered where Moiraine had gone as he set Raine down on a ladder-back chair.

The Maidens clustered by the entrance, faceless shapes in the dim light, all save for Ayla. The way her eyes glowed was eerily familiar. "The things we must talk about will be for her to share, or not," he told them. "Secure the house; see that we are not disturbed."

"Do as the *Car'a'carn* says," Sulin ordered. All save Ayla left at once.

It was her who pushed the door closed. "What has happened to me?"

"Raine?" When she didn't respond, he took a stab at it himself. "I've heard it called being wolfkin. I've met others like you. Raine for one. Wolfbrothers, wolfsisters. They can talk to wolves. But without words. Is that right?"

This time Raine spoke. "Words that aren't words. Scents, sights, meanings. Feelings. It's not for people. We should not be."

Rand winced. "Not all of those I've met are as ... critical of it as Raine here. And even Raine seems fine to me, most of the time. Do not panic."

"I do not panic," Ayla growled. "Why do they call you Shadowkiller? It was ... powerful. What they ..." She started pacing, rubbing furiously at her temples. "What they did not say, about you. Felt. Light."

"I don't know. I'm not wolfkin."

"Shadowkiller leads the greatest pack. He hunts the Shadow, for every moon that ever was or will be," Raine explained. If you could call it that.

"Talk sense, girl!" Ayla growled.

"I am! Rand is Shadowkiller, the Dragon Reborn, the *Car'a'carn*. Lews Therin Telamon. They are all just names for him."

"Don't call me Lews Therin," Rand said, as forbidden images tried to claw their way up from the depths of his soul. He stamped them down furiously.

Ayla was in no better mood. "How did you do this to me?"

"I didn't! I'm sorry. But I didn't."

"You and Daniele Rulonir were the only ones there!"

Rand pushed his own troubles aside as best he could. "It's like channelling. No-one made Aviendha a channeler. Or me. And no-one can make Mat or you one. Same with this. It's either in you or it's not. It was in you all along. Those wolves just brought it out."

Ayla's pacing stopped dead. "The Wise Ones. If ... when they find out ..."

Rand looked into Raine's sad eyes. Amys and the rest knew that wolfkin were dreamwalkers. Dreamwalkers were Wise Ones, among the Aiel, whether they could channel or not. Aviendha wasn't going to be pleased. Nor were Lidya and the rest. And Ayla least of all.

"I'm sorry," Rand said softly. "I think you must prepare yourself to follow Aviendha's path."

Ayla threw her head back and shouted wordlessly at the roof. She tossed her weapons to the floor as though the ceremony was already upon her, and started stalking back and forth again.

"My mother was *Far Dareis Mai* before marrying. And her mother. And all the women in my family, back five generations. I learned from my father until I was old enough to wed the spear. We hunted everything there was to hunt. Good training. Mother did not live long enough to see me join, but I fight to honour her and all my spearsisters through time. Now you say I must give up the spear. Why?"

Rand drew a deep breath. "You'll be able to dreamwalk. And your senses will become sharper than a regular human's. Oh! And you'll be able to kill Darkhounds, something the rest of us can't without using the One Power. There's probably more, but, Raine would need to tell you."

"Raine, Raine, Raine. Yet she says nothing, just sits there sulking!" She rounded on Rand next. "And you! You have always been pretty. I have enjoyed your body. But it has never done this to me before. Why do I hunger so?"

He felt his cheeks colour. "I ... have no idea how to answer that."

Ayla strode towards him. "The least you can do is rid me of it, so that I can think straight," she said, before pulling his lips down to hers.

Rand was prone to pleasing anyone who wanted pleasing. Too much so, he often thought. But even he had lines that he felt shouldn't be crossed. So he took Ayla by the shoulders and disentangled himself as gently as he could. "I think that's the wolves influencing your mind. Raine was like that once. Fight it. You don't have to do ... that sort of thing unless you want to."

She looked at him as if he was an idiot. "I have fucked you a dozen times. You have never been this shy before. Hurry up and take it out."

"Uhh ..." Well, that was true enough, he supposed. But there was still the wolfkin thing. While he was still standing there stupidly, trying to figure out what the right thing to do was, Ayla grabbed his shirt and ripped it right down the middle. "What the—?"

Her hands were all over him, nails scraping flesh in her eagerness. White teeth closed on the muscle of his chest, and for a moment he thought she was going to take a chunk out of him, but she only nipped. She was pulling at his clothes, grinding her crotch against his leg. Right or wrong, he couldn't help but respond.

It was Raine who pulled her away. "Leave him alone."

Ayla rounded on her, golden eyes blazing. "You challenge me, puppy?"

Though shorter and thinner, Raine growled right back at her. "He didn't want ... He's not yours to ... to ..."

"You claim the right? Ahead of me? Then let us dance."

Ayla slapped Raine across the face, hard. Rand was so shocked that she was already swinging again before he thought to intervene. "Stop that!"

He caught Ayla's wrist before the blow could land, but that only left her exposed to Raine's counterslap. The new wolfsister glared at him as though it had been he who slapped her. "Do not interfere!" His grip snapped open almost of its own accord.

The wolfsister he knew glared almost as hotly. "This is between us!"

That might well be so, but, "You can't just expect me to stand here while you kill each other!"

Ayla tried to shove Raine away, but the girl hopped back to land in a combat crouch. "I will not kill her. And she cannot kill me," the Aiel said. "No weapons. No veils. Just you and I, little girl. I will show you your place."

While Raine growled defiantly, Ayla shed her *shoufa* and veil, and threw her long knife aside. Not to be outdone, Raine took her own knives from their sheathes and tossed them to the far wall.

"No Maiden, but you have honour. You are still mine, though!" Ayla said. She attacked with hands and feet, flowing through such swift combinations that it was all Raine could do to avoid her, hopping back, ducking and rolling.

As much as he wanted her to win, Rand didn't have much hope for Raine's chances. Not only was Ayla bigger, she was far more experienced. It played out much as he'd expected at first. He dared to hope that the bloody lip Ayla gave her would be enough to make Raine yield but she fought on, throwing punches that didn't even come close to landing. She surprised them both, however, when one of those desperate rolls turned into a kick that locked Ayla's standing leg and brought her crashing down to the floor. They grappled, and Raine came out on top, her thin arms locked around Ayla's neck. She clung on for dear life while the furious Maiden tried to shake her off.

It was all much as he'd seen in the many sparring sessions he'd taken part in these past months. At first. It changed when Raine pushed Ayla's trousers down and started slapping at her crotch.

"You want him to breed you, but this isn't worthy of him," Raine growled. She used her foot to push Ayla's trousers the rest of the way down while the Maiden hissed in outrage.

Not for the reason Rand would have expected, however. "You will watch and wait your turn, pup!" Near naked from the waist down, she managed to get to her hands and knees, with Raine clinging to her back rather suggestively. She didn't stay that way long, but turned and slammed them down onto the ground, driving the air from Raine's lungs.

Ayla broke the hold, and immediately yanked Raine's ragged dress up, exposing her pale body. "Skinny little runt. A baby would barely get a sip from these." When she slapped Raine's breasts, the girl started kicking at her. She could do little else with her hands bound above her head. Ayla pinched and squeezed her nipples, smiling at her futile struggles. She pushed up her top to expose her own, larger breast, and set it against Raine's, taking her time, making sure they could all see the comparison. "I am stronger. Admit it, and I may go easy on you."

In response, Raine tried to bite her.

As bizarre as he found the situation, even Rand knew that was a mistake.

It was a mistake that resulted in Raine sprawling half atop the farmer's abandoned bed, her hands tied behind her back with a makeshift rope made from her own underwear. Ayla hadn't even left her a stocking for dignity. All she wore was that dark leash she'd bought in Tear, and the end of that waited for the hands of the woman who'd beaten her.

Said woman had shed her own clothes, too, and taken a trip to the case that, it turned out, held more than just her bow. Strutting back to the bed, slapped Raine's skinny butt, then took her by the ear and made her look at what was tied around her waist.

"You know where this is going." Raine's whimpers won her no pity. "I hope you have readied yourself."

Strong legs parted Raine's with ease. Ayla searched for and found her hole, and then pushed forward mercilessly. Raine yelped, Ayla growled, and the fucking started in earnest. Even if he hadn't known from the yelps, Rand could see Raine's poor little ass being spread by the dark horn. He could see Ayla's cheeks, too, clenching each time she rammed it home. Dew glistened on the red hair of both wolfsisters' sexes.

With the toy firmly lodged in Raine's butt, Ayla locked her arms around her and spoke into her bitch's ear. "He sees. He knows. This is what happens when a little girl challenges a woman. That is what you are. A girl. A puppy. Remember it. I am going to fuck him, and you are going to watch. You are going to ... Wait. Your. Turn." Her hips slammed against Raine's with each word, driving home more than just the point.

Rand's mouth was dry. As much as he loved Raine, it was hard not to see truth in Ayla's words. Fit and strong, muscles moving visibly under her battle-scarred skin as she mounted her, she really did make Raine look like a little girl in comparison. A red-faced little girl who could do nothing but lie there and accept her punishment.

"Say it. Who am I?" Ayla demanded.

"Huntress," Raine said.

The fucking slowed. The Maiden stared. "Yes. I am," she said slowly. Then she shook her head fiercely. "But what else am I?"

"The top bitch," Raine confessed to the woman dominating her.

"And what are you?"

Raine looked at Rand and bit her lip. He knew she didn't want to admit it, but admit it she did. "The bottom bitch."

Only then did Ayla stop humping her. She slid the toy out of her abused ass and said, "Roll over," punctuating the command with a slap on the bum. Raine did as she was told and, when Ayla crawled onto the bed, knelt over her head and said, "Lick," she did that as well.

It didn't take long. Her point made, Ayla got up again. "Now sit and watch," she said as she strode towards Rand, undoing the ties on the toy. It clattered to the ground just before she shoved him onto the chair and started yanking at his breeches.

Rand wondered if he was supposed to resist. Wrestle with her or something. He didn't want to. The cock that sprang free was rock hard and already sticky with his juices. Ayla didn't mess around, she just threw a leg over his lap, aimed him well, and slammed right down. He couldn't help but moan. He was so ready for that. She fucked hard, growling like a wild beast each time she took him in, rising and falling faster and faster.

He could see Raine past her shoulder, kneeling on the bed, back bowed and head lowered but watching it all. She was flushed all over, her pink nipples telling the tale almost as well as her big, golden eyes. He'd have to find a way to comfort her later.

For now, Ayla was demanding the attention she'd won. She had a lot on her mind, it was true, and had said she needed to clear it. It was only right to help her with that. So he let his hands rove, tracing straining muscles, cupping flapping breasts, squeezing at last the cheeks he'd been staring at as she probed Raine's cute little butt.

Ayla responded even better than he'd hoped, and came to a howling climax only a few minutes after first taking him inside her hot snatch.

That wasn't enough for her, though. She got off and went to the ground, uncaring of how rough the wood was against her breasts. Her waist she raised, pointing her dripping heat at him. "Breed me," she begged as she rolled her hips.

Rand was on her before even knowing he'd moved.

She spread her legs wide to accommodate his hard thrusts, and bit her own finger to try and quiet the sound he forced from her. He might have felt bad about it, if he hadn't been so consumed by lust. As it was, he fucked Ayla as hard as he could. Not even the dejected way Raine watched him fuck her rival could give him pause. He kept going at that pace until the moment his come burst forth to flood her pussy. And when that happened he wanted to howl like a wolf, too.

He managed to restrain himself that far, at least, but was still left poleaxed by it all. So much so that he was still sitting on the ground when Ayla finished dressing.

"That was surprisingly effective," she said. "I feel ... calmer. The changes are still disturbing, but at least my mind is more my own."

"What will you do now?" he asked.

Ayla went slowly to gather her weapons, including the one with which she had so defeated Raine. "I must face the Wise Ones eventually. But not tonight. Tonight I spend with my spearsisters." He recalled suddenly how steady her hands had been during the archery contest back in Cold Rocks Hold. It was hard to see them shaking now, as she held the spear she might soon have to break.

"Go quickly. Enjoy it for as long as you can," he said quietly.

She did not meet his eyes, but strode to the door and let herself out, showing a fine disregard for the two semi-naked people inside who had to scramble to hide themselves. Rand had to close the door again himself, and was glad to see no gawkers lurking.

"Bit rude. You'd think she grew up in the woods," he said. Raine's laugh was reluctant but he was glad to hear it. "So. This has been quite the day for you. To put it mildly."

She nodded glumly. "Worst for a long time."

"Should I have interfered in that fight?"

"No. Challenged. Lost. Knew the price."

“Poor girl. Is your bum sore? I could get Merile.”

The colour returned to her cheeks. “Please don’t.”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that.” He sat beside her on the bed, and draped his arm across her shoulders. “Listen, weird customs be damned, you are still my top girl. Ayla being a better fighter doesn’t change that at all.”

“It’s ... it’s not a very civilised thing, is it?” A smile tried to win free as she handed him her lead. “You taught me that.”

“I don’t know that that’s true, but thanks. Don’t you think it’s time you got rid of this thing? You don’t need it.”

“I think I do. And ... and even if I didn’t, I like when you hold it.” It was far too soon for him to be responding like that. Discomfort awaited if he didn’t calm down. “I trust you,” she went on in a whisper, those eyes shining in the fading light. “I know you would never hurt me deliberately.”

That “deliberately” killed his retort. She knew him well. And it was too late to avoid discomfort. “I would sooner die.”

Raine shuffled closer. “It h-hurt, what she did. But ... but it w-was ... almost nice, too. If someone gentler did it ... I-if you did ...” Her courage failed, and with it words.

Rand smiled, leaned in, and kissed her softly. “We should stay the night here.”

She was swift to agree, ducking under the covers and waiting for him to undress. A brief, relieved smile welcomed him when she saw the state he was in. As soon as he joined her in bed, Raine turned her back and invited his arms around her by snuggling closer. The arms she got, hands that held her lead pressed against her sweet chest. But there was something else she was inviting, too.

Before going further, Rand snatched at *saidin* and wove a slickening around himself. It had been mean of Ayla to do otherwise. Raine’s breath hitched when she felt a wetness pressing against her. He spoke into her ear as well, but his words were very different.

“Shush. You’re okay. Relax. Melt into my arms and let yourself go. I won’t hurt you. You’re my favourite wolfsister, whatever she said. Don’t worry about what happened. Everyone makes mistakes. You’re a good person, Raine. A good girl. My good girl.”

It was only when he felt his balls press up against her that he stopped speaking. He’d gone all the way in, and she hadn’t made a sound of pain. Those big golden eyes were staring at him worshipfully. She was wonderfully tight.

And yet, he moved slowly that night, whispering sweet nothings all the while, more interested in driving those dark thoughts from her mind than in driving his manhood into her. It was late when he finally finished, her own pleasures having shuddered through her long since. They slept like that, too, with her cradled in his arms. Doubtless she looked even smaller than she had with Ayla, but that didn’t matter at all. She wasn’t small to him.

## CHAPTER 59: *The Dangers of Dreaming*



Ayla's condition didn't merit as much talk from the Aiel as Dani had expected, not with so much else to wonder at. They had heard tales of the wetlands, read of them in books bought from merchants and peddlers like Hadnan Kadere, but few had actually seen them since the hunt for Laina. They adapted quickly, though; the grey-brown of the tents blended well with dead leaves under the trees and with the dying grass and weeds. The camp spread over miles, marked by thousands of small cookfires in the golden dusk.

Dani was more than happy to crawl into the tent she shared with Ilyena once the *gai'shain* had it up. Inside, the lamps were lit and a small fire burned in the firepit.

Cowinde, meek and silent in her white robes, brought their supper, some of that pale flat bread made from *zemai* flour and in a red-striped bowl, a thick stew that she ate mechanically, though she felt more tired than hungry. She recognized the dried peppers and beans, but did not ask what the dark meat was. Rabbit, she told herself firmly, and hoped that it was. The Aiel ate things that would put more curl in her hair than Elayne had.

There was little talk. Ilyena had wanted to know more of the wolfsisters than Dani had felt allowed to say. Urging her to ask Raine had only increased her annoyance. She'd since subsided into a frosty silence. That would pass, though. It always did.

Once done with the stew, she stretched out near an ornately worked silver lamp that had a polished silver disc to reflect and increase its light. She had felt a little guilty once she realized that most of the Aiel had no light at night but their fires; few had brought lamps or oil except the Wise Ones and the chiefs of clans and septs. But there was no point to sitting in the dim illumination of the firepit when she could have proper light. That reminded her: the nights here would not be so drastic a contrast with the days as in the Waste; the tent was already beginning to feel uncomfortably warm.

She channelled briefly, flows of Air to smother the fire, and dug into her saddlebags for the worn leather-bound book that she had borrowed from Aviendha. It was a small fat volume with crowded lines of small print, hard to read except in good light, but easily portable. *The Flame, the Blade and the Heart*, it was called, a collection of tales about Birgitte and Gaidal Cain, Anselan and Barashelle, Rogosh Eagle-eye and Dunsinin, and a dozen more. Aviendha claimed that she liked it for the adventures and battles, and maybe she did, but every last story told of the love of a man and a woman, too. Dani was willing to admit that that was what she liked, the sometimes stormy, sometimes tender threads of undying love.

In truth she did not feel like reading any more than she had felt like eating—all she really wanted to do was bathe and sleep, and she might be willing to forgo bathing—but tonight they were to meet Nynaeve in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. Dani would have to be the one to go. Rand and Raine had too much else to deal with. Should she have gone with them earlier? Despite everything she still felt a bit of an intruder in this world of Maidens and wolfkin. No. Someone had to take care of the meeting.

It would not be night yet in Altara, and that meant remaining awake, but her eyes kept trying to drift shut as she read, fuzzily half-dreaming the stories in the book. Yawning, she fished her *ter'angreal* out of her pouch and tried to embrace *saidar*. It took a few attempts, but she managed. Only a few moments later, her forehead came to rest on the open book.

Dani gave a start at finding herself among the great redstone columns of the Heart of the Stone, in the strange light of *Tel'aran'rhiad*, and another at realizing that she wore the *cadin'sor*. Amys would not be pleased to see her in that; not amused at all. Hastily she changed it, and was surprised when her clothes flickered back and forth between the *algode* blouse and bulky wool skirt and a fine gown of brocaded blue silk before finally settling on the Aiel garb, complete with her ivory bracelet of flames and her gold-and-ivory necklace. That indecision had not happened to her in some time.

She would have to wait for the others. If she left the World of Dreams now, very likely she would only step into a dream of her own, and she did not yet always have awareness in her dreams; without that, she could not return to *Tel'aran'rhiod*.

She had almost grown accustomed to the feel of unseen eyes in this vast chamber. Only the columns, and the shadows, and all this empty space. Still, she hoped that Amys was not too long in coming, nor Nynaeve. But they would be. Time could be as strange in *Tel'aran'rhiod* as in any dream, but it had to be a good hour yet before the arranged meeting. Perhaps she had time to ...

Suddenly she realized that she could hear voices, like faint whispers among the columns. Embracing *saidar*, she moved cautiously toward the sound, toward the place where Rand had left *Callandor* beneath the great dome. The Wise Ones claimed that control of *Tel'aran'rhiod* was as strong as the One Power here, but she knew her abilities with the Power far better, and trusted them more. Still hidden well back among the thick redstone columns, she stopped and stared.

It was not a pair of Black sisters, as she had feared, and not Nynaeve, either. Instead, Elayne stood near the glittering shaft of *Callandor* rising out of the floorstone, deep in quiet conversation with as oddly dressed a woman as Dani had ever seen. She wore a short white coat of peculiar cut and wide yellow trousers gathered in folds at her ankles, above short boots with raised heels. An intricate braid of golden hair hung down her back, and she held a bow that gleamed like polished silver. The arrows in the quiver shone, too.

Dani squeezed her eyes shut. First the difficulty with her dress, and now this. Just because she had been reading about Birgitte—a silver bow told the name for certain—was no reason to imagine that she saw her. Birgitte waited—somewhere—for the Horn of Valere to call her and the other Heroes to the Last Battle. But when Dani opened her eyes again, Elayne and the oddly dressed woman were still there. She could not quite make out what they were saying, but she believed her eyes this time. She was on the point of going out to announce herself when a voice spoke, behind her.

“Did you decide to come early? Alone?”

Dani whirled to face grey-haired Seana, who stood with her arms folded beneath her breasts; her shawl and her wrinkles both pulled tight in displeasure.

“I fell asleep,” Dani said. That it was the technical truth would not necessarily save her. Seana was not as strict as Bair but she was perfectly capable of setting her to piling up rocks the rest of the night. Many of the Wise Ones were great believers in useless labour for punishment; you could not tell yourself you were doing anything other than being punished while you were burying ashes with a spoon.

She could not hold back a sigh of relief when Seana nodded and said, “It can happen. But next time, return and dream your own dreams; I could have heard what Nynaeve has to say, and tell her what we know. If Melaine was not with Bael and Dorindha tonight, and the others were not discussing what to do with Ayla, they would be here, as well.” Her voice turned grumpy. “Now I suppose we have to wait for Nynaeve to arrive. If we must, we must, but we will use the time to advantage. Concentrate your mind on—”

“It isn’t Nynaeve,” Dani interrupted. A lesson with Seana was intriguing, since she had always been the most distant of the dreamwalkers for some reason, but there were other priorities. “It is Elayne, and ...” She trailed off, as she turned. Elayne, in elegant green silk suitable for a ball, was pacing up and down not far from *Callandor*. Birgitte was nowhere to be seen. *I did not imagine her.*

“Another young fool,” Seana muttered. “Girls today have no more brains or discipline than goats.” She stalked out ahead of Dani and planted herself across *Callandor*’s glittering shape from Elayne, fists on hips. “You are not my pupil, Elayne of Andor—though you’ve wheedled enough out of us to keep you from killing yourself here, if you are careful—but if you were, I would welt you from your toes up and send you back to your mother until you were grown enough to be let out of her sight. Which I think might take as many more years as you have lived already. I know you have been coming into the World of Dreams alone, you and Nynaeve. You are both fools to do it.”

Elayne gave a start when they first appeared, but as Seana’s tirade washed over her, she drew herself up, that chilly tilt to her chin. Her gown became red and took on a finer sheen, and grew embroidery down the sleeves and across the high bodice, including rearing lions in white and golden lilies, her own sigil. A thin golden diadem rested in her red-gold curls, a single rearing lion set in moonstones above her brows. She did not yet have the best control over such things. Then again, maybe she wore exactly what she intended this time. “I do thank you for your concern,” she said

regally. "Yet it is true that I am not your pupil, Seana of the Black Cliffs Nakai. I am grateful for your instruction, but I must go my own way on the tasks given me by the Amyrlin Seat."

"A dead woman," Seana said coldly. "You claim obedience to a dead woman."

"A truth that is secondary to the truth that I am not your subject, and this is not your realm."

"Why are you here instead of Nynaeve?" Dani asked. What she wanted to ask was what Elayne had been doing talking to Birgitte. *I did not imagine it.* Maybe it had been someone dreaming she was Birgitte. But only those who entered *Tel'aran'rhiad* knowingly remained for more than minutes, and Elayne surely would not have been speaking with one of them. Where did Birgitte and the others wait?

"Nynaeve is indisposed. The food of Altara does not always agree with her." The diadem vanished, and Elayne's gown became simpler, with only a few golden scrolls around the bodice.

Dani snorted a laugh. "For a woman so fond of forcing vile concoctions down people's throats, she has a surprisingly tender stomach."

"Believe me, I know," Elayne giggled.

"She can be a fool sometimes. I wish I had both of you alone. If we were in the Tower, in our old rooms, I'd say a few words to the pair of you."

Elayne stiffened, as queenly and cool as she had been with Seana. "You may say them to me whenever you wish."

Had she understood? Alone; away from the Wise Ones. In the Tower. Dani could only hope. Best to change the subject and hope the Wise Ones were not picking over her words as carefully as she hoped that Elayne was. "Are you still in Ebou Dar?"

"No. We have decided on our destination." And plainly did not want to say where it was.

"Let us finish what we are here for," Seana said briskly.

There was really little to tell Elayne. That they were in Cairhien finally, that Couladin had devastated Selean and ravaged the surrounding land, that the Shaido were still days ahead and moving west. The Wise One knew more than she; she had not been busy with Raine. There had been skirmishes in the evening, small ones and only a few, with mounted men who quickly fled, and other men on horses who had been sighted ran without fighting. There had been no prisoners taken. Moiraine and Lan seemed to think that the riders could have been bandits, or supporters of one or another of the Houses trying to claim the Sun Throne. All had been equally ragged. Whoever they were, word would soon spread that there were more Aiel in Cairhien.

"They had to learn sooner or later" was Elayne's only comment.

Dani watched Elayne as she and the Wise One faded away—to her it seemed as though Elayne and the Heart of the Stone became more and more attenuated—but her golden-haired friend gave no sign as to whether she had understood the message.

Instead of returning to her own body, Dani floated in darkness. She seemed to be darkness herself, without substance. Whether her body lay up or down or sideways from her, she did not know—there was no direction here—but she knew that it was near, that she could step into it easily. All around her in the blackness, fireflies seemingly twinkled, a vast horde fading away into unimaginable distance. Those were dreams, dreams of the Aiel in the camp, dreams of men and women across Cairhien, across the world, all glittering there.

She could pick out some among the nearer and name the dreamer, now. In one way those sparkles were just as alike as fireflies—that was what had given her so much trouble in the beginning—but in another, somehow, they now seemed as individual as faces. Moiraine's dreams appeared muted, dimmed by the wards she had woven. Amys' and Bair's were bright and regular in their pulsing; they had taken to their beds, apparently. If she ever learned to recognize Elayne and Nynaeve in the same way, she would be able to find them in that great constellation wherever they were in the world. But tonight she did not mean to observe anyone's dream.

Carefully she formed a well-remembered image in her mind, and she was back in *Tel'aran'rhiad*, inside the small, windowless room in the Tower where she had lived as a Novice. A narrow bed was built against one white-painted wall. A washstand and a three-legged stool stood opposite the door, and the current occupant's dresses and shifts of white wool hung with a white cloak on pegs. There could as easily have been none; the Tower had not been able to fill the Novices' quarters in many years. The floor was almost as pale as walls and clothes. Every day the Novice who

lived there would scrub that floor on hands and knees; Dani had done so herself, and Elayne had, too. If a queen came to train in the Tower, she would start in a room like this, scrubbing the floor.

The garments were arranged differently when she glanced at them again, but she ignored that. Ready to embrace *saidar* in a heartbeat, she opened the door just enough to stick her head out. And drew a relieved breath when she found Elayne's head coming just as slowly out of a distant doorway. Dani hoped she did not appear as wide-eyed and uncertain. She motioned hurriedly, and Elayne scurried across in Novice white that became a pale grey silk riding dress as she darted inside.

For an instant more she stayed there, scanning the railed galleries of the Novices' quarters. Layer on layer they rose, and fell as many levels to the Novices' Court below. Not that she really expected Liandrin or worse to be out there, but it never hurt to be careful.

"I thought this was what you meant when you were so strangely rude," Elayne said as she shut the door. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to remember what I can say in front of whom? Sometimes I wish we could just tell the Wise Ones everything. Let them know we are only Accepted, and be done with it."

"You would be done with it," Dani objected. "The rest of us would have a much less relaxing time, though. I happen to be sleeping not twenty paces from them."

Elayne shivered. "That Seana. She reminds me of Lini when I'd broken something I was not supposed to touch."

"Wait until you meet Sorilea." Elayne gave her a doubtful look, but then, Dani was not sure that she would have believed Sorilea herself until she met her. "Was that really Birgitte I saw you talking to?"

Elayne staggered as if hit in the stomach. Her blue eyes closed for a moment, and she took a breath that must have filled her to the toes. "I cannot talk to you about that."

"Why not?"

"I cannot, Dani. You must believe me. I would if I could, but I cannot. Perhaps ... I can ask ..." If Elayne had been the kind of woman to wring her hands, she would have been doing it then. Her mouth opened and closed without any words coming out; her eyes darted around the room as if seeking inspiration or aid. Taking a deep breath, she fixed an urgent blue gaze on Dani. "Anything I say violates confidences I promised to hold. Even that. Please, Dani. You must trust me. And you must not tell anyone what you ... think you saw."

Dani nodded solemnly. "I understand. I've been keeping secrets of my own. For good reasons, or so I tell myself, but they weigh on you after a while."

Elayne sat down on the edge of the neatly made bed. "We keep secrets too often, Dani, but sometimes there is a reason. You are right about the weight, however. It is at times like this that I am glad Rand created his Inner Circle. It is not just a gathering of his most trusted friends and allies you see. We share our secrets, to prevent any tragic misunderstandings." All that merited only a dismissive wave of the hand from Elayne. How nice for her to be included in this select group; one that Dani had never been bloody invited to!

While Dani seethed, Elayne had something else on her mind. "I told myself I was not going to ask this, Dani. Just once I was not going to have my head full of him." The grey riding dress became a shimmering green gown; Elayne could not possibly have been aware of how deeply the neckline swooped. "But ... is Rand well?"

"He is alive and unharmed, if that is what you mean," she said curtly. "I thought he was hard in Tear, but today I heard him threaten to hang men if they go against his commands. Not that they are bad orders—he won't let anyone take food without paying, or murder people—but still. They were the first to hail him as He Who Comes With the Dawn; they followed him out of the Waste without hesitation. And he threatened them, as hard as cold steel."

"Not a threat, Dani. He is a king, whatever you or he or anyone else says, and a king or queen must dispense justice without fear of enemies or favour for friends. Anyone who does that has to be hard. Mother can make the city walls seem soft, sometimes." There was something of a haughty tone to Elayne's voice, until she glanced down at herself. Then her face went crimson, and the green gown suddenly had a lace neck under her chin. "He has a right to expect to be obeyed," she finished in a strangled voice.

Secrets. What would Elayne say when, or if, she found out what Rand had been up to in her absence? What would she say about Dani's part in it? She could understand that urge to just get it

over with. But it was another secret she asked about. "Where are you all going? Not here I take it, assuming here would still be standing when you arrived."

"Elaida cannot destroy the White Tower, Dani. Whatever she does, the Tower will remain. Perhaps she will not stay Amyrlin. Once we arrive at Salidar, I will wager that we find a Tower in exile, with every Ajah but the Red."

"Salidar, huh? I hope you find what you're looking for there." Dani knew she sounded sad. She wanted Aes Sedai to support Rand and oppose Elaida, but that meant the White Tower broken for sure, maybe never to be made whole again.

"I must get back," Elayne said. "Nynaeve insists that whichever of us does not enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* remain awake. I do not know why she is so insistent. Whoever is watching can do nothing to help, and we both know enough to be perfectly safe here, now. She wouldn't even let Keestis take her watch tonight, the silly goose." Her green dress flickered to Birgitte's white coat and voluminous yellow trousers for an instant, then snapped back. "She said I wasn't to tell you this, but she thinks that Moghedien is trying to find us. Her especially."

Dani did not ask the obvious question. Clearly it was something that Birgitte had told them. "Be careful. The Forsaken are nothing to take lightly." It was as empty as advice could be, but what else could she say? She certainly didn't know how to defeat a Forsaken.

Elayne gave it a more polite nod than it merited before fading away.

Dani didn't wait very long before doing the same. Or trying to. After a moment spent sitting there awkwardly, she put her head in her hands. Why was nothing working tonight? She dismissed the creaking of the door as more *Tel'aran'rhiod* strangeness at first, but the long slow squeal of those hinges demanded attention. So did the figure who stepped into her room and looked right at her.

She was very tall, yet her curves thrust out in all the right ways. Skin almost as pale as her dress contrasted sharply with her midnight hair. Her face was a sculptor's muse, and those big black eyes tried to swallow Dani whole even as the anger in them made her put her back to the wall. Her old room, never large, seemed suddenly a coffin with that presence filling it.

The questions she wanted to ask failed to win past her parched throat.

"I see you with him far too often, little girl. There, and even here. Here! Did you think you could mock me in my own realm and escape!?"

"W-what?" The woman wasn't disappearing. She was a Dreamer, so she could not be an Aes Sedai. And she was obviously no Aiel. "Who a-are you?"

"The woman whose man you have been toying with. That should be answer enough." Rand? Burn him and his perpetually faulty belt! "But ... if you must hear a name, you will know me as ... Lanfear."

She felt the blood drain from her face. A Forsaken! A pitiful whimper escaped her despite her best efforts to strangle it. Embarrassment lent her strength. "Y-you're just another Darkfriend. A fool who betrayed the Light. And ... and doubly a fool if you think Rand would ever love someone like you!"

She embraced *saidar* as she spoke. She would fight, even if it was to the death—her death. Yet *saidar* was denied her as surely as escape. Had Lanfear caused that, too? Trying again amused the Forsaken.

"Pitiful. You cannot escape. You cannot break my shield. You cannot even move." Somehow Dani found herself being lifted up the wall, her dressed scraping against it from the pressure of the invisible force being used against her. Her head was almost to the ceiling by the time it stopped. She hung there, unable to do more than twitch her fingers, hovering in the air and on the brink of panic. "Look at you. You think to rival me?"

The Forsaken posed, hand on one round hip, a picture of feminine beauty. Save for the angry sneer that twisted her face. There was nothing beautiful about that.

"I don't even know you. Let me go!"

"I think not. An example must be made. But to break, or to destroy? Which would speak loudest?" Clawing for *saidar* did nothing now, just as it had not the last time she'd been at the mercy of a woman who'd pledged her soul to the Dark One. Only pride stopped her from screaming.

"Such pride! I can take that from you as easily as I could take your life." The pressure changed, pushing against her mind instead of her body. Sweat broke out on her forehead as she stared

at the monster in her room, at the Forsaken, at the glorious creature she had to worship. “Feel it, girl ... the ecstasy that sustains me. Is it not wonderful? Do you not hunger for more?”

“N-no” she said weakly. The pressure doubled. “Yes, oh yes!” she screamed.

“We will be bound. Such a link can never be broken. As I make you mine, so shall I do the same with your fellow Accepted. And together, we shall reach out across the world to make it mine!”

Lanfear’s eyes shone with madness. And, and the same madness was in her. She had to fight it! “I’m ... no-one’s slave, witch.”

The Forsaken blinked in surprise. It was such a small thing, and yet so human, so ... normal. “Still you defy me!? It is not possible!”

It took a great effort, but Dani managed to make herself smile. “Yeah? Maybe you’re not as tough as you like to think.”

She reached out and put her hand around Dani’s throat. “Do you dare think that a victory? Service was merely a mercy I considered. Your death will please me just as much.”

Something popped out of the Forsaken’s stomach, a horrible red shaft. Dani stared in confusion, all the more so when she realised Lanfear was staring, too. Her white dress was stained with red, and when she tried to speak blood flowed over her lips.

“Release her, creature,” Seana hissed.

Wonder of wonders, Lanfear obeyed. Dani dropped to the floor, the pressure that had held her by mind and by body evaporating. The Forsaken blinked out of existence in a flash of undeserving light. Dani dared to hope she was dead as she looked her gratitude at Seana.

“Where did you come from?”

“A foolish question. If you mean why am I here, it is because I checked on you and saw you were not dreaming as you should. I did not expect this.”

She rose on shaking legs. “Thank the Light you did. That was Lanfear herself. She ... she was jealous, I think. Of me and Rand.”

“An unworthy reaction from an unworthy woman,” Seana said, a bit oddly. How could she be so calm about encountering a Forsaken? “We shall continue this aw—”

“YOU DARE STRIKE ME!?”

Lanfear did not return to the room. She destroyed it, and all around it. The floor shook so much that Dani almost fell again as walls and roof shattered, the white stone shooting away like puffs of dandelion before a hurricane. She gaped around in horror. The White Tower looked more like the White Stump now—the upper two thirds of it was gone. Her room had become the new roof, an open landing at which Tar Valon stared in shock while Dragonmount grumbled over all.

The Forsaken stood in the middle of that devastation, and her dress was pristine white again. Had Dani thought her angry before? That had been nothing to her fury now.

Another spear had appeared in Seana’s hand. “Don’t,” Dani said. “We need to go.”

But the Wise One shook her grey head. “This is a servant of the Shadow, and a threat to the *Car'a'carn*. It must be destroyed.”

“The arrogance! And from an Aiel no less.” Lanfear raised her chin high. “Destroy me, then,” dared she around whom blazed a halo such as Dani had never seen. Not even Nynaeve was so strong in the Power.

Dani embraced *saidar* even so. She would fight if she had to, no matter how bad the odds. Yet, no lightning struck, no fires burned, no rocks flew. Lanfear and Seana just stared at each other, there atop the remains of the White Tower. Not knowing what else to do, she wove Fire and Air and sent a bolt lancing towards Lanfear. It disappeared midway. Her fireball did the same, as did the coils of Air she tried to strike her with. Seana’s spear disappeared, too. When that proud old woman took her first step back, Lanfear smiled and raised her hands. Seana rose with them, floating up much as Dani had, teeth gritted against the pain.

“Your kind once served me, Aiel. They would be ashamed to know one of their own dared think to destroy me. Know that as you die.”

Seana managed to force words through the pain. “Girl. Daniele. Wake, wake now!”

“Stop it, Lanfear,” Dani called instead. “Please! Spare her, let her go—I’ll do anything. I’ll become your slave!”

But Lanfear just looked down her nose. “You bargain from a position of absolute weakness. Why give up anything when soon enough I’ll have you all?”

So, as Dani watched through tear-blurred eyes, sudden flames roared into being around the floating Wise One. Of such intensity they were that they turned the remains of the White Tower into a temporary lighthouse. Yet it was not the heat that made her rip her gaze away.

Out of that inferno, a final scream came. But not of pain.

“Wake, girl! NOW!”

Dani woke, screaming in the darkness. She almost thought herself safe, but then something grabbed her. She lashed out desperately with her elbows, and managed to kick free of whatever was binding her feet. Curses failed to drown out her scream, until a globe of light sprang into being, casting its stark brightness across the inside of her tent.

The globe balanced above Ilyena’s hand. The one that was not trying to staunch the flow of blood from her nose. “What was that for?” she demanded.

“I’m sorry, I ... Is this real? I’m awake, aren’t I?” Lanfear could not get her if she was awake.

“Of course. Light, Dani, I’ve never seen you so frightened. What happened?”

She grabbed her girl and pulled her close. “Lanfear. She found me in the World of Dreams. She wanted to kill me, she ... Light! She killed Seana!”

Ilyena had hugged her at first, but she was as still as a statue by the end. “The Forsaken. Attacked you? How ... dare they? But don’t worry, you’re safe now.”

“Safe?” Despite Ilyena’s warmth, Dani shivered. Lanfear had spoken of Rand as if she knew him, and knew him well. “I don’t think any of us are safe.”

\* \* \*

Elayne did not leave the dream at once after meeting Dani. Instead she went to Elaida’s ornately furnished study to see if she could take a leaf from Nynaeve’s book and learn anything new.

It was as it had been on previous visits, though on every visit fewer of the vine-carved stools stood in that arc in front of the wide writing table. The paintings still hung above the fireplace, and the miniatures that Elaida treasured remained in place, a reminder of her old study back in Caemlyn, that Elayne had so often been schooled in. It was not difficult to push aside the distant echo of girlish admiration. Elaida had never been an easy woman to like. Elayne strode straight to the table, pushing aside that thronelike chair with its inlaid ivory Flame of Tar Valon, so she could reach the lacquered letterbox. Lifting the lid, all fighting hawks and clouds, she began scanning parchments as fast as she could. Even so, some melted away half-read, or changed. There was no way to tell what was important and what insignificant beforehand.

Most seemed reports of failure. Still no word of where the Lord of Bashere had taken his army and a note of frustration and worry tinging the words. No word on Rand’s whereabouts, either, said a cringing report filled with near panic. That was good to know, and worth the trip by itself. More than a month had passed since the last news from Tanchico by any Ajah’s eyes-and-ears, and others in Tarabon had also gone silent; the writer blamed the anarchy there; rumours that someone had taken Tanchico could not be confirmed, but the writer suggested that Rand himself was involved. Even better, if Elaida was looking in the wrong place by a thousand leagues. A confused report said that a Red sister in Caemlyn claimed to have seen the Queen at a public audience but various Ajahs’ agents in Caemlyn said her mother had been in seclusion for days. *Is she ill? I haven’t seen her in so long.* It would be nice to visit, but leaving again would not be easy judging by what Gawyn and Galad had said. There was fighting in the Borderlands, possibly minor rebellions in Shienar and Arafel; the parchment was gone before she reached the reason. Pedron Niall calling in Whitecloaks to Amadicia, possibly to move against Altara. That was most troubling. They would need to travel faster if they were to reach the safety of Salidar. Even an army of Whitecloaks were no threat to the Aes Sedai. One of the more striking reports said that Shemerin had been arrested and reduced to Accepted. An Amyrlin wasn’t supposed to be able to do that, yet Elayne could not be surprised that Elaida would try. The woman had always been authoritarian. As Amyrlin, she doubtless thought she could do anything she wanted.

The next parchment was about Elayne and Nynaeve. First the writer advised against punishing the agent who had allowed them to escape—Elaida had scratched that out in bold strokes and written “Make an example!” in the margin—and then, just when the woman began to detail the search for the pair in Ebou Dar, the single sheet became a fistful, a sheaf of what seemed to be

builders' and masons' estimates for constructing a private residence for the Amyrlin Seat on the Tower grounds. More like a palace, by the number of pages.

She let the pages fall, and they vanished before they finished scattering across the tabletop. The lacquered box was closed again. She could spend the rest of her life here, she knew; there would always be more documents in the box, and they would always be changing. The more ephemeral something was in the waking world—a letter, a piece of clothing, a bowl that might be frequently moved—the less firm its reflection in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. She could not remain here too long; Nynaeve needed her sleep.

Hurrying out to the antechamber, she was about to reach for the neat piles of scrolls and parchments, some with seals, on the Keeper's writing table, when the room seemed to flicker. Before she had time to even consider what that meant, the door opened, and Rand stepped in, smiling, his brocaded red coat fitting his shoulders perfectly, snug breeches showing the shape of his calves.

She took a deep breath, her stomach fluttering. It just was not fair for a man to have a face so beautiful.

He stepped closer, light eyes twinkling, and brushed her cheek with his fingers. "Will you walk with me in the garden?" he said softly.

"If you two wish to canoodle," a brisk woman's voice said, "you will not do so here."

Elayne spun, wide-eyed, staring at Leane seated behind the table with the Keeper's stole on her shoulders and a fond smile on her copper-cheeked face. The door to the Amyrlin's study was open, and inside Siuan stood beside her simple, well-polished writing table, reading a long parchment, the striped stole of office on her shoulders. This was madness.

She fled without thinking of what image she was forming, and found herself back in the garden of her mother's palace, looking up at a wall on which no handsome farmboy sat. Perhaps she should check on her mother while she was here. She could not see her in person, of course, but some reflection of her presence should be here. Why was she shivering?

*Flicker.*

Her mother stepped out of the palace, red-gold curls falling around her shoulders. Morgase Trakand was a beautiful woman, and beloved by her people. Elayne could hear the laughter of happy citizens all around; as it should be.

"Are you still out here, child?" her mother said, gently chiding and amused. "You've certainly been married long enough to know you shouldn't let your husband know you mope about waiting on him." With a shake of her head, she laughed. "Too late. Here he comes."

Elayne turned eagerly, eyes lingering on the children playing in the garden. Whether fair-haired or dark they were bouncing around a laughing Min, always careful not to bump her rounded stomach, in which the latest of their family was growing. They had, they had discussed ... When had Min told her that ...? Rand rustled the children's hair as he strolled past, smiling at his ease, all his worries a thing of the past. That solemn, perpetually lost air he carried, the one that called out to her for help in a way that he was ever too proud to, it was nowhere to be seen now. That was what she wanted, of course, yet ... He paused to give Min a long kiss before striding towards Elayne, intent on the same. She had to press her hands to her stomach in a vain attempt to still gigantic butterflies.

"Did you miss me?" he said, smiling.

"I always do," she confessed.

He touched her cheek but her mother interrupted before they could do more.

"Here he is," she said, approaching with a babe wrapped in swaddling. "Here's your new son. He is a fine boy. He never cries at all."

Rand laughed as he took the child, held him aloft. "He does have your eyes, Elayne. He will be a fine one with the girls one day."

A son. She did not remember what it was like to be pregnant. No, no, something was wrong.

Elayne turned away from them all. She fled, leaping from *Tel'aran'rhiad* to her own body. Awareness remained only long enough for her to wonder how she could possibly have been fool enough to let her own fancies nearly trap her, and then she was deep in her own safe dream. Rand and Min smiled as they reached out to her. She took their hands, one in each.

\* \* \*

Peering through a narrow window, Moghedien wondered how long she dared linger before Rahvin grew suspicious. The girl had been stronger than she had thought, to escape her weaving of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Even Lanfear could not improve on her abilities here, whatever she claimed. Still, even though she had escaped one trap, Elayne would yet lead her to Nynaeve al'Meara. If she had been anyone else, Moghedien's trap would have been fatal. There were too many who could walk *Tel'aran'rhiod* freely. It was bad enough that she must share it with Lanfear.

But Nynaeve al'Meara. That woman she meant to make beg to be bound in her service. She would take her in the flesh, perhaps ask the Great Lord to grant her immortality, so Nynaeve could have forever to regret opposing Moghedien. She and Elayne were scheming with Birgitte, were they? That was another she had reason to punish. Birgitte had not even known who Moghedien was, so long ago, in the Age of Legends, when she foiled Moghedien's finely wrought plan to lay Lews Therin by his heels. But Moghedien had known her. Only, Birgitte—Teadra, she had been then—had died before she could deal with her. Death was no punishment, no end, not when it meant living on here.

Nynaeve al'Meara, Elayne Trakand, and Birgitte. Those three she would find, and deal with. From the shadows, so that they would not know until too late. All three, without exception.

## CHAPTER 60: Sallie Daera



The halo of greatness, blue and gold, flickered fitfully around Logain's head, though he rode slumped in his saddle. Min did not understand why it had appeared more often of late. He no longer even bothered to lift his eyes from the weeds in front of his black stallion to the low, wooded hills rolling by all around them.

The other two women rode together a little ahead, Siuan as awkward on her horse as she had ever been, Leane guiding her grey mare deftly, with knees more than reins. Only an unnaturally straight ribbon of ferns, poking through the leaf-covered forest floor, hinted that there had ever been a road here. The lacy ferns were withering, and the leaf mould rustled and crackled dryly under the horses' hooves. Thickly woven branches gave a little shelter from the noonday sun, but it was hardly cool. Sweat rolled down Min's face, despite an occasional breeze that stirred from behind them.

Fifteen days now they had ridden west and south from Murandy, guided only by Siuan's insistence that she knew exactly where they were heading. Not that she shared her destination, of course; Siuan and Leane were as close-mouthing as sprung bear traps. Min was not even sure that Leane actually knew. Fifteen days, while towns and villages grew fewer and farther between, until finally there were none. Day by day Logain's shoulders had sagged a little more, and day by day the halo appeared more often. At first he had only begun muttering that they were chasing Jak o' the Mists, but after a while he'd stopped trying to persuade Leane to go for a "walk" with him. Siuan had regained her leadership without opposition as he turned more and more inward. For the past six days he had not seemed to have the energy to care where they were going or whether they would ever get there.

Siuan and Leane talked quietly up ahead, now. All Min could hear was a barely audible murmur that might as well have been the wind in the leaves. And if she tried to ride closer, they would tell her to keep an eye on Logain, or simply stare at her until only a stone-blind fool could keep her nose where it did not belong. They had done both often enough. From time to time, though, Leane twisted in her saddle to look at Logain.

Finally Leane let Moonflower fall back beside his black stallion. The heat did not seem to be bothering her; not so much as a sheen of perspiration marred her coppery face. Min reined Wildrose aside to give her room.

"It won't be long now," Leane told him in a sultry voice. He did not look up from the weeds in front of his horse. She leaned closer, holding his arm for balance. Pressing against it, really. "A little while longer, Dalyn. You will have your revenge." His eyes stayed dully on the road.

"A dead man would pay more notice," Min said, and meant it. She had been taking notes in her head of everything Leane did, and talking with her of an evening, though trying not to let on why. She would never be able to behave the way that Leane did—not unless I had enough wine in me that I couldn't think at all—yet a few pointers might come in handy. "Maybe if you kissed him?"

Leane shot her a glare that could have frozen a rushing stream, but Min merely looked back. She had never had the problems with Leane that she did with Siuan—well, not as many, anyway—and the few difficulties had grown less since the other woman had left the Tower. Much fewer since they had begun discussing men. How could you be intimidated by a woman who had told you in dead seriousness that there were one hundred and seven different kisses, and ninety-three ways to touch a man's face with your hand? Leane actually seemed to believe these things.

Min had not meant it as a jibe, really, the suggestion of a kiss. Leane had been cooing at him, giving him smiles that should have made steam rise from his ears, since the day he had had to be hauled out of his blankets instead of rising first to chivvy the rest of them. Min did not know whether Leane actually felt something for the man, though she did find it hard to credit even the possibility, or was just trying to keep him from giving up and dying, to keep him alive for whatever Siuan had planned.

Leane certainly had not given up flirting with others besides him. She and Siuan had apparently worked out that Siuan would deal with women, Leane with men, and so it had been ever since Murandy. Her smiles and glances had twice gotten them rooms where it had been said there were none, lowered the bill at several stores, and on two nights earned barns instead of bushes for sleeping. They had also gotten the four of them chased off by one farmwife with a pitchfork, and a breakfast of cold porridge thrown at them by another, but Leane had thought the incidents funny, if no-one else did. The last few days, however, Logain had stopped reacting like every other man who saw her for more than two minutes. He had stopped reacting to her or anything else.

Siuan pulled her horse back stiffly, elbows out and managing to look on the point of falling off any moment. The heat was not touching her, either. "Have you viewed him today?" She hardly glanced at Logain.

"It is still the same," Min said patiently. Siuan refused to understand or believe, however many times she told her, and so did Leane. It would not have mattered if she had not seen the aura since her first viewing of it in Tar Valon. Had Logain been lying in the road, rasping his death rattle, she would have wagered all she had and more on a miraculous recovery, somehow. The appearance of an Aes Sedai to Heal him. Something. What she saw was always true. It always happened. She knew the same way that she had known the first time she saw Rand al'Thor that she would fall desperately, helplessly in love with him, the same way she had known she would have to share him with two other women. Logain was destined for glory such as few men had dreamed of.

"Don't you take that tone with me," Siuan said, that blue-eyed gaze sharpening. "It is bad enough we have to spoon-feed this great hairy carp to make him eat, without you going sulky as a fisher-bird in winter. I may have to put up with him, girl, but if you start giving me trouble, too, you will regret it in short order. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mara." *At least you could have put a touch of sarcasm in it*, she thought scornfully. *You don't have to be meek as a goose. You've told Leane off to her face.* The Domani woman had suggested that she practice what they had been discussing on a farrier in the last village. A tall, handsome man, with strong-looking hands and a slow smile, but still ... "I will try not to be sulky." The worst part was that she realized she had tried to sound sincere. Siuan had that effect. Min could not even begin to imagine Siuan discussing how to smile at a man. Siuan would look a man in the eye, tell him what to do, and expect to see it done promptly. Just the way she did with everyone else. If she did anything else, as she had with Logain, it would only be because the point did not matter enough to press.

"It is not much farther, is it?" Leane said briskly. She saved the other voice for men. "I do not like the look of him, and if we have to stop for another night ... Well, if he helps any less than he did this morning, I don't know that we will be able to get him into his saddle again."

"Not much, if those last directions I had are right." Siuan sounded irritated. She had asked questions at that last village, two days ago—not letting Min hear, of course; Logain had showed no interest—and she did not like to be reminded of them. Min could not understand why. Siuan could hardly expect Elaida to be behind them.

She herself hoped it was not much farther. It was hard to be sure how far south they had drifted since leaving the highway to Amador. Unless her estimate was off, they were going to reach the River Eldar soon, with Amadicia and Whitecloaks on the far side. Only a fool would think to find a gathering of Aes Sedai any nearer to Amadicia than they had to be, and Siuan was anything but that, yet here they were.

"Gentling would have to catch up to him now," Siuan muttered. "If he can only hang on a few more days ..." Min kept her mouth shut; if the woman would not listen, there was no use in speaking.

Shaking her head, Siuan heeled the horse back into the lead, gripping her reins as though expecting the stout mare to bolt, and Leane returned to silken-voiced cajoling of Logain. Maybe she did have feelings for him; it would be no odder a choice than Min's own.

Forested hills slid on by with never a sign of change, all trees and tangles of weeds and brambles. The ferns that marked the old road ran on, arrow-straight; Leane had said the soil was different where the road had been, as if Min should have known that. Squirrels with tufted ears sometimes chattered at them from a branch, and occasionally birds called. Which birds, Min could not begin to guess. Baerlon might not be a city when compared to Caemlyn or Ilan or Tear, but she

thought of herself as a city woman; a bird was a bird. And she did not care what kind of dirt a fern grew in.

Her doubts began to surface again. They had oozed up more than once after Kore Springs, but back then it had been easier to push them down. Since Murandy they had bubbled to the top more often, and she found herself considering Siuan in ways she would never have dared, once. Not that she had the nerve to actually confront Siuan with any of them, of course; it galled her to admit that, even to herself. But maybe Siuan did not know where she was going. She could lie, since Stilling broke her away from the Three Oaths. Maybe she was still just hoping that if she continued searching she would find some trace of what she needed desperately to find. In a small way, a peculiar way surely, Leane had begun making a life for herself apart from concerns of power and the Power and Rand. Not that she had abandoned them entirely, but Min did not think there was anything else for Siuan. The White Tower and the Dragon Reborn were the whole of her life, and she would hold to them even if she had to lie to herself.

Woodland gave way to a large village so quickly that Min stared. Sweet-gum and oak and scrubby pine—those were trees she could recognize—running to within fifty paces of thatch-roofed houses made of rounded river stones and clinging to low hills. She was willing to wager that not so long ago the forest had grown right through. A good many trees actually stood in narrow little thickets among some of the houses, crowding against the walls, and here and there unweathered stumps stood close by the front of a house. The streets still had a look of new-turned earth, not the hard-packed surface that came from generations of feet. Men in their shirtsleeves were up laying new thatch atop three large stone cubes that had to have been inns—one actually had the remains of a faded, weathered sign dangling above the door—yet no old thatch lay anywhere that she could see. There were far too many women out and about for the number of men in sight, and far too few children playing for the number of women. The smells of midday cooking in the air were the only normal things about the place.

If the first glimpse startled Min, when she really saw what lay in front of her she nearly fell out of her saddle. The younger women, shaking blankets from a window or hurrying on some errand, wore plain woollen dresses, but no village of any size had ever contained so many women in riding dresses of silk or fine wool, in every colour and cut. Around those women, and around most of the men, auras and images floated before her eyes, changing and flickering; most people rarely had anything for her viewing, but Aes Sedai and Warders seldom lacked an aura for as much as an hour. The children must have belonged to Tower servants. Aes Sedai were forbidden to marry, but knowing them, they would have made every effort to bring their servants, with their families, out of any place they felt that they must flee themselves. Siuan had found her gathering.

There was an eerie stillness as they rode into the village. No-one spoke. Aes Sedai stood without moving, watching them, and so did younger women and girls who must be Accepted or even Novices. Men who a moment before had been moving with wolfish grace were frozen, one hand hidden in thatch, or reaching into a doorway, doubtless where weapons were hidden. The children vanished, hurriedly herded away by the adults who had to be servants. Under all those unwinking stares, the hair on the back of Min's neck tried to stand up.

Leane appeared uneasy, casting sidelong glances at the people they rode past, but Siuan stayed smooth-faced and calm as she led the way straight to the largest inn, the one with the unreadable sign, and scrambled down to tie her mare to the iron ring of one of the stone hitching posts that appeared to have been only recently set upright. Helping Leane help Logain to the ground—Siuan never offered a hand in getting him up or down—Min found her eyes darting around. Everyone staring, no-one moving. "I never expected to be greeted like a long-lost daughter," she murmured to the other woman, "but why isn't anyone at least saying hello?"

Before Leane could answer—if she meant to—Siuan said, "Well, don't stop pulling oar with the shore in reach. Bring him on in." She disappeared inside while Min and Leane were still guiding Logain to the door. He went easily, but when they ceased to urge him he took only one step before stopping.

The common room looked like none Min had ever seen before. The wide fireplaces were cold, of course, and had gaps where stones had fallen out; the plaster ceiling looked rotten, with holes in it as big as her head where the lathing showed. Mismatched tables of every size and shape stood about on an age-roughened floor that several girls were sweeping. Women with ageless faces sat examining

parchments, giving orders to Warders, a few of whom wore their colour-shifting cloaks, or to other women, some of whom had to be Accepted or Novices. Others were too old for that, perhaps half of them greying and clearly showing their years, and there were men who were not Warders, too, most either darting off as though carrying messages or else fetching parchments or cups of wine to the Aes Sedai. The bustle had a satisfying air of something being done. Auras and images danced around the room, wreathing heads, so many that she had to try to ignore them before they overwhelmed her. It was not easy, but it was a trick she had had to learn when around more than a handful of Aes Sedai at once.

Four Aes Sedai glided forward to meet the newcomers, all grace and cool serenity in their divided skirts. For Min, seeing their familiar features was like reaching home after being lost.

Sheriam's tilted green eyes fixed immediately on Min's face. Rays of silver and blue flashed about her fiery hair, and a soft golden light; Min could not say what it meant. Slightly plump in her dark blue silk, at the moment she was sternness itself. "I would be happier to see you, child, if I knew how you discovered our presence here, and if I had some inkling of why you conceived the crackbrained idea of bringing him." Half a dozen Warders had drifted near, hands resting on swords, eyes sharp on Logain; he did not seem to see them at all.

Min gaped. Why were they asking *her*? "My crackbr—?" She had no chance to say more.

"It would be far better," pale-cheeked Carlinya cut in icily, "if he had died as the rumours say." It was not the ice of anger, but of cold reason. She was White Ajah. Her ivory-coloured dress looked as if it had had hard wear. For an instant Min saw an image of a raven floating beside her dark hair; more a drawing of the bird than the bird itself. She thought it was a tattoo, but she did not know its meaning. She concentrated on faces, tried not to see anything else. "He looks nearly dead in any event," Carlinya continued, hardly taking breath. "Whatever you thought, you have wasted your effort. But I, too, would like to know how you came to Salidar."

Siuan and Leane stood there exchanging smugly amused glances, while the onslaught went on. No-one even *looked* at them.

Myrelle, darkly beautiful in green silk embroidered on the bodice with slanting lines of gold, her face a perfect oval, usually wore a knowing smile that at times could rival Leane's new tricks. She was not smiling now as she jumped in right behind the White sister. "Speak up, Min. Don't stand there gaping like a dolt." She was noted for her fiery temper, even among the Greens.

"You must tell us," Anaiya added in a more kindly voice. Exasperation tinged it, though. A blunt-featured woman, and motherly despite Aes Sedai smoothness to her face, at the moment stroking her pale grey skirts, she looked like a mother who was trying not to reach for a switch. "We will find a place for you and these other two girls, but you must tell us how you came here."

Min shook herself, and closed her mouth. Of course. These other two girls. She had grown so used to them as they were that she no longer thought of how much they had changed. She doubted whether any of these women had seen either since they were hauled off to the dungeons beneath the White Tower. Leane looked ready to laugh, and Siuan all but shook her head in disgust at the Aes Sedai.

"I am not the one you want to talk to," Min told Sheriam. *Let "these other two girls" have those stares on them for a change.* "Ask Siuan, or Leane." They stared at her as if she were mad, until she nodded to her two companions.

Four sets of Aes Sedai eyes shifted to the others, but there was no instant recognition. They studied and frowned and passed glances between them. None of the Warders took their eyes from Logain or their hands from their swords.

"Stilling might produce this effect," Myrelle murmured finally. "I have read accounts that imply as much."

"The faces are close, in many ways," Sheriam said slowly. "Someone could have found women who look much like them, but why?"

Siuan and Leane did not look smug any longer. "We are who we are," Leane said crisply. "Question us. No impostor could know what we know."

Siuan did not wait for questions. "My face may be changed, yet at least I know what I am doing and why. That is more than I can say for you, I'll wager."

Min groaned at her steely tone, but Myrelle nodded, saying, "That is Siuan Sanche's voice. It is she."

"Voices can be trained," Carlinya said, still coolly calm.

"But how far can memories be taught?" Anaiya frowned sternly. "Siuan—if that is who you are—on your twenty-second nameday we had an argument, you and I. Where did it occur, and what was the outcome?"

Siuan smiled confidently at the motherly woman. "During your lecture to the Accepted on why so many of the nations carved out of Artur Hawkwing's empire after his death failed to survive. I still disagree with you on some points, by the way. The outcome was that I spent two months working three hours a day in the kitchens. 'In the hope that the heat will overpower and diminish your ardour', I think you said."

If she had thought that one answer would be sufficient, she was wrong. Anaiya had more questions, for both women, and so did Carlinya and Sheriam, who apparently had been Novices and Accepted with the pair. They were all about the sort of thing no impostor would be able to learn, scrapes gotten into, pranks successful and not, opinions generally held of various Aes Sedai teachers. Min could not believe that the women who would become the Amyrlin Seat and the Keeper of the Chronicles could have dropped themselves into the soup so often, but she had the impression that this was only the tip of a buried mountain, and it appeared that Sheriam herself might not have been far behind them. Myrelle, the youngest by years, confined herself to amused comments, until Siuan said something about a trout put into Saroiya Sedai's bath and a Novice taught to mind her ways for half a year. Not that Siuan had much room to talk of anyone minding her ways. Washing a disliked Accepted's shifts with itchweed when she was a Novice? Sneaking out of the Tower to go fishing? Even Accepted needed permission to leave the Tower grounds except during certain hours. Siuan and Leane together had even chilled a bucket of water to near freezing and set it so it would douse an Aes Sedai who had had them switched, unfairly as they saw it. From the glint in Anaiya's eyes, it was a good thing for them that they had not been found out that time. From what Min knew of Novice training, and Accepted for that matter, these women were lucky that they had been allowed to remain long enough to become Aes Sedai, much less that they still had whole hides.

"I am satisfied," the motherly woman said at last, glancing at the others.

Myrelle nodded after Sheriam did, but Carlinya said, "There is still the question of what to do with her." She stared right at Siuan, unblinking, and the others suddenly seemed uneasy. Myrelle pursed her lips, and Anaiya studied the floor. Smoothing her dress, Sheriam seemed to avoid looking at the newcomers at all.

"We still know everything we knew before," Leane told them, her sudden frown at least half-worry. "We can be of use."

Siuan was dark-faced—Leane had seemed amused if anything at her recounted girlhood misdeeds and penalties, but Siuan had not liked the telling one bit—yet in contrast to her near-glare, her voice was only a little tight. "You wanted to know how we found you. I made contact with one of my agents who also works for the Blue, and she told me of Sallie Daera."

Min did not understand that about Sallie Daera at all—who was she?—but Sheriam and the others nodded at one another. Siuan had done something other than tell them how, Min realized; she had let them know that she still had access to the eyes-and-ears who had served her as Amyrlin.

"You sit over there, Min," Sheriam told Min, pointing to the one table not in use, in a corner. "Or are you still Elmindreda? And keep Logain with you." She and the other three gathered Siuan and Leane, herding them toward the back of the common room. Two more women in riding dresses joined them before they vanished through a new-made door of uncured boards.

Sighing, Min took Logain's arm and led him to the table, sat him down on a rough bench and took a shaky ladder-back chair herself. Two of the Warders positioned themselves nearby, leaning against the wall. They did not appear to be watching Logain, but Min knew the Gaidin; they saw everything and they could have their swords out in less than a heartbeat while sleeping.

So there were to be no open arms in welcome, even with Siuan and Leane recognized. Well, what did she expect? Siuan and Leane had been the two most powerful women in the White Tower; now they were not even Aes Sedai. The others very likely did not know how to behave toward them. And appearing with a Gentled false Dragon. Siuan had better not be lying or wishing about having a plan for him. Min did not think Sheriam and the others would be as patient as Logain had been.

And Sheriam, at least, had recognized her. She stood again, long enough to peer through a crack-paned window into the street. Their horses were still at the hitching posts, but one of those

Warders who were not watching would have her before she had Wildrose's reins untied. This last time in the Tower, Siuan had gone to great lengths to disguise her. To no end, it seemed. She did not think any of them knew about her viewings, though. Siuan and Leane had held that tightly to themselves. Min would be just as glad if it remained that way. If these Aes Sedai learned of it, they would entangle her just as Siuan had, and she would never reach Rand. She was not going to be able to show off what she had learned from Leane if they kept her on a leash here.

Helping Siuan find this gathering, helping bring Aes Sedai to Rand's aid, was all very well and important, but she still had a personal goal. Making a man who had run off and left her fall in love with her before he went mad. Maybe she was as mad as he was fated to be. "Then we'll make a matched pair," she muttered to herself.

A freckled, green-eyed girl who had to be a Novice stopped at her table. "Would you like something to eat or drink? There is venison stew, and wild pears. There might be some cheese, too." She put so much effort into not looking at Logain that she might as well have stared pop-eyed.

"Pears and cheese sound very good," Min told her. The last two days had been hungry; Siuan had managed to catch some fish in a stream, but Logain had done all the hunting when they had not eaten at an inn or a farm. Dried beans did not make a meal, in her opinion. "And some wine, if you have it. But first, I would like some information. Where are we, if it isn't a secret here, too? This village is called Salidar?"

"In Altara. The Eldar is about a mile to the west. Amadicia is on the other side." The girl put on a poor imitation of Aes Sedai mystery. "Where better to hide Aes Sedai than where they would never be looked for?"

"We should not have to hide," a dark, curly-haired young woman snapped, stopping. Min recognized her, an Accepted named Faolain; she would have expected her to be in the Tower still. Faolain had never liked anyone or anything as far as Min knew, and had often spoken of choosing the Red Ajah when she was raised. A perfect follower for Elaida. "Why did you come here? With *him*! Why did *she* come?" There was no doubt in Min's mind who she meant. "It is her fault we have to hide. I did not believe she helped Mazrim Taim escape, but if she appears here with *him*, maybe she did."

"That will be enough, Faolain," a slender woman with black hair spilling down her back to her waist told the round-faced Accepted. Min thought she knew the woman in the dark golden silk riding dress. Edesina. A Yellow, she believed. "Go about your duties," Edesina said. "And if you mean to bring food, Tabiya, do it." Edesina did not watch Faolain's sullen curtsy—the Novice gave a better and scurried away—but put a hand on Logain's head instead. Eyes on the table, he did not seem to notice.

To Min's eyes, a silvery collar suddenly appeared, snug around the woman's neck, and as suddenly seemed to shatter. Min shivered. She did not like viewings connected to the Seanchan. At least Edesina would escape somehow. Even if Min had been willing to expose herself, there was no point in warning the woman; it would not change anything.

"It is the Gentling," the Aes Sedai said after a moment. "He has given up on wanting to live, I suppose. There is nothing I can do for him. Not that I am sure I should if I could." The look she gave Min before leaving was far from friendly.

An elegant, statuesque woman in russet silk paused a few feet away, coolly examining Min and Logain with expressionless eyes. Kiruna was a Green, and regal in her manner; she was a sister of the Queen of Arafel, so Min had heard, but she had been friendly to Min in the Tower. Min smiled, but those large dark eyes swept over her without recognition, and Kiruna glided out of the inn, four Warders, disparate men but all with that deadly-seeming way of moving, suddenly heeling her.

Waiting for her food, Min hoped that Siuan and Leane were finding a warmer reception.

## CHAPTER 61: *The Practice of Diffidence*



“You are rudderless,” Siuan told the six women facing her in six different sorts of chair. The room itself was a muddle. Two large kitchen tables against the walls held pens and ink jars and sand bottles in neat arrays. Mismatched lamps, some glazed pottery and some gilded, and candles in every thickness and length stood ready to provide light at nightfall. A scrap of Illianer silk carpet, rich in blues and reds and gold, lay on a floor of rough, weathered planks. She and Leane had been seated across the piece of carpet from the others, in such a way that they were the focus of every eye. Open casement windows with panes cracked or replaced by oiled silk let a breath of air stir in, but not enough to cut the heat. Siuan told herself that she did not envy these women their ability to channel—she was past that, surely—but she did envy the way none of them perspired. Her own face was quite damp. “All that activity out there is play and show. You might be fooling each other, and maybe even the Gaidin—though I’d not count on that, were I you—but you can’t fool me.”

She wished that Morvrin and Beonin had not been added to the group. Morvrin was sceptical of everything despite her placid, sometimes vaguely absent look, a stout Brown with grey-streaked hair who demanded six pieces of evidence before she would believe fish had scales. And Beonin, a pretty Grey with dark honey hair and blue-grey eyes so big they constantly made her appear slightly startled—Beonin made Morvrin seem gullible.

“Elaida has the Tower in her fist, and you know she will mishandle Rand al’Thor,” Siuan said scornfully. “It will be pure luck if she doesn’t panic and have him Gentled before Tarmon Gai’don. You know that whatever you feel about a man channelling, Reds feel ten times more. The White Tower is at its weakest when it should be at its strongest, in the hands of a fool when it must have skilled command.” She wrinkled her nose, staring them in the eye one by one. “And you sit here, drifting with your sails down. Or can you convince me that you are doing more than twiddling your thumbs and blowing bubbles?”

“Do you agree with Siuan, Leane?” Anaiya asked mildly. Siuan had never been able to understand why Moiraine liked the woman. Trying to get her to do anything she did not want to was like hitting a sack of feathers. She did not stand up to you, or argue; she just silently refused to move. Even the way she sat, with her hands folded, looked more like a woman waiting to knead dough than an Aes Sedai.

“In part I do,” Leane replied. Siuan gave her a sharp look that she ignored. “About Elaida certainly. Elaida will misuse Rand al’Thor, as surely as she is misusing the Tower. For the rest, I know that you have worked hard to gather as many sisters here as you have, and I expect that you are working just as hard to do something about Elaida.”

Siuan sniffed loudly. On her way through the common room she had snatched glimpses of some of those parchments being examined so assiduously. Lists of provisions, allotments of timber for rebuilding, assignments for woodcutting and repairing houses and cleaning out wells. Nothing more. Nothing that looked the least like a report on Elaida’s activities. They were planning to winter here. All it took was one Blue being captured after she had learned of Salidar, one woman being put to the question—she would not hold back much if Alviarin had charge of it—and Elaida would know exactly where to net them. While they worried about planting vegetable gardens and having enough firewood cut before the first freeze.

“Then that is out of the way,” Carlinya said coolly. “You do not seem to understand that you are not Amyrlin and Keeper any longer. You are not even Aes Sedai.” Some had the grace to look embarrassed. Not Morvrin or Beonin, but the others. No Aes Sedai liked to speak of Stilling, or be reminded of it; they would think it especially harsh in front of the two of them. “I do not say this to be cruel. We do not believe the charges against you—despite your travelling companion—or we would not be here, but you cannot assume your old places among us, and that is a simple fact.”

Siuan remembered Carlinya well as Novice and Accepted. Once a month she had committed some minor offense, a small thing that earned her an extra hour or two of chores. Exactly once each

month. She had not wanted the others to think her a prig. Those had been her only offenses—she never broke another rule or put a foot wrong; it would not have been logical—yet she had never understood why the other girls had considered her an Aes Sedai pet anyway. A great deal of logic and not much common sense: that was Carlinya.

“While what was done to you followed the letter of the law narrowly,” Sheriam said gently, “we agree that it was malignantly unjust, an extreme distortion of the law’s spirit.” The chairback behind her fire-red head was incongruously carved with what seemed to be a mass of snakes fighting. “Whatever rumour might say, most of the charges laid against you were so thin that they should have been laughed away.”

“Not the charge that she knew of Rand al’Thor and conspired to hide him from the Tower,” Carlinya broke in sharply.

Sheriam nodded. “But be that as it may, even that was not sufficient for the penalty given. Nor should you have been tried in secret, without even a chance to defend yourself. Never fear that we will turn our backs on you. We will see that you both are cared for.”

“I thank you,” Leane said, her voice soft and almost trembling.

Siuan grimaced at them. “You haven’t even asked me about the eyes-and-ears I can use.” She had liked Sheriam when they were students together, though years and position had opened water between them. “Cared for” indeed! “Is Aeldene here?” Anaiya started to shake her head before stopping herself. “I suspected not, or you would know more of what is going on. You’ve left them sending their reports to the Tower.” Slow realization dawned on their faces; they had not known Aeldene’s office. “I headed the Blue Ajah’s net of eyes-and-ears, before I was raised Amyrlin.” More surprise. “With a little effort every Blue agent, and those who served me as Amyrlin, too, can be sending her reports to you, by routes that keep her ignorant of their final destination.” It would take considerably more than a little work, but she had already sketched most of it out in her head, and there was no need for them to know more at the moment. “And they can continue sending reports to the Tower, reports containing what … you want Elaida to believe.” She had almost said “we”; she had to watch her tongue.

They did not like it, of course. The women who tended the networks might be unknown to all but a few, but they were every one Aes Sedai. They had always been Aes Sedai. But that was her only lever with which to pry her way into the circles where decisions were made. Otherwise, they would likely stuff her and Leane into a cottage with a servant to look after them, and maybe a rare visit from Aes Sedai who wanted to examine women who had been Stilled, until they died. They would die soon, in those circumstances.

*Light, they might even marry us off!* Some thought that a husband and children could occupy a woman enough to replace the One Power in her life. More than one woman, Stilled by drawing too much of *saidar* to herself, or in testing *ter’angreal* for their uses, had found herself being matched with potential husbands. Since those who did marry always put as much distance as possible between themselves and the Tower and its memories, the theory remained unproven.

“It should not be difficult,” Leane said diffidently, “to put myself in touch with those who were my eyes-and-ears before I was Keeper. More importantly, as Keeper of the Chronicles I had agents in Tar Valon itself.” Startlement widened a few eyes, though Carlinya’s narrowed. Leane blinked, shifted uneasily, smiled weakly. “I always thought it foolish that we paid more attention to the mood of Ebou Dar or Bandar Eban than to the mood of our own city.” They had to see the value of eyes and-ears in Tar Valon.

“Siuan.” Leaning forward in her thick-armed chair, Morvrin said the name firmly, as though to emphasize that she had not said Mother. That round face looked more stubborn than placid now, her stoutness a threatening mass. When Siuan had been a Novice, Morvrin rarely seemed to notice the mischief of the girls around her, but when she did, she had taken care of matters herself, in ways that had everyone sitting straight and walking small for days. “Why should we allow you to do as you want? You have been Stilled, woman. Whatever you were, you are no longer Aes Sedai. If we want these agents’ names, you will both give them to us.” There was a flat certainty to that last; they would give them, one way or another. They would, if these women wanted them enough.

Leane shivered visibly, but Siuan’s chair creaked as she stiffened her back. “I know that I am not Amyrlin anymore. Do you think I don’t know I was Stilled? My face is changed, but not what is inside. Everything I ever knew is still in my head. Use it! For the love of the Light, use me!” She took

a deep breath to calm herself—*Burn me if I let them shove me aside to rot!*—and Myrelle spoke into the pause.

“A young woman’s temper to go with a young woman’s face.” Smiling, she sat on the edge of a stiff-backed armchair that could have stood in front of a farmer’s fireplace, if the farmer had not cared that the varnish was flaking. The smile was not her usual one, though, languid and knowing at the same time, and her dark eyes, nearly as large as Beonin’s, were full of sympathy. “I am sure that no-one wants you to feel useless, Siuan. And I am sure that we all want to employ your knowledge fully. What you know will be of great use to us.”

Siuan did not want her sympathy. “You seem to have forgotten Logain, and why I dragged him all the way here from Tar Valon.” She had not meant to bring this up herself, but if they were going to let it lie wallowing ... “My ‘crackbrained’ idea?”

“Very well, Siuan,” Sheriam said. “Why?”

“Because the first step to pulling Elaida down is for Logain to reveal to the Tower, to the world if need be, that the Red Ajah set him up as a false Dragon so that he could be pulled down.” She certainly had their attention now. “He was found by Reds in Ghealdan at least a year before he proclaimed himself, but instead of bringing him to Tar Valon to be Gentled, they planted the idea in his head of claiming to be the Dragon Reborn.”

“You are certain of this?” Beonin asked quietly, in a heavy Taraboner accent. She sat very still in her tall, cane-bottomed chair, watching carefully.

“He does not know who Leane and I are. He talked with us sometimes on the journey here, late at night when Min was sleeping and he could not rest. He said nothing before because he thinks the entire Tower was behind it, but he knows that it was Red sisters who shielded him and talked to him of the Dragon Reborn.”

“Why?” Morvrin demanded, and Sheriam nodded.

“Yes, why? Any of us would go out of our way to see a man like that Gentled, but the Red Ajah lives for nothing else. Why would they create a false Dragon?”

“Logain did not know,” she told them. “Perhaps they think they gain more by capturing a false Dragon than Gentling a poor fool who might terrorize one village. Perhaps they have some reason to want more turmoil.”

“We do not suggest they’ve had anything to do with Mazrim Taim or any of the others,” Leane added quickly. “Elaida will no doubt be able to tell you what you want to know.”

Siuan watched them mull it over in silence. They never considered the possibility that she was lying. An advantage to having been Stilled. It did not seem to occur to them that being Stilled might have broken all ties to the Three Oaths. Some Aes Sedai studied Stilled women, true, but gingerly and reluctantly. No-one wanted to be reminded of what might happen to herself.

For Logain, Siuan had no worry. Not as long as Min continued to see whatever it was that she saw. He would live long enough to reveal what Siuan wanted him to, once she had talked to him. She had not dared risk his deciding to go his own way, which he might well have done had she told him before. But it was his one chance for revenge now against those who had Gentled him, surrounded by Aes Sedai again as he was. Revenge only against the Red Ajah, true, but he would have to settle for that. A fish in the boat was worth a school in the water.

She glanced at Leane, who smiled the faintest possible smile. That was good. Leane had disliked being kept in the dark about her plan for the man until this morning, but Siuan had lived too long wrapped in secrecy to be easy revealing more than she had to, even to a friend. She thought that the idea of Red Ajah involvement with other false Dragons had been neatly planted. Reds had been the leaders in overthrowing her. There might not be a Red Ajah once this was done with.

“This changes a great deal,” Sheriam said after a time. “We cannot possibly follow an Amyrlin who would do such a thing.”

“Follow her!” Siuan exclaimed, for the first time truly startled. “You were actually considering going back to kiss Elaida’s ring? Knowing what she has done, and will do?” Leane quivered in her seat as if she wanted to say a few choice words herself, but they had agreed that Siuan was to be the one to lose her temper.

Sheriam looked a trifle embarrassed, and spots of colour floated in Myrelle’s olive cheeks, but the others took it as calmly as sunshine.

“The Tower must be strong,” Carlinya said in a voice as hard as winter stone. “The Dragon has been Reborn, the Last Battle is coming, and the Tower must be whole.”

Anaiya nodded. “We understand your reasons for disliking Elaida, even hating her. We do understand, but we must think of the Tower, and the world. I confess I do not like Elaida myself. But then, I have never liked Siuan, either. It is not necessary to *like* the Amyrlin Seat. There is no need to glare so, Siuan. You have had a file for a tongue since you were a Novice, and it has only roughened with the years. And as Amyrlin, you pushed sisters where you wanted and only seldom explained why. The two do not make a likable combination.”

“I will try to ... smooth my tongue,” Siuan said dryly. Did the woman expect the Amyrlin Seat to treat every sister like a childhood friend? “But I hope what I’ve told you changes your desire to kneel at Elaida’s feet?”

“If that is your smoother tongue,” Myrelle said idly, “I may have to smooth it myself, if we do allow you to run the eyes-and-ears for us.”

“We cannot go back to the Tower now, of course,” Sheriam said. “Not knowing this. Not until we are in position to see Elaida deposed.”

“Whatever she has done, the Reds, they will continue to support her.” Beonin stated it as fact, not objection. It was no secret that the Reds resented the fact that there had not been an Amyrlin from their Ajah since Bonwhin.

Morvrin nodded heavily. “Others will, as well. Those who have thrown themselves too much behind Elaida to believe they have any other choice. Those who will support authority, however vile. And some who will believe we are dividing the Tower when it must be whole at any cost.”

“All but the Red sisters can be approached,” Beonin said judiciously, “negotiated with.” Mediation and negotiation were her Ajah’s reason for existence.

“It seems we will have a use for your agents, Siuan.” Sheriam looked around at the others. “Unless anyone still thinks we should take them away from her?” Morvrin was the last to shake her head, but she did it, finally, after a long study that made Siuan feel she had been stripped, weighed and measured.

She could not stop a sigh of relief. Not a short life drying up in a cottage, but a life of purpose. It might still be a short life—no-one knew how long a Stilled woman could live given something to replace the One Power in her life—but with purpose it would be long enough. So Myrelle was going to smooth her tongue for her, was she? *I’ll show that fox-eyed Green—I will hold my tongue and be glad she isn’t doing more than look at me is what I’ll do. I knew how this would go. Burn me, but I did.*

“Thank you, Aes Sedai,” she said in the meekest tone she could find. To call them that pained her; it was another break, another reminder of what she was not any longer. “I will try to give good service.” Myrelle did not have to nod in such a satisfied way. Siuan ignored a small voice that said she would have done as much or more in Myrelle’s place.

“If I may suggest,” Leane said, “it is not enough to wait until you have enough support in the Hall of the Tower to depose Elaida.” Siuan put on an interested look, as though hearing this for the first time. “Elaida sits in Tar Valon, in the White Tower, and to the world she is Amyrlin. At the moment, you are only a flock of dissidents. She can call you rebels and agitators, and coming from the Amyrlin Seat, the world will believe it.”

“We can hardly stop her being Amyrlin before she is deposed,” Carlinya said, shifting on her chair in icy contempt. Had she been wearing her white-fringed shawl, she would have snapped it around her.

“You can give the world a true Amyrlin.” Leane spoke not to the White sister, but to all of them, eyeing each in turn, sure of what she was saying yet at the same time offering a suggestion that she merely hoped they would take. It had been Siuan who pointed out that the techniques she employed on men could be adapted for women. “I saw Aes Sedai from every Ajah save the Red in the common room, and in the streets. Have them elect a Hall of the Tower here, and let that Hall select a new Amyrlin. Then you can present yourselves to the world as the true White Tower, in exile, and Elaida as a usurper. With Logain’s revelations added in, can you doubt who the nations will accept as the real Amyrlin Seat?”

The idea took hold. Siuan could see them turning it over in their minds. Whatever the others thought, only Sheriam voiced a word against. “It will mean that the Tower truly is broken,” the green-eyed woman said sadly.

"It already is broken," Siuan told her tartly, and instantly wished she had not when they all looked at her.

This was supposed to be purely Leane's notion. She herself had a reputation as a deft manipulator, and they could well be suspicious of anything she proposed. That was why she had begun by scathing them; they would not have believed her if she had begun with mild words. She would come at them as if she still thought herself Amyrlin, and let them put her in her place. By comparison, Leane would seem more cooperative, only offering the little she could, and they would be more likely to listen to her. Doing her own part had not been difficult—until it came to pleading; then she had wanted to hang them all in the sun to dry. Sitting here, doing nothing!

*You didn't have to worry about them being suspicious. They think you are a broken reed.* If everything went properly, they would not learn differently. A useful reed, but a weak one, not to be thought of twice. It was a painful accommodation to make, but Duranda Tharne had shown her the necessity in Murandy. They would accept her only on their terms, and she would have to make the best of it.

"I wish I had thought of this myself," she went on. "Now that I hear it, Leane's idea gives you a way to build the Tower again without having to tear it down completely first."

"I still cannot like it." Sheriam's voice firmed. "But what must be must be. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and the Light willing, it will weave Elaida out of the stole."

"We will need to negotiate with those sisters who remain in the Tower," Beonin mused, only half to herself. "The Amyrlin we choose, she must be a skilled negotiator, yes?"

"Clear thinking will be needed," Carlinya put in. "The new Amyrlin must be a woman of cool reason and logic."

Morvrin's snort was loud enough to make everyone jump in their chairs. "Sheriam is the highest among us, and she has kept us together when we'd have been running in ten different directions."

Sheriam shook her head vigorously, but Myrelle gave her no chance to speak. "Sheriam is an excellent choice. I can promise every Green sister here behind her, I know." Anaiya opened her mouth, agreement plain on her face.

It was time to put a stop to this before it got out of hand. "If I may suggest?" Siuan thought she managed diffidence much better than she had meekness. It was a strain, but she thought she had better learn to maintain it. *Myrelle isn't the only one who will try to stuff me in the bilges if they think I've overstepped my place. Whatever it is.* Only, they would not try; they would do. Aes Sedai expected—no, required—respect from those who were not. "It seems to me that whoever you choose should be someone who was not in the Tower when I ... was deposed. Would it not be best if the woman who unites the Tower again was one whom no-one could accuse of choosing a side on that day?" If she had to keep this up, she was going to burst a seam in her head.

"Someone very strong in the Power," Leane added. "The stronger she is, the more she can stand for all that the Tower means. Or will again, once Elaida is gone."

Siuan could have kicked her. That thought was supposed to wait a full day, to be tossed in once they actually began considering names. Between them, she and Leane knew enough of every sister to find some weakness, some doubt to be dangled subtly as to her fitness for stole and staff. She would rather wade naked through a school of silverpike than have these women realize that she was trying to manipulate them.

"A sister who was out of the Tower," Sheriam said, nodding. "That makes excellent sense, Siuan. Very good." How easily they slipped into patting her on the head.

Morvrin pursed her lips. "It will not be easy, finding whoever we choose."

"Strength narrows the possibilities." Anaiya looked around at the others. "It will not only make her a better symbol, to the other sisters at least, but strength in the Power often goes with strength of will, and whoever we choose will surely need that."

Carlinya and Beonin were the last to join in agreement.

Siuan kept her face smooth, her smile on the inside. The breaking of the Tower had changed many things, many ways of thinking besides her own. These women had led the Sisters gathered here, and now they were discussing who should be presented to their new Hall of the Tower as if that should not be the Hall's choice. It would not be difficult to bring them around, ever so gently, to the belief that the new Amyrlin should be one who could be guided by them. And unknowing, they and

the Amyrlin she chose for her replacement, would be guided by herself. She and Moiraine had worked too long to find Rand al'Thor and prepare him, given too much of their lives, for her to risk the rest of it being bungled by someone else.

"If I may make another suggestion?" Diffidence was simply not in her nature; she was going to have to find something else. She waited, trying not to grit her teeth, for Sheriam to nod before going on. "Elaida will be attempting to discover where Rand al'Thor is; the farther south I came, the more rumours I heard that he has left Tear. I think that he has, and I think that I have reasoned out where he went."

There was no need for her to say that they had to find him before Tar Valon did. They all understood. Not only would Elaida mishandle him, certainly, but should she put her hands on him, display him shielded and in her control, any hope of toppling her would be gone. Rulers knew the Prophecies, if their people usually did not; they would forgive her a dozen false Dragons out of necessity.

"Where?" Morvrin barked, a hair ahead of Sheriam, Anaiya and Myrelle all together.

"The Aiel Waste."

There was a moment of silence before Carlinya said, "That is ridiculous."

Siuan bit back an angry reply and smiled what she hoped was an apologetic smile. "Perhaps, but I read something of the Aiel when I was Accepted. Gitara Moroso thought that some of the Aiel Wise Ones might be able to channel." Gitara had been Keeper then. "One of the books she had me read, an old thing from the dustiest corner of the library, claimed that the Aiel call themselves the People of the Dragon. I did not remember it until I tried puzzling out where Rand could have vanished to. The Prophecies say 'the Stone of Tear shall never fall till the People of the Dragon come', and there were Aiel in the taking of the Stone. That, every rumour and tale agrees on."

Morvrin's eyes suddenly seemed to look elsewhere. "I remember speculation about the Wise Ones when I was newly raised to the shawl. It would be fascinating, if true, but Aiel are little more welcoming to Aes Sedai than to anyone else who enters the Waste, and their Wise Ones apparently have some law or custom against speaking to strangers, so I understand, which makes it extremely hard to come close enough to one to feel if she—" Suddenly she gave herself a shake, staring at Siuan and Leane as though her wandering had been their fault. "A thin straw to weave a basket, something you remember from a book likely written by someone who never saw an Aiel."

"A very thin straw," Carlinya said.

"But worth sending someone to the Waste?" It took effort to make that a question instead of a demand. Siuan thought she might sweat down to nothing if she could not find another way. She still had enough control of herself to ignore the heat, usually, but not while trying to drag these women along without letting them notice her fist in their hair. "I do not think the Aiel would try to harm an Aes Sedai." Not if she was quick enough to show that she was Aes Sedai. Siuan did not think they would. It had to be risked. "And if he is in the Waste, the Aiel will know of it. Remember those Aiel at the Stone."

"Perhaps," Beonin said slowly. "The Waste is large. How many would we need to send?"

"If the Dragon Reborn is in the Waste," Anaiya said, "the first Aiel met will know of it. Events follow this Rand al'Thor, by all accounts. He could not slip into the ocean without making a splash heard in every corner of the world."

Myrelle smiled. "She should be Green. None of the rest of you will bond more than one Warder, and two or three Gaidin might be very useful in the Waste until the Aiel know her for Aes Sedai. I have always wanted to see an Aiel." She had been a Novice during the Aiel War, and not allowed out of the Tower. Not that any Aes Sedai had taken part beyond Healing, of course. The Three Oaths had bound them unless Tar Valon, or maybe even the Tower itself, was attacked, and that war had never crossed the rivers.

"Not you," Sheriam told her, "or any other member of this council. You agreed to see this through, Myrelle, when you agreed to sit with us, and that does not include gallivanting off because you are bored. I fear there will be more excitement than any of us could wish, before we finish." She would have made an excellent Amyrlin in other circumstances; in these, she was simply too strong and sure of herself. "But Greens ... Yes, I think so. Two?" Her green eyes swept along the others. "To be certain?"

"Kiruna Nachiman?" Anaiya offered, and Beonin added, "Bera Harkin?" The others nodded except for Myrelle, who shifted her shoulders irritably. Aes Sedai did not pout, but she came close.

Siuan took her second relieved breath. She was certain her reasoning was correct. He had vanished to somewhere, and if he was anywhere between the Spine of the World and the Aryth Ocean, rumours would have been flying. And wherever he was, Moiraine would be there with a hand on his collar. Kiruna and Bera would surely be willing to carry a letter to Moiraine, and they had seven Warders between them to keep the Aiel from killing them.

"We do not want to tire you and Leane," Sheriam went on. "I will ask one of the Yellow sisters to look at both of you. Perhaps she can do something to help, to ease you in some way. I will have rooms found for you, where you can rest."

"If you are to be our mistress of eyes-and-ears," Myrelle added solicitously, "you must maintain your strength."

"I am not so frail as you seem to think," Siuan protested. "If I were, could I have followed you nearly two thousand miles? Whatever weakness I had after being Stilled is gone, believe me." The truth was that she had found a centre of power again, and she did not want to leave it, but she could hardly say that. All those concerned eyes on her, and Leane. Well, not Carlinya's particularly, but the rest. *Light! They're going to have a Novice tuck us into bed for a nap!*

A knock at the door was followed immediately by Arinvar, Sheriam's Warder. Cairhienin, he was not tall, and slender besides, but in spite of grey at his temples he was hard of face, and he moved like a stalking leopard. "There are twenty-odd riders to the east," he said without preamble.

"Not Whitecloaks," Carlinya said, "or I presume you would have reported as much."

Sheriam gave her a look. Many sisters could be prickly when it came to another stepping between them and their Gaidin. "We cannot allow them to get away, and perhaps carry word of our presence. Can they be captured, Arinvar? I would prefer that to killing them."

"Either may be difficult," he replied. "Machan says they are armed and have the look of veterans. Worth ten times their number of younger men."

Morvrin made a vexed sound. "We must do one or the other. Forgive me, Sheriam. Arinvar, can the Gaidin sneak some of the more agile sisters close enough to weave Air around them?"

He shook his head fractionally. "Machan says they may have seen some of the Warders keeping watch. They would certainly see if we tried to bring more than one or two of you near. They are still coming, though."

Siuan and Leane were not the only ones to exchange startled glances. Few men saw a Warder who did not want to be seen, even without the Gaidin cloak.

"Then you must do as you think best," Sheriam said. "Capture them, if possible. But none must escape to betray us."

Before Arinvar could complete his bow, hand to sword hilt, another man was beside him, a dark bear of a man, tall and wide, with hair to his shoulders and a short beard that left his upper lip bare. That flowing Warder movement seemed odd on him. He winked at Myrelle, his Aes Sedai, even as he said in a thick Illianer accent, "Most of the riders do be stopped, but one does come on by himself. If my aged mother did say different, I would still name him Gareth Bryne from the glimpse I did get."

Siuan stared at him; her hands and feet suddenly felt cold. Strong rumour said that Myrelle had actually married this Nuhel and her other two Warders, in defiance of convention and law in every land Siuan had ever heard of. It was the sort of incongruous thought that drifted through a stunned mind, and right then she felt as if a mast had fallen on her head. Bryne, here? *It's impossible! It is mad!* Surely the man could not have followed them all this way for ... *Oh yes, he could and would. That one would.* As they journeyed, she had told herself that it was only sensible caution to leave no trace behind, that Elaida knew they were not dead, whatever the rumours said, and she would not stop hunting until they were found or she was pulled down. Siuan had been irritated at having to ask directions finally, yet the thought that had snapped at her like a shark had not been that Elaida might somehow find a blacksmith in one small Altaran village, but that the blacksmith would be like a painted sign for Bryne. *Told yourself it was foolish, didn't you? And now here he is.*

She well remembered her confrontation with him, when she had had to bend him to her will on that matter of Valreis. It had been like bending a thick iron bar, or some huge spring that would leap back if she let up for an instant. She had had to bring all of her force to bear, had had to humiliate

him publicly, in order to make certain he would remain bent for as long as she needed. He could hardly go against what he had agreed to on his knees, begging her pardon, with fifty nobles watching. Morgase had been difficult enough herself, and Siuan had not been willing to risk Bryne giving Morgase an excuse to go against her instructions. Strange to think that she and Elaida had worked together then, bringing Morgase to heel.

She had to take hold of herself. She was in a daze, thinking of everything except what she needed to. *Concentrate. This is no time to panic.* "You must send him away. Or kill him."

She knew it for a mistake while the words were still leaving her mouth, all too full of urgency. Even the Warders looked at her, and the Aes Sedai ... She had never before known what it felt like for someone who lacked the Power to have those eyes turned on them at full strength. She felt naked, her very mind laid bare. Even knowing that Aes Sedai could not read thoughts, she still wanted to confess before they listed her lies and crimes. She hoped that her face was not like Leane's, red-cheeked and wide-eyed.

"You know why he is here." Sheriam's voice was calmly certain. "Both of you do. And you do not want to confront him. Enough so that you would have us kill him for you."

"There do be few great captains living." Nuhel marked them off on gauntleted fingers. "Agelmar Jagad and Davram Bashere will no leave the Blight, I think, and Pedron Niall will surely no be of use to you. Syoman Surtir do be chained in his queen's dungeon they say. If Rodel Ituralde do be alive, he do be mired somewhere in what do remain of Arad Doman." He raised his thick thumb. "And that do leave Gareth Bryne."

"Do you think that we will need a great captain, then?" Sheriam asked quietly.

Nuhel and Arinvar did not look at one another, but Siuan still had the feeling that they had exchanged glances. "It is your decision, Sheriam," Arinvar replied just as quietly, "yours and the other sisters, but if you mean to return to the Tower, we could use him. If you intend to remain here until Elaida sends for you, then not." Myrelle gazed at Nuhel questioningly, and he nodded.

"It seems that you were right, Siuan," Anaiya said wryly. "We have not fooled the Gaidin."

"The question is whether he will agree to serve us," Carlinya said, and Morvrin nodded, adding "We must make him see our cause in such a way that he wishes to serve. It will not help us if it becomes known that we killed or imprisoned so notable a man before we have even begun."

"Yes," Beonin said, "and we must offer him the rewards that will bind him to us firmly."

Sheriam turned her eyes on the two men. "When Lord Bryne reaches the village, tell him nothing but bring him to us." As soon as the door closed behind the Warders, her gaze firmed. Siuan recognized it; the same clear green stare that had Novices' knees knocking before a word was said. "Now. You will tell us exactly why Gareth Bryne is here."

There was no choice. If they caught her in even the tiniest lie, they would begin to question everything. Siuan took a deep breath. "We took shelter for the night in a barn near Kore Springs, in Andor. Bryne is the lord there, and ..."

## CHAPTER 62: *Trapped*



A Warder in a grey-green coat approached Gareth as soon as he rode Traveller past the first stone houses of the village. Gareth would have known the man for a Warder after watching him walk two strides, even without all the Aes Sedai faces staring at him in the street. What in the name of the Light were so many Aes Sedai doing this close to Amadicia? Rumour in villages behind said the Amadicians meant to claim this bank of the River Eldar, which meant the Whitecloaks did. Aes Sedai could defend themselves well, but if Niall sent a legion across the Eldar, a good many of these women would die. Unless he could no longer tell how long a stump had been exposed to air, this place had been buried in the forest two months ago. What had Mara gotten herself into? He was sure he would find her here; village men remembered three pretty young women travelling together, especially when one of them asked directions to a town abandoned since the Whitecloak War.

The Warder, a big man with a broad face, an Illianer by his beard, planted himself in the street in front of Gareth's big-nosed bay gelding and bowed. "Lord Bryne? I am Nuhel Dromand. If you will come with me, there are those who do wish to speak with you."

Gareth dismounted slowly, pulling off his gauntlets and tucking them behind his sword belt as he studied the town. The plain buff-coloured coat he wore now was much better for a journey of this sort than the grey silk he had started in; that, he had given away. Aes Sedai and Warders, and others, watched him silently, but even those who had to be servants did not look surprised. And Dromand knew his name. His face was not unknown, but he suspected more than that. If Mara was—if *they* were Aes Sedai agents, it did not alter the oath they had taken. "Lead on, Nuhel Gaidin." If Nuhel was surprised at the address, he did not show it.

The inn that Dromand took him to—or what had been an inn once—had the look of a headquarters for a campaign, all bustle and scurry. That is, if Aes Sedai had ever commanded a campaign. He spotted Serenla before she did him, seated in the corner with a big man who was very likely Dalyn. When she did see him, her chin dropped almost to the table, and then she squinted at him as if not believing her eyes. Dalyn appeared to be asleep with his eyes open, staring at nothing. None of the Aes Sedai or Warders seemed to notice as Dromand led him through, but Gareth would have wagered his manor and lands that any one of them had seen ten times as much as all the staring servants combined. He should have turned and ridden away as soon as he realized who was in this village.

He took careful note as he made his bows while the Warder introduced him to the six seated Aes Sedai—only a fool was careless around Aes Sedai—but his mind was on the two young women standing against the wall beside the fresh-swept fireplace and looking chastened. The willowy Domani minx was offering him a smile more tremulous than seductive for a change. Mara was frightened, too—terrified out of her skin, he would say—but those blue eyes still met his full of defiance. The girl had courage to suit a lion.

"We are pleased to greet you, Lord Bryne," the flame-haired Aes Sedai said. Just slightly plump, and with those tilted eyes, she was pretty enough to make any man look twice despite the Great Serpent ring on her finger. "Will you tell us what brings you here?"

"Of course, Sheriam Sedai." Nuhel stood at his shoulder, but if any women needed less guarding from one old soldier, Gareth could not imagine who. He was sure that they knew already, and watching their faces while he told the tale confirmed it. Aes Sedai let nothing be seen that they did not want seen, but at least one of them would have blinked when he spoke of the oath if they had not known beforehand.

"A dreadful story to relate, Lord Bryne." That was the one called Anaiya; ageless face or not she looked more like a happy, prosperous farmwife than an Aes Sedai. "Yet I am surprised that you followed so far, even after oathbreakers." Mara's fair cheeks flushed a furious red. "Still, a strong oath, one that should not be broken."

"Unfortunately," Sheriam said, "we cannot let you take them quite yet."

So they were Aes Sedai agents. “A strong oath that should not be broken, yet you mean to keep them from honouring it?”

“They will honour it,” Myrelle said, with a glance at the pair by the fireplace that made them both stand straighter, “and you may rest assured that they already regret running away after giving it.” This time it was Amaena who reddened; Mara looked ready to chew rocks. “But we cannot allow it yet.” No Ajahs had been mentioned, yet he thought the darkly pretty woman was Green, and the stout, round-faced one called Morvrin was Brown. Perhaps it was the smile that Myrelle had given Dromand when the man brought him in, and Morvrin’s air of thinking of something else. “In truth, they did not say when they would serve, and we have a use for them.”

This was foolish; he should apologize for disturbing them and leave. And that was foolish, too. He had known before Dromand reached him in the street that he was unlikely to leave Salidar alive. There were probably fifty Warders in the forest around where he had left his men, if not a hundred. Joni and the others would give a good account of themselves, but he had not brought them all this way to die. Yet if he was a fool to have let a pair of eyes lure him into this trap, he might as well go the last mile for it. “Arson, theft and assault, Aes Sedai. Those were the crimes. They were tried sentenced, and sworn. But I have no objection to remaining here until you are done with them. Mara can act as my dog robber when you do not need her. I will mark the hours she works for me, and count them against her service.”

Mara opened her mouth angrily, but almost as if the women had known that she would try to speak, six pairs of Aes Sedai eyes swivelled to her in unison. She shifted her shoulders, snapped her mouth shut, and then glared at him, fists rigidly at her sides. He was glad she did not have a knife in her hand.

Myrelle appeared close to laughter. “Better to choose the other, Lord Bryne. From the way she is looking at you, you would find her far more ... congenial.”

He half-expected Amaena to go crimson, but she did not. And she was eyeing him—appraisingly. She even shared a smile with Myrelle. Well, she was Domani after all, and considerably more so than when he saw her last, it seemed.

Carlinya, cold enough to make the others seem warm, leaned forward. He was wary of her, and of the big-eyed one named Beonin. He was not sure why. Except that if he were in the Game of Houses here, he would say both women reeked of ambition. Maybe he was involved in exactly that.

“You should be aware,” Carlinya said coolly, “that the woman you know as Mara is in reality Siuan Sanche, formerly the Amyrlin Seat: Amaena is really Leane Sharif, who was Keeper of the Chronicles.”

It was all he could do not to gape like a country lout. Now that he knew, he could see it in Mara’s face—in Siuan’s—the face that had made him back down, softened into youth. “How?” was all he said. It was almost all he could have managed to say.

“There are some things men are better off not knowing,” Sheriam replied coolly, “and most women.”

Mara—no, he might as well think of her by her right name—Siuan had been Stilled. He knew that. It must be something to do with Stilling. If that swan-necked Domani had been Keeper, he was ready to wager she had been Stilled, too. But talking about Stilling around Aes Sedai was a good way to find out how tough you were. Besides, when they began going mysterious with you, Aes Sedai would not give a straight answer if you asked whether the sky was blue.

They were very good, these Aes Sedai. They had lulled him, then hit hard when his guard was down. He had a sinking feeling that he knew what they were softening him for. It would be interesting to learn whether he was right. “It does not change the oath they took. If they were still Amyrlin and Keeper, they could be held to that oath by any law, including that of Tar Valon.”

“Since you have no objection to remaining here,” Sheriam said, “you may have Siuan as your bodyservant, when we do not need her. You may have all three of them, if you wish, including Min, whom you apparently know as Serenla, all the time.” For some reason, that seemed to irritate Siuan as much as what had been said about her; she muttered to herself, not loud enough to be heard. “And since you have no objections, Lord Bryne, while you remain with us there is a service that you can give us.”

“The gratitude of Aes Sedai is not inconsiderable,” Morvrin said.

“You will be serving the Light and justice in serving us,” Carlinya added.

Beonin nodded, speaking in serious tones. "You served Morgase and Andor faithfully. Serve us as well, and you will not find exile at its end. Nothing we ask of you will go against your honour. Nothing we ask will harm Andor."

Gareth grimaced. He was in the Game, all right. He sometimes thought that Aes Sedai must have invented *Daes Dae'mar*; they seemed to play it in their sleep. Battle was surely more bloody, but it was more honest, too. If they meant to pull his strings, then his strings would be pulled—they would manage it one way or another—but it was time to show them he was not a brainless puppet.

"The White Tower is broken," he said flatly. Those Aes Sedai eyes widened, but he gave them no chance to speak. "The Ajahs have split. That is the only reason you can all be here. You certainly don't need an extra sword or two"—he eyed Dromand and got a nod in return—"so the only service you can want out of me is to lead an army. To build one, first, unless you have other camps with a good many more men than I saw here. And that means you intend to oppose Elaida." Sheriam looked vexed, Anaiya worried, and Carlinya on the point of speaking, but he went on. Let them listen; he expected he would be doing a great deal of listening to them in the months to come. "Very well. I've never liked Elaida, and I cannot believe she makes a good Amyrlin. More importantly, I can make an army to take Tar Valon. So long as you know the taking will be bloody and long.

"But these are my conditions." They stiffened to a woman at that, even Siuan and Leane. Men did not make conditions for Aes Sedai. "First, the command is mine. You tell me what to do, but I decide how. You give commands to me, and I give them to the soldiers under me, not you. Not unless I have agreed to it first." Several mouths opened, Carlinya's and Beonin's first, but he continued. "I assign men, I promote them, and I discipline them. Not you. Second, if I tell you it can't be done, you will consider what I say. I don't ask to usurp your authority"—small chance they would allow that—"yet I do not want to waste men because you do not understand war." It would happen, but no more than once, if he was lucky. "Third, if you begin this, you will stay the course. I will be putting my head in a noose, and every man who follows along with me, and should you decide half a year from now that Elaida as Amyrlin is preferable to war, you will pull that noose tight for every one of us who can be hunted down. The nations may stay out of a civil war in the Tower, but they'll not let us live if you abandon us. Elaida will see to that.

"If you will not agree to these, then I do not know that I can serve you. Whether you bind me with the Power for Dromand here to slit my throat or I end attainted and hung, death is still the end."

The Aes Sedai did not speak. For a long moment they stared at him, until the itch between his shoulder blades made him wonder if Nuhel was ready to plunge a dagger in. Then Sheriam rose, and the others followed her to the windows. He could see their lips moving, but he heard nothing. If they wanted to hide their deliberations behind the One Power, so be it. He was not certain how much of what he wanted he could wring out of them. All, if they were sensible, but Aes Sedai could decide that strange things were sensible. Whatever they decided, he would have to accede with as good a grace as he could muster. It was a perfect trap that he had made for himself.

Leane gave him a look and a smile that said as plain as words that he would never know what he had missed; he thought it would have been a fine chase, with him being led by the nose. Domani women never promised half what you thought they did, and they gave only as much as they chose and changed their minds either way in a blink.

The bait in his trap stared at him levelly, strode across the floor until she stood so close that she had to crane her neck to stare up at him, and spoke in a low, furious voice. "Why did you do this? Why did you follow us? For a barn?"

"For an oath." For a pair of blue eyes. Siuan Sanche could not be more than ten years younger than he, but it was hard to remember that she was Siuan Sanche while looking at a face nearer thirty years younger. The eyes were the same, though, deep blue and strong. "An oath you gave to me, and broke. I should double your time for that."

Dropping her gaze from his, she folded her arms beneath her breasts, growling, "That has already been taken care of."

"You mean they punished you for oathbreaking? If you've had your bottom switched for it, it doesn't count unless I do it."

Dromand's chuckle sounded more than half scandalized—the man had to be still struggling with who Siuan had been; Gareth was not certain that he was not, too—and her face darkened until he thought she might have apoplexy. "My time has already been doubled, if not more, you pile of rancid

fish guts! You and your marking hours! Not an hour will count until you have all three of us back at your manor, not if I must be your ... your ... *dog robber*, whatever that is ... for twenty years!"

So they had planned for this, too, Sheriam and the others. He glanced to their conference by the windows. They seemed to have divided into two opposing groups; Sheriam, Anaiya and Myrelle on one side, Morvrin and Carlinya on the other, with Beonin standing between. They had been ready to give him Siuan and Leane and—Min?—as bribe or sop, before he ever walked in. They were desperate, which meant he was on the weaker side, but maybe they were desperate enough to give him what he needed for a chance of victory.

"You are taking pleasure from this, aren't you?" Siuan said fiercely the moment his eyes moved. "You buzzard. Burn you for a carp-brained fool. Now that you know who I am, it pleases you that I'll have to bow and scrape to you." She did not seem to be doing much of that yet. "Why? Is it because I made you back down over Valreis? Are you so small, Gareth Bryne?"

She was trying to make him angry; she realized that she had said too much, and did not want to give him time to think on it. Maybe she was no longer Aes Sedai, but manipulation was in her blood.

"You were the Amyrlin Seat," he said calmly, "and even a king kisses the Amyrlin's ring. I can't say that I liked how you went about it, and we may have a quiet talk sometime on whether it was necessary to do what you did with half the court looking on, but you will remember that I followed Mara Tomanes here, and it was Mara Tomanes I asked for. Not Siuan Sanche. Since you keep asking why, let me ask it. Why was it so important for me to allow the Valreio to raid across the border?"

"Because your interference then could have ruined important plans," she said, driving each word home in a tight voice, "just as your interference with me now can. The Tower had identified a young border lady named Dula as a woman who could serve as a buffer between Andor and Valreis, with our help. I could hardly allow the chance your soldiers might kill her. I have work to do here, Lord Bryne. Leave me to do it, and you may see victory. Meddle out of spite, and you ruin everything."

"Whatever your work is, I am sure Sheriam and the others will see you do it. Dula? I've never heard of her. She cannot be succeeding yet." A Valreio lady with enough lands to cover the border, and who had Siuan's leash around her throat, could bring a considerable number of men.

"She ... died." Scarlet spots appeared in her cheeks, and she seemed to struggle with herself. "A month after I left Caemlyn," she muttered, "she fell off her horse."

He could not help laughing. "It was the horses you should have made kneel, not me. Well, you no longer need concern yourself with such things." That was certainly true. Whatever use the Aes Sedai had for her, they would never let her near power or decisions again now. He felt pity for her. He could not imagine this woman giving up and dying, but she had lost about as much as it was possible to lose short of dying. On the other hand, he had not liked being called a buzzard, or a pile of reeking fish guts. What was the other thing? A carp-brained fool. "From now on, you can concern yourself with keeping my boots clean and my bed made."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "If that is what you want, *Lord* Gareth Bryne, you should choose Leane. *She* might be fool enough."

Only barely did he stop himself from goggling. The way women's minds worked never ceased to amaze him. "You vowed to serve me however I choose." He managed to chuckle. Why was he doing this? He knew who she was, and what she was. But those eyes still haunted him, staring a challenge even when she thought there was no hope, just as they were now. "You will discover the kind of man I am, Siuan." He meant it to soothe her after his jest, but from the way her shoulders stiffened, she seemed to take it as a threat.

Suddenly he realized that he could hear the Aes Sedai, a soft murmur of voices that went silent immediately. They stood together, staring at him with unreadable expressions. No, at Siuan. Their eyes followed her as she started back to where Leane still stood; as if she could feel the pressure of them, each step came a little quicker than the one before. When she turned again, beside the fireplace, her face told no more than theirs. A remarkable woman. He was not sure he could have done as well, in her place.

The Aes Sedai were waiting for him to approach. When he did, Sheriam said, "We accept your conditions without reservation, Lord Bryne, and pledge ourselves to hold to them. They are most reasonable."

Carlinya, at least, did not look as though she thought they were reasonable at all, but he did not care. He had been prepared to give up all but the last, that they stay the course, if need be.

He knelt where he was, right fist pressed to the scrap of carpet, and they encircled him, each laying a hand on his bowed head. He did not care whether they used the Power to bind him to his oath or search for truth—he was not sure they could do either, but who really knew what Aes Sedai could do?—and if they meant something else, there was nothing he could do about it. Trapped by a pair of eyes, like a bullgoose fool country boy. He was carp-brained. “I do pledge and vow that I will serve you faithfully until the White Tower is yours ...”

Already, he was planning. Thad and maybe a Warder or two across the river to see what the Whitecloaks were up to. Joni, Barim and a few others down to Ebou Dar; it would keep Joni from swallowing his tongue every time he looked at “Mara” and “Amaena”, and every man he sent would know how to recruit. “... building and directing your army to the best of my ability ...”

\* \* \*

When the low buzz of talk in the common room died, Min looked up from the patterns she had been idly sketching on the table with a finger dipped in wine. Logain stirred, too, for a wonder, but only to stare at the people in the room, or maybe through them; it was hard to tell.

Gareth Bryne and that big Illianer Warder came out of the back room first. In the watchful silence, she heard Bryne say, “Tell them an Ebou Dari tavern maid sent you, or they’ll put your head on a stake.”

The Illianer roared with laughter. “A dangerous city, Ebou Dar.” Pulling leather gauntlets from behind his sword belt, he stalked out into the street drawing them on.

The talk began to pick up again as Siuan appeared. Min could not hear what Bryne said to her but she strode after the Warder snarling to herself. Min had a sinking feeling that the Aes Sedai had decided that they were going to honour that fool oath Siuan had been so proud of, honour it right now. If she could convince herself that the pair of Warders lounging against the wall would not notice, she would be out of the door and into Wildrose’s saddle in a flash.

Sheriam and the other Aes Sedai came out last, with Leane. Myrelle sat Leane down at one of the tables and began discussing something, while the rest circulated through the room, stopping to speak to each Aes Sedai. Whatever they said, it produced reactions from outright shock to pleased grins, despite that fabled Aes Sedai serenity.

“Stay here,” Min told Logain, scraping back her rickety chair. She hoped he was not going to start trouble. He was staring at Aes Sedai faces, one by one, and appearing to see more than he had in days. “Just stay at this table till I get back, Dalyn.” She was out of the habit of being around people who knew his real name. “Please.”

“She sold me to Aes Sedai.” It was a shock to hear him speak after being so long silent. He shivered, then nodded. “I will wait.”

Min hesitated, but if two Warders could not stop him from doing anything stupid, a roomful of Aes Sedai certainly could. When she reached the door, a chunky bay gelding was being led away by a man with the look of a groom. Bryne’s horse, she supposed. Their own mounts were nowhere in sight. So much for any dash for freedom. *I’ll honour the bloody thing! I will! But they can’t keep me from Rand now. I’ve done what Siuan wanted. They have to let me go to him.* The only problem was that Aes Sedai decided for themselves what they had to do, and usually what other people had to do as well.

Siuan nearly knocked her down, bustling back in with a scowl on her face, a blanket roll under her arm and saddlebags over her shoulder. “Watch Logain,” she hissed under her breath without slowing. “Let no-one talk to him.” She marched to the foot of the stairs, where a grey-haired woman, a servant, was starting to lead Bryne up, and fell in behind. From the stare she fixed on the man’s back, he should have been praying she did not reach for her belt knife.

Min smiled at the tall, slender Warder who had followed her to the door. He stood ten feet away, barely glancing at her, but she had no illusions. “We’re guests now. Friends.” He did not return the smile. *Bloody stone-faced men!* Why could they not at least give you a hint what they were thinking?

Logain was still studying the Aes Sedai when she got back to the table. A fine time for Siuan to want him kept silent, just when he was beginning to show life again. She needed to talk to Siuan. "Logain," she said softly, hoping neither of the Warders lounging against the wall could hear. They had hardly seemed to breathe since taking their positions, except when one had followed her. "I don't think you should say anything until Mara tells you what she has planned. Not to anyone."

"Mara?" He gave her a dark sneer. "You mean Siuan Sanche?" So he remembered what he had heard in his daze. "Does anyone here look as if they want to talk to me?" He returned to his frowning study.

No-one did look as if they wanted to talk with a gentled false Dragon. Except for the two Warders, no-one seemed to be paying them any mind at all. If she had not known better, she would have said the Aes Sedai in the room were excited. They had hardly appeared lethargic before, but they certainly seemed to have more energy now, talking in small groups, issuing brisk orders to Warders. The papers they had been so intent on largely lay abandoned. Sheriam and the others who had taken Siuan away had returned to the room at the back, but Leane had two clerks at her table now, both women writing as fast as they could. And a steady stream of Aes Sedai were coming into the inn, disappearing through that rough plank door and not coming out. Whatever had happened in there, Siuan had surely stirred them up.

Min wished she had Siuan at the table, or better yet somewhere alone, for five minutes. Doubtless at that moment she was beating Bryne over the head with his saddlebags. No, Siuan would not resort to that, for all of her glares. Bryne was not like Logain, larger than life in every dimension, every emotion; Logain had managed to overpower Siuan for a time with sheer hugeness. Bryne was quiet, reserved, not a small man certainly, but hardly overbearing. She would not want the man she remembered from Kore Springs as an enemy, but she did not think that he would hold out long against Siuan. He might think she was going to meekly serve out her time as his servant, but Min had no doubts who would end doing what who wanted. She just had to talk to the woman about him.

As if Min's thoughts had brought her, Siuan came stumping down the stairs, a bundle of white under her arm. Stalked down was nearer truth; if she had had a tail, she would have been lashing it. She paused for one instant, staring at Min and Logain, then marched toward the door that led to the kitchens.

"Stay here," Min cautioned Logain. "And please, say nothing until ... Siuan can talk to you." She was going to have to get used to calling people by their right names again. He did not even look at her.

She caught up with Siuan in a hallway short of the kitchen; the rattle and splash of pots being scrubbed and dishes washed drifted through gaps where boards had dried in the kitchen door.

Siuan's eyes widened in alarm. "Why did you leave him? Is he still alive?"

"He'll live forever, for all I can see. Siuan, no-one *wants* to talk to him. But I have to talk with you." Siuan stuffed the white bundle into her arms. Shirts. "What is this?"

"Gareth bloody Bryne's bloody laundry," the other woman snarled. "Since you are one of his *serving girls*, too, you can wash them. I must speak with Logain before anyone else."

Min caught her arm as she tried to brush past. "You can spare one minute to listen. When Bryne came in, I had a viewing. An aura, and a bull ripping roses from around its neck, and ... None of it matters except the aura. I didn't even really understand that, but more than anything else."

"How much did you understand?"

"If you want to stay alive, you had better stay close to him." Despite the heat, Min shivered. She had never had a viewing with an "if" in it before. It was bad enough sometimes knowing what *would* happen; if she started knowing what *might* ... "All I know is this. If he stays close to you, you live. If he gets too far away, for too long, you are going to die. Both of you. I don't know why I should have seen anything about you in his aura, but you seemed like part of it."

Siuan's smile would have done to peel a pear. "I'd as soon sail in a rotting hull full of last month's eels."

"I never thought he'd follow us. Are they really going to make us go with him?"

"Oh, no, Min. He is going to lead our armies to victory. And make my life the Pit of Doom! So he's going to save my life, is he? I don't know that it is worth it." Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her skirts. "When you have those washed and ironed, bring them to me. I will take them up to him. You can clean his boots before you go to sleep tonight. We have a room—a cubbyhole—near

him, so we will be close if he calls to have his bloody pillows plumped!” She was gone before Min could protest.

Staring down at the wadded shirts, Min was sure that she knew who was going to be doing all of Gareth Bryne’s laundry, and it was not Siuan Sanche. *Rand bloody al’Thor*. Fall in love with a man, and you ended up doing laundry, even if it did belong to another man. When she marched into the kitchen to demand a washtub and hot water, she was snarling every bit as much as Siuan.

## CHAPTER 63: A Wager



A soft night breeze stirred across the small town of Eianrod, then faded. Sitting on the stone rail of the wide flat bridge in the heart of the town, Rand supposed the breeze was hot, yet it hardly felt so after the Waste. Warm for nighttime perhaps, but not enough to make him unbutton his red coat. The river below him had never been large, and was half its normal width now, yet he still enjoyed watching the water flow south, moonshadows cast by scudding clouds playing across the darkly glittering surface. That was why he was out here in the night, really; to look at running water for a time. His wards were set, surrounding the Aiel encampment that itself surrounded the town. The Aiel themselves kept a watch a sparrow could not pierce unseen. He could waste an hour being soothed by the flow of a river.

It was surely better than another night where he had to order Moiraine to leave so he could study with Asmodean. She had even taken to bringing his meals to him and talking while he ate, as if she meant to cram everything she knew into his head before they reached the city of Cairhien. He could not face her begging to remain—actually begging!—as she had the previous night. For a woman like Moiraine, that behaviour was so unnatural that he had wanted to agree simply to stop it. Which was very likely why she had done it. The way she had clung to him as they made love—no, fucked—made love? That way had surely been an act, and one he should know better than to be moved by. Much better an hour listening to the quiet liquid ripplings of the river. With luck, she would have given up on him for tonight.

The eight or ten paces of clay between water and weeds on both sides below him was dried and cracked. He peered up at the clouds crossing the moon. He could try to make those clouds give rain. The town's two fountains were both dry, and dust lay in a third of the wells not fouled beyond cleaning. Try was the word, though. He had made it rain once; remembering how was the trick. If he managed that, then he could try not to make it a drowning deluge and a tree-snapping windstorm this time.

Asmodean would be no help; he did not know much about weather, it seemed. For every thing the man taught him, there were two more that made Asmodean either throw up his hands or give a lick and a promise. Once he had thought that the Forsaken knew everything, that they were all but omnipotent. But if the others were like Asmodean, they had ignorances as well as weaknesses. It might actually be that he already knew more of some things than they. Than some of them, at least. The problem would be finding out who. Semirhage was almost as poor at handling weather as Asmodean.

He shivered as if this were night in the Three-fold Land. Asmodean had never told him that. Better to listen to the water and not think, if he meant to sleep at all tonight.

Sulin approached him, the *shoufa* around her shoulders so it uncovered her short white hair, and leaned on the railing. The wiry Maiden was armed for battle, bow and arrows, spears and knife and buckler. She had taken command of his bodyguard tonight. Two dozen more *Far Dareis Mai* squatted easily on the bridge ten paces away. "An odd night," she said. "We were gambling, but suddenly everyone was throwing nothing but sixes."

"I am sorry," he told her without thinking, and she gave him a peculiar look. She did not know, of course; he had not spread it about. The ripples he gave off as *ta'veren* spread out in odd, random ways. Even the Aiel would not want to be within ten miles of him, if they knew.

The ground had given way beneath three Stone Dogs today, dropping them into a viper pit, but none of the dozens of bites had found anything but cloth. He knew that had been him, bending chance. Tal Nethin, the saddlemaker, had survived Taien to trip on a stone this very noon and break his neck falling on flat, grassy ground. Rand was afraid that had been him, too. On the other hand, Bael and Jheran had mended the blood feud between Shaarad and Goshien while he was with them, eating a midday meal of dried meat on the move. They still did not like each other, and hardly seemed to understand what they had done, but it was done, with pledges and water oaths given, each man

holding the cup for the other to drink. To Aiel, water oaths were stronger than any other; it might be generations before Shaarad and Goshien so much as raided each other for sheep or goats or cattle.

He had wondered if those random effects would ever work in his favour; maybe this was as close as it came. What else had happened today that might be laid at his feet, he did not know; he never asked, and would as soon not hear. The Baels and Jherans could only partly make up for the Tal Nethins. Or the Seanas.

He'd known there was death at the end of this march, of course. But he hadn't expected to find in along the way, or in such a manner. The Wise Ones said she had died in her sleep, that she was old. And she had been, it was so, for all that she liked to appear otherwise in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Old enough for her heart to give out? Perhaps. And perhaps a *ta'veren* twisting chance nearby played a factor in it, too. It had felt wrong to bury her in Cairhien, where her family would never find her. It had made him think of Kari's grave, soon to be forgotten on the abandoned land that no more al'Thors would tend. There would be more losses to come.

"I've not seen Enaila or Adelin for days," he said. It was as good a change of subject as any. That pair in particular had seemed to be jealous of their places guarding him. "Are they ill?"

If anything, the look Sulin gave him was even more peculiar. "They will return when they learn to stop playing with dolls, Rand al'Thor."

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Aiel were strange—Aviendha's lessons often made them more so, not less—but this was ridiculous. "Well, tell them they are grown women and they ought to act it."

Even by moonlight he could tell that her smile was pleased. "It shall be as the *Car'a'carn* wishes." What did that mean? She eyed him a moment, lips pursed thoughtfully. "You have not eaten yet tonight. There is still enough food for everyone, and you will not fill one belly by going hungry yourself. If you do not eat, people will worry that you are ill. You will become ill."

He laughed softly, a hoarse wheeze. The *Car'a'carn* one minute, and the next ... If he did not fetch something to eat, Sulin would probably go get it for him. And try to feed him to boot. "I will eat. Moiraine must be in her blankets by now." This time her odd look was satisfying; for a change he had said something that she did not understand.

As he swung his feet down, he heard the ring of horses' hooves walking down the stone-paved street toward the bridge. Every Maiden was upright in an instant, face veiled; half nocked arrows. His hand went to his waist by instinct, but the sword was not there. The Aiel felt strange enough about him riding a horse and carrying the thing at his saddle; he had not seen any need to offend their customs more by wearing it. Besides, there were not many horses, and they were coming at a walk.

When they appeared, surrounded by an escort of fifty Aiel, the riders numbered fewer than twenty, slumping in their saddles dejectedly. Most wore rimmed helmets and Tairen coats with puffy, striped sleeves beneath their breastplates. The pair in the lead had ornately gilded cuirasses, and large white plumes attached to the front of their helmets, and the stripes on their sleeves had the glisten of satin in the moonlight. Half a dozen men at the rear, though, shorter and slighter than the Tairens, two with small banners called *con* on short staffs harnessed to their backs, wore dark coats and helmets shaped like bells cut away to expose their faces. Cairhienin used the banners to pick out officers in battle, and also to mark a lord's personal retainers.

The Tairens with plumes stared when they saw him, exchanged startled glances, then scrambled down to come kneel before him, helmets under their arms. They were young, little older than he, both with dark beards trimmed to neat points in the fashion of Tairen nobility. Dents marred their breastplates, and the gilding was chipped; they had been crossing swords somewhere. Neither as much as glanced at the Aiel surrounding them, as if when ignored they would disappear. The Maidens unveiled, though they looked no less ready to put spear or arrow through the kneeling men.

Rhuarc followed the Tairens, with a grey-eyed Aiel younger and slightly taller than he, and stood behind. Mangin was of the Jindo Taardad, and one of those who had gone to the Stone of Tear. Jindo had brought in the riders.

"My Lord Dragon," the plump, pink-cheeked lordling said, "burn my soul, but have they taken you prisoner?"

His companion, jug ears and potato nose making him look a farmer despite his beard, kept sweeping lanky hair from his forehead nervously. "They said they were taking us to some Dawn

fellow. The *Car'a'carn*. Means something about chiefs, if I remember what my tutor said. Forgive me, my Lord Dragon. I am Edorion of House Selorna, and this is Estean of House Andiama."

"I am He Who Comes With the Dawn," Rand told them quietly. "And the *Car'a'carn*." He had them placed now: young lords who had spent their time drinking, gambling and chasing women when he was in the Stone. Estean's eyes nearly popped out of his face; Edorion looked as surprised for a moment, then nodded slowly, as if he suddenly saw how it made sense. "Stand. Who are your Cairhienin companions?" It would be interesting to meet Cairhienin who were not running for their lives from the Shaido, and any other Aiel they saw. For that matter, if they were with Edorion and Estean, they might be the first supporters he had met in this land. If the two Tairens' fathers had followed his orders. "Bring them forward."

Estean blinked in surprise as he rose, but Edorion barely paused in turning to shout, "Meresin! Daricain! Come here!" Much like calling dogs. The Cairhienins' banners bobbed as they dismounted slowly.

"My Lord Dragon." Estean hesitated, licking his lips as though thirsty. "Did you ... Did you send the Aiel against Cairhien?"

"They've attacked the city, then?"

Rhuarc nodded, and Mangin said, "If these are to be believed, Cairhien still holds. Or did three days ago." There was little doubt that he did not think it still did, and less that he cared about a city of treekillers.

"I did not send them, Estean," Rand said as they were joined by the two Cairhienin, who knelt doffing their helmets to reveal men of an age with Edorion and Estean, their hair shaved back in line with their ears and their dark eyes wary. "Those who attack the city are my enemies, the Shaido. I mean to save Cairhien if it can be saved."

He had to go through the business of telling the Cairhienin to rise; his time with the Aiel had almost made him forget the habit this side of the Spine of the World, bowing and kneeling right and left. He had to ask for introductions, too, and the Cairhienin gave them themselves. Lieutenant Lord Meresin of House Daganred—his *con* was all wavy vertical lines of red and white—and Lieutenant Lord Daricain of House Annallin, his *con* covered with small squares of red and black. It was a surprise that they were lords. Though lords commanded and led soldiers in Cairhien, they did not shave their heads and become soldiers. Or had not; much had changed, apparently.

"My Lord Dragon." Meresin stumbled a bit saying that. He and Daricain were both pale, slender men, with narrow faces and long noses, but he was a bit the heavier. Neither looked as if he had had much to eat lately. Meresin rushed on as if afraid of being interrupted. "My Lord Dragon, Cairhien can hold. For days yet, perhaps as many as ten or twelve, but you must come quickly if you are to save it."

"That is why we came out," Estean said, shooting Meresin a dark look. Both Cairhienin returned it, but their defiance was tinged with resignation. Estean raked stringy hair from his forehead. "To find help. Parties have been sent in every direction, my Lord Dragon." He shivered despite the sweat on his brow, and his voice turned distant and hollow. "There were more of us when we started. I saw Baran go down, screaming with a spear through his guts. He'll never turn a card at chop again. I could use a mug of strong brandy."

Edorion turned his helmet in gauntleted hands, frowning. "My Lord Dragon, the city can hold a while longer, but even if these Aiel will fight those, the question is, can you bring them there in time? I think ten or twelve days is a more than generous estimate, myself. In truth, I only came because I thought dying with a spear through me would be better than being taken alive when they made it over the walls. The city is packed with refugees who fled ahead of the Aiel; there isn't a dog or a pigeon left in the city, and I doubt there will be a rat left soon. The one good thing is that no-one seems to be worrying very much about who will take the Sun Throne, not with this Couladin outside."

"He called on us to surrender to He Who Comes With the Dawn, on the second day," Daricain put in, earning a sharp look from Edorion for the interruption.

"Couladin has some sport with prisoners," Estean said. "Out of bowshot, but where anyone on the walls can see. You can hear them screaming, too. The Light burn my soul, I don't know whether he is trying to break our will or simply likes it. Sometimes they let peasants make a run for the city, then shoot them full of arrows when they're almost safe. However safe Cairhien is. Only peasants, but ..." He trailed off and swallowed hard, as if he had just remembered what Rand's opinions were of

“only peasants”. Rand just looked at him, but he seemed to shrivel, and muttered under his breath about brandy.

Edorion leaped into the momentary silence. “My Lord Dragon, the point is that the city can hold until you come, if you can come quickly. We only beat back the first assault because the Foregate caught fire ...”

“Flames nearly took the city,” Estean interjected. The Foregate, a city in itself outside the walls of Cairhien, had been mostly wood, as Rand remembered. “Would have been disaster if the river was not right there.”

The other Tairen went on right over him. “... but Lord Meilan has the defence well planned, and the Cairhienin appear to be keeping their backbones for the time.” That earned him frowns from Meresin and Daricain that he either did not see or pretended not to. “Seven days with luck, perhaps eight at most. If you can ...” A heavy sigh abruptly seemed to deflate Edorion’s plumpness. “I did not see one horse,” he said as if to himself. “The Aiel do not ride. You will never be able to move men afoot so far in time.”

“How long?” Rand asked Rhuarc.

“Seven days” was the reply. Mangin nodded, and Estean laughed.

“Burn my soul, it took us as long to reach here on horses. If you think you can make the return in the same afoot, you must be ...” Becoming aware of the Aiel eyes on him, Estean scrubbed the hair from his face. “Is there any brandy in this town?” he muttered.

“It isn’t how fast we can make it,” Rand said quietly, “but how fast you can, if you dismount some of your men and use their horses for spares. I want to let Meilan and Cairhien know that help is on the way. But whoever goes will have to be sure he can keep his mouth shut if the Shaido take him. I do not intend to let Couladin know any more than he can learn on his own.” Estean went whiter in the face than the Cairhienin.

Meresin and Daricain were on their knees together, each seizing one of Rand’s hands to kiss. He let them, with as much patience as he could find; one bit of Moiraine’s advice that had the ring of common sense was not to offend people’s customs, however strange or even repulsive, unless you absolutely had to, and even then think twice.

“We will go, my Lord Dragon,” Meresin said breathlessly. “Thank you, my Lord Dragon. Thank you. Under the Light, I vow I will die before revealing a word to any but my father or the High Lord Meilan.”

“Grace favour you, my Lord Dragon,” the other added. “Grace favour you, and the Light illumine you forever. I am your man to the death.” Rand let Meresin say that he also was Rand’s man before taking his hands back firmly and telling them to stand. He did not like the way they were looking at him. Edorion had called them like hounds, but men should not look at anyone as if they were dogs gazing at a master.

Edorion drew a deep breath, puffing his pink cheeks, and let it out slowly. “I suppose if I made it out in one piece, I can make it back in. My Lord Dragon, forgive me if I offend, but would you care to wager, say, a thousand gold crowns, that you can really come in seven days?”

Rand stared at him. The man was as bad as Mat. “I don’t have a hundred crowns silver, much less a thousand in—”

Sulin broke in. “He has it, Tairen,” she said firmly. “He will meet your wager, if you make it ten thousand by weight.”

Edorion laughed. “Done, Aiel. And worth every copper if I lose. Come to think, I’ll not live to collect if I win. Come, Meresin, Daricain.” It sounded as if he were summoning dogs to heel. “We ride.”

Rand waited until the three had made their bows and were halfway back to the horses before rounding on the white-haired Maiden. “What do you mean, I have a thousand gold crowns? I’ve never seen a thousand crowns, much less ten thousand.”

The Maidens exchanged glances as if he were demented; so did Rhuarc and Mangin. “A fifth of the treasure that was in the Stone of Tear belongs to those who took the Stone, and will be claimed when they can carry it away.” Sulin spoke as to a child, instructing it in the simple facts of everyday life. “As chief and battle leader there, one tenth of that fifth is yours. Tear submitted to you as chief by right of triumph, so one tenth of Tear is yours as well. And you have said we can take the fifth in

these lands—a ... tax, you called it.” She fumbled the word; the Aiel did not have taxes. “The tenth part of that is yours also, as *Car'a'carn*.”

Rand shook his head. In all of his talks with Aviendha, he had never thought to ask whether the fifth applied to him; he was not Aiel, *Car'a'carn* or no, and it had not seemed anything to do with him. Well, it might not be a tax, but he could use it as kings did taxes. Unfortunately, he had only the vaguest idea how that was. He would have to ask Moiraine; that was one thing she had missed in her lectures. Perhaps she thought it so obvious that he should know.

Elayne would have known what taxes were used for. He wished he knew where she was. Somewhere in Altara, reportedly. He missed her, but not just her. Where was Min these days? Was she safe? Tam said she’d been bound for Tar Valon when last he’d seen her. She had laughed at him, but she had never made him think she was speaking some strange language the way Aviendha did. She would not laugh, now. If he ever saw her again, she would run a hundred miles to get away from the Dragon Reborn.

Edorion dismounted all his men, taking one of their horses and stringing the others together by their reins, along with Estean’s. No doubt he was saving his own for the final sprint through the Shaido. Meresin and Daricain did the same with their men. Though it meant that the Cairhienin had only two spare mounts apiece, no-one seemed to think they should have any of the Tairen horses. They clattered off together westward at a trot, with a Jindo escort.

Carefully not looking at anyone, Estean started to drift toward the soldiers standing uneasily in a circle of Aiel at the foot of the bridge. Mangin caught his red-striped sleeve. “You can tell us conditions inside Cairhien, wetlander.” The lumpy-faced man looked ready to faint.

“I am certain he will answer any questions you ask,” Rand said sharply, emphasizing the final word.

“They will only be asked,” Rhuarc said, taking the Tairen’s other arm. He and Mangin seemed to be holding the much shorter man up between them. “Warning the city’s defenders is well and good, Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc went on, “but we should send scouts. Running, they can reach Cairhien as soon as those men on horses, and meet us coming back with word of how Couladin has disposed the Shaido.”

Rand could feel the Maidens’ eyes on him, but he looked straight at Rhuarc. “Thunder Walkers?” he suggested. They formed the reserve of Aiel armies, men chosen for their judgement as much as their skill, who knew when to strike and when to hold back.

“*Sha'mad Conde*,” Rhuarc agreed. He and Mangin turned Estean—they *were* holding him up—and started toward the other soldiers.

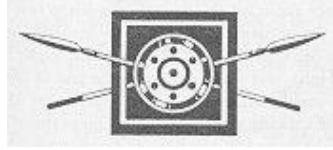
“Ask!” Rand called after them. “He is your ally, and my liege man.” He had no idea whether Estean was that last or not—it was another thing to ask Moiraine—or even how much of an ally he really was—his father, the High Lord Torean, had plotted against Rand enough—but he would allow nothing close to Couladin’s ways.

Rhuarc turned his head and nodded.

“You tend your people well, Rand al’Thor.” Sulin’s voice was flat as a planed plank.

“I try,” he told her. He was not about to rise to the bait. Whoever went to scout the Shaido, some would not return, and that was that. “I think I will have something to eat now. And get some sleep.” It could not be much more than two hours to midnight, and sunrise still came early this time of year. The Maidens followed him, watching the shadows warily as if they expected attack, handtalk flickering among them. But then, Aiel always seemed to expect attack.

## CHAPTER 64: *The Far Snows*



The streets of Eianrod ran straight and met at right angles, where necessary slicing through hills that were otherwise neatly terraced with stone. The slate-roofed stone buildings had an angular look, as if they were all vertical lines. Eianrod had not fallen to Couladin; no people had been there when the Shaido swept through. A good many of the houses were only charred beams and hollow ruined shells, however, including most of the wide three-story marble buildings with balconies that Moiraine said had belonged to merchants. Broken furniture and clothes littered the streets, along with shattered dishes and shards of glass from windows, single boots and tools and toys.

The burning had come at different times—Rand could tell that much himself, from the weathering of blackened timbers and how much smell of char lingered where—but Lan had been able to chart the flow of battles by which the town had been taken and retaken. By different Houses contending for the Sun Throne, most likely, though from the look of the streets, the last to hold Eianrod had been brigands. A good many of the bands roaming Cairhien held allegiance to no-one, and to nothing except gold.

“This was not the Shaido,” he heard Nici tell someone angrily as they crunched through the debris. “It was ... What is the wetlander word? Bandits.”

Rhamys backed her up. “Bandits succumb to desire and lose their honour, then band together and attack towns like those we passed earlier today. Their actions are inexcusable.”

While the Maidens echoed her condemnation, Rand frowned to himself. This was the first town they’d come upon on the day’s march. They’d passed some farmsteads, but ... It didn’t matter. He needed his bed.

It was to one of the merchants’ houses that Rand went, on the largest of the town’s two squares, three square stories of grey marble with heavy balconies and wide steps with thick angular stone siderails overlooking a silent fountain with a dusty round basin. A chance to sleep in a bed again had been too good to pass up, and he had hopes that Aviendha would choose to remain in a tent; whether his or with the Wise Ones, he did not care, so long as he did not have to try going to sleep while listening to her breathe a few paces away. Recently he had begun imagining he could hear her heart beat even when he had not taken hold of *saidin*. But if she did not stay away, he had taken precautions.

The Maidens stopped at the steps, some trotting around the building to take positions on all sides. He had feared that they would try declaring this a Roof of the Maidens, even for the one night and so as soon as he had chosen the building, one of the few in town with a sound roof and most of the windows unbroken, he had told Sulin that he was declaring it the Roof of the Winespring Brothers. No-one could enter who had not drunk from the Winespring, in Emond’s Field. From the look Ani had given him, she knew very well what he was up to, but none of them, not even her, followed him beyond the wide doors that seemed to be all narrow vertical panels. He tried not to imagine her looking at his bottom as he climbed the steps.

Inside, the large rooms were bare, though white-robed *gai’shain* had spread a few blankets for themselves in the broad entry hall, its high plaster ceiling worked in a pattern of severe squares. Keeping *gai’shain* out was beyond him even had he wanted to, as much so as keeping Moiraine out if she was not asleep elsewhere. Whatever orders he gave about not being disturbed, she always found a way to make the Maidens let her by, and it always took a direct command for her to go before she would leave.

The *gai’shain* rose smoothly, men and women, before he had the door closed. They would not sleep until he did, and some would take turns remaining awake in case he wanted something in the night. He had tried ordering them not to, but telling a *gai’shain* not to serve according to custom was like kicking a bale of wool; whatever impression you made was gone as soon as your toes were. He waved them away and climbed the marble stairs. Some of those *gai’shain* had salvaged a few bits of furniture, including a bed and two feather mattresses, and he was looking forward to washing and—

He froze as soon as he opened the door to his bedchamber. Aviendha had not chosen to remain with the tents. She stood before the washstand, with its mismatched, cracked bowl and pitcher, a cloth in one hand and a bar of yellow soap in the other. She had no clothes on. She seemed as stunned as he, as incapable of moving.

"I ..." She stopped to swallow, big green eyes locked on his face. "I could not make a sweat tent here in this ... town, so I thought I would try your way of ..." She was hard muscle and soft curves; she glistened damply from head to feet. A rivulet of water traced its way from her stunned and stunning face down her neck, to kiss her full breasts; untouched by the sun, they rose and fell with her rapid breathing. It stopped there but Rand's eyes could not. Most men would have been envious of her washboard stomach, but no man's hips had ever flared so wide. He had never imagined that her legs were so long. "I thought you would remain longer at the bridge. I ..." Her voice rose in pitch; her eyes widened in panic. "I did not arrange for you to see me! I must get away from you. As far away as I can! I must!"

Suddenly a shimmering vertical line appeared in the air near her. It widened, as if rotating, into a gateway. Icy wind rushed through it into the room, carrying thick curtains of snow.

"I must get away!" she wailed, and darted through the blizzard.

Immediately the gateway began to narrow again, turning, but without thought Rand channelled, blocking it at half its former width. He did not know what he had done or how, but he recognised her weaving: this was a gateway for Travelling. There was no time for thinking, for wondering how she had done it. Wherever Aviendha had gone, she had gone naked into the heart of a winter storm. Rand tied off the flows he had woven as he ripped all the blankets from the bed and tossed them onto her clothes and pallet. Seizing blankets, clothes and rugs all together, he plunged through only moments behind her.

Icy wind screamed through night air filled with swirling white. Even wrapped in the void, he could feel his body shivering. Dimly he could make out scattered shapes in the darkness; trees, he thought. There was nothing for him to smell but cold. Ahead of him, a form moved, obscured by darkness and the snowstorm; he might have missed it but for the sharpness of his eyes in the void. Aviendha, running as hard as she could. He lumbered after her through snow to his knees, clutching the thick bundle to his chest.

"Aviendha! Stop!" He was afraid that the howling wind would sweep his shout away, but she heard. And if anything, ran faster. He forced himself to more speed, staggering and tripping as the deepening snow tugged at his boots. The prints left by her bare feet were filling fast. If he lost sight of her in this ... "Stop, you fool woman! Are you trying to kill yourself?" The sound of his voice seemed to flog her to run harder.

Grimly, he pushed himself, half-falling and scrambling back up, knocked down by the hurtling wind as often as stumbling in the snow, blundering into trees. He had to keep his eyes on her. He was only thankful this forest, or whatever it was, had trees so far apart.

Plans skittered across the void and were discarded. He could try quelling the storm—and maybe the result would turn the air to ice. A shelter of Air to keep the falling snow away would do nothing for that underfoot. He could melt a path for himself with Fire—and slog through mud instead. Unless ... He channelled, and the snow ahead of him melted in a band a span wide, a band that ran ahead of him as he did. Steam rose, and falling snow vanished a foot above the sandy soil. He could feel the heat of it through his boots. Down almost to his ankles, his body shook with the bone-chilling cold; his feet sweated and flinched away from the heated ground. But he was catching up now. Another five minutes and ...

Suddenly the vague shape he had been following vanished as if she had fallen into a hole. Keeping his eyes fixed on the spot where he had last seen her, he ran as hard as he could.

Abruptly he was splashing in icy flowing water to his ankles, halfway to his knees. Ahead of him, the melting snow revealed more, and an edge of ice inching slowly back. No steam rose from the black water. Stream or river, it was too big for the amount of his channelling to warm the swift-moving flow even a hair. She must have run out onto the ice and fallen through, but he would not save her by trying to wade into this. Filled with *saidin*, he was barely aware of the cold, but his teeth chattered uncontrollably.

Retreating to the bank, gaze locked on where he thought Aviendha had gone down, he channelled flows of Fire into ground still bare, well back from the stream, until the sand melted and

fused and glowed white. Even in this storm, that would stay hot for a time. He set the bundle down in the snow beside it—her life would depend on finding the blankets and rugs again—then waded through the deep white to one side of the melted path and lay flat. Slowly he crawled out onto the snow-covered ice.

The wind shrieked across him. His coat might as well not have existed. His hands were numb now, and his feet going; he had stopped shivering except for an occasional shudder. Coldly calm inside the void, he knew what was happening; there were blizzards in the Theren, perhaps even as bad as this. His body was being overwhelmed. If he did not find warmth soon, he would be able to calmly watch from the void as he died. But if he died, Aviendha would, too. If she had not already.

He felt rather than heard the ice cracking beneath his weight. His probing hands fell into water. This was the place, but with snow whirling about, he could barely see. He flailed, searching, numb hands splashing. One hit something at the edge of the ice, and he commanded his fingers to close, felt frozen hair crackling.

*Got to pull her out.* He crawled backward, hauling at her. She was a dead weight, sliding slowly out of the water. *Don't care if the ice scrapes her. Better that than freezing or drowning. Back. Keep moving. If you quit, she dies. Keep moving, burn you!* Crawling. Pulling with his legs, pushing with one hand. The other locked in Aviendha's hair; no time to get a better grip; she could not feel it anyway. *You've had it easy for too long. Lords kneeling, and gai'shain running to fetch your wine, and Moiraine doing as she's told. Back. Time to do something yourself if you still can. Move, you flaming fatherless son of a spavined goat! Keep moving!*

Suddenly his feet hurt; the pain began creeping up his legs. It took him a moment to look back, and then he rolled off the steaming patch of melted sand. Tendrils of smoke, where his breeches had begun smouldering, were whisked away by the wind.

Fumbling for the bundle he had left, he swathed Aviendha from head to foot in all of it, the blankets, the rugs of her pallet, her clothes. Every bit of protection was vital. Her eyes were closed, and she did not move. He parted the blankets enough to put an ear to her chest. Her heart beat so slowly that he was not sure he was really hearing it. Even four blankets and half a dozen rugs were not enough, and he could not channel heat into her as he had the ground; even fining the flow as much as possible, he was more likely to kill than warm. He could feel the weave he had used to block open her gateway, a mile or perhaps two away through the storm. If he tried to carry her that far, neither of them would survive. They needed shelter, and they needed it here.

He channelled flows of Air, and snow began to move across the ground against the wind, building into thick square walls three paces on a side with one gap for a door, building higher, compacting the snow till it glistened like ice, roofing it over high enough to stand. Scooping Aviendha into his arms, he stumbled into the dark interior, weaving and tying flames dancing in the corners for light, channelling to scoop more snow to close the doorway.

Just with the wind shut away it felt warmer, but that would not be enough. Using the trick Asmodean had shown him, he wove Air and Fire, and the air around them grew warmer. He did not dare tie that weave off; if he fell asleep, it could grow and melt the hut. For that matter, the flames were almost as dangerous to leave, but he was too bone-weary and chilled to maintain more than one weave.

The ground inside had been cleared as he built, bare sandy soil with only a few brown leaves he did not recognize and some scruffy low dead weeds that were equally strange to him. Releasing the weave that warmed the air, he heated the ground enough to take away the iciness, then took up the other weave again. It was all he could do to lay Aviendha down gently rather than drop her.

He pushed a hand inside the blankets to feel her cheek, her shoulder. Trickles of water ran across her face as her hair melted. He was cold, but she was ice. She needed every scrap of warmth he could find for her, and he did not dare warm the air more. Already the insides of the walls shone with a faint layer of melt. However frozen he felt, he had more heat in him than she did.

Stripping off his clothes, he climbed into the coverings with her, arranging his own damp garments on the outside; they could help hold in the body heat. His sense of touch, enhanced by the void and *saidin*, soaked in the feel of her. Her skin made silk feel rough. Compared to her skin, satin was ... *Don't think.* He smoothed damp hair away from her face. He should have dried it, but the water no longer felt so cold, and there was nothing but the blankets or their clothes to use anyway. Her eyes were closed; her chest stirred against him slowly. Her head lay on his arm, snuggled against his chest.

If she had not felt like winter itself, she could have been sleeping. So peaceful; not angry at all. So beautiful. *Stop thinking.* It was a sharp command outside the emptiness surrounding him. *Talk.*

He tried talking of the first thing that came to mind, Elayne, Aviendha's friend, that she kept insisting he belonged to, but that soon had thoughts of golden-haired Elayne drifting across the void, of kissing her in secluded spots in the Stone. *Don't think of kissing, fool!* Speaking of any woman reminded him that he had his arms around a woman who had no clothes on. Filled with the Power, he could smell the scent of her, feel every inch of her as clearly as if he were running his hands ... The void trembled. *Light, you're only trying to warm her! Keep your mind out of the pigsty, man!* Aviendha would kill him if she knew he'd thought of her in such a way.

Trying to drive thought away, he talked of his hopes for Cairhien, to bring peace and an end to the famine, to bring the nations behind him without any more bloodshed. But that had its own life, too, its own inevitable path, to Shayol Ghul, where he must face the Dark One and die, if the Prophecies were true. It seemed cowardly to say that he hoped he might live through that somehow. Aiel did not know cowardice; the worst of them was brave as a lion. "The Breaking of the World killed the weak," he had heard Bael say, "and the Three-fold Land killed the cowards."

He began speaking of where they might be, where she had brought them with her wild senseless flight. Somewhere far and strange, to have snow at this time of year. It had been worse than a senseless flight. Mad. Yet he knew that she had fled from him. *Fled* from him. How she must hate him, if she had to flee as far as she could rather than just tell him to leave her to her bath in privacy.

"I should have knocked." At his own bedroom door? "I know you do not want to be around me. You don't have to be. Whatever the Wise Ones want, whatever they say, you are going back to their tents. You will not have to come near me again. In fact, if you do, I ... I'll send you away." Why hesitate on that? She gave him anger, coldness, bitterness when she was awake, and asleep ... "It was a crazy thing to do. You could have killed yourself." He was stroking her hair again; he could not seem to stop. "If you ever do anything half so crazy again, I'll break your neck. Do you have any idea how I will miss hearing you breathe at night?" Miss it? She drove him crazy with it! He was the one who was mad. He had to stop this. "You are going away, and that's that, if I have to send you back to Rhuidean. The Wise Ones can't stop me if I speak as *Car'a'carn*. You won't have to run away from me again."

The hand that he could not stop from stroking her hair froze as she stirred. She was warm, he realized. Very warm. He should be wrapping one of the blankets about himself decently and moving away. Her eyes opened, clear and deep, green, staring at him seriously from not a foot away. She did not seem surprised to see him, and she did not pull back.

He took his arms from around her, started to slither away, and she seized a handful of his hair in a painful grip. If he moved, he would have a bald patch. She gave him no chance to explain anything. "I promised my near-sister to watch you." She seemed to be speaking to herself as much as to him, in a low, almost expressionless voice. "I ran from you as hard as I could, to shield my honour. And you followed me even here. The rings do not lie, and I can run no more." Her tone firmed decisively. "I will run no more."

Rand tried to ask her what she meant while attempting to untangle her fingers from his hair, but she clutched another handful on the other side and pulled his mouth to hers. That was the end of rational thought; the void shattered, and *saidin* fled. He did not think he could have stopped himself had he wanted to, only he could not think of wanting to, and she certainly did not seem to want him to. In fact, the last thought he had of any coherency for a very long time was that he did not think he could have stopped *her*.

She was all passion. Hands clutched at him, pulling him close. Legs entangled with his, squeezing. The intensity of her kisses was so surprising and so welcome that he didn't even care when she bumped her teeth against his. She'd grown out her hair since giving up the spear, and clean strands of it now whispered through his fingers. In response, she did the same with his own hair. Soft breasts pressed against his hard chest; he could feel her heart hammering in time with his.

With her all over him like that, it was a struggle to find her sex. When he finally managed to pin a muscular thigh and slide his hand up, he found her wet from far more than the river. Aviendha gasped in shock when he touched her, breaking their kiss to stare in wide-eyed wonder. Her nails dug into his shoulders when he slipped a finger inside her.

Rand tried to say something but she captured his lips once more, while she grinded her hips against his palm. Light! He had never imagined there was such passion buried within her.

There was something else he wanted to be within her. All claims that he didn't want her around had melted like the snow. Rand's manhood strained towards her, desperate to taste what his finger was probing.

She didn't mind that he got on top, not at all; her legs spread at once. In their confused entanglement, it took him a while to find her, but when he did, when her heat kissed his, and she parted in welcome, it was all worth it. Aviendha threw back her head, eyes squeezed shut as she felt him penetrate her body. She was so tight, so hot. Her hands were busy on his body, as if they wanted to discover every inch of him. So he gave her every inch, not stopping until there was nothing left to separate them. Strong legs and strong arms held him close, kept him from moving too far away. Not that he ever would have wanted to. Her hips moved in time with his, and soft little noises escaped with each breath that tickled his ear. When he kissed the side of her neck, Aviendha let out a sexy little moan, the likes of which he would never have imagined hearing from her. He kissed it again, and again, eager now.

He found her bottom with his hands. She liked that. He found her breasts, too. She liked that more. It was while he was rubbing his thumb around her nipple that she went wild. There was no other word for it. Had he thought her impassioned before? That was nothing compared to the pop-eyed thrashing that overcame her then. She tore at the bundled blankets around them, muscles corded on her arms. Her legs locked around his hips, demanding he remain between them. Not once while marching under a noon sun in the Waste had he seen her look close to the desperate thirst she showed him then. And not since she had returned his lost sword to him had he looked on her with such awe.

Rand gentled. He drank in the sight of her in her orgasm, and the stunned lassitude that followed it. It was while he was brushing her cheek that she came back to herself.

"So ... that is what ... they were fussing ... about ..."

"What do you mean?"

Green eyes deftly avoided his. "Why have you stopped?" she asked, but she rolled them over without waiting for an answer. Aviendha knelt atop him, and rolled her hips experimentally. It was only when she rose and fell that he saw the red residue she'd left upon his manhood.

"You were a virgin?"

His shocked words made her freeze. He spoke quickly into the silence. "I'm honoured. I would never have guessed. You're good at this."

Cheeks made red by passion went redder still. She ducked down, hiding her face by his shoulder in a surprisingly girlish way. Charmed, Rand tried to kiss her cheek but she would not let him. She let him move her hips, though, and when he released her she kept right on going, moving faster and faster as she got into it again.

And get into it she did. Whatever motive had kept a woman as desirable as Aviendha a virgin for so long, she cast it aside completely. The feelings she had been keeping penned up came flooding out of her that night. Rand could never forget the sight of her as she pinned him by the shoulders, her breasts bouncing as she rode him, stomach muscles straining to move her hips as she made him touch every untouched inch of her body. There was nothing of the sternness or anger he'd come to identify with her to be seen in the expressions that played across her face. Only the wonder of discovery, the thrill of new pleasures. She was so utterly beautiful.

She looked on him with that same wonder when her beauty finally overwhelmed him and he spilled his seed inside her no longer virgin pussy. It didn't feel at all like soiling her; it felt like bliss.

And the smirk she wore when she realised what had happened certainly didn't suggest she felt soiled. "I had not imagined the *Car'a'carn* to be so easily defeated."

He caressed her thighs as she milked him. "Pretty sure you finished first, but don't let that stop you boasting."

Instead of getting angry, she actually grinned. "You are rude. And a greatmother in the Termool is less blind. But I begin to see why women are willing to tolerate you."

"Begin is right. Come here, you." She let him put her on her back again, and didn't even punch him when he kissed her lips. Truly it was a night of miracles.

His lips followed his hand, down her neck, across her chest, down and down ...

Some considerable time later—two hours, maybe three; he could hardly be sure—he lay atop the rugs with the blankets over him and his hands behind his head, watching Aviendha examine the slick white walls. They had held a surprising amount of the warmth; there was no need to latch on to *saidin* again, either to shut out cold or to try warming the air. She had done no more than rake her fingers through her hair on rising, and she moved completely unashamed at her nakedness. Of course, it was a bit late to be ashamed of something as small as having no clothes on. He had been worried about hurting her when dragging her out of the water, but she showed fewer scrapes than he did, and somehow they did not seem to mar her beauty at all.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Snow.” He explained what snow was as best he could, but she only shook her head, partly in wonderment, partly disbelief. For someone who had grown up in the Waste, frozen water falling from the sky must seem as impossible as flying. According to the records, the only time it had ever even rained in the Waste was the time he had made it.

He could not stop a sigh of regret when she began pulling her shift over her head. He could still feel his weave holding her gateway open, beckoning them back to cold reality. He’d thought it over while she was examined their tent of snow, when he could manage to think for staring at her bottom, and come to a suspicion. “Are the Wise Ones trying to marry us off? Do you want them to?”

Aviendha’s dark reddish head popped through the neck of the shift, and she stared at him flatly. Not unfriendly, but not friendly, either. Determined, though. “What makes you think a man has the right to ask me that? Besides, you belong to Elayne.”

After a moment he managed to close his mouth. “Aviendha, how can you still say that after we just ...”

She sniffed at him and felt her stockings to be sure they were dry, then sat down to don them. “I heard Nynaeve al’Meara speak of your Theren marriage customs. You have to wait a year, is that not so?” He had never realized before how much leg a woman showed pulling on a stocking; odd that that could seem so thrilling after he had seen her naked and sweating and ... He concentrated on listening to her. “She told us her apprentice, Egwene, said she thought of asking her mother’s permission for you, but before she mentioned it her mother told her she had to wait another year even if she did have her hair in a braid.” Aviendha frowned, one knee almost under her chin. “Is that right? She said a girl was not allowed to braid her hair until she was old enough to marry. Do you understand what I am saying? You look like that ... fish ... Moiraine caught in the river.” There were no fish in the Waste; Aiel knew them only from books.

“Of course I do,” he said. He might as well have been deaf and blind for all he understood. Shifting under the blankets, he made himself sound as sure as he could manage. “At least ... Well, the customs are complicated, and I am not certain which part you are talking about.”

She looked at him suspiciously for a moment, but Aiel customs were so intricate that she believed him. In the Theren, you walked out for a year, and if you suited, then you became betrothed and finally married; that was as far as custom went. She went on as she dressed. “I meant about a girl asking her mother’s permission during the year, and the Wisdom’s. I cannot say I understand that.” The white blouse going over her head muffled her words for a moment. “If she wants him, and she is old enough to marry, why should she need permission? But you see? By my customs,” her tone of voice said they were the only ones that mattered, “it is my place to choose whether to ask you, and I will not. By your customs,” fastening her belt, she shook her head dismissively, “I did not have my mother’s permission. And you would need your father’s, I suppose. Or your father-brother’s, since your father is dead? We did not have them, so we cannot marry.” She began folding the scarf to wrap around her forehead.

“I see,” he said weakly. Ask Jecht’s permission? Not this side of the Pit of Doom. It should have been a relief that Aviendha did not want to wed him. Marriage was not and should never be part of the Dragon Reborn. Look what had happened last time. It was good that she agreed. It shouldn’t have made him sad at all.

She must have gotten Nynaeve’s tale garbled, though. Any boy in the Theren who asked his father for that kind of permission was asking to have his ears soundly boxed. When he thought of the lads who had sweated themselves silly worrying that someone, anyone, would find out what they were doing with the girl they meant to marry ... For that matter, he remembered when Nynaeve caught Kimry Lewin and Bar Dowtry in Bar’s father’s hayloft. Kimry had had her hair braided for five years,

but when Nynaeve was through with her, Mistress Lewin had taken over. The Women's Circle had nearly skinned poor Bar alive, and that was nothing to what they had done to Kimry over the month they thought was the shortest decent time to wait for a wedding. The joke told quietly, where it would not get to the Women's Circle, had been that neither Bar nor Kimry had been able to sit down the whole first week they were married. Rand supposed Kimry had failed to ask permission. "I guess even the Wisdom doesn't know all the men's customs," he continued. "Women don't know everything."

Her sniff was pointed and meaning. Aiel, Andoran or anything else, women used those noises like sticks, to prod or thump. "It does not matter anyway, since we are going by Aiel customs. This will not happen again, Rand al'Thor." He was surprised—and pleased—to hear regret in her voice. "You belong to my near-sister. I have *toh* to Elayne, now, but that is none of your concern. Are you going to lie there forever? I have heard that men turn lazy, after, but it cannot be long until the clans are ready to begin the morning's march. You must be there." Suddenly a stricken look crossed her face, and she sagged to her knees. "If we can return. I am not certain that I remember what I did to make the hole, Rand al'Thor. You must find our way back."

He told her how he had blocked her gateway and could still feel it holding. She looked relieved, and even smiled at him. But it became increasingly clear as she folded her legs and arranged her skirts that she did not mean to turn her back while he dressed.

"Fair's fair," he muttered after a long moment, and scrambled out of the blankets.

He tried to be as nonchalant as she had been, but it was not easy. He could feel her eyes like a touch even when he turned away from her. She had no call to tell him he had a pretty behind; he had not said anything about how pretty hers was. She only said it to make him blush, anyway. He had an idea that life with Aviendha had not become one bit easier.

## CHAPTER 65: A Short Spear



There was little discussion. Even if the storm still raged outside, they could make it back to the gateway using the blankets and rugs for cloaks. Aviendha began dividing them while he seized *saidin*, filling himself with life and death, molten fire and liquid ice.

“Split them equally,” he told her. He knew his voice was cold and emotionless. Asmodean had said he could go beyond that, but he had not managed to so far.

She gave him a surprised look, but all she said was “There is more of you to cover,” and went on as she was.

There was no point in arguing. In his experience, from Emond’s Field to the Maidens, if a woman wanted to do something for you, the only way to stop her was to tie her up, especially if it involved sacrifice on her part. The surprise was that she had not sounded acid, had not said anything about him being a soft wetlander. Maybe something good besides a memory had come out of this. *She can’t really mean never again.* He suspected that she meant exactly that, though.

Weaving a finger-thin flow of Fire, he sliced the outline of a door in one wall, widening the gap at the top. Startlingly, daylight shone through. Releasing *saidin*, he exchanged surprised looks with Aviendha. He knew he had lost track of time—*You lost track of the year*—but they could not have been inside that long. Wherever they were, it was a great distance from Cairhien.

He pushed against the block, but it did not budge until he put his back to it, dug in his heels and shoved with all of his might. Just as it occurred to him that he very probably could have done this more easily with the Power, the block toppled outward, taking him with it into cold, crisp pale daylight. Not all the way, though. It stopped at an angle, propped against snow that had built up around the hut. Lying on his back, with only a bit of his head sticking out, he could see other mounds, some smooth drifts around sparse, stunted trees that he did not recognize, others maybe burying bushes or boulders.

He opened his mouth—and forgot what he was going to say as *something* swept through the air not fifty feet above him, a leathery grey shape far bigger than a horse, on slow-beating widespread wings, a horny snout thrust out before and clawed feet and thin, lizardlike tail trailing behind. His head twisted on its own to follow the thing’s flight over the trees. There were two people on its back; despite what seemed to be some sort of hooded garments, it was plain that they were scanning the ground below. If he had had more than his head showing, if he had not been directly under the creature, they would surely have seen him.

“Leave the blankets,” he said as he ducked back inside. He told her what he had seen. “Maybe they’d be friendly and maybe not, but I’d as soon not find out.” He was not sure he wanted to meet people who rode something like that in any case. If they were people. “We are going to *sneak* back to the gateway. As quickly as we can, but sneaking.”

For a wonder she did not argue. When he commented on it as he was helping her climb over the ice block—that was a wonder, too; she accepted his hand without so much as a glare—she said, “I do not argue when you make sense, Rand al’Thor.” That was hardly the way he remembered it.

The land around them lay flat beneath its deep blanket of snow, but to the west sharp, white-tipped mountains rose, peaks wreathed in cloud. He had no difficulty knowing they lay west, for the sun was rising. Less than half its golden ball stuck above the ocean. He stared at that. The land slanted down enough for him to see waves crashing in violent spray on a rocky, boulder-strewn shore maybe half a mile away. An ocean to the east, stretching endlessly to horizon and sun. If the snow had not been enough, that told him they were in no land he knew.

Aviendha stared at the rolling breakers and pounding waves in amazement, then frowned at him as it hit home. She might never have seen an ocean, but she had seen maps.

In her skirts the snow gave her even more trouble than it did him, and he floundered, digging his way through as much as walking, sometimes sinking to his waist. She gasped as he scooped her up in his arms, and her green eyes glared.

"We have to move faster than you can dragging those skirts," he told her. The glare faded, but she did not put an arm around his neck, as he had half-hoped. Instead she folded her hands and put on a patient face. A bit touched with sullenness. Whatever changes what they had done might have wrought in her, she was not completely different. He could not understand why that should be a relief.

He could have melted a path through the snow as he had in the storm, but if another of those flying things came, that cleared path would lead straight to them. A fox trotted by across the snow well to his right, pure white except for a black tip to its bushy tail, occasionally eyeing him and Aviendha warily. Rabbit tracks marred the snow in places, blurred where they had leapt, and once he saw the prints of a cat that had to be as large as a leopard. Maybe there were larger animals still, maybe some flightless relative of that leathery creature. Not something he wanted to encounter, but there was always the chance the ... *fliers* ... might take the ploughed furrow he was leaving now as the track of some animal.

He still made his way from tree to tree, wishing there were more of them, and closer together. Of course, if there had been, he might not have found Aviendha in the storm—she grunted, frowning up at him, and he loosened his hold on her again—but it would surely have helped now. It was because he was creeping in that way, though, that he saw the others first.

Less than fifty paces away, between him and the gateway—right at the gateway; he could feel his weave holding it—were four people on horseback and more than twenty afoot. The mounted were all women shrouded in long thick, fur-lined cloaks; two of them each wore a silvery bracelet on her left wrist, connected by a long leash of the same shining stuff to a bright collar tight around the neck of a grey-clad, cloakless woman standing in the snow. The others afoot were men in dark leather, and armour painted green and gold, overlapping plates down their chests and the outsides of their arms and fronts of their thighs. Their spears bore green-and-gold tassels, their long shields were painted in the same colours, and their helmets seemed to be the heads of huge insects, faces peering out through the mandibles. One was clearly an officer, lacking spear or shield, but with a curved, two-handed sword on his back. Silver outlined the plates of his lacquered armour, and thin green plumes, like feelers, heightened the illusion of his painted helmet. Rand knew where he and Aviendha were now. He had seen armour like that before. And women collared like that.

Setting her down behind something that looked a little like a wind-twisted pine, except that its trunk was smooth and grey, streaked with black, he pointed, and she nodded silently.

"The two women on leashes can channel," he whispered. "Can you block them?" Hurriedly he added, "Don't embrace the Source yet. They're prisoners, but they still might warn the others, and even if they don't, the women with the bracelets might be able to feel them sense you."

She looked at him oddly, but wasted no time on foolish questions such as how he knew; they would come later, he knew. "The women with the bracelets can channel also," she replied just as softly. "It feels very strange, though. Weak. As if they had never practiced it. I cannot see how that can be."

Rand could. *Damane* were the ones who were supposed to be able to channel, the "monsters" that needed to be chained. But, unbeknownst to most Seanchan, the *sul'dam* "heroes" who chained them were channelers, too, just ones who hadn't learned how. This was no time to be wrestling with Seanchan madness, though. "Can you shield all four?"

She gave him a very smug look. "Of course. Dani taught me to handle several flows at once. I can block them, tie those off, and wrap them up in flows of Air before they know what is happening." That self-satisfied little smile faded. "I am fast enough to handle them, and their horses, but that leaves the rest to you until I can bring help. If any get away ... They can surely cast those spears this far, and if one of them pins you to the ground ..." For a moment she muttered under her breath, as if angry that she could not complete a sentence. Finally she looked at him, her gaze as furious as he had ever seen it. "Dani has told me of Healing, but I cannot do it."

What could she be angry about now? *Better to try understanding the sun than a woman*, he thought wryly. Thom Merrilin had told him that, and it was simple truth. "You take care of shielding those women," he told her. "I will do the rest. Not until I touch your arm, though."

He could tell she thought he was boasting, but he would not have to split flows, only weave one intricate flow of Air that would bind arms to sides and hold horses' feet as well as human. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed hold of *saidin*, touched her arm and channelled.

Shocked cries rose from the Seanchan. He should have thought of gags, too, but they could be through the gateway before they attracted anyone else. Holding on to the Source, he seized Aviendha's arm and half-dragged her through the snow, ignoring her snarls that she could walk. At least this way he broke a trail for her, and they had to hurry.

The Seanchan quieted, staring as he and Aviendha made their way around in front of them. The two women who were not *sul'dam* had thrown back their hoods, struggling against his weave. He held it rather than tying; he would have to release it when he went anyway; for the simple reason that he could not leave even Seanchan bound in the snow. If they did not freeze to death, there was always the big cat whose tracks he had seen. Where there was one, there must be more.

The gateway was there alright, but instead of looking into his room in Eianrod, it was a grey blank. It seemed narrower than he remembered, too. Worse, he could see the weave of that greyness. It had been woven from *saidin*. Furious thought slid across the void. He could not tell what it was meant to do, yet it could easily be a trap for whoever stepped through, woven by one of the male Forsaken. By Asmodean, most likely; if the man could hand him over to the others, he might be able to regain his place among them. Yet there could be no question of staying here. If Aviendha only remembered how she had woven the gateway in the first place, she could open another, but as it was, they were going to have to use this, trap or no.

One of the mounted women, a black raven in front of a stark tower on the grey breast of her cloak, had a severe face and dark eyes that seemed to want to drill into his skull. Another, younger and paler and shorter, yet more regal, wore a silver stag's head on her green cloak. The little fingers of her riding gloves were too long. Rand knew from the shaven sides of her scalp and the tall crest her remaining hair had been styled into that those long fingers covered nails grown long and no doubt lacquered, both signs of Seanchan nobility. The soldiers were stiff-faced and stiff-backed, but the officer's blue eyes glittered behind the jaws of the insectlike helmet, and his gauntleted fingers writhed as he struggled futilely to reach his sword.

Rand did not care very much about them, but he did not want to leave the *damane* behind. At the least he could give them a chance to escape. They might be staring at him as they would a wild animal with bared fangs, but they had not chosen to be prisoners, treated little better than domestic animals themselves. He put a hand to the collar of the nearest, and felt a jolt that nearly numbed his arm; for an instant the void shifted, and *saidin* raged through him like the snowstorm a thousandfold. The *damane*'s short yellow hair flailed as she convulsed at his touch, screaming, and the *sul'dam* connected to her gasped, face going white. Both would have fallen if not held by bonds of Air.

"You try it," he told Aviendha, working his hand. "A woman must be able to touch the thing safely. I don't know how it unfastens." It looked of a piece, linked somehow, just like bracelet and leash. "But it went on, so it must be able to come off." A few moments could not make any difference to whatever had happened to the gateway. Was it Asmodean?

Aviendha shook her head, but began fumbling at the other woman's collar. "Hold still," she growled as the *damane*, a pale-faced girl of sixteen or seventeen, tried to flinch back. If the leashed women had looked on Rand as a wild beast, they stared at Aviendha like a nightmare made flesh.

"She is *marath 'damane*," the pale girl wailed. "Save Seri, mistress! Please, mistress! Save Seri!" The other *damane*, older, almost motherly, began weeping uncontrollably. Aviendha glared at Rand as hard as she did the girl for some reason, muttering angrily under her breath as she worked at the collar.

"It is he, Lady Morsa," the other *damane*'s *sul'dam* said suddenly in a soft drawl that Rand could barely understand. "I have borne the bracelet long, and I could tell if the *marath 'damane* had done more than block Jini."

Morsa did not look surprised. In fact, there seemed to be a light of horrified recognition in her blue eyes as she gazed at Rand. There was only one way that could be.

"You were at Falme," he said. If he went through first, it meant leaving Aviendha behind, although only for a moment.

"I was." The noblewoman looked faint, but her slow, slurring voice was coolly imperious. "I saw you, and what you did."

"Take a care I don't do the same here. Give me no trouble, and I will leave you in peace." He could not send Aviendha first, into the Light knew what. If emotion had not been so distant, he would

have grimaced the way she was grimacing over that collar. They had to go through together, and be ready to face anything.

"Much has been kept secret about what happened in the lands of the great Hawkwing, Lady Morsa," the severe-faced woman said. Her dark eyes were as hard on Morsa as they had been on him. "Rumours fly that the Ever Victorious Army has tasted defeat."

"Do you now seek truth in rumour, Jalindin?" Morsa asked in a cutting tone. "A Seeker above all should know when to keep silent. The Empress herself has forbidden speech of the *Corenne* until she calls it again. If you—or I—speak so much as the name of the city where that expedition landed, our tongues will be removed. Perhaps you would enjoy being tongueless, in the Tower of Ravens? Not even the Listeners would hear you scream for mercy, or pay heed."

Rand understood no more than two words in three, and it was not the odd accents. He wished he had time to listen. *Corenne*. The Return. That was what the Seanchan in Falme had called their attempt to seize the lands beyond the Aryth Ocean—the lands where he lived—that they considered their birthright. The rest—Seeker, Listeners, the Tower of Ravens—were a mystery. But apparently the Return had been called off, for the time being at least. That was worth knowing.

The gateway was narrower. Maybe as much as a finger width narrower than moments before. Only his block held it open; it had tried to close as soon as Aviendha released her weave, and it was still trying to.

"Hurry," he told Aviendha, and she gave him a look so patient it could as well have been a stone between his eyes.

"I am trying, Rand al'Thor," she said, still working at the collar. Tears trickled down Seri's cheeks; a continuous low moan came from her throat, as if the Aiel woman intended to slit it. "You nearly killed the other two, and maybe yourself. I could feel the Power rushing into both of them wildly when you touched the other collar. So leave me to it, and if I can do it, I will." Muttering a curse, she tried at the side.

Rand thought about making the *sul'dam* remove the collars—if anyone knew how the things came off, they would—but from the set frowns on their faces, he knew he would have to force them to it. If he could not kill a woman, he could not very well torture one.

With a sigh he glanced at the grey blankness filling the gateway again. The flows appeared to be woven into his; he could not slice one without the other. Passing through might trigger the trap, but cutting away the greyness, even if that act did not trip it, would allow the gateway to snap shut before they had a chance to leap through. It would have to be a blind jump into the Light knew what.

Morsa had listened carefully to every word he and Aviendha said, and now she was gazing thoughtfully at the two *sul'dam*, but Jalindin had never taken her eyes from the noblewoman's face. "Much has been kept secret that should not be held from the Seekers, Lady Morsa," the stern woman said. "The Seekers must know all."

"You forget yourself, Jalindin," Morsa snapped, her gloved hands jerking; had her arms not been bound to her sides, she would have sawed the reins. As it was, she tilted her head to stare down her nose at the other woman. "You were sent to me because Sarek looks above himself and has designs on Serengada Dai and Tuel, not to ask of what the Empress has—"

Jalindin broke in harshly. "It is you who forgets herself, Lady Morsa, if you think that you are proof against the Seekers for Truth. I myself have put both a daughter and a son of the Empress, may the Light bless her, to the question, and in gratitude for the confessions I wrenched from them she allowed me to gaze upon her. Think you that your minor House stands higher than the Empress's own children?"

Morsa remained upright, not that she had much choice, but her face went grey, and she licked her lips. "The Empress, may the Light illumine her forever, already knows far more than I can tell. I did not mean to imply—"

The Seeker cut her off again, twisting her head to speak to the soldiers as if Morsa did not exist. "The woman Morsa is in the custody of the Seekers for Truth. She will be put to the question as soon as we return to Merinloe. And the *sul'dam* and *damane* as well. It seems they, too, have hidden what they should not." Horror painted the faces of the named women, but Morsa could have stood for any of them. Eyes wide and suddenly haggard, she slumped as much as her invisible bonds would allow, voicing not a word of protest. She looked as if she wanted to scream, yet she—accepted. Jalindin's gaze turned to Rand. "She named you Rand al'Thor. You will be well treated if you

surrender to me, Rand al'Thor. However you came here, you cannot think to escape even if you kill us. There is a wide search for a *marath'damane* who channelled in the night." Her eyes flickered to Aviendha. "It will find you as well, inevitably, and you might be slain by accident. There is sedition in this district. I do not know how men like you are treated in your lands, but in Seanchan your sufferings can be eased. Here, you can find great honour in the use of your power."

He laughed at her, and she looked offended. "I cannot kill you, but I vow I should stripe your hide at least for that." He certainly would not have to worry about being Gentled in Seanchan hands. In Seanchan, men who could channel were killed. Not executed. Hunted and shot down on sight.

The grey-filled gateway was another finger narrower, barely wide enough now for both of them to pass through together. "Leave her, Aviendha. We have to go now."

She released Seri's collar and gave him an exasperated look, but her eyes went past him to the gateway, and she hoisted her skirts to stump through the snow to him, muttering to herself about frozen water.

He was all set to leave but then something made him stop. Opportunities. Tam had said he should always be on the lookout for them, and that he should seize them when they were spotted, before his rivals could. These Seekers for Truth were obviously powerful. If Morsa was on the outs with them and in need of sanctuary, then maybe she could be persuaded to answer some of his questions. And if not his, then Moiraine's.

Her eyes went wide when he stepped towards her, and she tried to thrash against the bonds when he reached to pluck her from her horse. She was quite short, and it was not overly difficult to tuck her under his arm. Her long silvery crest hung almost to the ground, and her heels drummed uselessly as Rand carried her off. He ignored the outraged bellows from the Seanchan soldiers.

It was harder to ignore the searing glare Aviendha shot at him. "I suspected you would save that whey-faced Morsa from her fate. From the way you looked at her, I knew big eyes and a round bosom had caught your eye."

That broke Morsa's silence. "No! Unhand me at once, you beast!"

Ignoring that, too, Rand stared at Aviendha in amazement that oozed across the emptiness surrounding him like syrup. He wondered how he was supposed to have noticed Morsa's bosom, hidden as it was in a fur-lined cloak. "I am bringing her," he said with what patience he could muster, "to question her about the Seanchan. I will be troubled by them again, I am afraid. Not for ... that. For the love of the Light, Aviendha; I'm not *that* bad."

Her sniff spoke volumes.

There was a way to prove it. It wasn't a very nice way. And definitely not something a good Theren man should do. But none of the other options available were things good Theren men would do, either. And Morsa was Seanchan. She'd been at Falme, had seen and, presumably, condoned all that had been done in Falmerden. *Remember how they tried to hang Evelin? Remember what they did to her mother? Better her than Aviendha.*

Rand took a quick stride towards the grey opening before his resolve could fail, and slung Morsa right through it, butt first. She screamed as she flew, and he fancied he could still hear her screaming on the other side. It wasn't immediately fatal, at least.

Aviendha looked surprised. "Be ready for anything," he told her, putting an arm around her shoulders. He told himself they had to be close together to fit. Not because she felt good. "I don't know what, but be ready." She nodded, and he said, "Jump!"

Together they leaped into the greyness, Rand releasing the weave that had held the Seanchan in order to fill himself to bursting with *saidin* ...

... and landed stumbling in his bedchamber in Eianrod, lamplit, with darkness outside the windows.

Asmodean sat against the wall beside the door with his legs crossed, staring at the strange woman scrambling away on the ground. He was not embracing the Source, but Rand slammed a block between the man and *saidin* anyway. Whirling with his arm still around Aviendha, he found the gateway gone. No, not gone—he could still see his weaving, and what he knew must be Asmodean's—but there seemed to be nothing there at all. Without pause he slashed his weave, and suddenly the gateway appeared, a rapidly narrowing view of Seanchan, Jalindin shouting orders. A green-and-white tasselled spear lanced through the opening, just before it snapped shut. Instinctively, Rand channelled Air to snatch the suddenly wobbling two-foot length of spear. The shaft ended as

smoothly as any craftsman could have worked it. Shivering, he was glad that he had not tried removing the grey barrier—whatever it had been—before jumping through.

“A good thing neither of the *sul’dam* recovered in time,” he said, taking the severed spear in his hand, “or we’d have had worse than this coming after us.” He watched Asmodean from the corner of his eye, but the man only sat there, looking slightly ill. He could not know whether Rand meant to stuff that spear down his throat.

Aviendha’s sniff was her most pointed yet. “Do you think I released them?” she said heatedly. She removed his arm firmly, but he did not think her temper was for him. Or not for his arm, anyway. “I tied their shields as tightly as I could. They are your enemies, Rand al’Thor. Even the ones you called *damane* are faithful dogs who would have killed you rather than be free. You must be hard with your enemies, not soft.” Her glare sent Morsa scrambling farther.

She was right, he thought, hefting the spear. He had left enemies behind that he might well have to face one day. He had to become harder. Or else he would be ground to flour before he ever reached Shayol Ghul.

“Would you mind binding this prisoner and checking her for weapons? I’ve seen Seanchan kill themselves for no good reason before. And I need her alive.”

The glint that had appeared in her eye vanished. She opened her mouth, but stopped, glancing at Asmodean, when he raised a hand. He could all but see the questions about Seanchan piled up behind her eyes. If he knew her, once begun she would not stop digging until she had uncovered scraps he did not even remember he knew. Which might not be a bad thing. Another time. After he had wrung a few answers out of Asmodean. She was right. He had to be hard.

“What do you want with me?” Morsa asked him while Aviendha was searching her. The Seanchan’s face was even paler than her hair. And her bosom was, in fact, notably round. How in the Light had Aviendha noticed? Women were a mystery sometimes.

“Nothing as dramatic as you’re imagining, or as painful as what that Seeker was offering. I know next to nothing about your people, where you come from, why you attacked us, how you do what you do. I want you to educate me on those matters.”

Her nose rose as her fear faded. “Educate the enemy. That sounds like treason.”

Rand hefted that broken spear once more, and shrugged. “Be stubborn if you want. The Seanchan are a distant problem. Your captivity can be as long or as short as you wish.”

He’d been at least partially right about her. Several small daggers were tucked behind Aviendha’s belt before she gave the Seanchan a rough shove, stood straight and turned back to Rand.

“That was a smart thing you did,” she said, “hiding the hole I made. If a *gai’shain* had come in here, a thousand of the spearsisters might have marched through seeking you.”

Asmodean cleared his throat. “One of the *gai’shain* did come. Someone named Sulin had told her she must see you eat, my Lord Dragon, and to stop her from bringing the tray in here and finding you gone, I took the liberty of telling her that you and the young woman did not want to be disturbed.” A slight tightening of his eyes caught Rand’s attention.

“What?”

“Just that she took it strangely. She laughed out loud and went running off. A few minutes later, there must have been twenty *Far Dareis Mai* beneath the window, shouting and beating their spears on their bucklers for a good hour or more. I must say, my Lord Dragon, some of the suggestions they called up startled even me.”

Rand felt his cheeks burning—it had happened on the other side of the bloody world, and still the Maidens knew!—but Aviendha only narrowed her eyes.

“Did she have hair and eyes like mine?” She did not wait for Asmodean’s nod. “It must have been my first-sister Niella.” She saw the startled question on Rand’s face and answered it before he could speak. “Niella is a weaver, not a Maiden, and she was taken half a year ago by Chareen Maidens during a raid on Sulara Hold. She tried to talk me out of taking the spear, and she has always wanted me wed. I am going to send her back to the Chareen with a welt on her bottom for every one she told!”

Rand caught her arm as she started to stalk out of the room. Opportunities. “How did you do it? The gateway, I mean. It’s called Travelling. I can do it, too, but I wasn’t aware the Wise Ones knew how.” Alone he could only transport enough for a raid. And wear himself out by doing even that. But if all the channelling Wise Ones did the same ...

But Aviendha was shaking her head. "I do not know. I ... It just happened."

"Can you remember how? I learned by studying what the," *Do not look at him!* "the Forsaken left behind. Residues. In the air. Can't you do the same?"

Aviendha turned her frown from him to the space where the gateway had once been. That frown stayed there for some time, until she spoke distractedly. "Yes ... I see. Lines, like the afterimage of the sun. Lines overlapping. I almost ..."

"You can do it," he urged quietly. "Remember how they fit together. Remember them, and you'll be remembered as the woman who rediscovered Travelling."

Instead of being encouraged, Aviendha pulled loose of his grip. "Do not speak to me that way. You belong to Elayne."

Rand let his mouth close again. There was no point repeating it. All he could do was hope she succeeded, and squash that unworthy little voice that lamented the idea of Travelling being a secret card that only he could play. He waited patiently until her focus shifted.

"I will see what can be done," she said. "After I have spoken to my first-sister."

"Alright. But take Morsa with you. Tell the Maidens she is my prisoner, and I want her to be watched but not harmed."

"It is said wetlander men expect their women to run and fetch for them. I am not a wetlander woman. And I am not yours! Do not think to give me orders, Rand al'Thor!"

Rand spluttered. That was not what he had been doing. And it definitely wasn't how things went with "wetlander women"! What drink-addled idiot had she heard that from?

There was no point arguing, though. He tried to make himself polite. "I want to talk with Natael. I don't suppose there is much time left until dawn ..."

"Two hours, maybe," Asmodean put in.

"... so there will be little sleeping now. If you want to try, would you mind making your bed elsewhere for what's left of the night? You need new blankets anyway."

Aviendha nodded curtly, dragged an outraged Morsa from the room by the ear, and slammed the door behind her. Surely she was not angry at being tossed out of his bedchamber—how could she be; she had said nothing more would happen between them—but he was glad he was not Niella.

Bouncing the shortened spear in his hand, he turned to Asmodean. "A strange sceptre, my Lord Dragon."

"It will do for one." To remind him that the Seanchan were still out there. For once he wished his voice was even colder than the void and *saidin* made it. He had to be hard. "Before I decide whether to skewer you with it like a lamb, why did you never mention this trick of making something invisible? If I hadn't been able to see the flows, I'd never have known the gateway was still there."

Asmodean swallowed, shifting as though he did not know whether Rand meant his threat. Rand was not sure himself. "My Lord Dragon, you never asked. A matter of bending light. You always have so many questions, it is hard to find a moment to speak of anything else. You must realize by now that I've thrown my lot in with yours completely." Licking his lips, he got up. As far as his knees. And began to babble. "I felt your weave—anybody within a mile could have felt it—I never saw anything like it—I didn't know that anyone but Demandred could block a gateway that was closing, and maybe Semirhage—and Lews Therin—I felt it, and came, and a hard time I had getting past those Maidens—I used the same trick—you *must* know I am your man now. My Lord Dragon, I am your man."

It was the repetition of what the Cairhienin had said that got through as much as anything else. Gesturing with the half-spear, he said roughly, "Stand. You aren't a dog." But as Asmodean slowly rose, he laid the long spearpoint alongside the man's throat. He had to be hard. "From now on, you will tell me two things I don't ask about every time we talk. Every time, mind. If I think you are trying to hide anything from me, you will be glad to let Semirhage have you."

"As you say, my Lord Dragon," Asmodean stammered. He looked ready to bow and kiss Rand's hand.

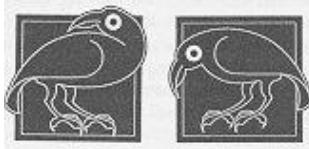
To avoid the chance, Rand moved to the blanketless bed and sat on the linen sheet, the feather mattresses yielding under him as he studied the spear. A good idea to keep it for remembrance, if not as a sceptre. Even with everything else, he had best not forget the Seanchan. Those *damane*. If Aviendha had not been there to block them from the Source ...

“You have tried showing me how to shield a woman and failed. Try showing me how to avoid flows I cannot see, how to counter them.” Once Lanfear had sliced his weavings as neatly as with a knife.

“Not easy, my Lord Dragon, without a woman to practice against.”

“We have two hours,” Rand said coldly, letting the man’s shield unravel. “Try. Try very hard.”

## CHAPTER 66: *Memories of Saldaea*



Lying on his bed in the dark, in his shirtsleeves, Kadere idly twirled one of his large kerchiefs between his hands. The wagon's open windows let in moonlight, but not much breeze. At least Cairhien was cooler than the Waste. Someday he hoped to return to Saldaea, to walk in the garden where his sister Teodora had taught him his first letters and numbers. He missed her as much as he did Saldaea, the deep winters when trees burst from their sap freezing and the only way to travel was by snowshoes or skis. In these southlands, spring felt like summer, and summer like the Pit of Doom. Sweat rolled out of him in streams.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed his fingers into a small gap where the bed was built into the wagon. The folded scrap of parchment rustled. He left it there. He knew the words on it by heart.

*You are not alone among strangers. A way has been chosen.*

Just that, without signature, of course. He had found it slipped under his door when he retired for the night. There was a town not a quarter of a mile away, Eianrod, but even if a soft bed remained empty there, he doubted whether the Aiel would allow him to spend a night away from the wagons. Or that the Aes Sedai would. For the moment, his plans fit in well enough with Moiraine's. Perhaps he would get to see Tar Valon again. A dangerous place, for his sort, but the work there was always important, and invigorating.

He put his mind back on the note, though he wished he could afford to ignore it. The word "chosen" made him sure it came from another Darkfriend. The first surprise had been receiving it now, after crossing most of Cairhien. Nearly two months ago, right after Jasin Natael attached himself to Rand al'Thor—for reasons the man had never deigned to explain—and his new partner Keille Shaogi had disappeared—he suspected she was buried in the Waste, with a thrust from Natael's knife through her heart, and small riddance—soon after that, he had been visited by one of the Chosen. By Lanfear herself. She had given him his instructions.

Automatically his hand went to his chest, feeling through his shirt the scars branded there. He mopped his face with the kerchief. Part of his mind thought coldly, as it had at least once a day since, that they were an effective way to prove to him that it had not been an ordinary dream. An ordinary nightmare. Another part of him almost gibbered with relief that she had not returned.

The second surprise of the note had been the hand. A woman's hand, unless he missed his guess by a mile, and some of the letters formed in what he now knew for an Aiel way. Natael had told him that there must be Darkfriends among the Aiel—there were Darkfriends in every land, among every people—but he had never wanted to find brothers in the Waste. Aiel would kill you as soon as look at you, and you could put a foot wrong with them by breathing.

Taken all in all, the note spelled disaster. Possibly Natael had told some Aiel Darkfriend who he was. Angrily twirling the kerchief to a long thin cord, he snapped it tight between his hands. If the gleeman and Keille had not had proofs that they stood high in Darkfriend councils, he would have killed them both before going near the Waste. The only other possibility made his stomach leaden. "A way has been chosen". Maybe that had only been to put the word "chosen" down, and maybe it was meant to tell him that one of the Chosen had decided to use him. The note had not come from Lanfear; she would simply have spoken to him in his dreams once more.

In spite of the heat, he shivered, yet he had to wipe his face again, too. He had the feeling that Lanfear was a jealous mistress to serve, but if another of the Chosen wanted him he would have no choice. Despite all the promises made when he had given his oaths as a boy, he was a man of few illusions. Caught between two of the Chosen, he could be flattened like a kitten beneath a wagon wheel, and they would notice as much as the wagon did. He wished he were home in Saldaea. He wished he could see Teodora again.

A scraping at the door brought him to his feet; for all his bulk, he was more agile than he let anyone see. Mopping his face and neck, he made his way past the brick stove that he certainly had no need for here, and the cabinets with their ornately carved and painted uprights. When he pulled the

door open, a slender figure swathed in black robes scurried in past him. He took one quick look around the moonlit darkness to make certain no-one was watching—the drivers were all snoring beneath the other wagons and the Aiel guards never came among the wagons themselves—and quickly shut the door again.

"You must be hot, Isendre," he chuckled. "Take off that robe and make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you, no," she said bitterly from the shadowed depths of her cowl. She stood stiffly, but every now and then she twitched; the wool must be even itchier than usual tonight.

He chuckled again. "As you wish." Beneath those robes, he suspected, the Maidens of the Spear still allowed her to wear nothing but the stolen jewellery, if that. She had become prudish in ways, since the Maidens had her. Why the woman had been stupid enough to steal, he could not understand. He had certainly made no objections when they dragged her screaming from the wagon by her hair; he was only glad that they had not thought he was involved. Her greediness had certainly made his task more difficult. "Have you anything to report on al'Thor or Natael?" A major part of Lanfear's instruction had been to keep a close eye on those two, and he knew no better way to keep an eye on a man than to put a woman in his bed. Any man told his bedmate things he had vowed to keep secret, boasted of his plans, revealed his weaknesses, even if he was the Dragon Reborn and this Dawn fellow the Aiel called him.

She shuddered visibly. "At least I can come near Natael." Come near him? Once the Maiden had caught her sneaking to the man's tent, they had practically begun stuffing her into it every night. She always put the best face on matters. "Not that he tells me anything. Wait. Be patient. Keep silent. Make accommodation with fate, whatever that means. He says that every time I try to ask a question. For the most part, all he wants to do is play music I've never heard before and make love." She never had anything more to say about the gleeman. For the hundredth time he wondered why Lanfear wanted Natael watched. The man was supposed to be as high as a Darkfriend could reach, only a step below the Chosen themselves.

"I take it that means you still have not managed to wriggle into al'Thor's bed?" he asked, brushing past her to sit down on the bed.

"No." She writhed uncomfortably.

"Then you will have to try harder, won't you? I am growing tired of failure, Isendre, and our masters are not as patient as I. He's only a man, whatever his titles." She had often boasted to him that she could have any man she wanted, and make him do whatever she wanted. She had shown him the truth of her boasts. She had not needed to steal jewellery; he would have bought her anything she wanted. He had bought her more than he could afford. "The bloody Maidens can't watch him every second, and once you are in his bed, he'll not let them harm you." One taste of her would be enough for that. "I have full faith and confidence in your abilities."

"No." If anything, the word was shorter this time.

He rolled and unrolled the kerchief irritably. "'No' is not a word our masters like to hear, Isendre." That meant their lords among the Darkfriends; not all lords or ladies by any means—a groom might give orders to a lady, a beggar to a magistrate—but their commands were at least as strictly enforced as any noble's, and usually more so. "Not a word our mistress will like to hear."

Isendre shuddered. She had not believed his tale until he showed her the burns on his chest, but since then, one mention of Lanfear had been enough to quell any rebellion on her part. This time, she began to weep.

"I cannot, Hadnan. When we stopped tonight, I thought I might have a chance in a town instead of tents, but they caught me before I got within ten paces of him." She pushed back her hood, and he gaped as moonlight played over her bare scalp. Even her eyebrows were gone. "They shaved me, Hadnan. Adelin and Enaila and Jolien, they held me down and shaved every hair. They beat me with nettles, Hadnan." She shook like a sapling in high wind, sobbing slack-mouthed and mumbling the words. "I itch from shoulders to knees, and I burn too much to scratch. They said they'd make me wear nettles, the next time I so much as looked in his direction. They meant it, Hadnan. They did. They said they'd give me to Aviendha, and they told me what she would do. I cannot, Hadnan. Not again. I cannot."

Stunned, he stared at her. She had had such lovely dark hair. Yet she was beautiful enough that even being bald as an egg only made her seem exotic. Her tears and sagging face detracted only a little. If she could put herself into al'Thor's bed for just one night ... It was not going to happen. The

Maidens had broken her. He had broken people himself, and he knew the signs. Eagerness to avoid more punishment became eagerness to obey. The mind never wanted to admit it was running from something, so she would soon convince herself that she really wanted to obey, that she really wanted nothing more than to please the Maidens.

"What does Aviendha have to do with it?" he muttered. How soon before Isendre felt the need to confess her sins, as well?

"Al'Thor has been bedding her since Rhuidean, you fool! Jolien said he was claimed now, that the games would have to end. The Maidens think she will marry him." Even through her sobs he could detect resentful fury. She would not like it that another had succeeded where she failed. Doubtless that was why she had not told him before.

Aviendha was a beautiful woman despite her fierce eyes, full-breasted compared to most of the Maidens, yet he would stack Isendre against her if only ... Isendre slumped in the moonlight coming through the windows, quivering from head to toe, sobbing openmouthed, tears rolling down her cheeks that she did not even bother to wipe away. She would grovel on the ground if Aviendha frowned at her.

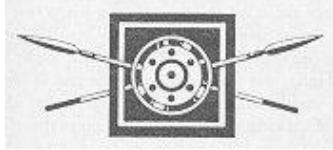
"Very well," he said gently. "If you cannot, then you cannot. You can still pry something out of Natael. I know you can." Rising, he took her shoulders to turn her toward the door.

She flinched away from his touch, but she did turn. "Natael will not want to look at me for days," she said petulantly around hiccoughs and sniffs. Sobs threatened to break out again any moment, but his tone seemed to have soothed her. "I'm red, Hadnan. As red as if I had laid naked in the sun for a day. And my hair. It will take forever to grow ba—"

As she reached for the door, her eyes going to the handle, he had the kerchief spun to a cord in an instant and around her neck. He tried to ignore her rasping gurgles, the frantic scraping of her feet on the floor. Her fingers clawed at his hands, but he stared straight ahead. Even keeping his eyes open, he saw Teodora; he always did, when he killed a woman. He had loved his sister, but she had discovered what he was, and she would not have kept silent. Isendre's heels drummed violently, but after what seemed an eternity they slowed, went still, and she became a dead weight dragging at his hands. He held the cord tight for a count of sixty before unwinding it and letting her fall. She would have been confessing, next. Confessing to being a Darkfriend. Pointing a finger at him.

Rummaging in the cabinets by touch, he pulled out a butchering knife. Disposing of a whole corpse would be difficult, but luckily the dead did not bleed much; the robe would absorb what little there was. Maybe he could find the woman who had left the note under his door. If she was not pretty enough, she must have friends who were also Darkfriends. Natael would not care if it was an Aiel woman who visited him—Kadere would rather have bedded a viper himself; Aiel were dangerous—and maybe an Aiel would have a better chance than Isendre against Aviendha. Kneeling, he hummed quietly to himself as he worked, a lullaby that Teodora had taught him.

## CHAPTER 67: Remember Honour



There were times during the next day's march that Rand found himself nodding off in the saddle. Not smart at the best of times, but especially foolish then, as Aviendha pointed out.

"You should be more alert when walking a land where the only hand without a knife in it is a hand too weak with hunger to grasp the hilt."

He shook himself awake. "I know." How was she not tired? She had slept as little.

He wasn't the only one to know it, either. They'd been getting strange looks from the Maidens all day. His offering to let Aviendha ride behind him had certainly set fingers wagging among them. Aviendha herself had been a lot less scathing in her refusal than usual. Something had definitely changed between them, yet most things remained the same.

Moiraine's lectures helped to keep him awake, though he feared he was taking in only one word of every five. He heard less than that of the conversations that passed between Lan and Tam, Mat and the Shienarans. Mostly war and destruction. Rand shared their laments but few words.

The Wise Ones had taken Morsa off his hands for now, but she was having a difficult time keeping up with the army on foot. He would have found her a horse, but they were already in short supply. That Jubes girl had been given their last spare, and she was as reluctant to part with it as she was with Moiraine. The other refugees that had joined the march, and the men Estean's party had left behind, were struggling to keep pace with the Aiel. They, and Kadere's wagons fell further behind with each hour, and spears had to slow their pace to make sure that the peddlers didn't desert.

There were more Maidens than usual clustered around him, coming and going throughout the day. He was glad of the extra protection, addled as he was, but he couldn't help but notice that most of them spent their time in close conversation rather than watching the war-torn countryside through which they marched.

Much of their talk seemed to revolve around Sulin, Dina and the senior Maidens. Adelin trailed that group rather than walking among it now. Nerise had been included, though she was grim of face and did not speak. "It is for the best," he heard Dina tell Anfia, who nodded reluctantly. Sulin was harsher with Alisha, who left in what could only be described as a strop. If she had thought that would pass among *Far Dareis Mai*, she was mistaken, for Sefela was immediately dispatched to "teach the girl the power of discipline". Recalling how impressively muscled Sefela had looked the one time she'd taken part in the orgies, and how tight her ass had been, made him feel sorry for Alisha. The only comfort he could send after her was that at least it wasn't Celesta or Rhuana in pursuit.

"I will be glad of the quiet," white-haired Nerilea said, and the tense moment dissolved in laughter. Rand briefly wondered what they were talking about, while stifling a yawn.

Later, as they were passing through sparse woodland, Somara, Enaila and Lamelle chanced to be walking near his horse. While talking so loud it was plain they wanted him to hear.

Enaila opined that it was past time he grew up and took responsibility, nodding to herself with a matronly righteousness that never failed to make him want to pull at his own hair, coming from a woman who was of an age with him. At least the other two were on the far side of forty. That stubborn-jawed look of censorship suited them. It didn't mean he was any more moved to care what they thought had been inappropriate in the first place, or what he shouldn't have been doing, but at least he didn't want to heel Jeade'en just to get away from them. Not that it would have worked.

Oddly enough, it was Aviendha that sent them packing. His own exasperated stare was as effective as usual on them. Perhaps it was his punishment for all those moments when he'd regretted there not being a woman on the farm growing up, after Kari died. He'd tempted fate, and now fate had gotten him adopted by *Far Dareis Mai*.

Mat's snickers certainly didn't help. And it was especially hurtful to see Tam—Tam, of all people!—looking amused at his son's harassment. At least Izana and the rest looked appropriately unimpressed with Enaila and her friends' antics.

It was a strange day, all told. Emotions of all kind seemed to be running high among the Maidens. Renay walked with her gaze on the ground, looking so miserable that he was tempted to go to her and ask what was wrong. Distance and Moiraine's questions were what stopped him. Carolyn, meanwhile, looked as happy as he'd ever seen her. Jec had a spring in her step, while Tuandha's feet looked leaden. The most startling displays came from Cara and Pamela, who had to be separated by their spearsisters when an argument grew too heated. He heard little of it beyond Aviendha's name, the word prude, and a claim that it should have been stopped long ago. That last came from Cara. Seeking an explanation from Aviendha was no use; even his asking was enough to send her stalking back to join the Wise Ones.

Rand dismounted not long after. He could see a road in the distance. Open territory. He needed to relieve himself while there were still trees and bushes to hide amongst. Most of the column moved on without him, and most of the Maidens, too, but Adelin, Rhamys and some others stayed to watch over him, and Lys came back to help. He gave her Jeade'en's reigns along with his thanks.

"I ... I wanted to ..."

He waited as long as he could before urging her to tell him later, then strode for the woods, leaving her muttering soft curses over who knew what.

It didn't take long to find a likely spot. Rand sighed loudly as he relieved himself against a tree. The army that surrounded him was huge, and privacy could not have been counted on were they not Aiel. They were, though, and he would have been more surprised if those who saw him enter that thicket walked through than if they didn't.

Which was why he jumped embarrassingly when she spoke.

"Are you busy, Rand al'Thor?"

He looked over his shoulder, mid-stream. "Just a bit. What's wrong, Rhamys?"

Her spears and buckler had joined the cased bow on her back, so it couldn't be an attack. She looked sad. "It is Aviendha."

Rand frowned. "What about her? Is she hurt?"

"Oh! No. No, she is well. You were worried for her. They are right, then. I am glad for her."

His stream slowed, leaving him to jiggle in front of her. Had it been another Maiden he'd have thought she was deliberately trying to embarrass him, but Rhamys was just a bit thoughtless at times. "Of course I'm worried for her. I worry for you all."

"That makes me happy. But we are Maidens and Aviendha is not. She is a Wise One now. Or will be. Perfect for you."

He sighed as he tucked himself away. Those nagging suspicions were getting louder. "Did you hear that from your mother?"

"Her, too." She looked a fair bit like her mother, but even prettier, with a more curvaceous figure. As with Amys, it was the hair you noticed first; so pale it looked white.

"What was it you wanted me for?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "I have not gotten to see you for a while. I did not mind waiting, but ... but now ..."

Rhamys saw him almost every day, if often from afar. That wasn't what she meant. Suddenly, Rand didn't feel so tired anymore. "I'm always happy to see a cute girl like you, Rhamys. It'll be a while yet before we make camp, though."

"Camp. I ... I cannot wait that long."

Seeing his raised brows made her blush deepen. He looked around. The thicket was fairly secluded, but the flickering light through the bushes spoke of people moving by outside. It would have been hard to see within, but not impossible. He stepped close, lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Here?"

She avoided his eyes. "It is n-nice to talk to you. T-that does not have to mean, that ... that ..."

Rand leaned closer, until his lips were almost touching hers. "That you want me to kiss you? Pity. Because I would like to. I'd like to do ... this ..."

For all her protestations, her mouth opened under his. She only stopped at the sound of leaves crackling underfoot, and even then did not release her grip on his coat.

"I cannot see her, but I sense eyes on me," she said, whispering, too.

Perhaps there were. And perhaps not. He certainly couldn't see anything, other than her. "Your lips have gotten so red, Rhamys. I think that excites you." She shivered when he brushed his thumb along the lower one, but she did not pull back.

"Do, do you think I am a pervert, too?"

"When it comes to that, you are asking the wrong person. I just want to see those beautiful breasts of yours."

He was almost certain she'd stop him before it went that far, but Rhamys just stood there as he undid the coat of her *cadin'sor* and pushed her top up, letting those big pale globes of hers bounce free. They gave under his hands, and she bit her lip to keep silent. It didn't take much to have those puffy nipples poking against his branded palms.

"Ah ... Everything you stare at ... Um ... seems to heat up ..." she breathed.

*Blood and ashes. If she won't stop this, I should. I should.* If he undid her belt and slid her loose trousers over her hips, surely then she would push him away. *I shouldn't.*

He did.

The white of her hair was quite natural, as was the dew that glistened on it. Though she turned her reddened face away, her big eyes searching nervously for the intruder that might step in at any moment, still Rhamys did not tell him to stop.

"A-all my shameful places ... are going to be seen ..."

"I've missed seeing them," he whispered, and meant it. She was quite the beauty.

"I feel the same way," she whispered back. "The wind against my breasts and crotch is making my body heat up." He could see the truth of that himself. His breeches felt very tight. "Your gaze ... it is telling me how much you want to touch me."

His hand hovered near her thigh. "Can I?"

At her nod, he began caressing the soft flesh of her inner leg, working slowly upward until he could feel her heat beating against the back of his hand.

Rhamys wasn't looking at the surrounding trees and bushes anymore. Her big blue eyes entreated him. "Sorry, but, I am, I am all too turned on," she said in a low moan. "Um ... Rand ... You might think this is indecent, but ... Can we have sex right now? I feel this constant throbbing in my crotch. I-I cannot take it."

It was an absolutely terrible idea. People were probably already wondering why he was taking so long. They could be interrupted at any moment. Discovered by, by anyone. Rhucard and Amys even. "Perhaps we should wait until tonight," he said, though the effort to restrain his own lust made it come out as a hiss. To put her against the nearest tree and ... and ... *Stop!*

Rhamys was shaking her head. "Oh, if we can, let us do it here, q-quickly."

Burn it all. She was too much. He captured her lips with his, and her fleshy bottom with his hands, the better to shield her from the rough bark of the tree he bulled her towards. The impact scraped his knuckles but he didn't care. Rhamys was pulling at his belt, eagerly shoving her hand inside to pull his manhood free.

"There it is," she breathed. "Oh, hurry, hurry ..." She strained to part her legs, what with the way her trousers and smallclothes were hanging at her knees. Rand couldn't wait for her to sort herself. She showed enough for him to find her pinkness and slip inside. Rhamys felt extra tight that way. Her lips were pressed extra tightly together, too, as she fought to take his length in silence.

It was a fight she won, though the long sigh that followed spoke of her strain. But if she could take that, then she could take everything he had to give her. Give it he did, too, fucking that hot pussy with the desperate speed of necessity.

While she leant against the tree, silently taking his all, Rand leant back so he could feast his eyes on those huge breasts of hers. Their wild shaking spurred him on. He knew he could not last like that. And should not last here, in this place. But her own pleasure was still his priority, and the exhibition she'd been making had not been the horror to her she pretended it.

"Rhamys," he whispered. "Use your hands. Touch yourself."

"T-touch ... Where?"

"Play with your pussy for me. Show me what you look like when you are alone and horny."

He hadn't thought it possible for her to blush redder, but he was wrong. She did as he'd asked, though, reaching a trembling hand down between them to rub furiously amidst her white curls, just above where his shaft was splitting her, again and again.

Seeing her like that, feeling her silken heat pressing so closely around him, it could not and did not take much longer.

"I ... can't ..." he started, before hiding any more words or sounds behind gritted teeth. Pleasure flowed through him and into her. Rhamys felt it. She pulled his forehead to hers, still furiously rubbing as he pumped into her.

She did not have to rub very long. When those eyes went wider still, he crushed her lips against his, to savour her as much as to help her hold her silence. He felt a new flow join the one already trickling down his shaft.

He did not release her lips until he'd felt her calm, and even then he kept his arms around her as they caught their breaths.

"I really am a pervert," she sighed.

He tightened his embrace. "You give too much weight to the bad things people say, and not enough to the good ones. You are a sweet, cute, adorable girl, a woman of honour and courage. Remember that instead." He parted from her with a kiss on the cheek, and left her smiling.

"I will try. You are so ... I think very ... um ..." Paling, she looked about as if suddenly remembering where they were. "Did anyone see us?" she hissed.

Rand tucked himself away with a bit more composure than Rhamys showed as she yanked at her *cadin'sor*. "If they did, they were discreet, at least. We'll have to hope they stay so," he whispered.

She looked horrified. "Oh, Light. It could have been anyone."

"I said 'if', Rhamys. 'If,'" he said, bemused.

But she was not to be consoled. "We must leave by different ways. I will circle around and meet you back at the column. If any watchers lurk, I will deal with them."

"I ... okay." She probably hadn't meant she would deal with them violently. Probably.

If anyone had been watching and wondering what was taking so long, they had probably already realised the truth. Even so, Rand waited a while longer after Rhamys scurried off before emerging from the thicket himself. He strove to make his face as expressionless as Lan's as he strolled off to where Jeade'en was waiting. The huge Aiel column continued to flow by, but he barely saw it, so intent was he on avoiding everyone's eyes.

Lys was no longer alone when he returned to recover his horse. A gaggle of Maidens had surrounded her.

"But which way did he go?" Beralna asked.

"Was anyone with him?" Reyela added.

"Why would you care? I thought you hated wetlanders?"

Reyela shifted under Beralna's scowl. She was another cute one, with hair almost as pale as Rhamys', though she was much thinner. Despite appearances, they were not related.

"Not all of them are terrible. I thought I might ..."

Lys sighed. "I know."

"Then why are you holding that ... horse thing?" Reyela asked.

That was when Lys saw him coming. She stood very straight. "I was waiting for the *Car'a'carn* to return," she said, empathising the title. Though a disparate group, there was a very sudden, very uniform blankness about the expressions of the gathered Maidens.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said gruffly. "Call of nature."

Adelin was not among the group that he led Jeade'en out of, but she was still nearby, watching over them all. And looking a bit exasperated. "They made *me* carry a doll. But I think it will be a different toy these slackers have to show," she told Dhael loudly.

That certainly got them moving, but it didn't quell their disgruntlement.

"But I was just starting to think he might not be so bad," Reyela said.

"Blame yourself, Shaarad. We only just got here," said Lila. There was a light rumble of agreement from some of her fellow Reyn, including a trio of older red-haired women he'd been wondering about; skinny Marisa, Tara of the pretty smile, and fleshy Juli.

Lys rumbled, too. "It is not fair. I never even got a go," she complained. Safana said something in her low voice. "Not like that. I wanted to, to get to know him first. And to be alone." She sighed. "Do you ever meet someone, and feel like you already know them somehow? No? Oh. Well I do."

Rand was still staring after them even long after their voices had grown too faint to hear. Were they talking about him? What was going on?

He was still wondering at nightfall, while the camp was going up around an abandoned town of unknown name. Only a few of the buildings were burnt, and those on the outskirts. Whoever had done it had plainly been driven off before they could do worse. But that must have been some time ago. The population had been long gone when his Aiel arrived. The central inn was not unlike the al'Vere's place back home, if a bit bigger, and it was to that that Rand gravitated. The Ploughman's Rest, read the sign outside. Rand shuffled past the Maidens who ringed it looking almost as tired as the painted man on the sign.

There were more Maidens inside, quite a few of them, but he hadn't the energy to argue over it. None of them were relaxing, oddly enough. Their eyes fixed on him when he entered, every face set and serious.

"What is it?" he asked.

It was Sulin who stepped out to answer. "A question of honour has been raised, Rand al'Thor. What *toh* does *Far Dareis Mai* owe a spearsister who was forced to leave us? How closely does her honour twine with ours? We have thought long on the answer."

"And come to the wrong conclusion," said Zie. She stood apart from the rest, her and a few others like Nici. He sensed the distance between them was more than physical.

Ayla of the newly yellow eyes had started pacing back and forth as soon as she saw him, very much like a caged animal. Lidya caught her by the arm and tried to hold her in place, only for her eyes to widen when her friend growled at her.

"You will be a Wise One soon," Lidya reminded her. It calmed her, for some reason.

"I get the impression this question and this answer has something to do with me," he said.

Sulin nodded. "Now that Aviendha has expressed her interest in you, we must choose where we stand. And who we are. The Maidens of the Spear have always been loyal to the spear and to their sisters, not to men or children. Having a man under our roof for the first time has confused some," Branwen was not the only one to nod then, "but it has not changed what we are at our core. We cannot dishonour Aviendha by cavorting with the man she is to marry. These games that some of the girls, and some who should have been old enough to know better, have indulged in must come to an end."

"Sadly," Amindha said with a big sigh.

Amili nodded. "At least it was fun for a time."

"Finding pretty men to play with gets harder as the years pass. Having one right under the Roof was so convenient," Leslaya lamented.

Rand didn't know what to say. Or what to feel. It was plain that the decision had been made, and that no input of his was going to be asked. Aiel honour was not something he could control. And if he could, would he? Rhamys' big blue eyes spoke to him; no wonder she had been willing to risk a public display. It had been farewell and he hadn't even known it. He didn't want it. He liked her, and not just her. Renay's misery of earlier took on new meaning, and seeped into his own heart, too. He was more than fond of her; why did they have to part? Tenelca stood straight and proud. He knew without asking that she had accepted this as the course of honour. And he knew he would regret not being able to tease some more expressions out of that statuesque Maiden. The unscarred half of Tuandha's face was marred with regret, and unshed tears shone in Riallin's eyes.

"Staring like a puppy is not going to change it, Rand al'Thor," Carahuin teased.

He flushed. "Aviendha ... she already knows about, about Elayne and ... some others ... She hasn't said anything about them."

Carwe shrugged that off. "Well why not marry them? As many as you can persuade to endure you."

"They are not *Far Dareis Mai*. This does not concern them," Sulin clarified.

That was good, at least. If they'd gotten it into their heads to try to run off Merile the way they did Isendre, there would have been trouble. The lack of hostility they showed Raine, after Ayla had explained what happened, had been a great relief.

"Such a rude expression! He is probably relieved to be free of us," said Rondha.

A slow smile spread across Celesta's face. "Very relieved. Lucky boy."

Rand's cheek coloured further. Admittedly there had been times he'd thought he might have bitten off more than he could chew. So many women, not all of whom were very nice. Yet there he'd been, feeling obliged to service them all. It would be a relief in some ways, but ...

"I will miss being so close to you all."

Nici turned on her heel and fled the room, looking at no-one.

"Do you want me to get her?" Sefela asked. On the other side of the room, Alisha hunched her shoulders.

"I will speak to her later," said Sulin. "The cups."

Several jugs sat atop one of the few bits of furniture that remained, a heavy carved wooden table that some innkeeper had cherished enough to polish regularly. A multitude of cups waited there, too. Rand knew what was coming.

Branwen was among the first to step forth, cup in hand. "It is for the best. It will remove temptation and allow us to focus on the path of honour, the path of war."

She drank half and offered him the rest. He accepted the cup solemnly. She'd come to this conclusion herself, long before the rest. An impressive woman, Branwen. No sweet words of his would move her. Stern ones did, though, when he spoke them first.

"Remember honour."

She graced him with a small smile before repeating the catechism.

It was Rhamys who came next. Her words surprised him. "Does Aviendha ever talk about me?"

The answer was easy, saying it was harder. Her mother was married to Aviendha's aunt, he knew. That made them relatives by Aiel lights, though they would not have been accounted kin in the Theren. Aiel were strange. A cousin of a female aunt was considered a closer relative than a half-sibling, if that sibling bond came from the father, for example. When Aviendha had first told him that, Rand had spent a good hour trying to puzzle out the logic of it, before giving up.

And when it came to Aviendha ... Well. He'd only just found out that she had a full sister, and even then only through happenstance. She could be quite single-minded at times. The truth was that she hadn't spoken of Rhamys to him at all. He didn't like saying that, or how her head fell when he did.

"We will both have to remember honour, then," she said sadly.

He drank with her, while remembering something Tam had said. "Never drink when you are miserable. It can make you into something you don't want to be. As you should know." Rand didn't know what he'd end up becoming; he just knew he didn't like watching Rhamys go.

One by one they came to him, to share a drink and say the words. Remember honour. He said it so often that night that it started echoing in his mind. Six cups he shared with the six daughters of Yusana, and marked Briana by the sadness in her eyes. She wasn't the only one to move him so, though a few of those surprised him. Elindha and Heidin hadn't seemed that fond of him before, nor did he expect Iona's voice to crack like that. Lys and Reyla's displeasure hinted at missed opportunities, while Su's forthright proclamation that this would not change her feelings and that she would always be loyal made his throat tight. But that was nothing compared to the moment when Riallin started crying. He downed the whole cup that time, his head swimming from more than just the alcohol. Nora was next in line, but lingered only long enough to finish the ceremony before rushing off after her tearful friend.

"Fools," Ani muttered. "It was always pointless." She toasted Rand coolly, and spoke as he drank. "Remember honour. And other things."

Her heart remaining flinty was no great surprise, but some of the others left him a little nonplussed. Jolien, Agirin, Susay, Osana and Beyla had been regulars, but they all spoke the words with an unflinching finality, a lack of compromise that was very ... Aiel.

Enaila's adding a "And let this be a lesson to you, young man," to the catechism was less Aiel, thank the Light. But Rand was not yet so drunk that he couldn't stop himself from throwing the cup at her.

He expected a similar rebuke from fair Luaine, when she said, "I am glad of this end. Such things should only take place between those who are wed," as she offered him the cup.

Rand took it from her slowly. "I did not know you felt that way. I hope you didn't feel pressured to do, ah, what you did."

Her cheeks coloured, though the rest of face remained composed. “I did not. It was a declaration of loyalty.”

“Then I am blessed to be guarded by a woman of such honour and virtue,” he said. She did not know what to make of the bow he gave her, so he raised the cup and drank her *oosquai*. “Remember honour.”

“Remember honour.”

“And should you ever find one that is tempting enough, I hope he proves worthy of you,” he whispered as she departed. A small smile was her only response.

That exchange left him feeling pleased, but the next brought him right down again. Dermin was another he’d only been with once. He’d taken her disinclination to return for more as disinterest, so could only gape when she proclaimed resentfully that this didn’t matter to her, since he had never liked her anyway. Admittedly she was not the most eye-catching of girls, and had not done much besides lie there, but he had done all he could to pleasure her. What call had she to look at him like that? Had he done something wrong?

Perhaps it should not have mattered, but it lingered with him after she moved on, while Careen sighed over how boring things would be now, Chiarid joked that they all had to grow up eventually, and Rhuana complained that she would have to find some other toy to play with.

He didn’t think he’d miss her, no matter how pretty she was. And the way Safana silently stared at him as he drank left him uncomfortable. *Her with her innocent face.*

At least she and the younger Maidens were only allowed to drink water, meaning it was water they offered him, too. That was such a relief that he barely noticed Sendara’s sulk, or Rya’s complaints as they filed past.

There were so many Maidens. Women he knew, women he knew well, women he only vaguely recalled the name of, and women he didn’t even recognise. Young women, old women, big women, small, mean or sweet. They had hair of red and yellow and, rarely, even brown. Tanned and freckled and burned faces. Sad eyes, stern eyes. But, without fail, they all wanted him to remember honour, and they all had cups. Rand kept it to sips—small sips—but even so he was swaying before he managed to get through half of them.

The state he was in won him no sympathy from his cousin, when it came to be her turn. Smirking, Harilin downed her *oosquai* smoothly. “It will be good to stay under a Roof without having to fear seeing my second-brother naked for once.”

Fighting to stay steady, Rand drank with her, allowing no mention of what had happened under one such Roof to pass his lips. Nor would he ever.

She wasn’t the only one to welcome the change. Linsay told him she was glad she wouldn’t have to be so careful where she wandered in future, though she smiled to take the sting out of it. She was a good sort; it was a pity she’d never been interested. Desora was similarly relieved, and red-faced to admit it. Viola’s face remained ice as she told them all it should never have started in the first place. Most let her words washed over them.

Nerise did not. Her rebuke surprised Rand as much as the other Maiden. She offered no explanation, and he shared a drink with her in thoughtful solemnity.

Cami proved more talkative. “It has been most enjoyable getting to know you in this way, Rand al’Thor. I hope that you will be saddened by this parting, as I will be, but that you will come to see that it is the right and honourable path that we have chosen. Know that I will protect you as though we were lovers, even now that we no longer are.” She offered her cup. “Remember honour.”

“Remember honour,” he mumbled. Such a striking woman, with her golden hair and bright blue eyes, strong and proud, a true Maiden of the Spear. Was it that she was beyond his reach now that made him want to touch her more? Or was it the *oosquai*? He had drunk quite a lot of it.

Aca was the last to drink with him, deep in the night. “Tam will be glad to hear it is over,” she told him, using his father’s first name alone, something Aviendha had never done for him. Saying it right to his face. Why had they picked her to go last, as if, as if she was his mother or something? He should tell her what he thought of that, just as soon as he stopped the room from spinning.

“Remember honour,” she said.

“Remember your face,” Rand attempted to tell her, but his wittiness came out as weird gargling noise.

It was even more difficult to walk that it was to speak. The Maidens helped him, faceless in the dark, watching always. Familiar, faceless, funny, fluffy. Like, like pillows. The pillows they took him to were colder than the ones he liked, but so soft than he nearly fell asleep as soon as his head touched one. Rand barely lingered long enough to realise they were undressing him, before sweet, longed for oblivion washed over him.

He woke in the same state the next morning, in a bed as comfortable as his head was sore. Naked he was, but alone. He dressed slowly before letting himself out into the abandoned inn. It was cold and empty, with not a Maiden to be seen. They would be outside, he somehow knew. Keeping watch, surrounding the building but never coming in.

Saying nothing, Rand washed, shaved, cleaned his teeth, and went forth to meet the new day.

## CHAPTER 68: A Fateful Crossing



Elayne held herself against the swaying of the coach on its leather hinges, trying to ignore Nynaeve's sour face across from her. The curtains were drawn back despite a sprinkling of dust that sometimes whipped through the windows; the breeze blew away some of the late-afternoon heat. Cleared fields dotted the distant hills, too, like brown patches on a mostly green cloth, the men working them seeming ants. Everything looked dry; one bolt of lightning would set a fire that could burn for leagues. But lightning meant rain, and the few clouds in the sky were too high and thin for that. Idly she wondered whether she could make it rain. She had learned considerable control over weather. Still, it was very difficult if you had to begin with nothing.

Not so difficult as dealing with Nynaeve in her current mood, however. It had been a perfectly sensible plan. Salidar was several weeks' journey away, and Elaida had ordered their arrest. Alias' were only prudent. It was not as though she had assigned anyone else's; she had only chosen her own. Nynaeve did the rest herself! Just because Elayne had started calling herself Morelin again, in remembrance of happy times, had not meant that Nynaeve had had to go back to being Nana. Or acting like such a, an onion-butterer!

"Is my lady bored?" Nynaeve asked acidly. "The way my lady is staring at the countryside—down my lady's nose—I think my lady must want to travel faster." Reaching back over her head, she pushed open a small flap and shouted, "More speed, Ragan. Don't argue with me! You hold your tongue, too, Juilin Thief-catcher! I said more speed!"

The wooden flap banged down, but Elayne could still hear Juilin muttering loudly. Cursing, very likely; Nynaeve had been barking at the men all day. A moment later a whip cracked, and the coach racketed ahead even faster, rocking so hard that the women bounced on the golden-coloured silk seats. The silk had been thoroughly dusted when Juilin bought the vehicle, but the padding had long since gone hard. Yet jounced about as she was, the set of Nynaeve's jaw said she would not ask Ragan to slow again right after ordering him to go faster.

Crammed in with them, and mirroring their disguises of lady and maid, Emara and Ronelle looked as if they'd rather be out fighting the Black Ajah again. She envied Keestis and Shimoku their horses. It might be more tiring, but at least she wouldn't be trapped in here with Nynaeve.

The trouble had started last night, at a place called Bellon, on a muddy stream grandly named the Gaean River, just north of the capital. The Bellon Ford Inn was larger than the first, and Mistress Alfara, the innkeeper, offered the Lady Morelin a private dining room, which Elayne could not very well refuse. Mistress Alfara had been sure that only the Lady Morelin's maid Nana, would know how to serve her properly; ladies did require everything just so, the woman said, as well they should, and her girls were simply not used to ladies. Nana would know exactly how the Lady Morelin wanted her bed turned down, and would prepare her a nice bath after a hot day of travel. The list of things that Nana would do exactly right for her mistress had been endless.

Elayne was not sure whether Altaran nobility expected such or Mistress Alfara was just getting work out of an outlander's supposed servant. She had tried to spare Nynaeve, but the woman had been as full of "as you wish" and "my lady is most particular" as the innkeeper. She would have seemed a fool, or at least odd, to press it. They were trying to avoid attracting undue attention.

As long as they had been in Bellon, Nynaeve had acted the perfect lady's maid in public. In private was another matter. Elayne wished the woman would just revert to herself instead of bludgeoning her with a lady's maid from the Blight. Apologies had been met with "my lady is too kind" or simply ignored. *I will not apologize again*, she thought for the fiftieth time. *Not for what was not my fault.*

Elayne had been glad their weekly meeting had been called off that night, in a terse message delivered directly to her dreams by Amys. Though the why of the cancellation made her nervous. It could not be anything to do with Rand. Amys would have mentioned if he'd been hurt. Wouldn't she?

"I have been thinking, Nynaeve." Gripping a hanging strap, she felt like the ball in the children's game called Bounce in Andor, where you tried to keep a colourful wooden ball bouncing up and down on a paddle. She would not ask for the coach to be slowed, though. She could stand it as long as Nynaeve did. The woman was so stubborn! "I want to reach Salidar and find out what is going on, but—"

"My lady has been thinking? My lady must have a headache from all that effort. I will make my lady a nice tea of sheepstongue root and red daisy as soon as—"

"Be quiet, Nana," Elayne said, calmly but firmly; it was her very best imitation of her mother. Nynaeve's jaw dropped. "If you pull that braid at me, you can ride on the roof with the baggage." Nynaeve made a strangled sound, trying so hard to talk that nothing came out. Quite satisfactory. "Sometimes you seem to think I am still a child, but you are the one behaving like a child. I did not ask you to wash my back, but I would have had to wrestle to stop you. I did offer to scrub yours in turn, remember. And I offered to sleep in the trundle bed. But you climbed in and wouldn't get out. Stop sulking. If you like, I will be the maid at the next inn." It would probably be a disaster. Nynaeve would shout at Juilin in public, or box someone's ears. But anything for a little peace. "We can stop right now and change in the trees."

"We chose the gowns to fit you," the other woman muttered after a moment. Pushing the flap open again, she shouted, "Slow down! Are you trying to kill us? Fool men!"

There was dead silence from above as the coach's speed diminished to something much more reasonable, but Elayne would have wagered the two men were talking. She straightened her hair as best she could without a mirror. It was still startling to see those glistening black tresses when she did look in one. The green silk was going to need a thorough brushing itself.

"What was it you were thinking, Elayne?" Nynaeve asked. Crimson stained her cheeks. At least she knew that Elayne was right, but backing down was very likely as much apology as she would ever give.

"Elaida's embassy must know we have left the capital by now. We should take a route they would not expect."

Nynaeve sniffed. "Which one? North into Amadicia? We'd just be trading one enemy for another. At least Elaida only wants to capture us. The Whitecloaks would kill us on sight."

"But from Ebou Dar to Salidar will take us along the main highway. How are we to hide in such circumstances? Fake names and dyed hair can only do so much," Elayne fretted.

"It's not just Elaida. Don't forget the Shadow," Ronelle said quietly.

Nynaeve stared out the window, mouth set, saying nothing. She hadn't needed reminding that Moghedien was out there, or that she was unlikely to have forgotten her defeat in Tanchico.

"Amadicia might be the better option," Elayne said. "If only because it is not the route our enemies would expect us to take."

"I'll think about it," was all Nynaeve said.

It wasn't long until they reached the ferry across the Eldar, running from Coramen on the west bank to Alkindar on the east, tidy little walled towns of tile-roofed stone buildings with half a dozen stone docks each. The sun was climbing high, hardly a cloud crossed the sky, and those white as new-washed wool. No rain today, maybe. It was an important crossing, with trading ships from upriver tied to some of the docks and big barge-like ferries crawling from one town to the other on long sweeps.

"We'll cross here," Nynaeve said. All the questions that begged asking were asked, but Nynaeve silenced them with a single phrase. "I know Moghedien. She is sneaky, but she is a coward. She would never take the highway—it would be the northern route for her. It's what she'll be expecting from us, too. So we cross here. Better the Aes Sedai than the Forsaken."

The determination in her dark eyes made plain she would have fought them over it, but Elayne acceded with grace. It was simple truth that she was the only one of them to have faced down a Forsaken. She probably did know best in this.

Elayne and Keestis crossed on the first ferry, with their carriage, Juilin and most of the Shienarans. She saw hilly wooded ridge country beyond the wall of the town they approached. If they abandoned the carriage, they could travel through the woods instead. She was no woodswoman but knew from past experience that Ragan and his armymen could guide them through rough terrain like that. Rikimaru had been particularly skilled in that regard, as far as she recalled.

The ferry hitting the rope-padded bumpers at the end of the landing jolted her from her musings. When the ramp came down, Mendao and Areku helped to carefully guide the carriage and team down onto the stone dock.

Nynaeve and the rest could barely be seen on the far side of the river as they waited for their chance to cross, but she waved to them anyway.

\* \* \*

The carriage was rocking along the quay when Moghedien spotted the woman. She was pacing on one of the ferries with three lesser channelers and a pair of soldiers. Even from behind she would have known that determined stride, known that woman, from any angle in any light. The carved screens that served as windows in the closed chair were certainly no hindrance. The *Atha'an Shadar* in Ebou Dar had spoken true, yet Moghedien was still shocked. The woman was moving across the river, not north. She was getting away!

Moghedien thumped a fist against the side of the carriage, shouting, "Stop!" The driver halted so quickly she was almost flung forward.

The crowd jostled past, some shouting curses at her for blocking the way, some shouting more good naturally. Down here by the river, the throng ran thin enough for her to watch through the gaps. It was sheer happenstance that she'd passed by while Nynaeve was crossing over. Fate was on her side for once.

Flinging open the door, she climbed out into the street and looked about hastily. There; that inn, right overlooking the docks. And the river. Lifting her skirts, she hurried away without the slightest fear anyone might hire her carriage; until she untied the webs of Compulsion on them, the men would tell anyone who asked that they were engaged, and stand there until they died of hunger. A path opened ahead of her, men and women leaping aside before she reached them, leaping with squeals and cries as they clutched where they thought they had been stabbed. As they had; there was no time to spin subtle webs on so many minds, but a flurry of needles woven of Air did as well here.

The stout innkeeper at The Oarsman's Pride nearly leaped, too, at the sight of Moghedien striding into her common room in comfortable black silk, sensibly unadorned. The woman would see her as someone of note but not someone to pay too much intention to, as intended. At least, she would if Moghedien had had time for such subtleties.

Instead, she spun a hasty web on the round-cheeked innkeeper that jerked her up straight and made her eyes pop. At Moghedien's command to show her the roof, the woman ran up the railless stairs at the side of the room. It was unlikely any of the drinkers saw anything unusual in the innkeeper's behaviour, Moghedien thought with a small laugh. The Oarsman's Pride probably had never seen a patron of her quality before.

On the flat roof, she quickly weighed the dangers of letting the innkeeper live versus those of killing her. Corpses had a way of pointing a finger, eventually. If you wished to remain quietly hidden in the shadows, you did not kill unless you absolutely had to. Hastily, she adjusted the web of Compulsion, told the woman to go down to her room, to go to sleep and forget ever having seen her. With the haste, it was possible the innkeeper might lose the whole day, or wake somewhat slower of wits than she had been—so much in Moghedien's life would have been so much easier had she possessed a better Talent for Compulsion—but in any case, the woman scurried away, eager to obey, and left her alone.

Speeding to the low wall that surrounded the roof, she searched the river spread out below. Scores of boats of every size swept along on their oars between larger vessels, anchored or under sail. Most of the cabins of the sort she sought were plain wood, but there she saw a yellow roof, and there a blue, and there, well past midriver and heading east fast ... the ferry. It had to be the right one; she could not take any more time here.

She raised her hands, but as Balefire launched itself, something flashed around her and she jerked, certain she'd been caught. She stared at the pigeons fluttering away. Pigeons! She nearly spewed the contents of her stomach across the roof. A glance at the river, made her snarl.

Because she had jerked, the Balefire she meant to slice through Nynaeve instead had sliced diagonally through the middle of the ferry, about where the oarsmen had stood. Because the rowers had been burned out of the Pattern before the Balefire struck, the two halves of the craft were now a

good hundred paces back up the river. Then again, perhaps it was not a complete disaster. Because that slice from the ferry's centre had gone at the same time the boatmen really died, the river had had minutes to rush in. The two parts of the ferry sank out of sight in a great froth of bubbles even as her eyes shifted to them, carrying their passenger to the depths.

Suddenly, what she had done struck her. She had always moved in the dim places, always kept herself hidden, always ... Any woman in the town who could channel would know someone had drawn a great deal of *saidar*, if not for what, and any eye watching had seen that bar of liquid white fire sear across the afternoon. And she was in Altara, where Asha'bellanar had supposedly made her lair. Fear gave her wings. Not fear. Terror.

Gathering her skirts, she ran back down the stairs, ran through the common room bumping into tables and careering off people trying to get out her way, ran into the street too frightened to think, battering a path through the crowd with her hands.

"Run!" she shrieked, hurling herself into the carriage. Her skirts caught in the door; she ripped them free. "Run!"

The carriage lurched into motion, tossing her about, but she did not care. She braced herself with fingers laced through the carved window screens, and shook uncontrollably. Softly, softly, in the shadows. That was her way. If that wretched savage had not made a fool of her ... Well, Nynaeve as surely done for now. But the rest of her friends would pay for Moghedien's humiliation as well.

\* \* \*

The ferry lurched. *A nice refreshing boat ride*, Nynaeve told herself. *Nice cool breezes on the bay. Moist breezes, not dry*. The boat rolled. "Oh, blood and ashes!" she moaned. Appalled, she clapped a hand over her mouth. If she had to endure any more of these trips on the water, she would have as much filth coming off of her tongue as Mat did.

"No!" she said firmly. "I want to settle my stomach, not rile it." The boat had begun a slow rocking. She tried to concentrate on her clothes. She was not fixated on clothes the way Elayne sometimes seemed to be, but thinking about silks and laces was soothing.

Suddenly she felt weaves of *saidar* almost atop her in huge amounts, and ...

... she floundered in water over her head, flailing upward to find air, tangled in her skirts, flailing. She floundered in alarm for only a moment. Something had hit the ferry, knocking her over. Where were the others? She could hardly see in the watery dimness, but the sun overhead beckoned her towards the surface. She knew how to swim—she had splashed in the Waterwood ponds often enough back home—it was just when the water started rocking her about that she minded.

Kicking awkwardly because of her skirts, Nynaeve fought her way towards the air, racing against the tightening of her chest, praying that she could get there before her air ran out. It might help to shed the dress, but she was not about to bob to the surface of the river in nothing but shift and stockings and jewels. She was not about to leave those behind, either. Besides, she could not get out of the dress without loosing her belt pouch, and she would drown before losing what was in there.

Lungs burning, Nynaeve fought for every last moment of life. Her reward was the blessed southern sun almost blinding her as her head burst free of the Eldar. Gasping, she saw a crowd gathered at the end of a dock not far away. Top-knotted men were tossing weapons to the ground, and a shirtless Juilin Sandar was arching cleanly through the air. Great interfering oaf he might be, but he cut through the water like a well-honed knife.

Setting her jaw, Nynaeve swam for the dock. She gave Juilin a good scowl when he got close. "Don't you even think of touching me, Juilin Sandar. You keep right on going and find the others."

His splashing stopped long enough to shoot her a rude look. "I don't know why I even bother sometimes," he said, before swimming on by.

It was awkward swimming in her skirts, but Nynaeve persisted, warning off Ragan and the others as well. She was forced to accept a hand up onto the dock, though, when she finally reached it, and graciously thanked the men who hauled her up not to ogle her. It felt like she was carrying half the river, she was so soaked.

Elayne's face was as white as snow when she came to throw a cloak around Nynaeve's shoulders. "Light. I thought we had lost you. Did ..." she lowered her voice. "Did you see where that came from?"

There were too many people nearby. All Nynaeve could do was shake her head.

"I don't see them." It was Keestis who spoke, off at the end of the dock, staring out at the water with the townsfolk and rivermen. They went to join her. And the longer they stared, the more Nynaeve's concern grew.

"They *can* all swim, can't they?" Elayne said. "I never thought to ask."

"I know Emara can ... But the others never said anything to me," said Keestis.

It had to have been the Shadow. Whether Black Ajah or Moghedien, the Shadow. Nynaeve was shivering, and she could not convince herself it was from the cold. Timid little Emara. Big, hearty Ronelle. Clever Shimoku. And the armsmen who'd ridden with Rand from Falme, that he'd sent to protect her in his stead. Rikimaru and Katsui, swift and strong. They were in her charge, too, even if they weren't Thereners. *If they've killed them, I'll ... I'll ...*

"There!"

The crowd rumbled at Keestis' shout. Nynaeve went up on her toes, trying to peer through the bright light that reflected off the water. There were shapes in the water, but she couldn't ...

"It's Shimoku! They found her. Well done, you two!" Elayne called. "You there, help them up. Fetch some warm blankets, swiftly now," she went on, pointing at the townsfolk as if they were servants in her mother's palace. It caused a stir, and not a friendly one, but the greater drama of the ferry's sinking won out over annoyance at Elayne's snobbery, and the chosen men went to do as she'd said.

It was indeed Shimoku that they were pulling through the waves, she saw now. And they needed to pull her, for she was a dead weight between the two top-knotted men. She knew Rikimaru by his unusually pale hair; a frightened looking Ragan supported Shimoku's other side.

When they reached their goal, Nynaeve had to force herself not to shove the dockworkers that were helping to haul Shimoku up aside, such was her haste. *Saidar* was in her, but she dared not use it to help with the hauling. It would be too easily seen. None of the townsfolk would know a Healing when they saw one, though.

"Hurry up! Get her out of the water!" she snapped.

She ignored their grumbles, and waited only long enough for them to deposit Shimoku on the docks before dropping to her knees and putting hands to her. The Accepted's blue dress was so soaked it almost looked black, and she was not moving, but she hadn't needed to Delve her to know she still breathed. The Delving revealed her injuries, though. A crack to the skull, from the debris of the ferry no doubt. Nynaeve spun the threads with effortless skill, and set her Healing in place around the Kaltori. She didn't wake, but she fancied that she could hear her breathing more easily.

She didn't ask how the girl had survived, unconscious in the water. Ragan didn't need to, either; as soon as they hauled themselves out of the river, he clasped Rikimaru's hand in a grip that looked tight enough to hurt.

Nynaeve let Ragan take Shimoku from her, and went to resume her nervous watch. It was some time before a dockman called the approach of another swimmer. Swimmers. Juilin was helping someone along, but Areku and Mendao swam alone. The sun had partially dried Nynaeve's clothes by then, but she shivered as hard as ever.

"He was a big man, Katsui." She hadn't noticed Rikimaru approach. "All those weapons. The mail under his coat." He lowered his head. "He was a big man. May the last embrace of the mother welcome him home."

Nynaeve's held her skirts in fists as she stalked over to where the dockmen waited. The wispy figure with an arm draped over Juilin's shoulders could only be Emara. Ronelle had been a big woman, too. *Is a big woman. IS, burn you!*

She stood ready to help, the One Power blazing within her. But it blazed uselessly. Emara was hefted out of the water with such ease that the burly men immediately turned their attention to those who had swam out to help. The oafs didn't notice the way her face was set, how she stared at nothing. Nynaeve put her arm around her. She didn't ask the question; didn't want to know the answer.

She heard it anyway.

Emara had her head in her hands, fingers clawlike among her curly hair. "I, I c-couldn't. She was too h-heavy. I couldn't pull her up!" she sobbed. Violent shudders ran through her, and no matter how tightly Nynaeve hugged she would not stop the shaking. Not Emara's, and not her own.

For no matter how much Power she drew, or how great her skill at Healing, she could not Heal death.

## CHAPTER 69: A Silver Arrow



Elayne made noises about leaving town, claiming that their attackers could be coming across the river on the next ferry. It was half-hearted, though, and only the Shienarans were moved. While Ragan was setting up a watch, Juilin opined that it would have taken the Defenders of the Stone to force a ferryman to go back to work if a bolt of light had sunk the last ferry right in front of him, and even then they might have had to quell a riot first.

Nynaeve didn't bother arguing with them. She was full of impotent fury, yet she felt so empty. She had led them out of the White Tower to hunt the Black Ajah. Everything that happened to them was her responsibility.

Seeing neither Elayne nor Nynaeve act, Keestis took charge of things, inquiring after a warm inn before politely but firmly asking the townsfolk to give them room to grieve, getting Areku to take charge of Emara, and chivvying the rest of them towards shelter. Nynaeve knew she should set her down for that, but she hadn't the energy.

Ragan was the only man to accompany them. From the way he was cradling Shimoku in his arms, even Nynaeve would have had to be firm to make him stay behind. Keestis didn't even try.

Elayne stirred when she saw the ominous name of the inn but did not gainsay her friend. She could be too nice for her own good sometimes. It was hard to see how she was supposed to rule a nation when she was so sensitive.

The innkeeper of The Last Stop, Mistress Jherico, was a plump woman with long grey curls, a warm smile, and searching dark eyes. Nynaeve suspected she could spot a worn hem or a flat purse at ten paces. Bedraggled as the rest of them looked, Elayne obviously passed muster, for the innkeeper made a deep curtsy, spreading her grey skirts wide, and made effusive welcome, inquiring whether the lady was on her way to or from Ebou Dar.

"From," Elayne replied with a languid hauteur. "The city's balls were most enjoyable, but I must return to my estates. I require a room for myself and Nana, and another two for my companions." She glanced at Nynaeve and added, "I must have two full beds. I need Nana close, and if she has only a trundle, she will keep me awake with her snoring." Nynaeve's funk receded slowly. Snore? She did not snore!

"Of course, my lady," the plump innkeeper said. "I have just the thing. But your men will have to bed down in the stable, in the hayloft. I am quite crowded, as you can see. I do have a few rooms left, however."

"I am sure they will do very well. If you will send up a light repast and some washwater, I think I shall retire early." There was still sunlight showing in the windows, but she put a hand delicately over her mouth as if stifling a yawn.

"Of course, my lady. As you wish. This way."

"I'm not a man," Areku muttered at the innkeeper's broad back. She was all but carrying Emara. Ragan was scowling at Mistress Jherico, too, even less pleased with the idea of being sent to the stables, if for very different reasons.

Mistress Jherico seemed to think she had to keep Elayne entertained as she showed them to the second floor. She went on the whole way about the crowding at the inn and how it was a miracle that she had a room left, about all the nobles who had stayed at her establishment over the years. Why, a Hunter of the Horn had come through just the day before, on his way to Tear, where they said the Stone of Tear had fallen into the hands of some false Dragon, and was it not horrible wickedness that men could do such things? "I hope they never find it." The innkeeper's grey curls swung as she shook her head.

"The Horn of Valere?" Elayne said. "Why ever not?"

"Why, my lady, if they find it, it means the Last Battle is coming. The Dark One breaking free." Mistress Jherico shivered. "The Light send the Horn is never found. That way, the Last Battle cannot happen, can it?" Elayne had no answer to such curious logic.

The bedchamber was snug, if not exactly cramped. Two narrow beds with striped coverlets stood to either side of a window looking out onto the street, and little more than walking room separated them from each other or the white-plastered walls. A small table holding a lamp and tinderbox between the beds, a tiny, flowered rug, and a washstand with a small mirror above it completed the furnishings. Everything was clean and well polished, at least.

The innkeeper plumped the pillows and smoothed the coverlets and said the mattresses were the best goose down and there was a good breeze at night if the lady opened the window and left the door cracked. As though she would sleep with her door open to a public hallway. Two aproned girls arrived with a large blue pitcher of steaming water and a large lacquered tray covered with a white cloth before Elayne managed to get Mistress Jherico out. The shape of a wine pitcher and two cups mounded up one side of the cloth.

As soon as the woman was gone, Elayne left again, returning to the larger but even sparser room that their companions had been perfunctorily dumped in.

“I do not snore,” Nynaeve said in a tight voice as she stalked after her.

Elayne’s brows rose, and she waited far too long before responding. “Of course you do not. I had to say something, though.”

Nynaeve gave a loud harrumph, but all she said was “I am glad I am tired enough to go to sleep. All the herbs I had to aid sleep have been utterly ruined.”

“Let us hope the same cannot be said of our friends.”

Nynaeve wondered at that herself. Shimoku still hadn’t woken. Though a thorough check had revealed no lasting injuries, blows to the head could be terrible things. She’d known men to recover from them well enough to go about their lives for days after, only to suddenly drop dead. Emara was up and about but looked even worse. Those big grey eyes of hers stared at nothing, like bottomless wells of misery. Ragan sat on Shimoku’s bedside, holding her hand, and Nynaeve couldn’t help but note—from the bare shoulders that showed above the coverlet—that someone had removed the girl’s wet dress. It reminded her of how poorly her own hung, but there was a more pressing concern.

“I hope you haven’t been taking advantage, Master Fanwar.”

He just stared at her in that confused male way of his. It was Areku who spoke. “I put her to bed. And no, I did not take advantage.” Areku was quite thickly muscled for a woman. More than many men, in fact. And scarred, too. Nynaeve didn’t much like how close she was standing. She firmed her stance and did not step back, reminding herself that she could channel and Areku could not.

“We have matters in hand here, Nynaeve. I can call you if anyone’s health worsens,” Keestis said. So she was not welcome was she? Nynaeve glowered for a moment before turning on her heel and stalking away. It had been the Shadow that caused it. They should blame it! And make it answer.

She had an idea of how to do just that. Once back in their room, she stripped angrily, tossing the serving girl’s dress to the floor. The *cuendillar* disk in her pouch was still intact. Even reaching in to take out the *ter’angreal* ring that rested against it made Nynaeve shudder, as she did every time she touched the seal. It had to be her imagination. There wasn’t really something trying to reach through the disk. Even so, it was a struggle to make herself hold onto the pouch long enough to hide it safely behind the headboard. Clad only in her linen shift, Nynaeve threaded the ring onto the leather thong with Lan’s signet and her own Great Serpent, then reknotted and hung it back around her neck before lying down atop one of the beds. Carefully tucking the rings in next to her skin, she settled her head on the pillows.

It took a long time before she finally dozed off, but eventually she found herself standing outside The Last Stop, in the night. The moon was high, and drifting clouds cast shadows over the camp. Crickets chirruped, and the night-birds called, but no dogs barked in the night. Rand had told her that only wild creatures had reflections here, but said even the Wise Ones didn’t know why.

Abruptly she realized that she was wearing a familiar old dress. Blazing red, far too snug around the hips for decency, and a square neck cut so low she thought she might pop out. She could not imagine any woman but Berelain donning it. For Lan, she might. If they were alone. She *had* been thinking of Lan when she drifted off. *I was, wasn’t I?*

In any case, she was not about to let Birgitte see her in the thing. The woman claimed to be a soldier, and the more time Nynaeve spent with her, the more she realized that some of her attitudes—and comments—were as bad as any man’s. Worse. A combination of Berelain and a tavern brawler. The comments did not come out all the time, but they certainly did whenever Nynaeve allowed idle

thoughts to put her in anything like this dress. She changed to good stout Theren wool, dark, with a plain shawl she did not need, her hair decently braided, and opened her mouth to call Birgitte.

"Why did you change?" the woman said, stepping out from the shadows to lean on her silver bow. Her intricate golden braid hung over her shoulder, and moonlight shone on her bow and arrows. "I remember wearing a gown that could have been twin to that, once. It was only to attract attention so Gaidal could sneak by—the guards' eyes bulged like frogs'—but it was fun. Especially when I wore it dancing with him later. He always hates dancing, but he was so intent on keeping any other man from getting close that he danced every dance." Birgitte laughed fondly. "I won fifty gold solids from him that night at spin, because he stared so much he never looked at his tiles. Men are peculiar. It was not as if he had never seen me—"

"That's as may be," Nynaeve cut in primly, wrapping the shawl firmly around her shoulders.

Before she could add her question, Birgitte said, "I have found her," and all thought of the question fled.

"Where? Did she see you? Can you take me to her? Without her seeing?" Fear fluttered in Nynaeve's belly but she was sure it would turn to anger as soon as she saw Moghedien. "If you can bring me close ..." She trailed off as Birgitte raised a hand.

"I cannot think she saw me, or I doubt I would be here now." She was all seriousness now. Nynaeve found it much easier to be around her when she showed this side of being a soldier. "I can take you close for a moment, if you want to go, but she is not alone. At least ... You will see. You must be silent, and you must take no action against Moghedien. There are other Forsaken. Perhaps you could destroy her, but can you destroy six of them?"

The fluttering in Nynaeve's middle spread to her chest. And her knees. Six. She should ask what Birgitte had seen or heard and let it go at that. Then she could return to her bed and ... But Birgitte was looking at her. Not questioning her courage, only looking. Ready to do this thing if she said. "I will be silent. And I won't even think of channelling." Not with Six Forsaken together. She stiffened her knees to keep them from knocking. "Whenever you are ready."

Birgitte hefted her bow and put a hand on Nynaeve's arm ...

... and Nynaeve's breath caught in her throat. They were standing on nothing, infinite blackness all around, no way to tell up from down, and in every direction a fall that would last forever. Head spinning, she made herself look where Birgitte pointed.

Below them, Moghedien also stood on darkness, garbed nearly as black as what surrounded her, bent and listening intently. And as far below her, five huge, high-backed chairs, each different, sat on an expanse of glistening white-tiled floor floating in the blackness. Strangely, Nynaeve could hear what those in the chairs said as well as if she had been among them.

"... never been a coward," a plumply pretty, sun-haired woman was saying, "so why begin?" Seemingly attired in silvery-grey mist and sparkling gems, she lounged in a chair of ivory worked so it appeared made of naked acrobats. Four carved men held it aloft, and her arms rested along the backs of kneeling women; two men and two women held a white silk cushion behind her head, while above more were contorted into shapes Nynaeve did not believe a human body could attain. She blushed when she realized that some were performing more than acrobatic tricks.

A compact man of middling height, with a livid scar across his face and a square golden beard, leaned forward angrily. His chair was heavy wood, carved with columns of armoured men and horses, a steel-gauntleted fist clasping lighting at the back's peak. His red coat made up for the lack of gilding on the chair, for golden scrollwork rolled across his shoulders and down his arms. "No-one names me coward," he said harshly. "But if we continue as we are, he will come straight for my throat."

"That has been the plan from the beginning," said a woman's melodious voice. Nynaeve could not see the speaker, hidden behind the towering back of a chair that seemed all snow-white stone and silver.

"My agents have done much to point him that way, and are poised to do more if necessary," said a dark-haired, voluptuous woman who reminded her somehow of Berelain. Perhaps it was the way she lounged in a white seat that looked to be more cushion than chair.

The second man was large and darkly handsome, with white wings streaking his temples. He toyed with an ornate golden goblet, leaning back in a throne. That was the only possible word for the gem-encrusted thing; a mere hint of gold showed here and there, but Nynaeve would not have doubted that it was solid gold beneath all those glittering rubies and emeralds and moonstones; it had an air of

weight quite apart from its massive size. "He will concentrate on you," the big man said in a deep voice. "If need be, one close to him will die, plainly at your order. He will come for you. And while he is fixed on you alone, the four of us, linked, will take him. What has changed to alter any of that?"

"Nothing has changed," the scarred man growled. "Least of all, my trust for you. I *will* be part of the link, or it ends now."

The golden-haired woman threw back her head and laughed. "Poor man," she said mockingly, waving a beringed hand at him. "Do you think he would not *notice* that you were linked? He has a teacher, remember. A poor one, but not a complete fool. Next you will ask to include enough of those Black Ajah children to take the circle beyond thirteen, so you or Rahvin must have control."

"If Rahvin trusts us enough to link when he must allow one of us to guide," the melodious voice said, "you can display an equal trust." The big man looked into his goblet, and the mist-clad woman smiled faintly. "If you cannot trust us not to turn on you," the unseen woman continued, "then trust that we will be watching each other too closely to turn. You *agreed* to all of this, Sammael. Why do you begin to quibble now?"

Nynaeve gave a start as Birgitte touched her arm ...

... and they were back in Alkindar, with the moon shining through the clouds. It seemed almost normal compared to where they had been.

"Why ..." Nynaeve began, and had to swallow. "Why did you bring us away?" Her heart leaped into her throat. "Did Moghedien see us?" She had been so intent on the other Forsaken—on the mingled strangeness and commonplaceness of them—that she had forgotten to keep an eye on Moghedien. She heaved a fervent sigh when Birgitte shook her head.

"I never took my gaze from her for more than a moment, and she never moved a muscle. But I do not like being so exposed. If she had looked up, or one of the others ..."

Nynaeve wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders and still shivered. "Rahvin and Sammael." She wished she did not sound hoarse. "Did you recognize the others?" Of course Birgitte had; it was a foolish way to phrase it, but she was shaken.

"Lanfear was the one hidden by her chair. Balthamel was the one who spoke of agents; she was always at home in low places. The other was Graendal. Do not think her a fool because she lolls in a chair that would make a Senje no-room keeper blush. She is devious, and she uses her *pets* in rites to cause the roughest soldier I ever knew to swear celibacy."

"Graendal is devious," Moghedien's voice said, "but not devious enough."

Birgitte whirled, silver bow coming up, silver arrow almost flying to nock—and abruptly hurtled thirty paces through the moonlight to crash against the inn wall so hard that she bounced back five and lay in a crumpled heap.

Desperately Nynaeve reached for *saidar* only to find an invisible wall between her and the warm glow of the True Source. She almost howled. Something seized her feet, jerking them backward and up off the ground; her hands flew up and back until wrists met ankles above her head. Her clothes became powder that slid from her skin, and her braid dragged her head back until the braid rested on her bottom. Frantic, she tried to step out of the dream. Nothing happened. She hung doubled in midair like some netted creature, every muscle strained to its limit. Tremors ran through her; her fingers twitched feebly, brushing her feet. She thought if she tried to move anything else, her back would break.

Strangely, her fear was gone, now that it was too late. She was certain that she could have been quick enough, if not for the terror that had laced through her when she needed to act. All she wanted was a chance to put her hands around Moghedien's throat. *Much good that does now!* Every breath came in strained panting.

Moghedien moved to where Nynaeve could see her, between the quivering triangle of her arms. The glow of *saidar* surrounded the woman mockingly. "A detail from Graendal's chair," the Forsaken said. Her dress was mist like Graendal's, sliding from black fog to nearly transparent and back to gleaming silver. The fabric changed almost constantly. Nynaeve had seen her wear it before, in Tanchico. "Not something I would have thought of on my own, but Graendal can be ... edifying. So you survived the river. Good. Killing you would have been enough, but I would rather see you broken." Nynaeve glared at her, but Moghedien did not appear to notice. "I can hardly believe that *you* actually came hunting *me*. Did you really believe that because once you were lucky enough to catch me off guard, you might be my equal?" The woman's laugh was cutting. "If you only knew the effort I have

put into finding you. And you came to me.” She glanced around at the town. “You didn’t flee in the night? That would make you easy enough to find. If I needed to, now.”

“Do your worst, burn you,” Nynaeve snarled. As best she could. Doubled up as she was, she had to force the words out one by one. She did not dare look straight toward Birgitte—not that she could have shifted her head enough to—but rolling her eyes as if caught between fury and fear, she caught a glimpse. Her stomach went hollow, even stretched tight as a sheepskin for drying. Birgitte lay sprawled on the ground, silver arrows spilling from the quiver at her waist, her silver bow a span from her unmoving hand. “Lucky, you say? If you hadn’t managed to sneak up on me, I’d have striped you till you wailed. I’d have wrung your neck like a chicken.” She had only one chance, if Birgitte was dead, and a bleak one. To make Moghedien so angry that she killed her quickly in a rage. If only there was some way to warn Elayne. Her dying would have to do it. “Remember how you said you’d use me for a mounting block? And later, when I said I’d do the same for you? That was after I had beaten you. When you were whimpering and pleading for your life. Offering me anything. You are a gutless coward! The leavings from a nightjar! You piece of—!” Something thick crawled into her mouth, flattening her tongue and forcing her jaws wide.

“You are so simple,” Moghedien murmured. “Believe me, I am quite angry enough with you already. I do not think I will use you for a mounting block.” Her smile made Nynaeve’s skin crawl. “I think I will turn you into a horse. It is quite possible, here. A horse, a mouse, a frog ...” She paused, listening. “... a cricket. And every time you come to *Tel’aran’rhiod*, you’ll be a horse, until I change it. Or some other with the knowledge does so.” She paused again, looking almost sympathetic. “No I’d not want to give you false hope. There are only nine of us now who know that binding, and you would not want any of the others to have you any more than myself. You will be a horse every time I bring you here. You will have your own saddle and bridle. I will even braid your mane.” Nynaeve’s braid jerked almost out of her scalp. “You will remember who you are even then, of course. I think I will enjoy our rides, though you may not.” Moghedien took a deep breath, and her dress darkened to something that glistened in the pale light; Nynaeve could not be sure, but she thought it might be the colour of wet blood. “You make me approach Semirhage. It will be well to be done with you, so I can turn my full attention to matters of importance. Is the little orange-haired chit still with you?”

The thickness vanished from Nynaeve’s mouth. “I am alone, you stupid—” Pain. As if she had been beaten from ankles to shoulders, every stroke landing at once. She bellowed shrilly. Again. She tried to clamp her teeth shut, but her own endless shriek filled her ears. Tears rolled shamefully down her cheeks as she sobbed, waiting hopelessly for the next.

“Is she with you?” Moghedien said patiently. “Do not waste time trying to make me kill you. I won’t. You will live many years serving me. Your rather pitiful abilities might be of some use once I train them. Once I train you. But I can make you think that what you just felt was a lover’s caress. Now, answer my question.”

Nynaeve managed to gather breath. “No,” she wept. “She ran off with a man after we left Tanchico. A man old enough to be her grandfather, but he had money. We heard what happened in the Tower”—she was sure Moghedien must know of that—“and she was afraid to go back.”

The other woman laughed. “A delightful tale. I can almost see what fascinates Semirhage about breaking the spirit. Oh, you are going to provide me with a great deal of entertainment, Nynaeve al’Meara. But first, you are going to bring the girl Elayne to me. You will shield her and bind her and bring her to lie at my feet. Do you know why? Because some things are actually stronger in *Tel’aran’rhiod* than in the waking world. That is why you will be a glossy white mare whenever I bring you here. And it is not only hurts taken here that last into waking. Compulsion is another. I want you to think of it for a moment or two, before you begin believing it your own idea. I suspect that the girl is your friend. But you are going to bring her to me like a pet—” Moghedien screamed as a silver arrow suddenly stuck its head out from below her right breast.

Nynaeve fell to the ground like a dropped sack. The fall knocked every speck of breath from her lungs as surely as a hammer in the belly. Straining to breathe, she struggled to make racked muscles move, to fight through pain to *saidar*.

Staggering on her feet, Birgitte fumbled another arrow from her quiver. “Go, Nynaeve!” It was a mumbling shout. “Get away!” Birgitte’s head wavered, and the silver bow wobbled as she raised it.

The glow around Moghedien increased until it seemed as if the blinding sun surrounded her. The night folded in over Birgitte like an ocean wave, enveloping her in blackness. When it passed, the bow dropped atop empty clothes as they collapsed. The clothes faded like fog burning off, and only the bow and arrows remained, shining in the moonlight.

Moghedien sank to her knees, panting, clutching the protruding arrow shaft with both hands as the glow around her faded and died. Then she vanished, and the silver arrow fell where she had been, stained dark with blood.

After what seemed an eternity, Nynaeve managed to push up to hands and knees. Weeping, she crawled to Birgitte's bow. This time it was not pain that made tears come. Kneeling, naked and not caring, she clutched the bow. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "Oh, Birgitte, forgive me. Birgitte!"

There was no answer except the mournful cry of a night-bird.

\* \* \*

Liandrin leaped to her feet as the door to Moghedien's bedchamber crashed open and the Chosen staggered into the sitting room, blood soaking her silk shift. Chesmal and Asne rushed to her side, each taking an arm to keep the woman on her feet, but Liandrin remained by her chair. The others were out; perhaps out of Amador, for all Liandrin knew. Moghedien told only what she wanted the hearer to know, and punished questions she did not like. Especially the biggest question, that of how she disappeared from the manor only to reappear as if out of thin air. She'd returned only a few hours ago, however. How had she been injured like that?

"What happened?" Asne gasped.

Moghedien's brief look should have fried her where she stood. "You have some small ability with Healing," the Chosen told Chesmal thickly. Blood stained her lips, trickled from the corner of her mouth in an increasing stream. "Do it. Now, fool!"

The dark-haired Ghealdanin woman did not hesitate in laying hands to Moghedien's head. Liandrin sneered to herself as the glow surrounded Chesmal; concern painted Chesmal's handsome face, and Asne's bold, Saldaean features were contorted with pure fright and worry. So faithful, they were. Such obedient lapdogs. Moghedien lifted up onto her toes, head flung back; eyes wide, she shook, breath rushing from her gaping mouth as if she had been plunged into ice.

In moments it was done. The glow around Chesmal disappeared, and Moghedien's heels settled to the blue-and-green-patterned carpet. Without Asne's support, she might have fallen. Only a part of the strength for Healing came from the Power; the rest came from the person being Healed. Whatever wound had caused all that bleeding would be gone, but Moghedien was surely as weak as if she had lain in bed an invalid for weeks. She pulled the plain green scarf from Asne's belt to wipe her mouth as the woman helped her turn toward the bedchamber door. Weak, and her back turned.

Liandrin struck as hard as she ever had, with everything she had puzzled out of what the woman had done to her.

Even as she did, *saidar* seemed to fill Moghedien like a flood. Liandrin's probe died as the Source was shielded from her. Flows of Air picked her up and slammed her against the panelled wall hard enough to make her teeth rattle. Spread-eagled, helpless, she hung there.

Chesmal and Asne exchanged confused glances, as if they did not understand what had occurred. They continued to support Moghedien as she came to stand in front of Liandrin, still calmly wiping her mouth on Asne's scarf. Moghedien channelled, and the blood on her shift turned black and flaked away, falling to the carpet.

"Y-you do not understand, Great M-mistress," Liandrin said frantically. "I only wished to help you to have the good sleep." For once in her life, slipping back into the accents of a commoner did not concern her in the least. "I only—" She cut off with a strangled gagging as a flow of Air seized her tongue, stretching it out between her teeth. Her brown eyes bulged. A hair more pressure, and ...

"Shall I pull it out?" Moghedien studied her face, but spoke as if to herself. "I think not. A pity for you that the al'Meara woman makes me think like Semirhage. Otherwise, I might only kill you." Suddenly she was tying off the shield, the knot growing ever more intricate, until Liandrin lost the twists and turns completely. And still it went on. "There," Moghedien said finally in tones of

satisfaction. "You will search a very long time to find anyone who can unravel that. But you will have no opportunity to search."

Liandrin searched Chesmal's face, and Asne's, for some sign of sympathy, pity, anything. Chesmal's eyes were cold and stern; Asne shook her head, as if over a foolish child.

"You thought you had learned something of Compulsion," Moghedien went on. "I will teach you a bit more." For an instant Liandrin shivered, Moghedien's eyes filling her vision as the woman's voice filled her ears, her entire head. "Live." The instant passed, and sweat beaded on Liandrin's face as the Chosen smiled at her. "Compulsion has many limits, but a command to do what someone wants to do in their inmost depths will hold for a lifetime. You will live, however much you think you want to take your life. And you will think of it. You will lie weeping many nights, wishing for it."

The flow holding Liandrin's tongue vanished, and she barely paused to swallow. "Please, Great Mistress, I swear I did not mean—" Her head rang and silvery black spots danced before her eyes from Moghedien's slap.

"There are ... attractions ... to doing a thing physically," the woman breathed. "Do you wish to beg more?"

"Please, Great Mistress—" The second slap sent her hair flying. "More?"

"Please—" A third nearly unhinged her jaw. Her cheek burned.

"If you cannot be more inventive than that, I will not listen. You will listen instead. I think what I have planned for you would delight Semirhage herself." Moghedien's smile was dark. "You will live, not Stilled, but knowing that you could channel again, if only you found someone to untie your shield. Yet that is only the beginning. Evon will be glad of a new scullery girl, and I am sure the Arene woman will want to have long talks with you about her husband. Why, they will enjoy your company so much that I doubt you will see the outside of this house during the years to come. Long years in which to wish that you had served me faithfully."

Liandrin shook her head, mouthing "no" and "please"; she was crying too hard to force the words out.

Turning her head to Asne, Moghedien said, "A pity the other one—Temaile was it?—a pity she is dead. Her predilections would have been useful. Tell them they are not to kill or maim her. I want her always to believe she might escape. Even futile hope will keep her alive to suffer." She turned away on Chesmal's arm, and the flows holding Liandrin to the wall vanished.

Her legs gave way like straw, crumpling her to the carpet. Only the shield remained; she hammered at it futilely as she crawled after Moghedien, trying to catch the hem of her shift, sobbing brokenly. "Please, Great Mistress."

"They are in Alkindar," Moghedien told Chesmal. "All of your searching, and I had to find them myself."

"I will serve faithfully," Liandrin wept. Fear turned her limbs to water; she could not crawl fast enough to catch up. They did not even look back at her, scrabbling across the carpet after them. "Bind me, Great Mistress. Anything. I will be the faithful dog!"

"There are many river ships. A fast one could take us there in days," Chesmal said, eagerness to negate her failure filling her voice.

"Such a primitive method of transportation," Moghedien said. "You will procure a fast ship and follow—" The bedchamber door closed on her words.

"I will be the faithful dog," Liandrin sobbed in a heap on the carpet. Lifting her head, she blinked tears away to see Asne watching her. "We could overwhelm her, Asne. We three together could—"

"We three?" Asne laughed. "You could not overwhelm fat Evon." Her eyes narrowed as she studied the shield fastened to Liandrin. "You might as well be Stilled."

"Listen. Please." Liandrin swallowed hard, trying to clear her voice, but it was still thick, it burning with urgency, when she went on at frantic speed. "We have spoken of the dissension that must rule among the Chosen. If Moghedien hides herself so, she must hide from the other Chosen. If we take her and give her to them, think of the places we could have. We could be exalted above queens. We could be Chosen ourselves!"

For a moment—one blessed, wonderful moment—the Saldaean hesitated. Then she shook her head. "You have never known how high to lift your eyes. 'Who reaches for the sun will be burned'.

No, I think that I will not be burned for reaching too high. I think that I will do as I am told.” A mocking smile crossed her lips. “And tell Moghedien what you said.”

Liandrin was still struggling to find her feet when Asne returned, accompanied by Chesmal and a rather irritated Moghedien. “The women of this Age do have a way of getting under my skin,” the Chosen said. “So you would barter me to the others, would you? Do you even know what that means, what they would do? No. But I do. In fact, I know just the man to introduce you to. He shares your liking for Compulsion. And he would have been most amused by what you did to that silly girl in Tanchico. Yes. You really should meet Rahvin. He would enjoy having a pretty little girl like you in his bed, enslaved to his will. Begging to suck his member.”

Liandrin’s stomach heaved at the very suggestion. “No! Please, Great Mistress! I will be the slave, *your* slave! But never a filthy man’s!”

Moghedien chuckled. “Filthy is definitely the word for that one. And the things you will do at his command. While you are doing them, remember this: you brought it on yourself.”

## CHAPTER 70: Ripped Away



Yawning, Elayne watched Nynaeve from her bed, her head propped up on one elbow and black hair spilling down her arm. It was really quite ridiculous, this insistence that whoever did not go to *Tel'aran'rhiod* remain awake. She did not know how long an interval Nynaeve had experienced in the World of Dreams, but Elayne had been lying here for a good two hours, with no book to read, no needlework to do, nothing at all to occupy her except staring at the other woman stretched out on her own narrow bed.

Suddenly she sat up. Tears were leaking from Nynaeve's closed eyes, trickling down the sides of her face; what Elayne had taken for a faint snore—Nynaeve *did* snore, whatever she said—was a tiny, whimpering sob deep in her throat. That should not be. If she had been injured, the hurt would have appeared, although she would not feel it here until she woke.

*Perhaps I should wake her.* But she hesitated, even as her hand stretched toward the other woman. Waking someone out of *Tel'aran'rhiod* was far from easy—shaking, even icy water in the face would not always do—and Nynaeve would not appreciate being pummelled.

Whatever was going on, Nynaeve should be able to step out of the dream whenever she wished. Unless ... Dani said that the Wise Ones could hold someone in *Tel'aran'rhiod* against their will, though if they had taught her the trick, she had not passed it on to Elayne or Nynaeve. If someone was holding Nynaeve now, hurting her, it could not be Birgitte, or the Wise Ones. Well, the Wise Ones might, if they caught her wandering where they thought she should not. But if not them, that left only ...

She took hold of Nynaeve's shoulders to shake her—if that did not work, she would freeze the pitcher of water on the table, or slap her face silly—and Nynaeve's eyes popped open.

Immediately Nynaeve began to weep aloud, the most despairing sound Elayne had ever heard. “I killed her. Oh, Elayne, I killed her with my foolish pride, thinking I could ...” The words trailed off in openmouthed sobs.

“You killed who?” It could not be Moghedien; that woman’s death would surely not bring this grief. “Ronelle? She wanted to fight the Shadow as much as any of us, as is only right. She would not want you to blame yourself, but to continue the fight in her name.” She was about to take Nynaeve in her arms to comfort her, when a pounding came at the door.

“Send them away,” Nynaeve mumbled, curling herself into a trembling ball in the middle of the bed.

Sighing, Elayne made her way to the door and pulled it open, but before she could say a word, Ragan pushed past her out of the night, rumpled shirt bagging out of his breeches, carrying someone shrouded in his cloak in his arms. Only a woman’s bare feet showed.

“She was just there,” Juilin said behind him, as if he did not believe the words coming out of his own mouth. Both men were barefoot, and Juilin was stripped to the waist, lean and hairless-chested. “I woke for a moment, and suddenly she was standing there, naked as the day she was born, collapsing like a cut net.”

“She’s alive,” Ragan said, laying the cloak-wrapped figure on Elayne’s bed, “but only barely. I could hardly hear her heart.”

Frowning, Elayne pulled aside the cloak’s hood—and found herself staring at Birgitte’s face, pale and wan.

Nynaeve scrambled stiffly from the other bed to kneel beside the unconscious woman. Her face glistened with tears, but her weeping had stopped. “She is alive,” she breathed. “She is alive.” Abruptly she seemed to realize that she was in her shift in front of the men, but she barely spared them a glance, and all she said was “Get them out of here, Elayne. I can do nothing with them gawking like sheep.”

Ragan and Juilin rolled their eyes toward each other when Elayne made a herding motion at them, and shook their heads slightly, but they backed toward the door without complaint. “She is ... a

friend," Elayne told them. She felt as if she were moving in a dream, floating, without feeling. How could this be? "We will take care of her." How could it possibly have happened? "Now, don't say a word to anyone." The looks they gave her as she closed the door nearly made her blush. Of course they knew better than to talk. But men did have to be reminded of the simplest things sometimes. "Nynaeve, how under the Light," she began, turning, and cut off as the glow of *saidar* surrounded the kneeling woman.

"Burn her!" Nynaeve growled, channelling fiercely. "Burn her forever for doing this!" Elayne recognized the flows being woven for Healing, but recognition was as far as she could go. "I will find her, Birgitte," Nynaeve muttered. Strands of Spirit predominated, but Water and Air were in there, and even Earth and Fire. It looked as complicated as embroidering one dress with either hand and two more with your feet. Blindfolded. "I will make her pay." The glow shining about Nynaeve grew and grew, until it overwhelmed the lamps, until it hurt to look at her except through slitted eyes. "I swear it! By the Light and my hope of salvation and rebirth, I will!" The anger in her voice changed, becoming deeper if anything. "It isn't working. There is nothing wrong with her to Heal. She is as perfect as anyone can be. But she is dying. Oh, Light, I can feel her slipping away. Burn Moghedien! Burn her! And burn me along with her!" She was not giving up, though. The weaving continued, complex flows weaving into Birgitte. And the woman lay there, golden braid flung over the side of the bed, the rise and fall of her chest slowing.

"I can do something that might help," Elayne said slowly. You were supposed to have permission, but it had not always been so. Once it had been done almost as often without as with. There was no reason it should not work on a woman. Except that she had never heard of it being done to any but men.

"Linking?" Nynaeve did not look away from the woman on the bed, or stop her efforts with the Power. "Yes, but let me guide. I do not know half what I am doing right this minute, but I know that I *can* do it. You could not Heal a bruise."

Elayne's mouth tightened, but she let the remark lie. "Not linking." The amount of *saidar* that Nynaeve had drawn into herself was amazing. If she could not Heal Birgitte with that, what Elayne could add would not make a difference. Together, they would be stronger than either apart, but not as strong as if their two strengths were simply added. "Stop, Nynaeve. You said yourself it is not working. Stop and let me try. If it doesn't work, you can ..." She could what? If Healing worked, it worked; if it did not ... There was no point in trying again if it failed.

"Try what?" Nynaeve snapped, yet she moved away awkwardly, letting Elayne come close. The weave of Healing faded, but not the shining nimbus.

Instead of answering, Elayne put one hand on Birgitte's forehead. Physical contact was as necessary for this as for Healing, and the two times she had watched it done in the Tower, the Aes Sedai had touched the man's forehead. The flows of Spirit she wove were complex, if not so intricate as Nynaeve's of a moment before. She barely understood some of what she was doing, and none at all of other parts, yet she had paid close attention, from her hiding place, to how the weave was shaped. Watched closely because she had built up a stock of stories in her head, made silly romances where there so seldom were any. After a moment, she sat down on the other bed and let *saidar* go.

Nynaeve frowned at her, then bent to examine Birgitte. The unconscious woman's colour was perhaps a little better, her breathing a little stronger. "What did you do, Elayne?" Nynaeve did not take her eyes from Birgitte, but the glow around her faded away slowly. "It wasn't Healing. I think could do it myself, now, but it was not Healing."

"Will she live?" Elayne asked faintly. There was no visible link between her and Birgitte, no flows, but she could sense the woman's weakness. A terrible weakness. She would know the moment Birgitte died, even if she was sleeping, or hundreds of miles away.

"I do not know. She isn't fading anymore, but I do not know." Weariness made Nynaeve's voice soft, and pain touched it strongly, as if she shared Birgitte's injury. Wincing, she rose and unfolded a red-striped blanket to spread over the woman lying there. "What did you do?"

Silence held Elayne long enough for Nynaeve to join her, lowering herself awkwardly onto the bed. "Bonding," Elayne said finally. "I ... bonded her. As a Warder." The incredulous stare on the other woman's face made her rush on. "Healing was doing no good. I had to do something. You know the gifts a Warder gets from being bonded. One is strength, energy. He can keep going when other

men would collapse and die, survive wounds that would kill anyone else. It was the only thing I could think of.”

Nynaeve drew a deep breath. “Well, it is working better than what I did, at least. A woman Warder. I wonder what Lan will think of that? No reason why she shouldn’t be. If any woman can, it would be her.” Wincing, she curled her legs up beneath her; her gaze kept returning to Birgitte. “You will have to keep this secret. If anyone learns that an Accepted has bonded a Warder, whatever the circumstances ...”

Elayne shivered. “I know,” she said simply, and quite fervently. It was not quite a Stilling offense, but any Aes Sedai would very likely make her wish she had been Stilled. “Nynaeve, what happened?”

For a long moment she thought the other woman was going to start crying again as her chin quivered and her lips worked. When she began speaking, her voice was iron, her face a blend of fury and too many tears ever to be shed. She told the tale starkly, almost sketchily, until she came to Moghedien’s appearance among the wagons. That she rendered in painful detail.

“I should be welted from the neck down,” she said bitterly at last, touching a smooth, unmarked arm. Unmarked or not, she flinched. “I don’t understand why I am not. I feel it, but I deserve the welts, for stupid, foolish pride. For being too afraid to do what I should. I deserved being hung up like a ham in a smokehouse. If there was any justice, I would still be dangling there, and Birgitte would not be lying on that bed, with us wondering whether she’ll live or not. If only I knew more. If only I could have Moghedien’s knowledge for five minutes, I *could* Heal her. I am sure of it.”

“If you were still hanging,” Elayne said practically, “in a very short while you would be waking up and shielding me. I doubt very much that I would have suspected anything until you had done it. I do not fancy being carted off to Moghedien, and I cannot believe you do either.” The other woman did not look at her. “It must have been a link, Nynaeve, like an *a’dam*. That is how she made you feel pain without marking you.” Nynaeve still sat there in a glowering sulk. “Nynaeve, Birgitte is alive. You did everything you could for her, and the Light willing, she will live. It was Moghedien who did this to her, not you. A soldier who takes blame for comrades who fall in battle is a fool. You and I are soldiers in a battle, but you are not a fool, so stop behaving like one.”

Nynaeve did look at her then, a scowl that lasted only a moment before she turned her face completely away. “You don’t understand.” Her voice sank almost to a whisper. “She ... *was* ... one of the Heroes bound to the Wheel of Time, destined to be born again and again to make legends. She wasn’t born this time, Elayne. She was ripped out of *Tel’aran’rhiod* as she stood. Is she still bound to the Wheel? Or has she been ripped away from that, too? Ripped away from what her own courage earned her, because I was so proud, so man-stubborn stupid, that I made her hunt for Moghedien?”

Elayne had hoped that those questions had not occurred to Nynaeve yet, would not until she had had a little time to recover first. “Do you know how badly Moghedien was hurt? Maybe she is dead.”

“I hope not,” the other woman almost snarled. “I want to make her pay ...” She took a deep breath, but instead of invigorating her, it seemed to make her sag. “I would not count on her dying. Birgitte’s shot missed her heart. A wonder she managed to hit the woman at all, staggering as she was. I could not have stood up if I were thrown that far, hard enough to bounce like that. I couldn’t even stand up after what Moghedien did to me. No, she is alive, and we had best believe that she can have her wound Healed and be after us by morning.”

“She would still need time to rest, Nynaeve. You know that. Can she even know where we are?”

“It was her who sank the ferry and killed Ronelle and Katsui. She knows exactly where we are. She could send Darkfriends after us. The Black Ajah. And then she herself.”

“Nynaeve, it will take her days to regain strength after a wound like that, even if she does find some Black sister to Heal her, or one of the other Forsaken.”

“I am so tired, Elayne,” Nynaeve sighed. “Tired of being afraid of who might be around the next corner. Tired of being afraid of Moghedien. I cannot seem to think of what to do next.”

“You need to sleep,” Elayne said firmly. “Without the ring. Give it to me.” The other woman hesitated, but Elayne merely waited with her hand outstretched until Nynaeve fished the flecked stone ring from the cord around her neck. Stuffing it into her pouch, Elayne went on. “Now you lie down here, and I will watch Birgitte.”

Nynaeve stared at the woman stretched out on the other bed for a moment, then shook her head. "I can't sleep. I ... need to be alone. To walk." Getting to her feet as stiffly as if she really had been beaten, she took her dark cloak from its peg and swung it over her shift. At the door she paused. "If she wants to kill me," she said bleakly, "I do not know that I could make myself stop her." She went into the night barefoot and sad-faced.

Elayne hesitated, unsure which woman needed her more, before settling back where she sat. Nothing she said could make things better for Nynaeve, but she had faith in the woman's resilience. Time alone to work it all over in her mind, and she would see that blame lay at Moghedien's door, not hers. She had to.

## CHAPTER 71: A New Name



For a long time Elayne sat there, watching Birgitte sleep. It did seem to be sleep. Once she stirred, muttering in a desperate voice, "Wait for me, Gaidal. Wait. I'm coming, Gaidal. Wait for ..." Words trailed off into slow breath again. Was it stronger? The woman still looked deathly ill. Better than she had, but pale and drawn.

After perhaps an hour, Nynaeve returned, her feet dirty. Fresh tears shone on her cheeks. "I could not stay away," she said, hanging her cloak back on its peg. "You sleep. I will watch her. I have to watch her."

Elayne rose slowly, smoothing her skirts. Perhaps watching over Birgitte for a time would help Nynaeve work matters out. "I don't feel like sleeping yet, either." She was exhausted, but not sleepy any longer. "I think I will stroll outside myself." Nynaeve only nodded as she took Elayne's place on the bed, her dusty feet dangling over the side, her eyes fastened to Birgitte.

To Elayne's surprise, Ragan and Juilin were not asleep, either. They had taken chairs by the flickering remains of the fire, down in the darkened common room of the inn, and were smoking their long-stemmed pipes. Ragan had tucked his shirt in, and Juilin had donned his coat, though no shirt, and turned the cuffs back. She took a look around before joining them. No-one stirred in the inn.

Neither man said anything while she settled her skirts; then Juilin looked at Ragan, who nodded and the thief-catcher took something from the ground and held it out to her. "I found it where she was lying," the dark man said. "As if it had dropped from her hand."

Elayne took the silver arrow slowly. Even the fletching feathers appeared to be silver. "Distinctive," Ragan said conversationally around his pipe. "And added to the braid ... Every story mentions the braid for some reason."

"I do not care about stories," Juilin put in. He sounded no more agitated than Ragan. But then, it took a great deal to agitate either one of them. "Is it her? Bad enough if it isn't, a woman appearing naked out of nothing like that, but ... What have you gotten us into, you and N ... Nana?" He was troubled; Juilin did not make mistakes, and his tongue *never* slipped. Ragan merely bubbled at his pipe, waiting.

Elayne turned the arrow in her hands, pretending to study it. "She is a friend," she said finally. Until—unless—Birgitte released her, her promise held. "She is not Aes Sedai, but she has been helping us." They looked at her, waiting for her to say more. "Why didn't you give this to Nynaeve?"

One of those glances passed between them—men seemed to carry on entire conversations through glances, around women at least—saying as clearly as spoken words what they thought of her keeping secrets. Especially when they all but knew for certain already. But she had given her word. "She seemed upset," Juilin said, sucking at his pipe judiciously, and Ragan took his from between his teeth to gesture at the heavens.

"Upset? Peace! She came out in her shift, looking lost, and when I asked if I could fetch her cloak, she didn't snap my head off. She cried on my shoulder," He plucked at his linen shirt, looking bewildered. "My lady, she *apologized* for every cross word she has ever said to me, which is very nearly every other word out of her mouth. Said she ought to be switched, or maybe that she had been; she was incoherent half the time. She said she was a coward, and a stubborn fool. Peace find her. I don't know what is the matter with her, but she isn't herself by a mile."

"I knew a woman who behaved like this, once," Juilin said, peering into the fire. "She woke to find a burglar in her bedchamber and stabbed the man through the heart. Only, when she lit a lamp, it was her husband. His boat had come back to the docks early. She walked around like Nynaeve for half a month." His mouth tightened. "Then she hanged herself."

"Nynaeve would never do that," Elayne said firmly.

He nodded agreement. "There are proven ways to deal with a man who is in such a state, but I doubt Nynaeve will be getting drunk or getting—" He cleared his throat abruptly and looked away, as if she was twelve and could not infer his meaning. "I would sooner dandle a fangfish, myself," the

thief-catcher muttered, but not as roughly as he would have yesterday. He was as concerned as Ragan, though less willing to admit it.

"I will do what I can," she assured them, turning the arrow again. They were good men, and she did not like lying to them, or hiding things from them. Not unless it was absolutely necessary, anyway. Nynaeve claimed that you had to manage men for their own good, but there was such a thing as taking it too far. It was not right to lead a man into dangers he knew nothing of.

So she told them. About *Tel'aran rhiod* and about Moghedien. Not quite everything, of course. Some events had been too shaming for her to want to think of them. Her promise held her concerning Birgitte's identity, and there was certainly no need to go into detail about what Moghedien had done to Nynaeve. It made explaining this night's happenings a little difficult, yet she managed. She did tell them everything she thought they should know, enough to make them aware for the first time what they were really up against. Not just the Black Ajah but the Forsaken, and one of them very likely hunting Nynaeve. And she made it quite plain that they would be hunting Moghedien as well, and that anyone close to them was in danger of being caught between hunter and prey either way.

"Now that you know," she finished, "the choice to stay or go is yours." She left it at that.

"Rand al'Thor will have my guts for fish bait if I don't hand you back to him in the same health he last saw you," Juilin said dryly.

Elayne lifted her chin. "I will not have you stay for Rand al'Thor, Juilin." Hand her back! Indeed! "You will stay only if you want to. And I do not release you—or you, Ragan!"—he had grinned at the thief-catcher's comment—"from your promise to do as you are told. You will follow me, and Nynaeve of course, knowing full well the enemies we face, or you may pack your belongings and ride Skulker where you wish. I will give him to you."

Juilin sat up straight as a post, his dark face going darker. "I have never abandoned a woman in danger in my life." He pointed his pipestem at her like a weapon. "You send me away, and I will be on your heels like a soarer on a stern-chase."

Not exactly what she wanted, but it would do. "Very well, then." Rising, she held herself erect, the silver arrow at her side, and kept her slightly frosty manner. She thought they had finally realized who was in charge. "Morning is not far off." Had Rand actually had the nerve to tell Juilin to "hand her back"? Ragan would just have to suffer along with the other man for a time, and it served him right for that grin. "You will put out this fire and go to sleep. Now. You'll be no good at all tomorrow without sleep."

Her good mood lasted until she was back inside her room. Nynaeve sat on the very edge of the bed, holding herself up with both hands, eyes trying to drift shut as she watched Birgitte. Her feet were still dirty.

Elayne put Birgitte's arrow into one of their packs. Luckily, the other woman never so much as glanced at her. She did not think the sight of the silver arrow was what Nynaeve needed right at that moment. But what was? Certainly not what Juilin had implied. Were men truly so simple?

"Nynaeve, it is past time for you to wash your feet and go to sleep."

Nynaeve swayed in her direction, blinking sleepily. "Feet? What? I must watch her."

It would have to be one step at a time. "Your feet, Nynaeve. They are dirty. Wash them." Frowning, Nynaeve peered down at her dusty feet, then nodded. She spilled water tipping the big white pitcher over the washbasin, and sloshed more out before she was washed and ready to towel dry, but even then she resumed her seat. "I must watch. In case ... In case ... She cried out once. For Gaidal."

Elayne pressed her back on the mattress. "You need sleep, Nynaeve. You can't keep your eyes open."

"I can," Nynaeve muttered sullenly, trying to sit up against Elayne's pressure on her shoulders. "I must watch her, Elayne. I must."

Nynaeve made the two men downstairs look sensible and biddable. Sympathy and common sense had surely made no impression. That left a swift kick. "I have had enough of this sulking and self-pity, Nynaeve," she said firmly. "You are going to sleep now, and in the morning you are not going to say one word about what a miserable wretch you are. If you cannot behave like the clearheaded woman you are, I shall turn you over my knee until you remember you are not a little girl anymore. Now go to sleep!"

Nynaeve's eyes widened indignantly—at least she did not look on the point of tears—but Elayne slid them shut with her fingers. They closed easily, and despite softly murmured protests, the deep slow breath of sleep followed quickly.

Elayne patted Nynaeve's shoulder before straightening. She hoped it was a peaceful sleep, with dreams of Lan, but any sort of sleep was better for her now than none. Fighting a yawn, she bent to check Birgitte. She could not tell whether the woman's colour or breathing was any better. There was nothing to do but wait and hope.

The lamps did not seem to be bothering either of the women, so she left them alight and sat on the floor between the beds. They should help keep her awake. Not that she knew why she should remain awake, really. She had done what she could as much as Nynaeve had. Unthinkingly she leaned back against the front wall, and her chin sank slowly to her chest.

The dream was a pleasant one, if odd. Rand knelt before her, and she put a hand on his head and bonded him as her Warder. One of her Warders; she would *have* to choose Green now, with Birgitte. There were other women there, faces changing between one glance and the next. Nynaeve, Min, Moiraine, Aviendha, Berelain, Morrigan, Merile, Raine, Saeri, Imoen, Avaleen, Amathera, Liandrin, others she did not know. Whoever they were, she knew that she had to share him with them, because in the dream she was certain that that was what Min had viewed. She was not sure how she felt about that—some of those faces she wanted to claw to shreds—but if it was fated by the Pattern, it would have to be. Yet she would have one thing of him the others could never have, the bond between Warder and Aes Sedai.

“Where is this place?” Berelain said, raven-haired and so beautiful that Elayne wanted to bare her teeth. The woman wore a low-cut red dress; she always dressed revealingly. “Wake up. This is not *Tel'aran'rhiad*.”

Elayne started awake to find Birgitte leaning over the side of the bed, gripping her arm weakly. Her face was too pale, and damp with sweat as if a fever had broken, but her blue eyes were sharp and intent on Elayne's face.

“This is not *Tel'aran'rhiad*.” It was not a question, but Elayne nodded, and Birgitte sank back with a long sigh. “I remember everything,” she whispered. “I am here as I am, and I remember. All is changed. Gaidal is out there, somewhere, an infant, or even a young boy. But even if I find him, what will he think of a woman more than old enough to be his mother?” She scrubbed angrily at her eyes, muttering, “I do not cry. I never cry. I remember that, the Light help me. I never cry.”

Elayne got up on her knees beside the woman's bed. “You will find him, Birgitte.” She kept her voice low. Nynaeve still seemed sound asleep—a small, rasping snore rose from her regularly—but she needed rest, not to confront this all over again now. “Somehow you will. And he will love you. I know he will.”

“Do you think that is what matters? I could stand him not loving me.” Her glistening eyes gave her the lie. “He will need me, Elayne, and I will not be there. He always has more courage than is good for him; I always must supply him with caution. Worse, he will wander, searching for me, not knowing what he is looking for, not knowing why he feels incomplete. We are always together, Elayne. Two halves of a whole.” The tears welled up, flowing across her face. “Moghedien said she would make me cry forever, and she ...” Suddenly her features contorted; low ragged sobs came as if ripped from her throat.

Elayne gathered the taller woman into her arms, murmuring words of comfort she knew were useless. How would she feel if Rand were taken away from her? The thought was nearly enough to make her put her head down atop Birgitte's and join her weeping.

She was not sure how long it took Birgitte to cry herself out, but eventually she pushed Elayne away and settled back, wiping her cheeks with her fingers. “I have never done that except as a small child. Never.” Twisting her neck, she frowned at Nynaeve, still asleep on the other bed. “Did Moghedien hurt her badly? I have not seen anyone trussed like that since the Tourag took Mareesh.” Elayne must have looked confused, because she added, “In another Age. Is she hurt?”

“Not badly. Her spirit, mainly. What you did allowed her to escape, but only after ...” Elayne could not make herself say it. Too many wounds were too fresh. “She blames herself. She thinks that ... everything ... is her fault, for asking you to help.”

“If she had not asked me, Moghedien would be teaching her to beg right now. She has as little caution as Gaidal.” Birgitte's dry tone sounded odd with her wet cheeks. “She did not drag me into

this by my hair. If she claims responsibility for the consequences, then she claims responsibility for my actions.” If anything, she sounded angry. “I am a free woman, and I made my own choices. She did not decide for me.”

“I must say you are taking this better than ... I would.” She could not say “better than Nynaeve”. That was true, but the other was as well.

“I always say, if you must mount the gallows, give a jest to the crowd, a coin to the hangman, and make the drop with a smile on your lips.” Birgitte’s smile was grim. “Moghedien sprang the trap, but my neck is not yet snapped. Perhaps I will surprise her before it is done.” The smile faded into a frown as she studied Elayne. “I can ... feel you. I think I could close my eyes and point to you a mile away.”

Elayne took a very deep breath. “I bonded you as a Warder,” she said in a rush. “You were dying, and Healing did no good, and ...” The woman was looking at her. Not frowning anymore, but her eyes were disconcertingly sharp. “There was no other choice, Birgitte. You would have died, else.”

“A Warder,” Birgitte said slowly. “I think I remember hearing a tale of a female Warder, but it was in a life so long ago that I cannot remember more than that.”

It was time for another deep breath, and this time she had to force the words. “There is something you should know. You will discover it sooner or later, and I’ve decided not to keep things from people who have a right to know, not unless I absolutely must.” A third breath. “I am not Aes Sedai. I am only Accepted.”

For a long moment, the golden-braided woman stared up at her, then slowly shook her head. “An Accepted. In the Trolloc Wars, I knew an Accepted who bonded a fellow. Barashelle was due to be tested the next day for raising to full Aes Sedai, and certain to be given the shawl, but she was afraid that a woman testing that same day would take him. In the Trolloc Wars, the Tower tried to raise women as quickly as possible, from necessity.”

“What happened?” Elayne could not stop herself from asking. Barashelle? That name sounded familiar.

Lacing her fingers over the blanket atop her bosom, Birgitte shifted her head on the pillow and put on a look of mock sympathy. “Needless to say, she was not allowed to take the tests once it was discovered. Necessity did not outweigh such an offense. They made her pass the poor fellow’s bond to another, and to teach her patience, put her into the kitchens among the scullions and spit-girls. I heard that she stayed there three years, and when she did receive her shawl, the Amyrlin Seat herself chose her Warder, a leather-faced, stone-stubborn man named Anselan. I saw them a few years after, and I could not tell which of them gave the commands. I do not think Barashelle was certain either.”

“Not pleasant,” Elayne muttered. Three years in the ... Wait. Barashelle and *Anselan*? It could not be the same pair; that story said nothing about Barashelle being Aes Sedai. But she had read two versions and heard Thom tell another, and all had Barashelle doing some long, arduous service to earn Anselan’s love. Two thousand years could change a great deal in a story.

“Not pleasant,” Birgitte agreed, and suddenly her eyes were much too large and innocent in her pale face. “I suppose, since you wish me to keep your dreadful secret, you will not ride me as hard as some Aes Sedai ride their Warders. It would not do to push me to tell just to escape you.”

Elayne’s chin came up instinctively. “That sounds very like a threat. I do not take well to threats, from you or anyone else. If you think—”

The reclining woman caught her arm and cut her off apologetically; her grip was noticeably stronger. “Please. I did not intend it that way. Gaidal claims I have a sense of humour like a rock tossed into a shoja-circle.” A cloud swept across her face at Gaidal’s name, and was gone. “You saved my life, Elayne. I will keep your secret and serve you as Warder. And be your friend, if you will have me.”

“I will be proud to have you for friend.” Shoja-circle? She would ask another time. Birgitte might be stronger, but she needed rest, not questions. “And for Warder.” It seemed that she really was going to choose the Green Ajah; aside from everything else, that was the only way she could bond Rand. The dream was still clear in her mind, and she intended to convince him to accept it one way or another. “Perhaps you could try to ... moderate ... your sense of humour?”

“I will try.” Birgitte sounded as if she were saying she would try to pick up a mountain. “But if I am to be your Warder, even in secret, then I will be Warder to you. You can barely hold your eyes open. It is time for you to sleep.” Elayne’s eyebrows and chin shot up together, but the woman gave

her no opportunity to speak. "Among many other things, it is a Warder's place to tell his—her—Aes Sedai when she pushes herself too hard. Also to provide a dose of caution when she thinks she can walk into the Pit of Doom. And to keep her alive so she can do what she must. I will do these things for you. Never fear for your back when I am near, Elayne."

She did need sleep, she supposed, but Birgitte needed it more. Elayne dimmed the lamps and got the woman settled and asleep, though not until Birgitte had seen her put a pillow and blankets on the floor between the beds for herself. There was some slight argument over who would sleep on the floor, but Birgitte was still weak enough that Elayne had no trouble making her stay in the bed. Well, not very much anyway. At least Nynaeve's soft snore never broke.

She herself did not go to sleep immediately, whatever she had told Birgitte. The woman could not put her nose outside the room until she had something to wear, and she was taller than Elayne or Nynaeve. Sitting down between the beds, Elayne began letting out the hem on her dark grey silk riding dress. There would hardly be time in the morning for more than a quick fitting and stitching the new hem. Sleep overtook her with her ripping no more than half done.

She had the dream of bonding Rand again, more than once. Sometimes he knelt voluntarily, and sometimes she had to do what she had done with Birgitte, even sneaking into his bedchamber while he slept. Birgitte was one of the other women now. Elayne did not mind that too much. Not her, or Min, or Saeri, or Aviendha, or Nynaeve, though she could not imagine what Lan would say to that last. Others, though ... She had just ordered Birgitte, in a Warder's colour-shifting cloak, to drag Berelain and Elaida to the kitchens for three years, when suddenly the two women began pummelling her. She awakened to find Nynaeve trampling her to reach Birgitte and check on the woman. The grey light just before dawn showed in the small windows.

Birgitte woke claiming she was as strong as ever, and ravenous besides. Elayne was not certain whether Nynaeve had finished her bout of self-blame. She did not wring her hands or speak of it, but while Elayne washed her face and hands, and explained about their destination, Nynaeve hastily peeled and cored red pears and yellow apples, sliced cheese, and handed it all to Birgitte on a plate with a cup of watered wine with honey and spices. She would have fed the woman had Birgitte let her. Nynaeve washed Birgitte's hair in white henpepper herself, until it was as black as Elayne's—Elayne did her own, of course—donated her best stockings and shift, and looked disappointed when a pair of Elayne's slippers fit better. She insisted on helping Birgitte into the grey silk as soon as her hair had been towelled dry and braided again—the hips and bosom needed letting out, too, but that would have to wait—and even wanted to stitch the hem herself, until Elayne's incredulous stare made her retreat to her own ablutions, muttering as she scrubbed her face that she could sew as well as anyone. When she wanted to.

When they were ready to go outside at last, the first sharp golden edge of the sun was peeking above the houses beyond their window. For this little while, the day felt deceptively comfortable. There was not a cloud to be seen in the sky, and by noon the air would be hot and gritty. Down below, she could see Mendao and Rikimaru hitching the team to the wagon.

"How long can we afford to stay on the road?" Elayne asked as they left the room.

"She will not be far behind," Birgitte said. "Unlike the Aes Sedai of this Age, she can Travel."

"Then we must gather the others quickly. Nynaeve could you—"

She acquiesced with a most unlikely haste, and let herself into the other room after a perfunctory knock. Elayne stared after her in much the same way Juilin stared at Birgitte when they reached the foot of the stairs.

"You are awake. No bow, and no braid, though. Well met, total stranger," he said.

"I am still an archer, pretty man," Birgitte said firmly. "Fetch a bow, and I will outshoot you or anyone you name, a hundred gold crowns to your one."

He made a bow, a bigger one than he'd ever given her. "That's a bet I will never take. We are almost ready to leave, Elayne. I suggest speed."

"Do that," she said frostily. There was a wary look in his dark eyes as he left the inn.

"Jealous?" Birgitte said. "He has nice legs but I have never liked tall men. Add a pretty face, and they are always insufferable. Lews Therin was like that. And this new incarnation is going to be much the same, from what I saw. I pity the girl foolish enough to start swooning over him."

Elayne made a point of surveying the common room. Only a few patrons were up and about as yet, though the staff could be heard working in the nearby kitchen. No-one had overheard. This time. Her point made, she looked back, only to find Birgitte's brows reaching for her hairline.

"Tell me you didn't. Oh for the Light's sake!" she strode off, shaking her head. "I'm going to have my work cut out for me with this one."

Blushing furiously, Elayne hastened after her. She was sure she had schooled her face appropriately. How—? Oh. The bond went both ways. She hadn't considered that. Birgitte would know everything she ...

"You knew him in the Age of Legends?" she choked.

"Not the way you're thinking. Sheathe the claws, kitten." Kitten! She'd certainly never heard a Warder call their Aes Sedai that! "He was much more tolerable back when he was Miles. Those were the days. The adventures we had!" Birgitte laughed heartily, and stepped out into the light of the new morning. "Must have been a foot shorter than you in that life, and boy was he eager to prove how big a deal that wasn't. Frodo had less of a chip on his shoulder, but was a bit less fun, too."

Elayne had already known on a logical level that Birgitte would have known Rand before he was Rand. She had seen the Horn sounded at Falme, after all, and heard what they'd told him there. It didn't make hearing such things any less disturbing.

"You must be careful that you are not overheard," she said, but Birgitte went right on. She hadn't liked him as Nate or Fitz or Mua'Dhib, but Naruto and Aang had been much nicer.

*As my Warder, she has to do as I say. Doesn't she?* From the evidence so far, obedience was no part of the bond. Had those Aes Sedai she had spied on made the men give oaths as well? Now that she thought of it, she believed one of them had.

Minako and Victorya had apparently been nice, too, but quicker to lift their skirts than a smart girl would be. Elayne was too busy reeling under the idea that Rand had worn skirts and had been a girl to be properly outraged by the significant look Birgitte gave her over the skirt lifting part. He couldn't have been a girl, he was just a boy, and boys could not be trusted to make decisions, so if he had been a girl, then ... The bond was hurting her head. Birgitte didn't stop her reminiscing until they came to the wagon, and the waiting Shienarans.

"Who is this?" Mendaو asked.

Elayne hesitated. Birgitte's real name was so well known. Using it would be like putting up a sign for Moghedien to follow. Thankfully, Birgitte spoke before she had to. "I am a friend, if you'll have me, Borderlander. Call me Maerion; I was called that, once. So I'll be called it again, too." She laughed. "We always are."

## CHAPTER 72: Dark Delivery



Liandrin stared in awe at the hole in the air, bordered by silvery lines. She was so stunned that she forgot to be afraid as tentacles of Air pushed her through that hole, taking her from the manor in Amador to somewhere else entirely, all in a single step. She had read about something that could do that: Travelling. She could even see the weaves. Her eyes darted as she tried to record every detail. Once she got free of this shield, she would have power such as no woman had had for three thousand years. Moghedien gave her a shove and stepped through behind her. The gateway contracted into a single line, then shrank into nothingness. They were alone, Chesmal and Asne not having been trusted to see the wonder that Liandrin had seen. A knife, a club, a turned back. There had to be something!

"I am the loyal dog, Great Mistress," she said in her most servile voice.

Moghedien smirked. "Not yet. But you soon will be."

They were in a richly appointed suite, one with cushioned chairs arranged around a small circular table, and several closed doors. The shuttered windows ruled out the more southern nations, and the opulent style was uncommon in the Borderlands. Red and white predominated. "Caemlyn?" she guessed. Moghedien did not answer, but Liandrin felt sure it was. Elayne's home. She would return here eventually; and not expect to find her waiting in ambush. Despite everything, imagining killing her, imagining the look on that snooty little chit's face as she looked up at Liandrin while breathing her last, brought a smile to her lips.

The Chosen began to pace. "I told him when and where. I told him what I was bringing. He makes me wait, the—" She hissed in vexation. "But of course he does. They all think they can look down on me. Let them. It just makes them easier to eliminate."

She had said she was bringing her to Rahvin. A male Chosen. Liandrin hated the idea of any man wielding power over her—or any woman, for that matter, but it was even worse if it was a wretched man. Still, perhaps if she told him what Moghedien was planning, he might remove this shield. Liandrin could pretend to serve, for a little while.

So she tried to put a pleasant smile on her face when the door finally opened and a stranger stepped in. He was a tall fellow, and very dark by Andoran standards. Wings of white marked his otherwise black hair. Muscular. She couldn't comment on his face, never having found any man to be less than repellent, but she definitely didn't like the way he smiled back at her.

"It is unlike you to bring me gifts, Moghedien. I thought, for a moment, that she would be plain. But then I reminded myself that you would never have the nerve to insult me," Rahvin said in a deep, self-satisfied voice. She hated the sound of it.

So did Moghedien, though she tried to hide it. "A favour now for a favour later. And as an added bonus, a fitting punishment for a disobedient girl."

Rahvin grunted. "I am not Semirhage. Were she less pretty, I would turn her away. But as it happens, I recently lost some of my pets and am in need of replacements. This one will do nicely."

Liandrin's heart was hammering, and not from excitement. The way the dark man was looking at her made her skin crawl. "Moghedien, she spoke aloud before. She plans to eliminate you, Great Master!" she blurted.

The two Chosen exchanged wary looks, but then, to her shock, burst out laughing. "Of course, she does," Rahvin said. "Do you take me for as big a fool as you? There can be only one Nae'blis."

"I am past tired of Liandrin here," said Moghedien as she spun the weaves to open that gateway again. "I have matters of my own to attend to. Enjoy your ... games, Rahvin."

He watched her leave, composed but with an air of readiness. "I always do," he said when the gateway closed behind her. "But not just the kind you mean." Turning back to Liandrin, he let his gaze travel rudely up and down her body. "Though it is, I admit, my favourite one."

She backed away. "I know much of what Moghedien has been doing, yes? And I am the Aes Sedai. I would be useful."

"You will be. And you will tell me everything you know. But only afterwards. You are going in the right direction, by the way," he said, with a smugness no man should show an Aes Sedai.

Liandrin's back touched wood. The other door. She didn't want to know what lay beyond, yet the door opened of its own accord. It was there that the bed lurked, comfy, wide, horrifying. "No!"

Rahvin smiled. "I do love hearing that word become yes. Say it again."

There being no other direction to run, she fled into the room. "No!"

He chuckled as he unbuttoned his coat. Invisible cords grabbed Liandrin and flung her to the bed. She couldn't get up. She couldn't channel. And when he took hold of the front of her bodice and ripped at it, she couldn't stop her breasts from spilling free. He took a pink nipple between his dark fingers and squeezed as though testing fruit at the market. "Not bad. I've had better, but you will make an interesting plaything. Until I bore of you."

"Do not touch me, you great pig, you!"

He was as surprised as her, but only laughed. "I will leave you that defiance, for a little while. It will make turning you into my devoted cocksleeve all the more satisfying." He ripped at the rest of her clothes then, stripping her to her skin and pawing at all he exposed. His touch left nothing but disgust in its wake. Liandrin fought against the bonds that held her but it was useless. She could no more stop him than a mouse could stop a lion.

It was when he pulled down his breeches and revealed the horribly large shaft that rose from his crotch that the hateful tears began to trickle from her eyes. "Please. For this, there is no need, yes? I have said I will serve."

He climbed on top of her, his strength allowing him to push her legs apart despite her best efforts to resist. "Need? I need nothing, least of all you, slut. You are more pleasant than my hand, that is all." By such a hand around her throat did he hold her down. She felt his thing touch her for the first time, and howled in outrage. That just made his black eyes twinkle with malice. They stared right into hers as he pushed forwards, invading her body. She wasn't sure if it was the act itself, or what he saw in her as he did it that pleased him so, she just knew she hated the look on his face. She hated him.

"But you'll take it anyway. You have no choice," he said. The One Power did not allow you to read someone's mind. She knew that. She refused to fear that he had.

When he pulled back and saw the proof of her virginity, Rahvin huffed a surprised laugh. "Are all the so-called Aes Sedai of this Age truly such misandrist prudes? I suppose that adds a bit of spice to it." His dark eyes suddenly bored into hers. "Get on your hands and knees."

Liandrin wasn't going to, yet she did, bouncing from her back to a different position, her ass pointed towards him. "W-what did you—Ahh!"

Rahvin rammed into her once more, the end of his manhood striking against her insides. "You love it, don't you?"

"I do n—Uhh ..." Her head felt strange, her thoughts sluggish.

"Tell me you love it," he insisted as he fucked her. She did not, but ... there was something wrong. She felt pleasure instead of pain, satisfaction instead of disgust. It wasn't real, it was ... A hard hand cracked across her bottom, but did not bring the pain and outrage it should have. "Tell me what a good slut you are."

"I am the good slut, Great Master," she heard herself say, while inside she howled in objection. He had done it with disgusting *saidin*, of course, but she knew the weave even so. It was her special trick, after all. Compulsion. He would make her his unthinking puppet if she let him. Liandrin set herself to resist it, but he was so strong.

"Tell me how much you love having my big dark cock in you. You need it, don't you? It has finally shown you what a whore you've always been. You exist only to be a sheathe for my cock."

Lies. Lies and lies on lies. But something was stirring in Liandrin, an unnatural heat. She could feel her own wetness trickling down her thighs. She tossed her head in denial, loose golden strands flying, but she could not stop what was coming. Or rather, who was coming.

Her mind shattered into hot bright shards. Rahvin kept right on pounding her.

\* \* \*

Rahvin gripped his latest pet by her honeyed hair as he rode her. She'd offered more resistance than some, but nowhere near enough. They never did anymore. Back before he had become Rahvin, he'd

had to use other means to lure them into his bed. He'd had to work for it, and then deal with the annoyance of their tears when he tired of them. The change had been welcome at first, but sometimes he found himself bored with it all. The mindless sluts all blended together after a while. Except for Morgase, and her only because her "disappearance" was causing him so much trouble with these backwards Andorans.

Liandrin was making the sounds women made now, that intriguing resistance she'd shown already fading. It was good, really. He'd always liked the easy life, even if it was a bit dull at times. Though strong in the Power, Ared Mosinel had never gone out of his way in search of a third name. If the Shadow hadn't proven stronger during the war, he probably wouldn't even have turned. He was glad that doing so had freed him of the need to pretend with these sluts. They were more effort than they were worth.

Liandrin certainly was, kneeling there and taking anything he wanted to give her, squealing each time he spanked her ass. So why was he the one doing the work?

Rahvin pulled out, and sat on the edge of the bed. He touched the web of Compulsion he'd woven around her head. "Come here and kneel in front of me." A touch of defiance returned to her slack face, but she obeyed as she must. "Suck it," he commanded.

Liandrin did as she was told, though her technique was terrible. Her little fingers could not encircle his girth, and her rosebud mouth had to stretch wide to let him in. She only managed the tip, which was far from satisfying, but he let her work for a while. Breaking women like this was more satisfying than a simple carnal pleasure could ever be. Watching her golden-haired head bob on his cock, hearing the slurping noises she made, and watching the slime they made leak over her chin made him smile.

"Look at me." Brown eyes stared up at him. She was nowhere near so pretty with her face distorted like that, but he liked it better this way. "Now stroke it with your hand. Fast. I am going to come in your mouth, little Liandrin. And you are going to swallow every drop, and thank me for it." There was still a cinder of defiance in those eyes, and tears leaked from them, but her hand became busy on his shaft.

He grabbed her by her hair when he felt it begin, and held the pale little bitch in place as he dumped his come into her. He was breathing heavy by the time it was done, and his come was all over her chin and breasts.

Rahvin slapped her across the face. It was a light blow, but Liandrin gasped and cowered. "Your technique is terrible. You will have to practice on some of the guards. By this time tomorrow, I want you to have sucked ten of them off. If your performance hasn't improved the next time I use you ... well. The whores you are replacing did not retire. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Great Master," Liandrin whispered as she knelt there with her head lowered, soiled and beaten, hot tears of fury and grief trickling down her stained face. Rahvin nodded, and turned his back on her. That was as it should be.

## CHAPTER 73: *The Craft of Kin Tovere*



One hand on his sword hilt, the other holding the green-and-white tasselled length of Seanchan spear, Rand ignored the others on the sparsely treed hilltop for the moment while he studied the three camps spread out below in the midmorning sun. Three distinct camps, and that was the rub. They were all the Cairhienin and Tairen forces at his disposal. Every man else who could use sword or spear was penned in the city, or the Light alone knew where.

The Aiel had rounded up refugees in hordes between the Jangai Pass and here, and a few had even straggled in on their own, lured by rumours that these Aiel at least were not killing everyone in sight, or else too dispirited to care so long as they had a meal before dying. Too many thought they would die, at the hands of the Aiel or the Dragon Reborn, or in the Last Battle, which they seemed to think was shaping up for any day now. A goodly number all together, but farmers and craftsmen and shopkeepers for the most part. Some knew how to use bow or sling to fetch a rabbit, but there was not a soldier in the lot and no time to teach them. The city of Cairhien itself lay little more than five miles to the west, some of the fabled “topless towers of Cairhien” visible above the intervening forest. The city sprawled across hills hard by the River Alguanya, encircled by Couladin’s Shaido and those who had joined him.

One haphazard set of tents and cookfires in the long shallow valley below Rand held some eight hundred Tairens, armoured men. Nearly half were Defenders of the Stone in burnished breastplates and rimmed helmets, their plump coatsleeves striped black and gold. The rest were levies from a double handful of lords whose banners and pennants made a circle in the camp’s centre around the silver Crescent-and-Stars of the High Lord Weiramon. Guards stood thickly along their picket lines as if they expected a raid against the horses any minute.

Three hundred paces away, the second camp guarded their horses as tightly. The animals were a mixed lot, few approaching the fine arch-necked stock of Tear, and some former plough and cart horses were tied along those ropes or Rand missed his guess. The Cairhienin numbered perhaps a hundred more than the Tairens, but their tents were fewer and most often patched, and their banners and *con* represented some seventy-odd lords. Few Cairhienin nobles still had many retainers, and the army had broken apart early in the civil war.

The last gathering lay another five hundred paces along, full of Cairhienin for the most part, yet well and truly separated from the others by more than distance. Larger than the other pair combined, this camp held few tents or horses. It displayed no banners, and only the officers wore *con*, the small pennants on their backs in solid colours meant to pick them out for their men rather than signify a House. Infantry might be necessary, but rare was the lord of Tear or Cairhien, either one, who would admit it. Certainly none would agree to actually lead such. It was the most orderly of the camps, though, the cookfires in neat rows, the long pikes stacked upright where they could be seized in a moment and clusters of archers or crossbowmen dotted along the lines. According to Lan, discipline kept men alive in battle, but infantry were more likely to know it and believe than cavalry.

The three groups were supposedly together, under the same command—the High Lord Weiramon had brought them in from the south late the day before—but the two camps of horsemen watched each other nearly as warily as they did the Aiel on the surrounding hills, the Tairens with a dose of contempt that the Cairhienin echoed in ignoring the third, which in turn eyed the others sullenly. Rand’s followers, his allies, and as ready to fight each other as anyone else.

Still pretending to study the camps, Rand examined Weiramon, helmetless and iron-spined straight nearby. Two younger men, minor Tairen lords, hung at the High Lord’s heels, dark beards trimmed and oiled in perfect imitation of Weiramon’s except that his was streaked with grey, and their breastplates, worn over brightly striped coats, bore goldwork only a touch less ornate than his. Aloof, apart from everyone else on the hilltop yet close to Rand, they could have been waiting for some martial ceremony at a royal court, except for the sweat rolling down their faces. They ignored that as well, though.

The High Lord's sigil lacked only a few stars to duplicate Lanfear's, but the long-nosed fellow was not her in disguise, with his mainly grey hair oiled like his beard and combed in a vain attempt to hide its thinness. He had been coming north with reinforcements from Tear when he heard that Aiel were attacking the city of Cairhien itself. Instead of turning back or sitting still, he continued north as hard as his horses could stand, gathering what forces he found along the way.

That was the good news of Weiramon. The bad was that he had fully expected to dispel the Shaido around Cairhien with what he had brought. He still did. And he was none too happy that Rand would not let him be about it or that he was surrounded by Aiel. One Aiel was no different from another to Weiramon. To the others, too, for that matter. One of the young lords pointedly sniffed a scented silk handkerchief whenever he looked at an Aiel. Rand wondered how long the fellow would survive. And what Rand would have to do about it when he died.

Weiramon noticed Rand watching, and cleared his throat. "My Lord Dragon," he began in a gravelly bark, "one good charge will scatter them like quail." He slapped his gauntlets against his palm loudly. "Foot never stands up to horse. I will send in the Cairhienin to flush them, then follow with my—"

Rand cut him off. Could the man count at all? Did the number of Aiel he could see here give him no clue to how many might be around the city? It did not matter. Rand had heard as much of this as he could stomach. "You are certain of the news you bring from Tear?"

Weiramon blinked. "News, my Lord Dragon? What—? Oh, that. Burn my soul, there's nothing to that. Illianer pirates often try to raid along the coast." They were more than trying, by what the man had said when he arrived.

"And the attacks on the Plains of Maredo? Do they often do that, as well?"

"Why, burn my soul, those are just brigands." It was more statement of fact than protest. "Perhaps not Illianers at all, but certainly not soldiers. The jumble those Illianers make of things, who can say whether queen or Assemblage or Council of Nine has the whiphand on any given day, yet if they do decide to move, it will be armies striking at Tear under the Golden Bees, not raiders burning merchants' wagons and border farms. You can mark me on that."

"If you wish it," Rand replied, as politely as he could. Whatever power the Assemblage, or the Council of Nine, or Mattia Stepaneos den Balgar had, it was what Sammael chose to leave them. But relatively few knew that the Forsaken were loose already. Some who should know refused to believe, or ignored it—as if that would make the Forsaken go away—or seemed to think that if it had to happen, it would be in some vague and preferably distant future. There was no point in trying to convince Weiramon, whichever group he belonged in. The man's belief or disbelief changed nothing.

The High Lord scowled at the hollow between the hills. More specifically, at the two Cairhienin camps. "With no proper rule here as yet, who can say what riffraff have drifted south?" Grimacing, he slapped his gauntlets even harder before turning back to Rand. "Well, we will bring them to heel soon enough for you, my Lord Dragon. If you will only give the order, I can drive ..."

Rand brushed past him, not listening, though Weiramon followed, still asking authority to attack, the other two trailing him like heelhounds. The man was a stone-blind fool.

They were not alone, of course. The hilltop was crowded, really. Sulin had a hundred *Far Dareis Mai* arrayed around the peak, for one thing, every last one looking even more ready to don her veil than Aiel usually did. It was not only the nearness of the Shaido that had Sulin on edge. In mockery of Rand's contempt for the suspicions in the camps below, Enaila, Branwen and Linsay were never far from Weiramon and his lordlings, and the closer they stood to Rand, the more the three Maidens looked about to don veils.

Rand had brought Uno and Izana with him as well, armed and armoured, arrayed to left and right. It was not so much that he needed their protection, as that he wanted to present as multi-national a front as possible when meeting with the Tairens and Cairhienin. If they saw him as an Aiel chief, it would only make things harder.

Not far off, Aviendha stood talking with a dozen or more Wise Ones, shawls looped over their elbows, all but she decked in bracelets and necklaces. Surprisingly, it was a bony white-haired woman, even older than Bair, who seemed to be taking the lead. Rand would have expected Amys or Bair, but even they shut up as soon as Sorilea spoke. Melaine was with Bael, halfway between the other Wise Ones and the other clan chiefs. She kept adjusting the coat of Bael's *cadin'sor* as if he did not know how to dress himself, and he had the patient look of a man reminding himself of all the

reasons he had married. It might be personal, but Rand suspected the Wise Ones were trying to influence the chiefs again. If that was the case, he would learn the particulars soon enough.

It was Aviendha who held Rand's eye, though. She smiled at him briefly before returning to listening to Sorilea. A friendly smile, but no more. That was something, he supposed. She had not lashed out at him once since what had happened between them; the occasional acid comment, sure, but none of the rage she'd shown before. Except the one time he had brought up marriage again; then she had scorched his ears so thoroughly that he had left it alone thereafter. But friendly was as far as it went, though she was sometimes careless now about undressing in front of him at night. She still insisted on sleeping no more than three paces from him.

The Maidens, at any rate, seemed sure that there were a lot fewer than three paces between their blankets, and he kept expecting that certainty to spread, but so far it had not. All in all, he was tenser than ever when he as much as looked at Aviendha, but she seemed more relaxed than he had ever seen her. Somehow or other, that seemed the opposite of how it should be. It all seemed topsy-turvy with her.

Sighing, he walked on, still not listening to Weiramon. One day he was going to understand women. When he had the time to apply to it. He suspected a lifetime would not be enough, though.

The clan chiefs had their own gathering, of sept chiefs and representatives from the societies. Rand recognized some of them. Dark Heirn, chief of the Jindo Taardad, and Mangin, who gave him a companionable nod and the Tairens a contemptuous grimace. Spear-slender Juranaï, leader of *Aethan Dor*, the Red Shields, on this expedition despite a few streaks of white in his pale brown hair, and Roidan, thick-shouldered and grey, who led *Sha'mad Conde*, the Thunder Walkers. Those four had sometimes joined him in practicing the Aiel way of fighting without weapons since leaving the Jangai Pass.

"Do you want to go hunting today?" Mangin asked as Rand passed, and Rand looked at him in surprise.

"Hunting? This is not a good time for such ... games."

"There has not been much time for visiting the sweat tents, either," put in Jarasai, a True Blood that Rand was somewhat less fond of. He was a handsome fellow about Rand's age, but there was a resentment in him that he could never quite hide. He also tended to hint of things that were supposed to be secret.

Mangin did not, and moved to change the subject. "There is not much to give sport, but we could try catching sheep in a sack." The wry glance Mangin darted at the Tairens left little doubt what "sheep" he meant, though Weiramon and the others did not see. Or affected not to. The lordling with the perfumed handkerchief sniffed it again. Izana looked from Rand to the Aielen speculatively.

"Another time, maybe," Rand replied, shaking his head. He thought he could have been friends with any of the four, but especially Mangin, who had a sense of humour much like Mat's. If he had no time to study women, he certainly had no time for making new friends. Little time for old friends, for that matter. Mat worried him.

On the highest part of the hill, a heavy framework tower of logs thrust above the treetops, the wide platform at the top twenty spans or more above the ground. The Aiel knew nothing about working with wood on that scale, but there had been plenty among the Cairhienin refugees who did.

Moiraine was waiting at the base of the first slanting ladder with Lan, and the Accepted. Ilyena had been getting a good bit of sun; she could have passed for Aiel if not for the green dress. He scanned her face quickly, but detected nothing except tiredness. Dani looked resolved, the others defiant.

"Have you decided?" Rand asked, stopping. Weiramon fell silent at last.

Dani hesitated, but Rand noted that she did not look at Moiraine before nodding. "I will do what I can."

Her reluctance bothered him. He had not asked Moiraine—she could not use the One Power as a weapon against the Shaido, not unless they threatened her or he managed to convince her they were all Darkfriends—but the Accepted had not taken the Three Oaths, and he had been sure they would see the necessity. Instead, Pedra had gone white-faced when he suggested it and had avoided him for three days until now. Theodrin and Mayam had been almost as repelled. At least Dani had agreed. Whatever made the fight shorter against the Shaido must be for the good.

Moiraine's face never changed, though he had no doubt what she thought. Those smooth Aes Sedai features, those Aes Sedai eyes, could register icy disapproval without altering a jot.

Thrusting the piece of spear through his belt, he put foot to the first rung—and Moiraine spoke. "Why are you wearing a sword again?"

The last question he would have expected. "Why shouldn't I?" he muttered, and scrambled upward. Not a good answer, but she had caught him off balance.

The half-healed wound in his side tugged as he climbed, not quite hurting but seeming about to break open just the same. He paid it no mind; it often felt that way when he exerted himself.

Rhuarc and the other clan chiefs came after him, Bael leaving Melaine last of all, but thankfully Weiramon and his two toadies remained on the ground. The High Lord knew what was to be done; he needed and wanted no more information. Feeling Moiraine's eyes following him, Rand glanced down. Not Moiraine. It was Ilyena watching him climb, her face so close to Aes Sedai that he could not have slid a hair through the difference. Moiraine had her head together with Lan's.

On the broad platform at the top, two short, sweating young men in shirtsleeves were setting a brassbound wooden tube, three paces long and bigger around than either's arm, on a pivoting frame fastened to the railing. An identical tube already sat a few paces away, where it had been almost since the tower was completed the day before. A third coatless man wiped his bald head with a striped kerchief while he growled at them.

"Easy with it. Easy, I said! You motherless weasels knock a lens out of alignment, and I will knock your brainless heads backward to front. Fasten it tight, Jol. Tight! If it falls while the Lord Dragon is looking through it, you both had better jump after it. Not just for him. You break my work and you will wish you had broken your fool skulls."

Jol and the other fellow, Cail, worked on, quickly but not very visibly perturbed. They had had years to grow used to Kin Tovere's way of talking. It had been finding a craftsman who made lenses and looking glasses—and his two apprentices—among the refugees that had first given Rand the idea for this tower.

At first none of the three noticed they were not alone. The clan chiefs climbed on silent feet, and Tovere's harangue was enough to cover the sound of Rand's boots. Rand himself was startled when Lan's head popped through the open trap after Bael; boots or no, the Warder made no more noise than the Aiel. Even Han stood a head taller than the Cairhienin.

When they finally did see the new arrivals, the two apprentices gave wide-eyed starts as if they had never seen an Aiel before, then bent themselves in half bowing to Rand and stayed that way. The lensmaker jerked almost as much at the sight of the Aiel, but made a more restrained bow, wiping his head again in the middle of it.

"Told you I would have the second finished today, my Lord Dragon." Tovere managed to get respect into his tone without making his voice one bit less gruff. "A wonderful thought, this tower. I would never have conceived it, but once you started asking how far you could see with a looking glass ... Give me time, and I will make you one to see Caemlyn from here. If the tower is built high enough," he added judiciously. "There are limits."

"What you've done already is more than enough, Master Tovere." More than Rand had hoped for, certainly. He had already had a look through the first looking glass.

Jol and Cail were still bent at right angles, heads down. "Perhaps you had best take your apprentices below," Rand said. "So we don't get crowded."

There was room for four times as many, but Tovere immediately poked Cail's shoulder with a thick finger, "Come along, you ham-fisted stableboys. We are in the Lord Dragon's way."

The apprentices barely straightened enough to follow him, gazing round-eyed at Rand even more than at the Aiel as they vanished down the ladder. Cail was a year older than he, Jol two. Both had been born in bigger towns than he had imagined before leaving the Theren, had visited Cairhien and seen the queen and the Amyrlin Seat, if at a distance, while he was still tending sheep. Very likely, they still knew more of the world than he in some ways. Shaking his head, he bent to the new looking glass.

Cairhien leaped into view. The forests, never particularly thick to one used to the Theren's woods, stopped completely well short of the city, of course. High grey, square-towered walls in a perfect square against the river mocked the hills' flowing curves. Within, more towers rose in a precise pattern, marking the points of a grid, some twenty times as high as the walls or more, yet all

surrounded by scaffolding. The legendary topless towers were still being rebuilt after their burning in the Aiel War.

When last he had seen the city, another city had surrounded it from riverbank to riverbank—Foregate, a rabbit warren as raucous as Cairhien was solemn, all in wood. Now only a wide stretch of ash and charred timbers bordered the walls. How that fire had been kept from spreading into Cairhien itself, he could not understand.

Banners decked every tower in the city, too distant to make out clearly, but scouts had described them to him. Half bore the Crescents of Tear; the other half, perhaps not surprisingly, duplicated the Dragon banner he had left flying over the Stone of Tear. Not one bore the Rising Sun of Cairhien.

Moving the looking glass only a little swept the city from his sight. On the far side of the river still stood the blackened stone shells of the granaries. Some of the Cairhienin Rand had talked to claimed the torching of the granaries had led to riots and then Queen Galldria's death, and thus to the civil war. Others said Galldria's assassination had caused the riots and the burning. Rand doubted that he would ever know which was the truth, or whether either was.

A number of burned-out hulks dotted both banks of the wide river, but none lay close to the city. Aiel had an uneasiness—fear might be too strong a word—about bodies of water they could not step across or wade, but Couladin had managed to put barriers of floating logs across the Alguenya both above and below Cairhien, along with enough men to see they were not cut. Fire-arrows had done the rest. Nothing except rats and birds could get into or out of Cairhien without Couladin's leave.

The hills around the city showed little sign of a besieging army. Here and there vultures flapped heavily, no doubt feasting on the remains of some attempt to break out, but no Shaido were visible. Aiel seldom were unless they wanted to be.

Wait. Rand swung the looking glass back to a treeless hilltop perhaps a mile from the city walls. Back to a cluster of men. He could not discern faces, or much else aside from the fact that they all wore the *cadin'sor*. One thing more. One of those men had bare arms. Couladin. Rand was sure it must be imagination, but he thought that when Couladin moved, he could see sunlight glittering off the metallic scales encircling the man's forearms in imitation of his own. Asmodean had put those there. Just an attempt to divert Rand's attention, to occupy him while Asmodean worked his own plans, but without that, how much would have turned out differently? Certainly, he would not be standing on this tower, watching a besieged city and awaiting a battle.

Suddenly, something streaked through the air on that distant hilltop, a long blur, and two of the men there went down thrashing. Staring at the fallen men, both apparently transfixed with the same spear, Couladin and the others seemed as stunned as Rand. Twisting the looking glass, Rand scanned for the man who had thrown with such force. He had to be brave—and a fool—to get close enough. Rand's search widened quickly, beyond any possible range of a human arm. He was beginning to think of Ogier—not likely; it took a great deal to rouse an Ogier into violence, as Loial had proved by vowing to spend the coming fight defending the refugees—when another streaking blur caught his eye.

Startled, he half-straightened before jerking the glass back to Cairhien's walls. That spear—or whatever it was—had come from there. He was certain of it. How was another matter entirely. At this distance it was all he could do to make out an occasional someone moving on the walls or atop a tower.

Raising his head, Rand found Rhuarc just stepping away from the other looking glass, giving up his place to Han. That was the whole reason for the tower and the glasses. Scouts brought back what word they could of how the Shaido were deployed, but this way the chiefs could see for themselves the terrain on which the battle would be fought. They had worked out a plan between them already, but one more look at the land could never go amiss. Rand did not know much about battles, but Lan and Tam thought their plan a good one. At least, Rand did not know much in his own mind; sometimes those other memories crept in, and then he seemed to know more than he wanted.

"Did you see that? Those ... spears?"

Rhuarc looked as puzzled as Rand knew he himself must, but the Aiel nodded. "The last took another Shaido, but he crawled away. Not Couladin, worse luck." He gestured to the looking glass and Rand let him take his place.

Was it such bad luck? Couladin's death would not end the threat to Cairhien, or to anywhere else. Now they were this side of the Dragonwall, the Shaido would not tamely return just because the man they thought was the true *Car'a'carn* died. It might well shake them, but not enough for that. And after all Rand had seen, he did not think Couladin deserved so easy a way out. *I can be as hard as I must*, he thought, stroking his sword hilt. *For him, I can*.

He left the older men to their discussion, and descended the ladder again. For all that he was the supposed leader of this army, he hadn't given much in the way of orders since they arrived. Tam had said that was the right way to do it, but it felt wrong to Rand.

"It will be nice to be flaming useful again," Uno was saying. He and Izana guarded the foot of the ladder, and his youthful, even-tempered companion, was nodding agreement and casting a dark eye on the distant hill behind which the Shaido lay.

Rand didn't like to reveal his plans too soon. It gave people more time to counter them. But he felt it necessary then. "Don't go charging off to fight the Shaido, you two. And tell the others not to, either. I have important work for you all."

It smote him that Uno looked so surprised, and eager. "You do? Name it and it'll be blo—ah, done, my Lord Dragon." Izana was listening intently.

"It is an idea Berelain gave me," he said as he stepped off the ladder. A scornful sound drew his attention to a suddenly blank-faced Weiramon. He didn't want to talk in front of that one, and was glad that a long stare was enough to get him to move off and give them space. Only once he was out of earshot did Rand turn back to the Shienarans.

"In Mayene, everyone is expected to train for combat, even the bakers and fishers. In case of invasion from a bigger nation, you see. The Aiel do the same, if for different reasons. I'd already been considering it, but looking at all these refugees, incapable of defending themselves ... It has to be done. Tarmon Gai'don is coming, and that's a fight that no-one can afford to sit out. I want the armies of Tear—and Cairhien once we have it stabilised—expanded, and I want everyone, soldier or otherwise, fit enough to hold a weapon trained in the best ways to kill Shadowspawn. I can think of no-one better suited to that task than you lot."

Uno punched his gauntleted palm. "Bloody right!" he said, forgetting not to curse for once.

Rand grinned. "I'm planning to promote you all to captains, and put you in charge of the training camps. Maybe one each, or in pairs so you can split the work."

"You're sending us away?" Izana asked. He sounded hurt.

"To do important work," Rand explained. He didn't look convinced, so he pressed ahead. "I can't afford to lose you, so I don't want you fighting on the front lines of this one. Loial will be holding back. Merile, too." The look she'd given him when he'd broached the topic of channelling against the Shaido had left him feeling like the worst kind of heel. "I want you to concentrate on protecting them and the refugees from any stray Shaido that get through."

To his surprise, it was Uno who readily agreed, rather than Izana. Rand set it aside. Uno would get the rest of them to fall in line, whatever their objections. "Tai'shar Shienar," he said, clapping him on the shoulder as they parted.

Moiraine and her Accepted were watching him, blank-faced, save for Ilyena. Smirking, she stepped out of the pack. "Tai'shar Shienar? Have you gone from pretending to be Aiel to pretending to be a Borderlander?"

He frowned. "No. Have you made up your mind yet?"

She shot a look at Moiraine before moving off. "Do you think I would rain lightning on strangers just to impress you? I am not one of those fools queuing up for your attention."

"I never thought you were," he said, following. "You haven't spoken to me much at all since ..."

He didn't need her warning glare to stop. "You should be grateful for that."

"Well I'm not. You aren't as fearsome as you think. I grew up in the Theren." Nynaeve or Egwene or Daisy would have eaten this girl alive.

Ilyena shook her head at him. "Fool. I should leave you to your foolishness, but Dani ..." She sighed softly. "I will do what I must."

They stopped safely out of earshot of the other Accepted, who were still watching. Rand tried to keep the smile from his face. "Thank you. If there is anything I can do to, ah, compensate you. A hand I could offer, say. Just let me know."

She glared at him. "An invitation to the head of the queue? How gallant! I'll pass."

He took her mockery in stride. It was no less than he deserved. "*Tai'shar Volsung*. Be sure to rest well tonight. Tomorrow will be a long day."

The questions began as soon as she'd stalked back to join her fellow Accepted. The recriminations soon followed, with Moiraine leading the chorus. Dani interlinked her arm with Ilyena's as they walked off, the others clucking around them like angry hens. He could only hope they remained strong in the face of that disapproval, and he did not wake to find they'd changed their minds.

Something they said gave Theodrin pause. The apple-cheeked Domani's steps slowed, and she glanced back at Rand thrice before stopping entirely. He cocked his head curiously. His curiosity grew as she walked back towards the wooden tower.

"Is something wrong?" he asked once she was close enough.

She shrugged her narrow shoulders. "A lot. But perhaps not in the way I had feared. I will not be taking part in the fighting."

"I know." He had already made his argument. There was no point harassing her with a repeat.

She wore a small smile. "Do you? I don't think you realise how horrifying it was when Moiraine of all people started ... Um ... doing stuff that, that no Aes Sedai should ..."

Rand had always valued discretion but ... A large camp, small tents, closely packed. There was little point in lying. "I was a bit too preoccupied to think it over," he drawled.

She laughed softly. "I imagine so. You've been very busy. But less so in the future. I'm told you've had a falling out with the Maidens."

"Not exactly." He gestured to the *cadin'sor*-clad women lurking around the hill. "They are still doing what they do."

That smile turned wry. "You didn't think it was a secret, did you? Poor boy. But Dani tells me they have decided to put a stop to those ... activities."

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "Yes."

"Good." She grinned outright at his surprise. It was quite a pretty sight. "Don't you see? The very fact that they could choose to turn away means that others can, too. It was not what I feared. Or at least not as bad as I'd feared."

Rand hadn't really been preoccupied with something as far outside his control as how the *ta'veren* effect worked, but it was still nice to hear her say that. He hadn't liked the idea of anyone thinking him some kind of rapist. "That's a relief."

"It is. Though I still wonder at the unlikeliness of it all. Dani is one thing—she has always been ... She's my friend and I do not mean to insult her, but she's, well, a bit ... overly passionate?" Rand's raised brow sped her on. "But Moiraine? That's as easy to imagine as Nynaeve going to a tavern and canoodling with strange boys."

His lack of reaction was making her frown. "She certainly would never do that."

"No ... You know, you never did tell me how you helped her break her block. I tried my best, and failed." Recalling that failure darkened her cheeks. "I am curious. Could you show me?"

It was harder to clear his throat this time. "I could ... but I'm not sure you'd like it. And you definitely wouldn't want me to do it here. Ask me again some other day."

"That smile ... that's a dangerous smile," she whispered.

"These are dangerous times," he agreed with a solemn nod.

## CHAPTER 74: Before the Arrow



The inside of a tent roof had to be the most boring sight in the world, but lying back in his shirtsleeves on scarlet-tasselled cushions that Melindhra had acquired, Mat studied the grey-brown cloth intently. Or rather, he stared beyond it. One arm curled behind his head, he swirled a hammered-silver goblet full of good wine from the south of Cairhien. A small cask had cost him as much as two good horses would—as much as two horses would have if the world and everything in it had not been stood on its head—but he counted it a small price for something decent. Sometimes a drop or two splashed over onto his hand, but he never noticed and he never took a drink.

By his book, matters had long since gone beyond merely serious. Serious was being stuck in the Waste with no idea of the way out. Serious was Darkfriends popping up when you least expected, Trolloc attacks in the night, the odd Myrddraal freezing your blood with an eyeless stare. That sort of thing came quickly, and usually was done before you had much chance to think. It was certainly not what you would seek out, yet if you had to, you could live with it if you could live through it. But for days he had known where they were heading, and why. Nothing quick about it. Days to think.

*I am no bloody hero, he thought grimly, and I'm no bloody soldier.* Fiercely he pushed down a memory of walking fortress walls, ordering his last reserves to where another crop of Trolloc scaling ladders had sprung up. *That was not me, the Light burn whoever it was! I'm ...* He did not know what he was—a sour thought—but whatever he was, it involved gambling and taverns, women and dancing. That he was sure of. It involved a good horse and every road in the world to choose from, not sitting and waiting for somebody to shoot arrows at him or try to stick a sword or a spear through his ribs. Any different would make him a fool, and he would not be that, not for Rand or Moiraine or anybody else.

As he sat up, the silver foxhead medallion, hanging on its leather thong, slipped from the unlaced neck of his shirt. He tucked it back before taking a long swallow of wine. The medallion made him safe from Moiraine, or any other Aes Sedai, as long as they did not get it away from him—surely one or another would try sooner or later—but nothing except his own wits kept him safe from some fool killing him along with a few thousand other fools. Or from Rand, or from being *ta'veren*.

A man ought to be able to find a profit in something like that, having events twist themselves around him. Rand certainly had, in a way. He himself had never noticed anything twisting around him except the fall of dice. He would not turn away from some of the things that happened to *ta'veren* in stories. Wealth and fame dropped into their pockets as if from the sky; men who wanted to kill them decided to follow instead, and women with ice in their eyes decided to melt.

Not that he was complaining at what he had, really. And certainly not that he wanted anything like Rand's bargain; the price to get into the game was too high. It was just that he seemed to be stuck with all the burdens of being *ta'veren* and none of the pleasure. Not unless you counted the company of Melindhra and Acavi, and that he put down to his own charm. Neither would come with him when he left, of course, but that was as it should be.

"It is time to go," he told the empty tent, then paused thoughtfully and sipped at the goblet. "It is time to get on Pips and ride. Ride to Caemlyn, maybe." Not a bad city, so long as he avoided the Royal Palace. "Or Murandy." He had heard rumours about Murandy. A fine place, that, for the likes of him. "Time to leave Rand in my dust. He's got a bloody Aiel army and more Maidens than he can count taking care of him. He doesn't need me."

That last was not strictly true. In some strange way he was tied to Rand's success or failure in Tarmon Gai'don, him and Perrin both, three *ta'veren* all tangled together. The histories would probably only mention Rand. Small chance he or Perrin would find any place in the stories. There might be some way out of that particular mess yet. Any way he looked at it, it was a problem for another day. A distant day. With luck, all those bills would come due on a very distant day. Only, that might take more luck than he had.

The point now was that he had said all of that about going and felt scarcely a twinge. Not long ago, he had been unable even to speak of leaving; when he got too far from Rand, he had been drawn back like a hooked fish on some invisible line. Then he had become able to say it, even to lay plans, but the slightest thing would distract him, make him put off his schemes for stealing away. Even in Rhuidean, when he had told Rand he was going, he had been sure something would get in the way. It had, in a manner of speaking; Mat had made it out of the Waste, but he was no further from Rand than before. This time, he did not think he would be diverted.

"Not like I was abandoning him," he muttered. "If he can't bloody take care of himself by now, he'll never be able to. I'm not his bloody nursemaid."

Draining the goblet, he scrambled into his green coat, settled his knives in their hiding places, arranged a dark yellow silk scarf to hide the hanging scar on his throat, then snatched up his hat and ducked out.

Heat hit him in the face after the relatively cool shade inside. He was not sure how the seasons changed here, but summer was hanging on too long to suit him. One thing he had looked forward to on leaving the Waste was the arrival of autumn. A little coolness. No luck here. At least the hat's wide brim kept the sun off.

This hilly Cairhienin forest was a pitiful thing, more clearings than trees and half of them going brown in the drought. Not a patch on the Westwood, back home. Low Aiel tents were everywhere, though at any distance they took on the look of a pile of dead leaves or a bare hummock of ground unless the side flaps were up, and even then they were not easy to see. The Aiel going about their business did not look at him twice.

From one crest as he crossed the encampment, he caught sight of Kadere's wagons, all in a circle, the drivers lying in the shade underneath and the peddler nowhere in view. Kadere kept to his wagon more and more, seldom poking his nose out except when Moiraine came to inspect the ladings. The Aiel ringing the wagons, small knots with spears and bucklers, bows and quivers, made little pretence of being anything but guards. Moiraine must think Kadere or some of his men would try to make off with what she had brought out of Rhuidean. Mat wondered whether Rand realized that he was giving her anything and everything she asked. For a while Mat had thought Rand had gotten the upper hand there, but he was not so sure any longer, even if Moiraine did do everything but curtsy and fetch Rand's pipe. The man had been a fool to start diddling an Aes Sedai, no matter how pretty.

Rand's tent was on a hilltop by itself, naturally, that red banner on a staff at its front. It rippled in a light breeze, sometimes standing out enough to show the black-and-white disc. The thing made Mat's skin crawl as much as the Dragon banner had. If a man wanted to avoid Aes Sedai entanglements, as any but an idiot would, the last thing to do was wave that symbol about.

The slopes of the hill were bare, but Maidens' tents encircled the foot of the hill and spread through the trees up surrounding slopes and down the other side. That was as usual, too, and so was the Wise Ones' camp within the *Far Dareis Mai*, dozens of low tents in shouting distance of Rand's hill, with white-robed *gai'shain* bustling about.

There were only a few of the Wise Ones to be seen, yet they made up for lack of numbers with the stares that followed him. He had no idea how many could channel in that bunch, but they were a fair equal of Aes Sedai weighing and measuring when it came to stares. He picked up his pace, making an effort not to shrug uncomfortably; he could feel those eyes on his back as surely as he could have a poke from a stick. And he would have to run the same gauntlet coming out. Well, a few words with Rand, and it would be the last time he had to run it.

Only, when he pulled off his hat and ducked into Rand's tent, no-one was there except Natael, lounging on the cushions with his gilded, dragon-carved harp propped against his knee and a gold goblet in his hand.

Mat grimaced, and swore under his breath. He should have known as much. If Rand had been here, he would have had to pass through a circle of Maidens right around the tent. Most likely he was up at that new-built tower. A good idea, that. Know the terrain. That was the second rule, close behind "Know your enemy", and not much to choose between them.

The thought put a sour twist to his mouth. Those rules came from other men's memories; the only rules he wanted to remember were "Never kiss a girl whose brothers have knife scars" and "Never gamble without knowing a back way out". He almost wished those memories of other men were still separate lumps in his brain instead of oozing into his thoughts when he least expected.

"Trouble with a bilious stomach?" Natael asked lazily. "One of the Wise Ones might have a root to cure it. Or you could try Moiraine."

Mat could not like the man; he always seemed to be thinking of a joke he did not mean to share. And he always looked as if he had three servants taking care of his clothes. All that snowy lace at collar and cuffs, always seeming freshly laundered. The fellow never appeared to sweat, either. Why Rand wanted him around was a mystery. He almost never played anything merry on that harp. "Will he be back soon?"

Natael shrugged. "When he decides to. Perhaps soon, perhaps late. No man clocks the Lord Dragon. And few women." There it was again, that secretive smile. A touch bleak, this time.

"I'll wait." He meant to go through with this. Too many times he had found himself putting off going.

Natael sipped at his wine, studying him across the goblet's rim.

It was bad enough that Moiraine and the Wise Ones watched him in that silent, searching way, but from Rand's gleeman, it was enough to set his teeth on edge. The best thing about leaving would be not having anyone look at him as if they would know in a minute what he was thinking, and already knew whether his smallclothes were clean.

Two maps lay spread out near the firepit. One, copied in detail from a tattered map found in a half-burned town, covered northern Cairhien from west of the Alguenya halfway to the Spine of the World, while, the other, newly drawn and sketchy, showed the land around the city. Slips of parchment held down with pebbles dotted both. If he was going to stay, and ignore Natael's searching look at the same time, there was nothing for it but to study the maps.

With the toe of his boot he shifted a few pebbles on the map of the city so he could read what was written on the parchments. In spite of himself, he winced. If the Aiel scouts could count, Couladin had nearly one hundred and sixty thousand spears—Shaido and those who had supposedly gone to join their societies among the Shaido. A hard nut to crack, and prickly. This side of the Spine of the World had not seen an army like that since Artur Hawkwing's time.

The second map showed the other clans that had crossed the Dragonwall. All had now, in one force or another, strung out according to when they had left the Jangai and spread apart, but too close to here for comfort. The Shiande, the Codarra, the Daryne, and the Miagoma. Between them, they apparently had at least as many spears as Couladin; they had not left many behind, if that was true. The seven clans with Rand almost doubled that, easily enough to face Couladin or the four clans. Either or. Not both, not at once. But both at once might be what Rand had to fight.

What the Aiel called the bleakness had to be affecting those clans, too—every day still men tossed down their weapons and vanished—but only a fool would think it lessened their numbers any more than it did Rand's. And there was always the possibility that some of those were going to Couladin. The Aiel did not speak of it very much or very freely, and masked the idea behind talk of joining societies, but even now, men and Maidens decided they could not accept Rand or what he had told them of themselves. Every morning some were missing, and not all left their spears behind.

"A pretty situation, wouldn't you say?"

Mat's head jerked up at Lan's voice, but the Warder had entered the tent alone. "Just something to look at while I waited. Is Rand coming back?"

"He will be with us soon." Thumbs tucked behind his sword belt, Lan stood beside Mat, looking down at the map. His face gave away as much as a statue's would. "Tomorrow should bring the largest battle since Artur Hawkwing."

"You don't say?" Where was Rand? Still up on that tower, probably. Maybe he should go there. No, he could end up haring all over the camp, always one step behind. Rand would come here eventually. He wanted to talk about something besides Couladin. *This fight is none of mine. I'm not running away from anything that concerns me in the least.* "What about them?" He gestured to the slips representing the Miagoma and the others. "Any word on whether they mean to join Rand, or do they just intend to sit there watching?"

"Who can say? Rhuarc doesn't seem to know any more than I do, and if the Wise Ones do, they are not telling. The only thing certain is that Couladin is not going anywhere."

Couladin again. Mat shifted uncomfortably and took a half-step toward the entrance. No, he *would* wait. Fastening his gaze on the maps, he pretended to study them further. Perhaps Lan would leave him in silence. He just wanted to say his piece to Rand and go.

The Warder appeared to want to talk, though. "What do you think, Master Gleeman? Should we rush down on Couladin with everything and crush him tomorrow?"

"That sounds as good to me as any other plan," Natael replied dourly. Emptying the goblet down his throat, he dropped it on the carpets and picked up the harp to begin softly strumming something dark and funereal. "I lead no armies, Warder. I command nothing save myself, and not always that."

Mat grunted, and Lan glanced at him before returning to his study of the maps. "You do not think it a good plan? Why not?"

He said it so casually that Mat answered without thinking. "Two reasons. If you surround Couladin, trap him between you and the city, you might crush him against it." How long was Rand going to be? "But you might push him right over the walls, too. From what I hear, he's nearly gotten over twice already, even without miners or siege engines, and the city is hanging on by its teeth." Say his piece and go, that was it. "Press him enough, and you'll find yourself fighting inside Cairhien. Nasty thing, fighting in a city. And the idea is to save the place, not finish ruining it." Those slips laid out on the maps, the maps themselves, made it all so clear.

Frowning, he squatted with his elbows on his knees. Lan got down with him, but he hardly noticed. A dicey problem. And fascinating. "Best if you try to shove him away. Hit him from the south, mainly." He pointed to the River Madaem; slow but wide, it joined the Alguanya some miles north of the city. "There are bridges up here. Leave the Shaido a clear path to them. Always leave a way out, unless you really want to find out how hard a man can fight when he's nothing to lose." His finger slid east. Wooded hills for the most part, it seemed. Probably not much different from right around here. "A blocking force here on this side of the river will make sure they go for the bridges, if it's big enough and positioned right. Once they are moving, Couladin won't want to try fighting someone ahead of him while you're coming behind." Yes. Almost exactly the same as at Jenje. "Not unless he's a complete fool, anyway. They might make it to the river in good order, but those bridges will choke them. I don't see Aiel swimming, or hunting out fords for that matter. Keep the pressure on, shove them across. With luck you'll be able to harry them all the way to the mountains." It was like Cuaindaigh Fords, too, late in the Trolloc Wars, and on much the same scale. Not much different from the Tora Shan, either. Or Sulmein Gap, before Hawkwing found his stride. The names flickered through his head, the images of bloody fields forgotten even by historians. Absorbed in the map as he was, they did not register as anything but his own remembrances. "Too bad you don't have more cavalry. Light cavalry is best for the harrying. Bite at the flanks, keep them running, and never let them settle to fight. But Aiel should do almost as well."

"And the other reason?" Lan asked quietly.

Mat was caught up in it, now. He more than merely liked gambling, and battle was a gamble to make dicing in taverns a thing for children and toothless invalids. Lives were the stake here, your own and other men's, men who were not even there. Make the wrong wager, a foolish bet, and cities died, or whole nations. Natael's sombre music was fit accompaniment. At the same time, this was a game that set the blood racing.

Without lifting his eyes from the map, he snorted. "You know as well as I. If even one of those four clans decides to side with Couladin, they'll take you from behind while your hands are still full of Shaido. Couladin will be the anvil and they the hammer, with you the nut between. Only take half of what you have against Couladin. That makes it an even fight, but you have to settle for it." There was no such thing as fairness in war. You took your enemy from behind, when he least expected it, when and where he was weakest. "You still have an edge. He has to worry about a sortie from the city. The other half, you split in three parts. One to funnel Couladin to the river, the other two a few miles apart, between the city and the four clans."

"Very neat," Lan said, nodding. That slab-carved face never changed, but approval touched his voice, if lightly. "It would gain a clan nothing to attack either force, especially not when the other could take it in the rear. And none will try to interfere in what happens around the city for the same reason. Of course, all four could join. Not likely, if they haven't already, but if they do, everything changes."

Mat laughed aloud. "Everything always changes. The best plan lasts until the first arrow leaves the bow. This would be easy enough for a child to handle, except for Indiran and the rest not knowing their own minds. If they all decide to go over to Couladin, you toss the dice and hope,

because the Dark One's in the game for sure. At least you'll have enough strength clear of the city nearly to match them. Enough to hold them for the time you need. Abandon the idea of pursuing Couladin and turn everything on them as soon as he's well and truly begun crossing the Madaem. But it's my bet they'll wait and watch, and come to you once Couladin is done for. Victory settles a lot of arguments in most men's heads."

The music had stopped. Mat glanced at Natael, and found the man holding his harp rigidly, staring at him over it harder than ever. Staring as if he had never seen him before, did not know what he was. The gleeman's eyes were dark polished glass, his knuckles white on the harp's gilding.

With that it all crashed home, what he had been saying, the memories he had been embracing.

*Burn you for a fool for not guarding your tongue!* Why had Lan had to take the conversation that way? Why could he not have talked about horses, or the weather, or just kept his mouth shut? The Warder had never seemed all that eager to talk before. Usually the man made a tree seem talkative. Of course, he could have kept his own mind focused and his own mouth shut, too. At least he had not been babbling in the Old Tongue. *Blood and ashes, but I hope I wasn't!*

Springing to his feet, Mat turned to go, and found Rand standing just inside the tent, absently twisting that odd bit of tasselled spear as if he did not realize he was holding it. How long had he been there? It did not matter. Mat spilled it all out in a rush. "I'm leaving, Rand. Come first light in the morning, I am in the saddle and gone. I'd go this minute if I could get far enough in half a day to suit me for stopping. I mean to put as many miles between me and the Aiel—*any* Aiel—as Pips can cover before I make camp." No point in bedding down close enough to be snapped up and hung out to dry by somebody's scouts; Couladin must have them out, too, and even the others might not recognize him before he had a spear in his liver.

"I will be sorry to see you go," Rand said quietly.

"Don't try to talk me out of—" Mat blinked. "That's it? You'll be sorry to see me go?"

"I've never tried to make you stay, Mat. Perrin went when he had to, and so can you."

Mat opened his mouth, then closed it again. Rand had never tried to make him stay, true. He had just done it without trying. But there was not the slightest bit of *ta'veren* tugging, now, no vague feelings that he was doing the wrong thing. He was firm and clear in his purpose.

"Where will you go?"

"South." Not that there was much choice of direction. The others led to the Madaem, with nothing north of the river that he was interested in, or else to Aiel, one lot that would certainly kill him and one that might or might not, depending on how close by Rand was and what they had had for supper the night before. Not good odds, by his reckoning. "To begin, anyway. Then somewhere there's a tavern, and some women who don't carry spears." Melindhra. She might present a problem. He had the feeling she might be the sort of woman who did not let go until she wanted. Well, one way or another, he would deal with her. Maybe he could just ride out before she knew it. Acavi had always known it was a temporary thing, at least. "This isn't for me, Rand. I don't know anything about battles, and I don't want to know." He avoided looking at Lan and Natael. If either man cracked his teeth, he would punch him right in the mouth. Even the Warder. "You understand, don't you?"

Rand's nod could have been understanding. Maybe it was.

"The Light shine on you, Mat," he added, sticking out his hand, "and send you smooth roads, fair weather and pleasant company until we meet again."

That would not be soon, if Mat had his way. He felt a little sad about that, and a little foolish for feeling sad, yet a man had to look after himself. When all was said and done, that was the long and short of it.

Rand's grip was as hard as it had ever been—all that swordwork had only added new calluses atop older bowman's—but the ridged heron brand in his palm was distinct against Mat's hand. Just a little reminder, in case he should forget the markings under his friend's coatsleeves, or those even stranger things inside his head that let him channel. If he could forget that Rand could channel—and he had not thought of it once in days; days!—then it was *far* past time to be gone.

A few more awkward words standing there—Lan seemed to ignore them, arms folded, silently studying the maps, while Natael had begun idly plucking his harp; Mat had an ear for music, and to him the unfamiliar tune had an ironic sound; he wondered why the fellow had chosen it—a few more moments and Rand half-stepping around actually putting an end to it, and then Mat was outside. There was a crowd out there, a good hundred Maidens spread about the hilltop and walking on tiptoe

they were so ready to spear somebody, all seven clan chiefs waiting patient and still as stone, three Tairen lords trying to pretend that they were not sweating and the Aiel did not exist.

He had heard about the lords' arrival, and had even gone to take a look at their camp—or camps—but there had been no-one there he knew, and no-one wanting to take a turn at dice or cards. These three eyed him up and down, frowning disdainfully, and apparently decided he was no better than the Aiel, which was to say not worth seeing.

Clapping his hat on his head and pulling the brim low over his eyes, Mat studied the Tairens coldly in return for a moment. He had the pleasure of seeing the younger pair, at least, become uncomfortably aware of him again before he started down the hill. The grey-beard still looked all barely concealed impatience to enter Rand's tent, but it did not matter anyway. He would never see any of them again.

He had no idea why he had not simply ignored them. Except that his step was lighter and he felt full of vinegar. No wonder, really, leaving tomorrow at last. The dice seemed to be spinning in his head, and there was no knowing what pips would show when they landed. Odd, that. It must be Melindhra worrying him. Yes. He would definitely leave early, and as quietly as a mouse tiptoeing on feathers.

Whistling, he set off for his tent. What was the tune? Oh, yes. "Dance with Jak o' the Shadows. He had no intention of dancing with death, but it had a merry sound, so he whistled it anyway as he tried to plan the best route away from Cairhien.

\* \* \*

Rand stood staring after Mat long after the tent flaps had fallen to hide him. "I only heard the last bit," he said finally. "Was it all like that?"

"Very nearly," Lan replied. "With only a few minutes to study the maps, he laid out close to the battle plan that Rhuarc and the others made. He saw the difficulties and the dangers, and how to meet them. He knows about miners and siege engines, and using light cavalry to harry a defeated foe."

Rand looked at him. The Warder showed no surprise, not the twitch of an eyelash. Of course, he was the one who had said Mat seemed surprisingly knowledgeable about military matters. And Lan was not going to ask the obvious question, either, which was good. Rand had no right to give the little answer he had.

He could have asked a few questions himself. Such as, what did miners have to do with battles? Or maybe it was only sieges. Whatever the answer, there was not a mine closer than the Kinslayer's Dagger, and no certainty anyone was still digging ore. Well, this battle would be fought without. The important thing was that he knew Mat had gained more on the other side of that doorway *ter'angreal* than a tendency to spout the Old Tongue when not thinking. And knowing that, Rand would surely make use of it.

*You don't have to get any harder*, he thought bitterly. He had seen Mat climbing toward this tent, and never hesitated in sending Lan in to discover what might come to the surface in idle conversation, alone. That had been deliberate. The rest might or might not be, but it would happen. He hoped Mat had a fine time while he was free. He hoped that Perrin was enjoying himself in the Theren, that his marriage to Faile was all he could want. He hoped it because he knew he would draw them back, *ta'veren* pulling at *ta'veren*, and he the strongest. Moiraine had named it no coincidence, three such growing up in the same village, all nearly the same age; the Wheel wove happenstance and coincidence into the Pattern, but it did not lay down the likes of the three of them for no reason. Eventually he would pull his friends back to him, however far they went, and when they came, he would use them, however he could. However he had to. Because he did have to. Because whatever the Prophecy of the Dragon said, he was sure the only chance he had of winning Tarmon Gai'don lay in having all three of them, three *ta'veren* who had been tied together since infancy, tied together once more. No, he did not need to become hard. *You're rank enough already to make a Seanchan spew his supper!*

"Play 'March of Death,'" he commanded in a harsher voice than he wanted, and Natael looked at him blankly for a moment. The man had been listening to everything. He would have questions, but he would find no answers. If Rand could not tell Lan Mat's secrets, he would not spread them before one of the Forsaken, however tame he appeared. This time he deliberately made

his tone rough, and pointed the length of spear at the man. "Play it, unless you know a sadder. Play something to make your soul weep. If you have one still."

Natael gave him an ingratiating smile and a seated bow, but he went white around the eyes. It was indeed "The March of Death" that he began, yet it had a sharper edge on his harp than ever before, a dirgelike keen that surely would make any soul weep. He stared fixedly at Rand as if hoping to see some effect.

Turning away, Rand stretched out on the carpets with his head to the maps and a red-and-gold cushion under his elbow. "Lan, would you ask the others to come in now?"

The Warder made a formal bow before stepping outside. It was the first time that he had ever done that, but Rand noticed only absently.

The battle would begin tomorrow. It was a polite fiction that he helped Rhuarc and the others plan. He was smart enough to know what he did not know, and despite all of his talks with Lan and Rhuarc, he knew he was not ready. *I've planned a hundred battles this size or more and given orders that led to ten times as many.* Not his thought. Lews Therin knew war—had known war—but not Rand al'Thor, and that was him. He listened, asked questions—and nodded as if he understood when the chiefs said a thing should be done a certain way. Sometimes he did understand and wished he did not, because he knew where that understanding came from. His only real contribution had been to say that Couladin had to be defeated without destroying the city. In any case, this meeting would only add a few touches at most to what had already been decided. Mat would have been useful, with his new-found knowledge.

No. He would not think of his friends, of what he would do to them before it was all done. Even leaving the battle aside, there was plenty to occupy him, things he could do something about. The absence of Cairhien flags above Cairhien marked a major problem, and the continued skirmishes with Andorans another. What Sammael was up to warranted thought, and ...

The chiefs filed in in no particular order. This time Dheanic came first, Rhuarc and Erim together at the rear with Lan. Bruan and Jheran took the places next to Rand. They did not concern themselves with precedence among themselves, and *Aan'allein* they seemed to take as all but one of them.

Weiramon entered last, his lordlings at his heels and a tight-mouthed scowl on his face. Precedence certainly mattered to him. Muttering into his oiled beard, he stalked his way around the firepit, taking up a place behind Rand. Until the chiefs' flat stares finally broke through his shell, at least. Among Aiel, a close kinsman or society brother might position himself so, if there was the possibility of a knife in the back. He still frowned at Jheran and Dheanic as though expecting one of them to make room.

Finally Bael gestured to the place beside him, across the maps from Rand, and after a pause Weiramon strode back to sit cross-legged and rigid, staring straight ahead and looking like a man who had swallowed an unripe plum whole. The younger Tairens stood almost as stiffly at his back, one with the grace to look embarrassed.

Rand took note of him but said not a word, only thumbed his pipe full of tabac and seized *saidin* long enough to light it. He had to do something about Weiramon; the man exacerbated old problems and made new ones. Not a flicker crossed Rhuarc's features, but the other chiefs' expressions ranged from Han's sour disgust to Erim's clear, cold-eyed readiness to dance spears there and then. Perhaps there was a way for Rand to rid himself of Weiramon and make a beginning on another of his worries at the same time.

With Rand's example, Lan and the chiefs began filling pipes.

"I see only small changes necessary," Bael said, puffing his pipe alight, and sparking a glower from Han, as usual.

"Do these small changes concern the Goshien, or perhaps some other clan?"

Putting Weiramon from his mind, Rand bent himself to listening as they worked out what had to be altered from their new view of the terrain. Now and again one of the Aiel would glance at Natael, a brief tightness to eyes or mouth suggesting that the mournful music plucked at something in him. Even the Tairens grimaced sadly. The sounds washed over Rand, though, touching nothing. Tears were a luxury he could no longer afford, not even inside.

## CHAPTER 75: This Place, This Day



The next morning Rand was up and dressed well before first light. In truth, he had not slept, and it had not been Aviendha who kept him awake, not even after she began undressing before he could put out the lamps and channelled one alight again as soon as he did, chiding him that she was unable to see in the dark even if he could. He made no reply, and hours later, had hardly noticed when she rose, a good hour before he did, dressed and left. He did not even think to wonder where she was going.

The thoughts that had had him staring up into the blackness still ran through his head. Men would die today. A great many men, even if everything went perfectly. Nothing he did now would change it; today would run out according to the Pattern. But over and over he mulled the decisions he had made since he first entered the Waste. Could he have done something different, something that would have avoided this day, this place? Next time, perhaps. The tasselled length of spear lay atop his sword belt and scabbarded blade beside his blankets. There would be a next time, and one beyond that, and beyond again. Morsa was with the refugees. He'd asked Tam to keep an eye on her, knowing it would keep him out of the fighting. When he could find time, he'd have to store her somewhere she could not easily escape, and he thought he knew just the place.

While darkness still held, the chiefs came in a bunch for a few final words, to report that their men were in position and ready. Not that anything else was expected. Stone-faced as they were, some emotion showed. An odd mix, though, a skim of ebullience over sombreness.

Erim actually wore a slight smile. "A good day, to see the end of the Shaido," he said finally. He seemed to be walking on his toes.

"The Light willing," Bael said, his head brushing the roof of the tent, "we will wash the spears in Couladin's blood before sunfall."

"Bad luck to talk of what will be," Han muttered. The skim was very thin on him, of course. "Fate will decide."

Rand nodded. "The Light send it does not decide on too many of our number dead." He wished his concern were only that few men should die because men should not have their lives cut short, but there were many more days to come. He would need every spear to bring order to this side of the Dragonwall. That was a bone between him and Couladin every bit as much as the rest.

"Life is a dream," Rhuarc told him, and Han and the others nodded agreement. Life was only a dream, and all dreams had to end. Aiel did not run toward death, yet they did not run from it either.

As they were departing, Bael paused. "Are you certain of what you want the Maidens to do? Sulin has been speaking to the Wise Ones."

So that was what Melaine had been at Bael about. The way Rhuarc stopped to listen, he had been hearing from Amys on the subject, too.

"Everyone else is doing what they are supposed to without complaining, Bael." That was unfair, but this was no game. "If the Maidens want special consideration, Sulin can come to me, not go running to the Wise Ones."

Had they been anything but Aiel, Rhuarc and Bael would have been shaking their heads as they left. Rand supposed each would get an earful from his wife, but they would have to live with it. If *Far Dareis Mai* carried his honour, this time they would carry it where he wanted.

To Rand's surprise Lan appeared just as he was ready to go out himself. The Warder's cloak hung down his back, disturbing the vision as it rippled with his movements.

"Is Moiraine with you?" Rand had expected Lan to be glued to her side.

"She is fretting in her tent. She cannot possibly Heal even all of the worst hurt today." That was her choice of how to help; she could not use the Power as a weapon today, but she could Heal. "Waste always angers her."

"It angers us all," Rand snapped. His taking Ilyena away probably upset her, too. As far as he could tell, Dani was not very good at Healing on her own, but Ilyena had the Talent. She could have aided Moiraine in saving lives, instead of helping Rand to do all that he was good at: Destroying them.

Well, he needed her to keep her promise. "Tell Moiraine if she needs help, ask some of the Wise Ones who can channel." But few Wise Ones had any knowledge of Healing. "She can link with them and use their strength." He hesitated. Had Moiraine ever spoken of linking to him? "Merile would help her, too, if they can set aside their differences." Even if they won this battle, there were so many others to come, and not just the physical ones. "You didn't come here to tell me Moiraine is brooding," he said irritably. It was difficult sometimes, keeping straight what came from her, what from Asmodean, and what bubbled up from Lews Therin.

"I came to ask why you've taken to wearing a sword again."

"Moiraine asked already. Did she send—?"

Lan's face did not change, but he cut in roughly. "I want to know. You can make a sword from the Power, or kill without, but suddenly you are wearing steel on your hip again. Why?"

Unconsciously, Rand ran one hand up the long hilt at his side. "It's hardly fair to use the Power that way. Especially against someone who can't channel. I might as well fight a child."

The Warder stood silent for a time, studying him. "You mean to kill Couladin yourself," he said at last in flat tones. "That sword against his spears."

"I don't mean to seek him out, but who can say what will happen?" Rand shrugged uncomfortably. Not to hunt for him. But if ever his twisting of chance was to favour him, let it be to bring him face-to-face with Couladin. "Besides, I'd not put it past him to seek me. The threats I've heard from him have been personal, Lan." Raising one fist, he thrust his arm out of a crimson coatsleeve enough to make the golden-maned Dragon's fore end plainly visible. "Couladin won't rest while I live, not so long as we both wear these."

And truth to tell, he would not rest himself until only one living man bore the Dragons. By rights he should lump Asmodean in with Couladin. Asmodean had marked the Shaido. But Couladin's unrestrained ambition had made it possible; his ambition and refusal to abide by Aiel law and custom had led inevitably to this place, this day. Beyond the bleakness and war between Aiel, there was Taien to be laid at Couladin's feet, and Selean, and dozens of ruined towns and villages since, countless hundreds of burned farms. Unburied men and women and children had fed the vultures. If he was the Dragon Reborn, if he had any right to demand that any nation follow him, much less Cairhien then he owed them justice.

"Then have him beheaded when he's taken," Lan said harshly. "Set a hundred men, or a thousand, with no purpose but to find and take him. But do not be fool enough to fight him! You are good with a blade now—very good—but Aielmen are all but born with spear and buckler in hand. A spear through your heart, and all has been for naught."

"So I should avoid the fighting? Would you, if Moiraine had no claims on you? Will Rhuarc, or Bael, or any of them?"

"I am not the Dragon Reborn. The fate of the world does not rest on me." But the momentary heat had gone from his voice. Without Moiraine, he would have been wherever the fighting was hottest. If anything, he looked to be regretting those claims at the moment.

"I'll not take needless risks, Lan, but I can't run from them all." The Seanchan spear would remain in the tent today; it would only get in his way if he did find Couladin. "Come. The Aiel will finish it without us if we stand here much longer."

When he ducked outside, only a few stars remained, and a thin brightness outlined the eastern horizon sharply. That was not why he stopped, though, and Lan with him. Maidens made a ring around the tent, shoulder to shoulder, facing inward. A thick ring that spread down the dark shrouded slopes, *cadin'sor*-clad women jammed so a mouse could not have slipped through. Jeade'en was nowhere in sight, though a *gai'shain* had been ordered to have him saddled and waiting.

Not Maidens alone. Three women in the front rank wore skirts. It was too black yet to discern faces with any certainty, but there was something in the shape of those three, in their folded-arm stance, that named Dani, Ilyena and Aviendha.

Sulin stepped forward before he could open his mouth to ask what they were up to. "We have come to escort the *Car'a'carn* to the tower with Daniele Sedai, Ilyena Sedai and Aviendha."

"Who put you up to this?" Rand demanded. One glance at Lan showed it had not been him. Even in the darkness the Warder looked startled. For a moment anyway, his head jerking up; nothing surprised Lan for long. "Dani and Ilyena are supposed to be on their way to the tower now, and the

Maidens are supposed to be there to guard them. What they will do today is very important. They must be protected while they do it.”

“We will protect them.” Sulin’s voice was as flat as a planed board. “And the *Car'a'carn*, who gave his honour to *Far Dareis Mai* to carry.” A murmur of approval rippled through the Maidens.

“It only makes sense, Rand,” Dani said from where she stood. “If two using the Power as a weapon will make the battle shorter, four will shorten it even more. And you are stronger than Ilyena and me together.” She did not sound as if she liked saying that last any more than Ilyena liked hearing it. Aviendha said nothing, but the way she stood was eloquent.

“This is ridiculous,” Rand scowled. “Let me through, and go to your assigned place.”

Sulin did not budge. “*Far Dareis Mai* carries the honour of the *Car'a'carn*,” she said calmly, and others took it up. No louder, but from so many women’s voices it made a high rumble. “*Far Dareis Mai* carries the honour of the *Car'a'carn*. *Far Dareis Mai* carries the honour of the *Car'a'carn*.”

“I said let me through,” he demanded the instant the sound died.

As if he had told them to begin again, they did. “*Far Dareis Mai* carries the honour of the *Car'a'carn*. *Far Dareis Mai* carries the honour of the *Car'a'carn*.” Sulin just stood there looking at him.

After a moment Lan leaned close to murmur dryly, “A woman is no less a woman because she carries a spear. Did you ever meet one who could be diverted from anything she really wanted? Give over, or we will stand here all day while you argue and they chant at you.” The Warder hesitated, then added, “Besides which, it does make sense.”

Dani opened her mouth as the litany fell off once more, but Aviendha put a hand on her arm and whispered a few words, and Dani said nothing. Ilyena was not so easily quelled, and her opinion on the dullness of his wits definitely not whispered. Aviendha studied her carefully. She’d taken to doing that with a lot of women lately. Merile and Raine had not merited much attention from her before, but she had sought them both out for long talks over the past few days. Rand tried not to speculate as Ilyena called him a dozen different kinds of fool.

The trouble was that he was beginning to feel like one. It *did* make sense for him to go to the tower. He had nothing to do elsewhere—the battle was in the hands of the chiefs and fate, now—and he would be of more use channelling than riding around hoping to meet with Couladin. If being *ta'veren* could pull Couladin to him, it could draw him to the tower as easily as anywhere else. Not that he would have much chance of seeing the man, not after ordering every last Maiden to defend the tower.

But how to back down and retain a scrap of dignity after blustering left, right and centre? “I’ve decided I can do the most good from the tower,” he said, his face going hot.

“As the *Car'a'carn* commands,” Sulin replied without a hint of mockery, just as if it had been his idea from the first. Lan nodded, then slipped away, the Maidens making narrow room for him.

The gap closed up right behind Lan, though, and when they began to move, Rand had no choice except to go with them. He could have channelled, of course, flung Fire about or knocked them down with Air, but that was hardly the way to behave with people on his side, let alone women. Besides, he was not sure he could have made them leave him short of killing, and maybe not then. And anyway, he had decided he was of most use at the tower, after all.

Aviendha and the Accepted were as silent as Sulin as they walked, for which he was grateful. Of course, at least part of their silence had to do with picking their way uphill and down in the dark without breaking their necks. Aviendha did raise a mutter now and then that he barely caught, something angry about skirts. But none of them made fun of him for backing down so visibly. Though that might well come later. Women seemed to enjoy jabbing the needle in just when you thought the danger was past.

The sky began to lighten into grey, and as the log tower came into sight above the trees, he broke the quiet himself. “I didn’t expect you to be part of this, Aviendha. I thought you said Wise Ones take no part in battles.” He was sure she had. A Wise One could walk through the middle of a battle untouched, or into any hold or stand of a clan that had blood feud with hers, but she took no part in fighting, certainly not with channelling. Until he came to the Waste, even most Aiel had not really known that some Wise Ones could channel, though there were rumours of strange abilities, and sometimes something the Aiel thought might be close to channelling.

"I am not a Wise One yet," she replied pleasantly, shifting her shawl. "If an Aes Sedai like Daniele can do this, so can I. I arranged it this morning, while you still slept, but I have thought of it since you first asked Daniele."

There was enough light now for him to see Dani flush. When she saw him glancing at her, she tripped over nothing, and he had to catch her arm to keep her from falling. Avoiding his eyes, she jerked free. Maybe he would not have to worry about any needles from her. They started uphill through the sparse woods toward the tower.

"They didn't try to stop you? Amys, I mean, or Bair, or Melaine?" He knew they had not. If they had, she would not be there.

Aviendha shook her head, then frowned thoughtfully. "They talked for a long time with Sorilea, then told me to do as I thought I must. Usually they tell me to do as *they* think I must."

Glancing at him sideways, she added, "I heard Melaine say that you bring change to everything."

"I do that," he said, setting his foot on the bottom rung of the first ladder. "The Light help me, that I do."

The Tower was already well-guarded, with Maidens spread throughout the surrounding countryside, and a pair squatting by the ladder. He recognised Nici right away, looking sulkier than usual.

"I would have fought," she said when she caught his eye. "There was no need to keep me back. I would not have joined Couladin, clan or not."

Rand hesitated. It was too close to a thing he didn't like to speak of, especially with women like her. "I know that. I trust you. It's just ... because it's dangerous and I don't want you to get hurt."

He kept his voice low, not wanted the others to hear. The narrow-eyed stare the other guard shot him said that was a wise precaution. He'd expected the same from Nici, but she broke into a shy smile. "Really!?"

"Really." Rand smiled back, but briefly. He ascended the ladder with haste, while telling himself he wasn't fleeing the drama brewing at its foot.

The view from the platform was magnificent even to the naked eye, the land spreading out in wooded hills. The trees were thick enough to hide the Aiel moving toward Cairhien—most would already be in position—but dawn cast the city itself in golden light. Two women already waited on the platform, and *their* naked eyes had no need of glasses. Four golden orbs, shining in the dim light, fixed on Rand.

"Seen anything so far?" he asked.

Raine shook her head, but Ayla pointed towards the distant city. "Look at this. Cowards must have locked the place down after the Shaido charged in. You can taste the fear."

For all the troubles he'd had with them, her low growl felt at odds with the bulky skirts and white blouse of an apprentice Wise One. That change would take a while to get used to, even for him. He couldn't imagine what it was like for her. Leta had taken charge of her training, and presumably been let in on the secrets Raine had shared with Amys and the rest, too.

"Not good. Fear. That's the curse talking," Raine cautioned.

Ayla smiled in the dark. "Being wolfkin is not so much of a curse as you might think."

Rand could not comment on that. "Keep an eye out for trouble," he said, while moving to do the same. A quick scan through one of the looking glasses showed the barren hills along the river placid and seemingly empty of life. That would change soon enough. The Shaido were there, if concealed for now. They would not remain concealed when he began to direct ... What? Not Balefire. Whatever he did, it had to unnerve the Shaido as much as possible before his Aiel attacked.

Dani, Ilyena and Aviendha had been taking turns looking through the other long tube, with pauses for quiet discussion, but now they were simply talking softly. Exchanging nods finally, they moved closer to the railing and stood with their hands on the rough-hewn timber, staring toward Cairhien. Goose bumps suddenly dotted his skin. One of them was channelling, maybe all three.

It was the wind that he noticed first, blowing toward the city. Not a breeze; the first real wind he had felt in this country. And clouds were beginning to form above Cairhien, heaviest to the south, growing thicker and blacker as he watched, roiling. Only there, over Cairhien and the Shaido. Everywhere else as far as he could see, the sky was a clear blue, with only a few high thin white wisps. Yet thunder rolled, long and solid. Suddenly lightning stabbed down, a jagged silver streak that rent a hilltop below the city. Before the crack of the first bolt reached the tower, two more crackled

earthward. Wild forks danced across the sky, but those single lances of brilliant white struck with the regularity of a heartbeat. Abruptly, ground exploded where no lightning had fallen, fountaining fifty feet, then again somewhere else, and again.

Rand had no idea which woman was doing what, but they certainly looked set to harrow the Shaido out. Time to do his bit, or stand watching. Reaching out, he seized *saidin*. Icy fire scoured the outside of the void that surrounded what was Rand al'Thor. Coldly, he ignored the oily filth seeping into him from the taint, juggled wild torrents of the Power that threatened to engulf him.

At this distance, there were limits to what he could do. In fact, it was about as far as he could do anything, really, without *angreal* or *sa'angreal*. Very likely that was why the women were channelling one lightning bolt at a time, one explosion; if he was at his boundary, they must be stretching theirs.

A memory slid across the emptiness. Not his; Lews Therin's. For once he did not care. In an instant he channelled, and a ball of fire enveloped the top of a hill nearly five miles away, a churning mass of pale yellow flame. When it faded, he could see without the looking glass that the hill was lower now, and black at the crest, seemingly melted. Between the four of them, there might be no need for the clans to fight Couladin at all.

*Ilyena, my love, forgive me!*

The void trembled; for an instant Rand teetered on the brink of destruction. Waves of the One Power crashed through him in a froth of fear; the taint seemed to solidify around his heart, a reeking stone.

Clutching the rail until his knuckles ached, he forced himself back to calmness, forced the emptiness to hold. It had not been the pale-haired Volsuni nearby whose face had suddenly filled his vision. It had not been her at all. Thereafter he refused to listen to the thoughts in his head. Instead he concentrated everything on channelling, on methodically searing one hill after another.

\* \* \*

Standing well back into what treeline there was on the crest, Mat held Pips' nose under his arm so the gelding would not whicker as he watched a thousand or so Aiel slanting toward him across the hills from the south. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, stretching long rippling shadows to one side of the trotting mass. The night's warmth was already beginning to give way to the heat of day. The air would swelter once the sun reached any height. He was already beginning to sweat.

The Aiel had not seen him yet, but he had few doubts that they would if he waited there much longer. It hardly mattered that they very nearly had to be Rand's men—if Couladin had men to the south, the day was going to get very interesting for those stupid enough to be in the middle of the fighting—hardly mattered because he was not going to run the risk of letting them see him. He had already come too close to an arrow this morning for that kind of carelessness. Absently he fingered the neat slice across the shoulder of his coat. Good shooting, at a moving target only half-seen through trees. He could have admired it more had he not been the target.

Without taking his eyes from the approaching Aiel, he carefully backed Pips deeper into the sparse thicket; if they saw him and picked up their pace, he wanted to know. People said Aiel could run down a man on horseback, and he meant to have a good lead if they tried.

Not until the trees hid them from him did he quicken his own step, leading Pips onto the reverse slope before mounting and turning west. A man could not be too careful if he wanted to stay alive on this day and this ground. He muttered to himself as he rode, hat pulled low to shade his face and black-hafted spear across his pommel. West. Again.

The day had begun so well, a good two hours before first light, when Melindhra had gone off to some meeting of the Maidens. Thinking him asleep, she had not glanced at him as she stalked out muttering half under her breath about Rand al'Thor and honour and "*Far Dareis Mai* above all." She sounded as if she were arguing with herself, but frankly, he did not care whether she wanted to pickle Rand or stew him. Before she was a minute out of the tent, he was stuffing his saddlebags. No-one had so much as looked at him twice while he saddled Pips and ghosted away to the south. A good beginning. Only he had not counted on columns of Taardad and Tomanelle and every other bloody clan sweeping around to the south. No consolation that it was very close to what he had babbled to

Lan. He wanted to go south, and those Aiel had forced him toward the Alguenya. Toward where the fighting would be.

A mile or two on, he cautiously turned Pips upslope, pausing deep in the scattered trees on the crest. It was a higher hill than most, and he had a good view. This time there were no Aiel in sight, but the column winding along the bottom of the twisting hill valley was almost as bad. Mounted Tairens had the lead behind a knot of colourful lords' banners, with a gap back to a thick, bristling snake of pikemen in the Tairens' dust, and then another to the Cairhienin horse, with their multitude of banners and pennants and *con*. The Cairhienin maintained no order at all, milling about as lords shifted back and forth for conversation, but at least they had flankers out to either side. In any case, as soon as they were past, he had a clear route south. *And I'll not stop until I'm halfway to the bloody Erinin!*

A flicker of movement caught his eye, well ahead of the column below. He would not have seen it except for being so high. None of the riders could have, certainly. Digging his small looking glass from his saddlebags—Kin Tovere liked the dice—he peered toward what he had seen, and whistled softly through his teeth. Aiel, at least as many as the men in the valley, and if they were not Couladin's, they meant to give a nameday surprise, for they were lying low among the dying bushes and dead leaves.

For a moment he drummed fingers on his thigh. Shortly there were going to be some corpses down there. And not many of them Aiel. *None of my affair. I am out of this, out of here, and heading south.* He would wait a bit, then head off while they were all too busy to notice.

This fellow Weiramon—he had heard the grey beard's name yesterday—was a stone fool. No foreguard out, and no scouts, or he'd know what was bloody in store for him. For that matter, the way the hills lay, the way the valley twisted, the Aiel could not see the column, either, only its thin dust rising skyward. They certainly had had scouts to get themselves in place; they could not just be waiting there on the off chance.

Idly whistling “Dance with Jak o' the Shadows”, he put the looking glass back to his eye and studied the hilltops. Yes. The Aiel commander had left a few men where they could signal a warning just before the column entered the killing ground. But even they could not possibly see anything yet. In a few minutes the first Tairens would come in sight, but until then ...

It came as a shock when he heeled Pips to a gallop downslope. *What under the Light am I doing?* Well, he could not just stand by and let them all go their deaths like geese to the knife. He would warn them. That was all. Tell what lay in wait ahead, then he was gone.

The Cairhienin outriders saw him coming before he reached the bottom of the slope, of course, heard Pips' dead-flat charge. Two or three lowered their lances. Mat did not precisely enjoy having a foot and a half of steel pointed at him, and still less three times over, but obviously one man was no threat, even riding like a madman. They let him pass, and he swung in near the lead Cairhienin lords long enough to shout, “Halt here! Now! By order of the Lord Dragon! Else he'll channel your head into your belly and feed you your own feet for breakfast!”

His heels dug in, and Pips sprang ahead. He only glanced back to be sure they were doing what he said—they were, if showing some confusion over it; the hills hid them from the Aiel still, and once their dust settled, the Aiel would have no way of knowing they were there—and then he was lying low on the gelding's neck, whipping Pips with his hat and galloping up alongside the infantry.

*If I wait to let Weiramon pass the orders, it'll be too late. That's all.* He would give his warning and go.

The foot marched in blocks of two hundred or so pikemen, with one mounted officer in the front of each and maybe fifty archers or crossbowmen at the rear. Most looked at him curiously as he dashed by, Pips' heels kicking up spurts of dust, but none broke stride. Some of the officers' mounts frisked as if the riders wanted to come see what had him in such a hurry, but none of them left their places either. Good discipline. They would need it.

Defenders of the Stone brought up the tail end of the Tairens, in their breastplates and puffy black-and-gold-striped coatsleeves, plumes of various colours on the rimmed helmets marking officers and underofficers. The rest were armoured the same, but bore the colours of various lords on their sleeves. The silk-coated lords themselves rode at the very front in ornate breastplates and large white plumes, their banners rippling behind them in a rising breeze toward the city.

Reining around in front of them so quickly that Pips danced, Mat shouted, “Halt, in the name of the Lord Dragon!”

It seemed the fastest way to stop them, but for a moment he thought they meant to ride right over him. Almost at the last moment, a young lord he remembered from outside Rand's tent flung up a hand, and then they were all drawing rein in a flurry of shouted orders that ran back along the column. Weiramon was not there; not a lord was as much as ten years older than Mat.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the fellow who had signalled. Dark eyes glared arrogantly down a sharp nose, chin lifted so his pointed beard looked ready to stab. Sweat trickling down his face spoiled it only a little. "The Lord Dragon himself gave me this command. Who are you to—?"

He cut off as another man Mat knew caught his sleeve, whispering urgently. Potato-faced Estean looked haggard beneath his helmet as well as hot—the Aiel had wrung him out concerning conditions in the city, so Mat had heard—but he had gambled at cards with Mat in Tear. He knew exactly who Mat was. Estean's breastplate alone had chips in the ornate gilding; none of the others had done more than ride around looking pretty. Yet.

Sharp-nose's chin came down as he listened, and when Estean left off, he spoke in a more moderate tone. "No offense intended ... ah ... Lord Mat. I am Melanril, of House Asegora. How may I serve the Lord Dragon?" Moderation slipped into actual hesitation at that last, and Estean broke in anxiously.

"Why should we 'halt'? I know the Lord Dragon told us to hold back, Mat, but burn my soul there's no honour in sitting and letting the Aiel do all the fighting. Why should we be saddled with chasing them after they're broken? Besides, my father is in the city, and ..." He trailed off under Mat's stare.

Mat shook his head, fanning himself with his hat. The fools were not even where they should be. There was no chance of turning them back, either. If Melanril would go—and looking at him, Mat was not sure he would, even on supposed orders from the Lord Dragon—there was still no chance. He sat his saddle in plain sight of the Aiel lookouts. If the column started turning around, they would know themselves discovered, and very likely they would attack while the Tairens and the Cairhienin pike were tangled up. It would be a slaughter as surely as if they had gone ahead in ignorance.

"Where is Weiramon?"

"The Lord Dragon sent him back to Tear," Melanril replied slowly. "To deal with the Illianer pirates, and the bandits on the Plains of Maredo. He was reluctant to go, of course, even for so great a responsibility, but ... Pardon, Lord Mat, but if the Lord Dragon sent you, how is it that you don't know—"

Mat cut him off. "I am no lord. And if you want to question what Rand lets people know, ask him." That set the fellow back; he was not about to question the Lord bloody Dragon about anything. Weiramon was a fool, but at least he was old enough to have been in a battle. Except for Estean, looking like a sack of turnips tied on his horse, all this lot had seen was a tavern fight or two. And maybe a few duels. Fat lot of good that would do them. "Now, you all listen to me. When you pass through that gap ahead between the next two hills, Aiel are going to come down on you like an avalanche."

He might as well have told them there was going to be a ball, with the women all sighing to meet a Tairen lordling. Eager grins broke out, and they started dancing their horses about, slapping each other on the shoulder and boasting how many they would kill. Estean was odd man out, just sighing and easing his sword in its scabbard.

"Don't stare up there!" Mat snapped. The fools. In a minute they would be calling the charge. "Keep your eyes on me. On me!"

It was who he was friends with that settled them down. Melanril and the others in their fine, unmarked armour frowned impatiently, not understanding why he did not want to let them begin the business of killing Aiel savages. If he had not been Rand's friend they probably would have trampled him and Pips both.

He could let them go charging off. They would do it piecemeal, leaving the pikes and the Cairhienin horse behind, though the Cairhienin might join in once they realized what was happening. And they would all die. The smart thing would be to let them get on with it while he headed in the opposite direction. The only trouble was that once these idiots let the Aiel know they were discovered, those Aiel might decide to do something fancy, like swinging around to take the strung-out fools in the flank. If that happened, there was no certainty that he would get clear.

"What the Lord Dragon wants you to do," he told them, "is to ride ahead slowly, just as if there wasn't an Aiel inside a hundred miles. As soon as the pikes are through the gap, they'll form a hollow square, and you get yourselves inside it double quick."

"Inside!" Melanril protested. Angry mutters rose from the other young lords—except Esteian who looked thoughtful. "There is no honour in hiding behind stinking—"

"You bloody do it," Mat roared, reining Pips close to Melanril's horse, "or if the bloody Aiel don't kill you, Rand will, and whatever he leaves, I'll chop into sausage myself!" This was taking too long; the Aiel had to be wondering what they were talking about by now. "With any luck, you will be set before the Aiel can hit you. If you have horsebows, use them. Otherwise, hold tight. You'll get your bloody charge, and you'll know when, but if you move too early ...!" He could almost feel time running down.

Setting the butt of his spear in his stirrup like a lance, he heeled Pips back down the column. When he glanced over his shoulder, Melanril and the others were talking and peering after him. At least they were not haring up the valley.

The commander of the pikemen proved to be a pale, slender Cairhienin, half a head shorter than Mat and mounted on a grey gelding that looked past ready for the pasture. Daerid had hard eyes, though, an oft-broken nose, and three white scars crisscrossing his face, one of them not very old. He took off his bell-shaped helmet while he talked with Mat; the front of his head was shaved. No lord, he. Maybe he had been part of the army, before the civil war started. Yes, his men knew how to form a hedgehog. He had not faced Aiel, but he had faced brigands, and Andoran cavalry. There was an implication that he had fought other Cairhienin as well, for one of the Houses contesting for the throne. Daerid sounded neither eager nor reluctant; he sounded like a man with a job of work to do.

The column stepped off as Mat turned Pips' head the other way. They marched with a measured pace, and a quick look behind showed the Tairens' horses moving no faster.

He let Pips go a little quicker than a walk, but not much. It seemed he could feel Aiel eyes on his back, feel them wondering what he had said, and where he was going now and why. *Just a messenger who's delivered his message and is going away. Nothing to worry about.* He certainly hoped that was what the Aiel thought, but his shoulders did not untense until he was sure they could no longer see him.

The Cairhienin were still waiting where he had left them. They still had their flankers out, too. Banners and *con* made a thicket where the lords had gathered, one in ten or better of the Cairhienin's number. Most of them wore plain breastplates, and where there was gilt or silverwork, it was battered as though a drunken blacksmith had been at it. Some of their mounts made Daerid's look like Lan's warhorse. Could they even do what was needed? But the faces that turned to him were hard, the gazes harder.

He was in the clear, now, hidden from the Aiel. He could ride on. After telling this lot what was expected of them, anyway. He had sent the others on into the Aiel trap; he could not simply abandon them.

Talmanes of House Delovinde, his *con* three yellow stars on blue and his banner a black fox, was even shorter than Daerid and had three years on Mat at most, but he led these Cairhienin although there were older men and even grey hair present. His eyes held as little expression as Daerid's, and he looked like a coiled whip. His armour and sword were utterly plain. Once he had told Mat his name the man listened quietly while Mat laid out his plan, leaning a little out of the saddle to cut lines in the ground with the sword-bladed spear.

The other Cairhienin lords gathered round on their horses, watching, but none so sharply as Talmanes. Talmanes studied the map he drew, and studied him from boots to hat, even his spear. When he was done, the fellow still did not speak, until Mat barked, "Well? I don't care whether you take it or leave it, but your friends will be hip-deep in Aiel in not much longer."

"The Tairens are no friends of mine. And Daerid is ... useful. Certainly not a friend." Dry chuckles ran through the onlooking lords at the suggestion. "But I will lead one half, if you lead the other."

Talmanes pulled off one steel-backed gauntlet and put out his hand, but for a moment Mat only stared at it. Lead? Him? *I'm a gambler, not a soldier. A lover.* Memories of battles long gone spun through his head, but he forced them down. All he had to do was ride on. But then maybe Talmanes would leave Esteian and Daerid and the rest to roast. On the spit Mat had hung them from.

Even so, it was a surprise to him when he grasped the other's hand and said, "You just be there when you're supposed to be."

For reply Talmanes began calling off names in a quick voice. Lords and lordlings reined toward Mat, each followed by a bannerman and perhaps a dozen retainers, until he had four hundred odd of the Cairhienin. Talmanes did not have much to say after, either; he just led the remainder west at a trot, trailing a faint cloud of dust.

"Keep together," Mat told his half. "Charge when I say charge, run when I say run, and don't make any noise you don't have to." There was the creak of saddles and the thud of hooves as they followed him, of course, but at least they did not talk, or ask questions.

A last glimpse of the other bristle of bright banners and *con*, and then a twist in the shallow valley hid them. How had he gotten into this? It had all started so simply. Just give warning and go. Each step after had seemed so small, so necessary. And now he had waded waist deep into the mud, and no choice but to keep on. He hoped Talmanes meant to show up. The man had not even asked who he was.

The hill valley twisted and forked as he angled north, but he had a good sense of direction. For instance, he knew exactly which way lay south and safety, and it was not the way he was heading. Dark clouds were forming up there toward the city, the first he had seen so thick in a long time. Rain would break the drought—good for the farmers, if any remained—and settle the dust—good for horsemen, so they did not announce themselves too early. Maybe if it rained, the Aiel would give up and go home. The wind was beginning to pick up, too, bringing a little cool, for a wonder.

The sound of fighting drifted over the crests, men shouting, men screaming. It had begun.

Mat turned Pips, raised his spear and swung it right and left. He was almost surprised when the Cairhienin formed into one long line to either side of him, facing upslope. The gesture had been instinctive, from another time and place, but then, these men had seen fighting. He started Pips up through the scattered trees at a slow walk, and they kept pace to the quiet jangle of bridles.

His first thought on reaching the height was relief at seeing Talmanes and his men coming into sight on the crest across from him. His second was to curse.

Daerid had formed the hedgehog, spiny thickets of pikes four deep interspersed with bowmen to make a large hollow square. Long pikes made it difficult for the Shaido to get close, however they rushed in, and the archers and crossbowmen were exchanging shots hot and fast with the Aiel. Men were falling on both sides, but the pikes simply closed in when one of their number went down, making the square tighter. Of course, the Shaido did not appear to slacken their assault either.

The Defenders were dismounted in the centre, and maybe half the Tairen lords with their retainers. Half. That was what made him want to curse. The rest dashed about among the Aiel slashing and stabbing with sword and lance in knots of five or ten, or alone. Dozens of riderless horses told how well they were doing. Melanril was off with only his bannerman, laying about with his blade. Two Aiel darted in to neatly hamstring the lordling's horse; it fell, head flailing—Mat was sure it screamed, but the din swallowed it—and then Melanril vanished behind *cadin'sor*-clad figures, spears stabbing. The bannerman lasted a moment longer.

*Good riddance*, Mat thought grimly. Standing in his stirrups, he raised the sword-bladed spear high, then swept it forward, shouting, "*Los! Los caba'drin!*"

He would have had the words back if he could, and not because they were Old Tongue; it was a boiling cauldron down in the valley. But whether or not any of the Cairhienin understood a command of "horsemen forward" in the Old Tongue, they understood the gesture, especially when he dropped back into his saddle and dug in his heels. Not that he really wanted to, but he could not see any choice now. He had put those men down there—some might have gotten away if he had told them to turn and run—and he just did not have a choice.

Banners and *con* waving, the Cairhienin charged downhill with him, shouting battle cries. In imitation of him, no doubt, though what he was shouting was "Blood and bloody ashes!" Across the valley, Talmanes raced down just as hard.

Sure that they had all the wetlanders penned, the Shaido never saw the others until crashed into from behind on both sides. It was then that the lightning began to fall. And after that things really got hairy.

## CHAPTER 76: *The Lesser Sadness*



Rand's shirt clung to him with the sweat of effort, but he kept his coat on for protection from the wind gusting toward Cairhien. The sun had at least another hour to reach its noonday peak, yet already he felt as if he had run all morning and been beaten with a club at the finish. Wrapped in the void, he was only distantly aware of the weariness, dimly perceiving the ache in arms and shoulders, in the small of his back, a throb around the tender scar in his side. That he was aware of them at all told the story. With the Power in him, he could make out individual leaves on the trees at a hundred paces, but whatever happened to him physically should have been as if it were happening to someone else.

He had long since taken to drawing on *saidin* through the *angreal* in his pocket, the stone carving of the fat little man. Even so, working the Power was a strain now, weaving it at this distance of miles, but only the rancid threads streaking what he drew kept him from pulling more, from trying to pull it all to him. The Power was that sweet, taint or no. After hours of channelling without rest, he was that tired. At the same time, he had to fight *saidin* itself harder, to put more of his strength into keeping it from burning him to ash where he stood, from burning his mind to ash. It was ever more difficult to hold off *saidin*'s destruction, more difficult to resist the desire to draw more, more difficult to handle what he did draw. A nasty downward spiral, and hours to go before the battle was decided.

Wiping sweat from his eyes, he gripped the platform's rough railing. He was near the brink, yet he was stronger than Dani, Ilyena or Aviendha. All three looked as worked out as he felt. The Aiel woman was standing, peering off toward Cairhien and the storm clouds, occasionally bending to stare through the long looking glass; Ilyena sat cross-legged, leaning back against an upright still covered in grey bark, her eyes closed. Dani sat with her head against her knees, her face a sickly pallor.

Before he could do anything—not that he knew what; he had no skill at Healing—Dani waved him off tiredly. “I’ll be fine. I just can’t channel as strongly as the rest of you. Ilyena can pick up the slack.”

The Volsuni’s eyes opened on hearing her name. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dani. I wish it was deserved,” she said before climbing to her feet. She exchanged a few quiet words with Aviendha that the wind snatched away from even his *saidin*-enhanced hearing. Then Aviendha sat down in Ilyena’s place and let her head fall back against the upright. The black clouds around the city continued to stab lightning, but they were wild forks far more often than single lances now.

So they were taking turns, giving each other a rest. It would have been nice to have someone do that with him, but he did not regret telling Asmodean to stay in his tent. He would not have trusted him to channel. Especially not now. Who could say what he would have done when he saw Rand weakened as he was?

Staggering slightly, Rand pulled his looking glass around to study the hills outside the city. Life was certainly visible there now. And death. Wherever he looked there was fighting, Aiel against Aiel, a thousand here, five thousand there, swarming over the treeless hills and too closely meshed for him to do anything. He could not find the column of horse and pike.

Three times he had seen them, once fighting twice their number of Aiel. He was certain they were still out there. Small hope that Melanril had decided to obey his orders at this late juncture. Choosing the man just because he had had the grace to be embarrassed by Weiramon’s behaviour had been a mistake, but there had been little time to make a choice, and he had had to get rid of Weiramon. Nothing to be done about it now. Maybe one of the Cairhienin could be put in command. If even his direct order would make the Tairens follow a Cairhienin.

A milling mass right at the city’s high grey wall caught his eye. Tall ironbound gates stood open, Aiel battling horsemen and spearmen almost in the open while folk tried to close the gates, tried and failed because of the press of bodies. Horses with empty saddles and armoured men unmoving on the ground half a mile from the gate marked where the sortie had been driven back. Arrows rained down from the walls, and head-sized chunks of rubble—even occasional spears slashing down with enough force to spit two men, or three, though he still could not see from where exactly—but the Aiel

were going over their dead, ever closer to forcing their way in. A quick scan showed him two more columns of Aiel trotting toward the gates, perhaps three thousand all told. He did not doubt that they were Couladin's as well.

He was aware of grinding his teeth. If the Shaido got inside Cairhien, he would never drive them north. He would have to dig them out street by street; the cost in lives would dwarf the number of those already dead, and the city itself would end a ruin like Eianrod, if not Taien. Cairhienin and Shaido were mingled like ants in a bowl, but he had to do something.

Taking a deep breath, he channelled. The two women had set the conditions, bringing the storm clouds; he did not need to be able to see their weavings to take advantage of them. Stark silver-blue lightning struck into the Aiel, once, twice, again, as fast as a man could clap.

Rand jerked his head up, blinking away the burning lines that still seemed to cross his sight, and when he looked through the long tube again, Shaido lay like cut barley all around where the bolts had fallen. Men and horses thrashed on the ground closer to the gates, too, and some did not move at all, but the uninjured were dragging the injured and the gates were beginning to close.

*How many won't make it back inside? How many of my own did I kill?* The cold truth was that it did not matter. It had had to be done, and it was done.

"Messenger," Ayla said. There was no-one there when he turned, but a few moments later a head popped up from the open trap. Only the eyes showed past the *shoufa* and veil, but Rand recognised him before he spoke.

"I see you, Jarasai. What word from Rhuarc?"

Instead of answering, Jarasai looked over the women gathered on the platform with them. "You must have been having fun."

Aviendha and the other two were too tired to bother with him, but Ayla's glare was hot enough to pick up their slack. Rand didn't care for such boasting at the best of times, and these were hardly they. He turned back to his looking glass, and the devastation unfolding below. "Not even a little bit. What word?"

"The 'word' ... dumb wetlanders ... is that Couladin is losing. Which makes it the perfect environment for someone to become a hero."

Raine called his name, but Rand was already moving. He didn't bother going for the sword, or trying to channel. Knife or spear? Spear. The momentum of his spin made it easier to deflect and lean away but he still felt the steel slice through coat and shirt and skin, damaging his left shoulder. He was icy cold in the void. He trapped the arm that held the spear, knowing that the knife would follow in the other hand, its point bound for his exposed stomach. If he let it. Left arm was unreliable. He swept the feet instead, trusting the fall to interrupt the fatal stab. Elbow jab to temple. Enough to loosen grip? Yes. He snatched the spear from Jarasai's hand and stabbed down. His would-be assassin tried to roll away, but that only meant that the spear missed his heart and took him in the gut instead.

It had all happened in seconds. Raine was still several feet away, knives in hand, a snarl marring her pretty face. Ayla had a knife out, too, though Wise Ones and their apprentices were not supposed to take part in any fighting. It was Aviendha who spoke.

"You are Taardad! You betray us for the Shaido? The *Shaido*!?" From the look on her face, Jarasai should have been wishing Rand hadn't missed.

"Lucky ... bastard," he said, coughing blood. "Getting everything handed to you. Girls. Fame. Glory. Even this. *Ta'veren*. That is the only reason you ... you ..."

There was a deeper cold, beyond the void. It crept into Rand's voice. "That's your motive? Then I won't be polite. It wasn't luck. You just aren't very good."

That seemed to pain him more than the spear in his belly did. "Where is your honour?" Aviendha asked, but of him, not Rand.

"My honour is great!" Jarasai said through gritted teeth. "I should have been a hero, but I could not, because of all those restrictions! They keep strong men down, in this world of weaklings. We are supposed to just give up on a hot girl because someone else took her first? Not kill someone because they are a shithead? Hah, could it be any more fucked up? But Couladin has freed us."

Rand had heard enough. While Aviendha voiced her condemnations, he turned his attention to other matters. Ayla and Dani were fussing over Rand's shoulder, pulling at the ruined fabric and peering close, while Ilyena hovered nearby. He would have demanded she step back if she'd tried to Heal him—they needed her strength more elsewhere—but Ilyena didn't need to have that pointed out.

The wound didn't look too deep; it was just the bleeding that was the problem. He couldn't afford to be passing out from blood loss. "Just burn it closed," he said.

"I will not!" Dani snapped. "You could end up crippled."

He shook his head. "I'll get a proper Healing later, assuming we win. We can't afford to be wasting our strength."

"You mean my strength," Ilyena said. "You look ready to fall over."

Rand refused to point out that he'd been doing the work of three. It would have been petty as well. But Light it was tempting!

"I think the two of you should leave Rand alone!" said a scowling Raine. "Just because he's properly appreciative of the stakes, and the two of you are immature oafs, doesn't mean—"

"Oafs? Oafs!? Why you little suckup," Dani said, fists planted firmly on hips.

Ilyena managed to raise her chin so high even Elayne would have been proud. "Just because she's known him longer, she thinks she can act the big woman. Little girl, you do not know who you are playing with."

"Um ... my shoulder? Hello?" The three gave over glaring at each other long enough to glare at him. It was not much of an improvement, but at least it didn't last long. While Dani glared at Rand's wound instead, Ilyena turned cold eyes on the injured Aielman. "I take it there is to be no Healing for this one?"

The wound would be lethal without it. And her energy was better used elsewhere, instead of being wasted on such a petty man. "No. His dream is over," Rand said. He drew his sword, and struck quickly, interrupting Jarasai's last words. This time, he did not miss.

It troubled him. Not the killing, not even killing someone he'd known. The reason. How many of the other Aiel who'd gone over to Couladin thought the same? How many revelled in the cruelty he'd unleashed on people who were "just wetlanders", who didn't follow *ji'e'toh*, and so were not protected by it? He feared they would not stop, even if they lost here. Rand still hoped to talk the Shaido down—the remaining Shaido, once Couladin was dealt with. But these others, the ones who had given in to the bleakness ... He had no solution for them, other than ...

He turned away from the body, and back to his work. Trying to sheathe the blade was made awkward by Dani's closeness, and her grasping hands. "Fine! I'll do it. Just hold still, burn you!"

Rand was on the verge of saying something cheeky, but a sudden searing pain stilled his tongue. Even with the void making everything feel distant, he came close to crying out. He could smell his own flesh cooking disturbingly well. It was a relief to see the two wolfsisters move away rather than towards him.

Distantly he felt his knees wobbling. He would have to pace himself if he was to last the rest of the day. No more laying about him everywhere; he had to spot where he was particularly needed, where he could make a—

The storm clouds were massed only over the city and the hills to the south, but that did not stop lightning from slashing out of the clear, cloudless sky above the tower, flashing down into the gathered Maidens below with a deafening crack.

Hair lifting with the tingle in the air, Rand stared. He could feel that bolt in another way, feel the weaving of *saidin* that had made it. *So Asmodean was tempted even back in the tents.*

There was no time for thought, though. Like rapid beats on a giant drum, bolt followed bolt, marching through the Maidens until the last struck the base of the tower in an explosion of splinters the size of arms and legs.

As the tower slowly began to slant over, Rand threw himself at Dani and Ilyena. Somehow he managed to scoop them both into one arm, then wrap the other around an upright on what was now the upslope side of the platform. He saw Raine hop clear of the tower. Ayla tried to do the same but her skirts hindered her and she fell from sight. *Aviendha!* She was sliding away from him. That could never be allowed. He channelled desperately. What his hands could not do, a rope of Air could, yanking her towards him. Her arms locked around his neck. She stared at him wide-eyed, mouth coming open, but there was no more time for speaking than for thinking. The shattered log tower toppled, crashing through the branches of the trees. For an instant he believed they might cushion the fall.

With a snap, the upright he clung to broke off. The ground came up and knocked all the breath out of him a heartbeat before the women came down on top of him. Darkness rolled in.

He regained consciousness slowly. Hearing returned first.

"... have dug us up like a boulder and sent us rolling downhill in the night." It was Aviendha's voice, low, as if she spoke for her own ears. There was something moving on his face. "You have taken away what we are, what we were. You must give us something in return, something to be. We need you." The moving thing slowed, touched more softly. "I need you. Not for myself, you will understand. For Elayne. What is between her and me now is between her and me, but I will hand you to her. I will. If you die, I will carry your corpse to her! If you die—!"

His eyes popped open, and for a moment they stared at each other almost nose to nose. Her hair was all in disarray, her head scarf gone, and a purple lump marred her cheek. She straightened jerkily, folding a damp cloth stained with blood, and began dabbing at his forehead with considerably more force than before.

"I've no intention of dying," he told her, though in truth he was not sure of that at all. The void and *saidin* were gone, of course. Just thinking of losing them as he had made him shiver; it was pure luck that *saidin* had not scoured his mind blank in that last instant. Just thinking of seizing the Source again made him groan. Without the void for buffer, he felt every ache, every bruise and scrape, to the fullest. He was so tired he could have dropped off to sleep at once if he had not hurt so much. As well he did hurt, then, because he surely could not sleep. Not for a long time yet.

Sliding a hand beneath his coat, he touched his side, then surreptitiously wiped the blood off his fingers onto his shirt before bringing the hand out again. No wonder that a fall like that had broken open the half-healed, never-healed wound. He did not seem to be bleeding too badly, but if the Maidens saw it, or Dani, or even Aviendha, he might have a fight to keep from being hauled off to Moiraine for Healing. He had too much to do yet for that—being Healed on top of everything else would act on him like a cudgel to the temple—and besides, there must be far worse hurt than what he suffered for her to deal with.

Grimacing, suppressing another groan, he got to his feet with only a little help from Aviendha. And promptly forgot about his injuries.

Sulin sat on the ground nearby, with Dani bandaging a bloody split in her scalp and muttering fiercely at herself because she did not know how to Heal, but the white-haired Maiden was not the only casualty, and not the worst by far. Everywhere *cadin'sor*-clad women were covering the dead with blankets, and tending those who had merely been burned, if "merely" could be used for lightning burns. The red streak across Ani's face made her dead white eyes all the more noticeable. Rand had only a moment to register the horror of that, however, for Ilyena was there. At her touch, the red receded and colour returned to the Maiden's eyes. Ani shuddered in relief, Ilyena in exhaustion. He doubted she had another Healing left in her. Except for Dani's grumbling, the hilltop lay in near silence, even the injured women quiet save for hoarse breathing.

The log tower, all but unrecognizable now, had not spared the Maidens in its fall, breaking arms and legs, tearing open gashes. He watched as a blanket was laid over the face of a Maiden with red-gold hair almost the shade of Elayne's, head twisted at an unnatural angle and glazed eyes staring. Jolien. One of those who first crossed the Dragonwall to search for He Who Comes With the Dawn. She had gone to the Stone of Tear for him. And now she was dead. For him. He saw Alisha and Osana not far from her, they who had been all smiles and enthusiastic touches not so long ago. Only Alisha stood, and there was no smile as she stared down at her friend's corpse. There was Zoe, who hadn't much cared for him. Dermin, who might have cared more than he'd realised; he'd never know now. *Oh, you've done well at keeping the Maidens from harm*, he thought bitterly. *Very well indeed*. At least Nici was up and about, with nary a scratch on her somehow. He saw many other familiar faces, blessedly alive, but not ...

"Where is Raine?" he asked, alarmed.

Aviendha face showed little of her thoughts. "Raine Cinclare is unharmed. She got clear and landed well. She is nimble, for a wetlander. You care for her." Rand said nothing, sure any words he spoke would just make things worse. After a moment, she nodded and went on. "Ayla's leg is broken. She and Lidya will tend her until she can be brought to the Wise Ones. All the casualties were down below."

Rand gritted his teeth. And so many casualties at that. He could still feel the lightning, or rather the residue of its making. Almost like the after-image burned into his eyes earlier, he could

trace the weave, though it was fading. To his surprise, it led west, not back toward the tents. Not Asmodean, then.

“Sammael.” He was sure of it. Sammael had sent that attack in the Jangai, Sammael was behind the pirates and the raids in Tear, and Sammael had done this. His lips peeled back in a snarl, and his voice was a harsh whisper. “Sammael!” He did not realize he had taken a step until Aviendha seized his arm.

A moment later, Dani had the other, the pair of them clinging to him as if they meant to root him to the spot. “Do not be a complete fool,” Dani said, matching him glare for glare. Her dress was dirty and torn, and one of her braids had come undone, but she looked uninjured. “Whoever did this, why do you think he waited so long, until you must be tired? Because if he missed killing you, and you went after him, you would be easy meat. You can barely stand on your own!”

Aviendha was no readier to let go, meeting his stare with a flat one of her own. “You are needed here, Rand al’Thor. Here, *Car’a’carn*. Does your honour lie with killing this man, or here with those you have brought to this land?”

A young Aiel man came running up through the Maidens, *shoufa* around his shoulders, spears and buckler swinging easily. If he thought it odd to find two women holding Rand between them, he gave no hint of it. He eyed the shattered remnants of the tower and the dead and wounded with a slight curiosity, as though wondering how it might have happened and where the enemy dead might be. Grounding his spearpoints in front of Rand, he said, “I am Seirin, of the Shorara sept of the Tomanelle.”

“I see you, Seirin,” Rand replied just as formally. Not easy with a pair of women holding him as if they thought he might run.

“Han of the Tomanelle sends word to the *Car’a’carn*. The clans to the east are moving toward each other. All four. Han means to join with Dheanic, and he has sent to Erim to join them.”

Rand drew a measured breath, and hoped the women thought his grimace was for the news; his side burned, and he could feel blood spreading slowly down his shirt. So there would be nothing to force Couladin north when the Shaido broke. If they broke; they had given no evidence of it yet that he had seen. Why were the Miagoma and the others joining together? If they meant to come against him they were only giving warning. But if they meant to come against him, Han and Dheanic and Erim would be outnumbered, and if the Shaido held long enough and the four clans broke through ...

Across the wooded hills he could see that it had begun to rain over the city now that Aviendha and the others were not holding the clouds. That would hamper both sides. Unless the women were in better shape than they looked, they might be unable to regain control from this distance.

“Tell Han to do what he must to keep them off our backs.”

Young as he was—he was about Rand’s age, come to that—Seirin raised an eyebrow in surprise. Of course. Han would not do differently, and Seirin knew it. He waited only long enough to make certain that Rand had no further message; then he was off and running downhill, just as fast as he had come. No doubt he hoped to get back without missing any more of the fighting than he had to. For that matter, it might already have begun, there to the east.

“I need someone to fetch Jeade’en,” Rand said as soon as Seirin had dashed off. If he tried to walk that far, he really would need the women to hold him up. The two of them looked nothing alike, yet they managed practically identical suspicion. Those frowns must have been one of the things every girl was taught by her mother. “I am not going after Sammael.” Not yet. “I have to get closer to the city, though.” He nodded to the fallen tower; that was the only gesture available with them hanging on. Master Tovere might be able to salvage the lenses from the looking glasses, but there were not three logs of the tower unbroken. No more observing everything from on high today.

Dani was plainly uncertain, but Aviendha barely paused before asking a young Maiden to go to the *gai’shain*. To fetch Brightwind, too, which he had not counted on. Dani began brushing herself off, muttering under her breath at the dust, and Aviendha had found an ivory comb and another scarf somewhere. Despite the fall, somehow they already looked considerably less dishevelled than he. Weariness still marked their faces, but as long as they could channel at all, they would be useful.

That gave him pause. Did he ever think of anyone now except as to how useful they were? He should be able to keep them as safe as they had been atop the tower. Not that the tower had been very safe, as it turned out, but this time he would manage things better.

"Can you manage without the rest you need?" Dani asked, as if hearing his thoughts. He nodded curtly. "Okay, if you fall, I'll be there to catch you." Aviendha was studying her, and when Dani noticed she returned a matching curiosity.

Sulin stood as he approached, a pale cap of *algode* bandage covering the top of her head, her hair a white fringe below.

"I am moving nearer the city," he told her, "where I can see what is happening, and maybe do something about it. Everyone who is injured is to remain here, along with enough others to protect them if need be. Make it a strong guard, Sulin; I only need a handful with me, and it's poor repayment for the honour the Maidens have shown me if I let their wounded be slaughtered." That should hold the greater part of them away from the fighting. He himself would have to stay clear to keep the rest out, but the way he felt, that would be no burden. "I want you to stay here, and—"

"I am not one of the injured," she said stiffly, and he hesitated, then nodded slowly.

"Very well." He had no doubt that her injury was serious, but neither did he doubt that she was tough. And if she stayed, he might be stuck with someone like Enaila leading his guard. Being treated like a brother was nowhere near as annoying as being treated like a son, and he was in no mood to put up with the latter. "But I trust you to see that no-one follows who *is* injured, Sulin. I will have to keep moving. I can't afford anyone who will slow me down or must be left behind."

She nodded so quickly that he was convinced she would make any Maiden with as much as a scratch remain behind. Except herself, of course. This was one time he felt no guilt over using someone. The Maidens had chosen to carry the spear, but they had chosen to follow him, too. Maybe "follow" was not precisely the word, considering some of the things they did, but that did not change anything, to his mind. He would not, he could not, order a woman to her death, and that was that. In truth, he had expected some sort of protest before this. He was only grateful that it had not come. *I must be more subtle than I think.*

Two pale-robed *gai'shain* arrived leading Jeade'en and Brightwind, and behind them followed a crowd of others, arms full of bandages and ointments and over their shoulders bulging water bags in layers, under the direction of Sorilea and a dozen other Wise Ones whom he had met. At most he thought he might know the names of half.

Sorilea was very definitely in charge, and she quickly had *gai'shain* and other Wise Ones alike circulating among the Maidens tending wounds. Samara walked with Ilyena, the beautiful young apprentice who trailed her laying hands on whomever the Wise One pointed to. Those that she touched recovered immediately, to Ilyena's complete lack of surprise. Rand wondered how much they had learned by watching, and how much she had taught.

Sorilea eyed Rand and Dani and Aviendha, frowning thoughtfully and pursing her thin lips, obviously thinking that all three looked tossed about enough to need their injuries bathed. That look was enough to send Dani scrambling into the white's saddle with a smile and a nod for the aged Wise One, though if Aiel had been more familiar with riding, Sorilea would have realized that Dani's awkward stiffness was not usual. And it was a measure of Aviendha's condition that she let Dani pull her up behind the saddle without the slightest protest. She smiled at Sorilea, too.

Gritting his teeth, Rand pulled himself into his own saddle in one smooth motion. Aching muscles' protests were buried under an avalanche of pain in his side, as though he had been stabbed anew, and it took a full minute before he could breathe again, but he let none of it show.

Dani reined Brightwind close to Jeade'en, near enough to whisper. "If you cannot mount a horse any better than that, Rand, maybe you should forget about riding at all for a while." Aviendha wore one of those blank Aiel expressions, but her eyes were intent on his face.

"I noticed you mounting, too," he said quietly. "Maybe you ought to stay here and help Sorilea until you feel better." That shut her up, even if it did tighten her mouth. Aviendha gave Sorilea another smile; the old Wise One was still watching.

Rand booted the dapple to a trot downhill. Every step sent a jolt up his side that had him breathing through his teeth, but he had ground to cover, and he could not do it at a walk. Besides, Sorilea's stare had been starting to get on his nerves.

Brightwind joined Jeade'en before he was fifty paces down the overgrown slope, and another fifty brought Sulin and a stream of Maidens, some running to position themselves ahead. More than he had hoped for, but it should not matter. What he had to do would not involve getting very close to the fighting. They could stay back in safety with him.

Seizing *saidin* was an effort in and of itself, even through the *angreal*, and the sheer weight of it seemed to press down on him greater than ever, the taint stronger. At least the void shielded him from his own pain. Somewhat, anyway. And if Sammael tried to play games with him again ...

He quickened Jeade'en's pace. Whatever Sammael did, he still had his own job to do.

\* \* \*

Rain dripped from the brim of Mat's hat, and periodically he had to lower his looking glass and wipe off the end of the tube. The downpour had slackened in the last hour, but the sparse branches overhead gave no shelter at all. His coat was long since soaked, and Pips' ears were down; the horse stood as if not intending to move however Mat thumped his heels.

He did not know for sure what time of day it was. Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, he thought, but the dark clouds had not thinned along with the rain, and they hid the sun where he was. On the other hand, it felt very much like three or four days since he had ridden down to warn the Tairens. He was still not sure why he had done that.

It was southward that he peered, and a way out that he looked for. A way out for three thousand men; easily that many survived yet, though they had no idea what he was up to. They believed he was hunting another fight for them, but three so far were three too many by his book. He thought he could have escaped on his own, now, so long as he kept his eyes open and his wits about him. Three thousand men, however, drew eyes whenever they moved, and they did not move quickly, what with more than half their number afoot. That was why he was on this Light-forsaken hilltop, and why the Tairens and Cairhienin were all jammed into the long, narrow hollow between this hill and the next. If he simply made a break for it ...

Jamming the looking glass back to his eye, he glared south at sparsely wooded hills. Here and there were thickets, some fairly large, but most of the land was scrub or grass even here. He had worked back to the east, using every fold in the ground that would hide a mouse, bringing the column with him out of the treeless terrain and into some proper cover. Out of those bloody lightning strikes and fireballs; he was not sure whether it was worse when they came, or when the earth simply erupted in a roar for no apparent reason. All that effort to find that the battle was shifting with him. He could not seem to get out of the centre of the thing.

*Where's my bloody luck now that I really need it?* He was a pea-brained fool for staying. Just because he had managed to keep the others alive this long did not mean he could keep it up. Soon or late, the dice would come up the Dark One's Eyes. *They're the flaming soldiers. I should leave them to it and ride.*

But he kept searching, scanning the wooded peaks and ridges. They gave cover for Couladin's Aiel as well as for him, but here and there he could make them out. Not all were involved in pitched battles, but every last group was larger than his, every one was between him and safety to the south, and he had no way to tell who was who until it might be too late. The Aiel themselves seemed to know at a glance, but that did him no good.

Some mile or more off, a few hundred *cadin'sor*-clad shapes running eight abreast and heading east topped a rise where half-a-dozen leatherleaf made a poor excuse for a copse. Before the lead runners could start down the other side, a lightning bolt flashed down into their midst, splashing men and earth like a stone thrown into a pond. Pips did not even quiver as the clap reached Mat; the gelding had grown accustomed to closer strikes than that.

Some of the fallen men picked themselves up, limping, and immediately joined those who had kept their feet in a hasty check of the unmoving. No more than a dozen were hauled across shoulders before they all dashed down from the height, back the way they had come. None paused to look at the crater. Mat had watched them learn that lesson; waiting only invited a second silvery lance from the clouds. In moments they were out of sight. Except for the dead.

He swung the looking glass east. There was a look of sunlight a few miles that way. The log tower should have been visible, poking above the trees, but he had not been able to find it in some time. Maybe he was looking in the wrong places. It did not matter. The lightning had to be Rand's work, and all the rest of it as well. *If I can get far enough that way ...*

He would be right back where he started. Even if it was not the pull of *ta'veren* drawing him back, he would have a hard time leaving again once Moiraine found out. And there was Melindhra to

consider. He had never heard of a woman who would not take it askance when a man tried to walk out of her life without letting her know.

As he panned the looking glass slowly, hunting the tower, a slope covered in spaced leatherleaf and paperbark abruptly went up in flames, every tree became a torch at the same instant.

Slowly he lowered the brass-bound tube; he hardly required it to see the fire, and the thick grey smoke already making a thick plume into the sky. He did not need signs to recognize channelling when he saw it, not like that. Had Rand finally tipped over the edge of madness? Or maybe Aviendha had finally had enough of being forced to stay around him. Never upset a woman who could channel; that was a rule Mat seldom managed to follow, but he did try.

*Save the smart mouth for somebody besides yourself*, he thought sourly. He was just trying not to think about the third alternative. If Rand had not finally gone mad, and Aviendha or Moiraine or one of the Wise Ones had not decided to be rid of him, then someone else was taking a hand in the day's business. He could add two twos without getting five. *Sammael*. So much for trying that way out; it was no way out of anything. *Blood and bloody ashes! What has happened to my—?*

A fallen branch cracked under someone's foot behind him, and he reacted without thinking, knees more than reins pulling Pips in a tight circle, sword-bladed spear whipping across from the pommel of his saddle.

Estean almost dropped his helmet, his eyes going wide, as the short blade stopped a breath short of splitting his head for him. The rain had slicked his hair down into his face. Also afoot, Nalesean grinned, partly startled and partly amused at the other young Tairen's discomfort. Square-faced and blocky, Nalesean was the second since Melanril to lead the Tairen cavalry. Talmanes and Daerid were there as well, a pace behind as usual, and blank-faced beneath their bell-shaped helmets, also as usual. The four had left their horses farther back in the trees.

"There are Aiel coming straight for us, Mat," Nalesean said as Mat raised the raven-marked spear upright. "The Light burn my soul if there's a one less than five thousand." He grinned at that, too. "I don't think they know we're here waiting for them."

Estean nodded once. "They are keeping to the valleys and hollows. Hiding from ..." He glanced at the clouds and shivered. He was not the only one to be uneasy about what might come out of the sky; the other three looked up, too. "Anyway, it's plain they mean to go through where Daerid's men are." There was actually a touch of respect in his voice when he mentioned the pikes. Grudging, true, and not very strong, but it was difficult to look down on someone after they had saved your neck a few times. "They will be on top of us before they see us."

"Wonderful." Mat breathed. "That is just bloody wonderful."

He meant it for sarcasm, yet Nalesean and Estean missed the flavour, of course. They looked eager. But Daerid wore as much expression on his scarred face as a rock, and Talmanes lifted an eyebrow at Mat just a fraction, shook his head a hair. That pair knew fighting.

The first encounter with the Shaido had been an even wager at best, one Mat would never have taken if not forced. That all the lightning had shaken the Aiel enough to turn it into a rout changed nothing. Twice more today they had seen action, when Mat discovered himself in a choice of whether to catch or be caught, and neither had come out nearly as well as the Tairens believed. One had been a draw, but only because he had been able to lose the Shaido after they pulled back to regroup. At least they had not come again while he was getting everyone away through the twisting hill valleys. He suspected they had found something else to occupy them; maybe more of that lightning, or fireballs, or the Light knew what. He knew very well what had allowed them to escape their last fight with skins mostly whole. Another bunch of Aiel ploughing into the rear of those fighting him, just in time to keep the pikes from being overrun. The Shaido had decided to withdraw to the north, and the others—he still did not know who—had swung off to the west, leaving him in possession of the field. Nalesean and Estean considered it a clear victory. Daerid and Talmanes knew better.

"How long?" Mat asked.

It was Talmanes who answered. "Half an hour. Perhaps a little more, if grace favours us." The Tairens looked doubtful; they still did not seem to realize how quickly Aiel could move.

Mat had no such illusions. He had already studied the surrounding terrain, but he looked at it again and sighed. There was a very good view from this hill, and the only halfway decent stand of trees within half a mile was right where he sat his saddle. The rest was scrub brush, little as much as

waist-high, dotted with leatherleaf and paperbark and the occasional oak. Those Aiel would surely send scouts up here for a look, and there was no chance at all that even the horsemen could get out of sight before they did. The pikes would be right out in the open. He knew what had to be done—it was catch or be caught again—but he did not have to like it.

He only took a glance, but before he could open his mouth, Daerid said, “My scouts tell me Couladin himself is with this lot. At least, their leader has his arms bare, and shows marks such as the Lord Dragon is said to carry.”

Mat grunted. Couladin, and heading east. If there was any way to step aside, the fellow would run headlong into Rand. That might even be what he was after. Mat realized that he was smouldering, and it had nothing to do with Couladin wanting to kill Rand. The Shaido chief, or whatever the man was, might remember Mat vaguely as somebody hanging about Rand, but Couladin was the reason he was stuck out here in the middle of a battle, trying to stay alive, wondering whether any minute it was going to turn into a personal fight between Rand and Sammael, the kind of fight that might kill everything within two or three miles. *That's if I don't get a spear through the brisket first.* And no more choice about it than had a goose hanging outside the kitchen door. None of it would be so without Couladin.

A pity no-one had killed the man years ago. He certainly gave excuses enough. Aiel seldom let anger show, and when they did, it was cold and tight. Couladin, on the other hand, seemed to flare up two or three times a day, losing his head in a fiery rage as quick as snap a straw. A miracle he was still alive, and the Dark One's own luck.

“Nalesean,” Mat said angrily, “swing your Tairens wide to the north and come in on these fellows from behind. We will be holding their attention, so you ride hard and come down like a barn collapsing.” *So he has the Dark One's luck, does he? Blood and ashes, but I hope mine is back in.*

“Talmanes, you do the same to the south. Move, both of you. We've little time, and it's wasting.”

The two Tairens bowed hastily and dashed for their horses, clapping on their helmets.

Talmanes' bow was more formal. “Grace favour your sword, Mat. Or perhaps I should say your spear.” Then he was gone, too.

Looking up at Mat as the three vanished down the hill, Daerid slashed rain from his eyes with a finger. “So you will stay with the pikes this time. You must not let your anger at this Couladin overcome you. A battle is no place to try fighting a duel.”

Mat barely stopped from gaping. A duel? Him? With Couladin? Was that why Daerid thought he was staying with the foot? He had chosen it because it was safer to be behind the pikes. That was his reason. The whole reason. “Not to worry. I can hold myself in rein.” And he had thought Daerid the most sensible of the whole lot.

The Cairhienin merely nodded. “I thought that you could. You have seen pikes pushed before, and faced a charge or two, I vow. Talmanes gives praises when there are two moons, yet I heard him say aloud that he would follow wherever you led. Some day I would like to hear your story, Andormen. But you are young—under the Light, I mean no disrespect—and young men have hot blood.”

“This rain will keep it cool if nothing else does.” *Blood and ashes!* Were they all mad? Talmanes was praising him? He wondered what they would say if they found out he was only a gambler following bits of memory from men dead a thousand years and more. They would be drawing lots for first chance to spit him like a pig. The lords especially; no-one liked being made to look a fool, but nobles seemed to like it least of all, perhaps because they so often managed it on their own. Well, one way or another, he meant to be miles away when that discovery came. *Bloody Couladin. I'd like to shove this spear down his throat!* Heeling Pips, he started for the opposite slope, where the foot waited below.

Daerid climbed into his own saddle and swung in beside him, nodding as Mat spun out his plan. The bowmen on the slopes, where they could cover the flanks, but lying down, hidden in the brush until the last minute. One man on the crest to signal the Aiel in sight. And the pikes to step off as soon as he did, marching straight out toward the approaching enemy. “As soon as we can see the Shaido, we'll retreat just as fast as we can, almost back to the gap between these two hills, then turn to face them.”

"They will think we wanted to run, realized we could not, and turned at bay like a bear to the hounds. Seeing us less than half their number and fighting only because we must, they should think to roll over us. Can we but hold their attention until the horse comes down on them from behind ..." The Cairhienin actually grinned. "It is using the Aiel's own tactics against them."

"We had better hold their bloody attention." Mat's tone was as dry as he was wet. "To make sure we do—to make sure they don't start putting loops around our flanks—I want a cry raised as soon as you stop the retreat. 'Protect the Lord Dragon'." This time Daerid laughed aloud.

That should bring the Shaido in right enough, especially if Couladin was leading. If Couladin really was leading, if he thought Rand was with the pikes, if the pikes could hold until the horse arrived ... A lot of ifs. Mat could hear those dice rolling in his head again. This was the biggest gamble he had ever taken in his life. He wondered how long it was until nightfall; a man should be able to make his way out in the night. He wished those dice would get out of his head, or else fall so he knew what they showed. Scowling into the rain, he booted Pips on down the hillside.

\* \* \*

Jeade'en stopped on a crest where a dozen trees made a thin topknot, and Rand hunched slightly against the pain in his side. The crescent moon, riding high, cast a pale light, yet even to his *saidin*-amplified vision anything more than a hundred paces distant was featureless shadow. Night swallowed the surrounding hills whole, and he was only intermittently aware of Sulin hovering nearby, and Maidens all around him. But then, he could not seem to keep his eyes more than half open; they felt grainy, and he thought the gnawing pain in his side might be all that held him awake. He did not think of it often. Thought was not only distant now, it was slow.

Was it twice Sammael had attempted his life today, or three times? More? It seemed that he should be able to remember how often someone had tried to kill him. No, not to kill. To bait. *Are you still so jealous of me, Tel Janin? When did I ever slight you, or give you one finger less than your due?*

Swaying, Rand scrubbed a hand through his hair. There had been something odd about that thought, but he could not recall what. Sammael ... No. He could deal with him when ... if ... No matter. Later. Today Sammael was only a distraction from what was important. He might even be gone.

Vaguely it seemed that there had been no attack after ... After what? He recalled countering Sammael's last move with something particularly nasty, but he could not pull the memory to the surface. Not Balefire. *Mustn't use that. Threatens the fabric of the Pattern. Not even for Ilyena? I would burn the world and use my soul for tinder to hear her laugh again.*

He was drifting again, away from what was important.

However long ago the sun had gone down, it had sunk on fighting, lengthening shadows gradually overwhelming the golden-red light, the men killing and dying. Now, vagrant winds still brought distant shouts and screams. Because of Couladin, true, but at the heart of it, because of himself.

For a moment he could not remember his name.

"Rand al'Thor," he said aloud, and shivered, though his coat was damp with sweat. For an instant, that name had sounded strange to him. "I am Rand al'Thor, and I need to ... I need to see."

He had not eaten since morning, but then, the taint on *saidin* drove hunger away. The void quivered constantly, and he hung on to the True Source by his fingernails. It was like riding a bull driven mad by redwort, or swimming naked in a river of fire churned to rapids by jagged boulders of ice. Yet when he was not on the brink of being gored or battered or drowned, it seemed that *saidin* was the only strength left in him. *Saidin* was there, filing at the edges of him, trying to erode or corrode his mind, but ready to be used.

With a jerky nod, he channelled, and something burned high in the sky. Something. A ball of bubbling blue flame that banished shadows in harsh light.

Hills mounded up all around, trees black in the stark illumination. Nothing moved. A faint sound came to him on a gust of wind. Cheering perhaps, or singing. Or maybe he was imagining things; it was so tiny, he could well have been, and it died with the wind.

Suddenly he became aware of the Maidens around him, hundreds of them. Some, including Sulin were staring at him, but many had their eyes squeezed shut. It took him a moment to realize they

were trying to preserve night vision. He frowned, searching. Dani and Aviendha were no longer there. Another long moment passed before he remembered to loose the weave of his channelling and let blackness reclaim the night. A deep blackness to his eyes, now.

"Where are they?" He was vaguely irritated when he had to say who he meant, and just as vaguely aware that he had no reason for it.

"They went to Moiraine Sedai and the Wise Ones at dusk, *Car'a'carn*," Sulin replied, moving closer to Jeade'en. Her short white hair shone in the moonlight. No, her head was bandaged. How could he have forgotten? "A good two hours gone. They know that flesh is not stone. Even the strongest legs can run only so far."

Rand frowned. Legs? They had been riding Brightwind. The woman was making no sense. "I have to find them."

"They are with Moiraine Sedai and the Wise Ones, *Car'a'carn*," she said slowly. He thought she was frowning, too, but it was hard to be sure.

"Not them," he muttered. "Have to find my people. They're still out there, Sulin." Why was the stallion not moving? "Can you hear them? Out there, in the night. Still fighting. I need to help them." Of course; he had to dig his heels into the dapple's ribs. But when he did, Jeade'en only shifted sideways, with Sulin holding on to his bridle. He did not remember that she had been holding the bridle.

"The Wise Ones must speak to you now, Rand al'Thor." Her voice had changed, but he was too weary to say how.

"Can't it wait?" He must have missed the runner with the message. "I must find them, Sulin."

Enaila seemed to spring up on the other side of the stallion's head. "You have found your people, Rand al'Thor."

"The Wise Ones are waiting for you," Sulin added. She and Enaila turned Jeade'en without waiting on his agreement. Maidens crowded in for some reason as they started along a winding way down the side of the hill, faces reflecting moonlight as they stared up at him, so close their shoulders brushed the horse's flanks.

"Whatever they want," he grumbled, "they had best be quick." There was no need for them to be leading the dapple, but it was too much effort to make a fuss over it. He twisted to look back, grunting at the pain in his side; the crest was already swallowed in the night. "I have a lot to do yet. I need to find ..." Couladin. Sammael. The men who were fighting and dying for him. "I need to find them." He was so tired, but he could not sleep yet.

Lamps on poles lit the Wise Ones' encampment, and small fires where kettles of water were hauled away and replaced by white-robed men and women as soon as they began boiling. *Gai'shain* scurried everywhere, and Wise Ones as well, tending the wounded whose numbers swelled the camp. Moiraine was moving slowly down the long lines of those who could not stand, only rarely pausing to lay hands on an Aiel who then thrashed in the throes of being Healed. She swayed whenever she straightened, and Lan hovered behind her as if wanting to hold her up, or expecting to have to. Sulin exchanged words with Adelin and Enaila, too low for Rand to make out, and the younger women ran to speak to the Aes Sedai.

Her self-appointed assistant, Jubes, was with her, bringing water and bandages to those whose injuries Moiraine judged non-critical. Her mouth hung open and her eyes were wide, giving her a permanently shocked expression. That was understandable. He doubted she'd imagined herself treating the wounds of Aiel, not after what had happened to her home. When she saw Adelin coming, and Rand sitting his horse beyond her, the girl's jaw dropped even further and her face darkened.

Despite the numbers of wounded, not all of the Wise Ones were looking after them. Inside a pavilion off to one side, perhaps twenty sat in a circle listening to one standing in the centre. When she sat, another took her place. *Gai'shain* knelt around the outside of the pavilion, but none of the Wise Ones appeared to have any interest in wine, or anything except what they were hearing. Rand thought the speaker was Amys.

To his surprise, Asmodean was also helping out with the wounded, the water bags hanging from each shoulder looking decidedly odd with his dark velvet coat and white lace. Straightening from giving a drink to a man stripped to the waist except for bandages, he saw Rand and hesitated.

After a moment he handed the water bags to one of the *gai'shain* and wove his way through the Maidens toward Rand. They ignored him—they all seemed to be watching Adelin and Enaila

speaking to Moiraine or else eyeing Rand—and his face was tight by the time he had to pause for the solid circle of *Far Dareis Mai* around Jeade'en. They were slow in parting, and did so just enough to let him through to Rand's stirrup.

"I was sure you must be safe. I was sure." From his tone of voice, he had been no such thing. When Rand did not speak, Asmodean shrugged uncomfortably. "Moiraine insisted I carry water. A forceful woman, to not allow the Lord Dragon's bard to ..." Trailing off, he licked his lips quickly. "What happened?"

"Sammael," Rand said, but not in answer. He was just speaking the thoughts that drifted through the void. "I remember when he was first named Destroyer of Hope. After he betrayed the Gates of Hevan, and carried the Shadow down into the Rorn M'doi and the heart of Satelle. Hope did seem to die that day, Culan Cuhan wept. What is wrong?" Asmodean's face had gone as white as Sulin's hair; he only shook his head mutely. Rand peered at the pavilion. Whoever was speaking now, he did not know her. "Is that where they are waiting for me? Then I should join them."

"They will not welcome you yet," Lan said, appearing beside Asmodean, who jumped, "or any man." Rand had not heard or seen the Warder approach either, but he only turned his head. Even that seemed an effort. It seemed to be someone else's head. "They meet with Wise Ones from the Miagoma, the Codarra, the Shiande and the Daryne."

"The clans are coming to me," Rand said flatly. But they had waited long enough to make today bloodier. It never happened like that in the stories.

"So it seems. But the four chiefs will not meet you until the Wise Ones have made their arrangements," Lan added dryly. "Come. Moiraine can tell you more than I of it."

Rand shook his head. "Done is done. I can hear details later. If Han doesn't need to keep them from our backs any longer, then I need him. Sulin, send a runner. Han—"

"It is done, Rand," the Warder said insistently. "All of it. Only a few Shaido remain south of the city. Thousands have been taken prisoner, and most of the rest are crossing the Madaem. Word would have been sent to you an hour ago, had anyone known where you were. You've kept moving. Come and let Moiraine tell you."

"Done? We've won?"

"You have won. Completely."

Rand peered at the men being bandaged, the patient lines awaiting bandages and those leaving with them. The rows that lay almost unmoving. Moiraine was still making her way along those, pausing wearily here and there to Heal. Only a few of the wounded would be here, of course. They would have been coming as they could throughout the day, leaving as and when they could. If they could. None of the dead would be here. *Only a battle lost is sadder than a battle won.* He seemed to remember saying that before, long ago. Perhaps he had read it.

No. There were too many living in his responsibility for him to worry over the dead. *But how many faces will I know, like Jolien's? I will never forget Ilyena, not if all the world burns!*

Frowning, he raised a hand to his head. Those thoughts had seemed to come on top of one another, from different places. He was so tired he could hardly think. But he needed to, needed thoughts that did not slide by almost beyond his reach. He released the Source and the void, and convulsed as *saidin* almost drove him under in that moment of retreat. He barely had time to realize his mistake. With the Power gone, exhaustion and pain crashed down on him.

He was aware of faces turned up to him as he toppled from his saddle, mouths moving, hands reaching to grab him, cushion his fall.

"Moiraine!" Lan shouted, voice hollow in Rand's ears. "He is bleeding badly!"

Sulin had his head cradled in her arms. "Hold on, Rand al'Thor," she said urgently. "Hold on." Asmodean said nothing, but his face was bleak, and Rand felt a trickle of *saidin* flowing into him from the man. Darkness came.

## CHAPTER 77: After the Storm



Sitting on a small boulder jutting from the foot of the slope, Mat winced as he pulled his broad-brimmed hat lower against the midmorning sun. Partly to shield his eyes from the sun. There was another thing he did not want to see, though cuts and bruises reminded him, especially the arrow slash along his temple that the hat pressed against. An ointment from Daerid's saddlebags had stopped the bleeding, there and elsewhere, yet everything still hurt, and most of it stung. That part would grow worse. The heat of the day was just beginning to take hold, but sweat was beading up on his face and already dampening his smallclothes and shirt. Idly he wondered whether autumn would ever come to Cairhien. At least discomfort kept him from thinking how tired he was; even after a night with no sleep he would have lain awake in a feather bed, much less blankets on the ground. Not that he wanted to be anywhere near his tent in any case.

*A fine bloody to-do. Nearly killed, I'm sweating like a pig, I can't find a comfortable place to stretch out, and I don't dare get drunk. Blood and bloody ashes!* He stopped fingering a slice across the chest of his coat—an inch difference, and that spear would have gone through his heart; Light, but the man had been good!—and put that part of it out of his mind. Not that it was easy, with what was going on all around him.

For once the Tairens and Cairhienin did not seem to mind seeing Aiel tents in every direction. There were even Aiel right in the camp, and almost as miraculously, Tairens mingling with Cairhienin among the smoky cook-fires. Not that anyone was eating; the kettles had not been set on the fires, although he could smell meat burning somewhere. Instead, most were as drunk as they could manage on wine, brandy, or Aiel *oosquai*, laughing and celebrating. Not far from where he sat, a dozen Defenders of the Stone, stripped to sweaty shirtsleeves, were dancing to the claps of ten times as many watchers. In a line, with arms around each others' shoulders, they stepped so quickly that it was a wonder none of them tripped or kicked the man next to them. For another circle of onlookers, near a ten-foot pole stuck in the ground—Mat hastily averted his eyes—as many Aielmen, Acavi among them, were doing some kicking of their own. Mat assumed it was a dance; another Aiel was playing the pipes for them. They leaped as high as they could, flung one foot even higher, then landed on that foot and immediately leaped upward again, faster and faster, sometimes spinning like horizontal tops at the height of their leaps, or turning somersaults or backflips. Seven or eight Tairens and Cairhienin sat nursing broken bones from trying it, all the while cheering and laughing like madmen, passing a stone crock of something back and forth. In other places other men were dancing, and maybe singing. It was hard to say, in the din. Without stirring, he could count ten flutes, not to mention twice as many tin whistles, and a skinny Cairhienin in a ragged coat was blowing something that looked part flute and part horn with some odd bits tossed in. And there were countless drums, most of them pots being banged with spoons.

In short, the camp was bedlam and a ball rolled into one. He recognized it, mainly from those memories he could still assign to other men if he concentrated hard enough. A celebration of still being alive. One more time they had walked under the Dark One's nose and survived to tell the tale. One more dance along the razor's edge finished. Almost dead yesterday, maybe dead tomorrow, but alive, gloriously alive, today. He did not feel like celebrating. What good was being alive if it meant living in a cage?

He shook his head as Daerid, Estean and a heavyset red-haired Aiel man he did not know staggered by, holding each other up. Barely audible through the clamour, Daerid and Estean were trying to teach the taller man between them the words to "Dance with Jak o' the Shadows."

*"We'll sing all night, and drink all day,  
and on the girls we'll spend our pay,  
and when it's gone, then we'll away,  
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows."*

The sun-dark fellow showed no interest in learning, of course—he would not unless they convinced him it was a proper battle hymn—but he listened, and he was not the only one. By the time the three passed out of sight in the milling crowd, they had acquired a tail of twenty more, waving dented pewter cups and tarred-leather mugs, all bellowing the tune at the top of their lungs.

*"There're some delight in ale and wine,  
and some in girls with ankles fine,  
but my delight, yes, always mine,  
is to dance with Jak o' the Shadows."*

Mat wished he had never taught any of them the song. The teaching had just kept his mind occupied while Daerid stopped him from bleeding to death; that ointment stung as bad as the gashes themselves had, and Daerid would never make a seamstress jealous with his delicate handling of needle and thread. Only, the song had spread from that first dozen like fire in dry grass. Tairens and Cairhienin, horse and foot, had all been singing it when they returned at dawn.

Returned. Right back to the hill valley where they had started, below the ruin of the log tower, and no chance for him to get away. He had offered to ride ahead, and Talmanes and Nalesean nearly came to blows over who was to provide his escort. Not everyone had become the best of friends. All he needed now was for Moiraine to come asking questions about where he had been and why, nattering at him about *ta'veren* and duty, about the Pattern and Tarmon Gai'don, until his head spun. Doubtless she was with Rand now, but she would get around to him eventually.

He glanced up at the hilltop and the tangle of shattered logs among broken trees. That Cairhienin fellow who had made the looking glasses for Rand was up there with his apprentices, poking about. The Aiel had been full of what happened there. It was definitely past time for him to be gone. The foxhead medallion protected him from women channelling, but he had heard enough from Rand to know a man's channelling was different. He had no interest in finding out whether the thing would shield him from Sammael and his ilk.

Grimacing at darts of pain, he used the black-hafted spear to lever himself to his feet. Around him the celebration went on. If he drifted down to the picket lines now ... He was not looking forward to saddling Pips.

“The hero should not sit without drinking.”

Startled, he jerked around, grunting at the stab of his wounds, to stare at Melindhra. She had a large clay pitcher in one hand, not spears, and her face was not veiled, but her eyes seemed to be weighing him. “Now listen, Melindhra, I can explain everything.”

“What must be explained?” she asked, flinging her free arm around his shoulders. Even with the sudden jolt, he tried to stand straighter; he still was not used to having to look up at a woman. “I knew you would seek your own honour. The *Car'a'carn* casts a great shadow, but no man wishes to spend his life in the shade.”

Closing his mouth hurriedly, he managed a faint, “Of course.” She was not going to try to kill him. “That’s it exactly.” In his relief, he took the pitcher from her, but his gulp turned into a splutter. It was the rawest double-distilled brandy he had ever tasted.

She retrieved the pitcher long enough to take a draw, then sighed gratefully and pushed it back at him. “He was a man of much honour, Mat Cauthon. Better that you had captured him, but even by killing him, you have gained much *ji*. It was well that you sought him out.”

Despite himself, Mat looked at what he had been avoiding, and shivered. A leather cord tied in short flame-red hair held Couladin’s head atop the ten-foot pole near where the Aielmen were dancing. The thing seemed to be grinning. At him.

Sought Couladin out? He had done his best to keep the pikes between him and any of the Shaido. But that arrow had clipped the side of his head, and he was on the ground before he knew it, struggling to get to his feet with the fight raging all around him, laying about him with the raven-marked spear, trying to make it back to Pips. Couladin had appeared as if springing out of air, veiled for killing, but there had been no mistaking those bare arms, entwined with Dragons glittering gold-and-red. The man had been cutting a swath into the pikemen with his spears, shouting for Rand to show himself, shouting that *he* was the true *Car'a'carn*. Maybe he really believed it by then. Mat still

did not know whether Couladin had recognized him, but it had made no difference, not when the fellow decided to carve a hole through him to find Rand. He did not know who had cut off Couladin's head afterward, either.

*I was too busy trying to stay alive to watch*, he thought sourly. And hoping he would not bleed to death. Back in the Theren he had been as fine a hand with a quarterstaff as anyone, and a quarterstaff was not so different from a spear, but Couladin must have been born with the things in his hands. Of course, that skill had not availed the man much in the end. *Maybe I still have a little bit of luck. Please, Light, let it show itself now!*

He was thinking of how to get rid of Melindhra so he could saddle Pips when Talmanes presented himself with a formal bow, hand to heart in the Cairhienin fashion. "Grace favour you, Mat."

"And you," Mat said absently. She was not going to go because he asked. Asking would certainly put a fox in the henyard. Maybe if he told her he wanted to take a ride. They said Aiel could run down horses.

"A delegation came from the city during the night. There will be a triumphal procession for the Lord Dragon, in gratitude from Cairhien."

"Will there?" She had to have duties of some sort. The Maidens were always flocking around Rand; maybe she would be called off for that. Glancing at her though, he did not think he had better count on it. Her wide smile was ... proprietary.

"The delegation was from the High Lord Meilan," Nalesean said, joining them. His bow was just as correct, both hands sweeping wide, but hasty. "It is he who offers the procession to the Lord Dragon."

"Lord Dobraine, Lord Maringil and Lady Colavaere, among others, also came to the Lord Dragon."

Mat pulled his mind back to the moment. Each of the pair was trying to pretend the other of them did not exist—both looking right at him, with never the flicker of an eye toward each other—but their faces were as tight as their voices from the strain, their hands white-knuckled on sword hilts. It would be a cap to everything if they came to blows, and him likely still trying to hobble out of reach when one of them ran him through by accident. "What does it matter who sent a delegation, as long as Rand gets his procession?"

"It matters that you should ask him for our rightful place at the head," Talmanes said quickly. "You slew Couladin, and earned us that place." Nalesean closed his mouth and scowled; plainly he had been about to say the same thing.

"You two ask him," Mat said. "It's none of my affair." Melindhra's hand tightened on the back of his neck, but he did not care. Moiraine would surely not be far from Rand. He was not about to put his neck in a second noose while still trying to think his way out of the first.

Talmanes and Nalesean gaped at him as if he were demented. "You are our battle leader," Nalesean protested. "Our general."

"My bodyservant will polish your boots," Talmanes put in with a small smile that he carefully did not direct at the square-faced Tairen, "and brush and mend your clothes. So you will appear at your best."

Nalesean gave his oiled beard a jerk; his eyes darted halfway to the other man before he could stop them. "If I may offer, I have a good coat I think will fit you well. Gold satin and crimson." It was the Cairhienin's turn to glower.

"General!" Mat exclaimed, holding himself up with the spear haft. "I'm no flaming—! I mean, wouldn't want to usurp your place." Let them figure out which one of them he meant.

"Burn my soul," Nalesean said, "it was your battle skill that won for us, and kept us alive. Not to mention your luck. I've heard how you always turn the right card, but it is more than that. I'd follow you if you had never met the Lord Dragon."

"You are our leader," Talmanes said right on top of him, in a voice more sober if no less certain. "Until yesterday I have followed men of other lands because I must. You I will follow because I want to. Perhaps you are not a lord in Andor, but here, I say that you are, and I pledge myself your man."

Cairhienin and Tairen stared at one another as though startled at voicing the same sentiment, then slowly, reluctantly, exchanged brief nods. If they did not like each other—and only a fool would bet against that—they could meet on this point. After a fashion.

"I will send my groom to prepare your horse for the procession," Talmanes said, and barely frowned when Nalesean added, "Mine can share the work. Your mount must do us proud. And burn my soul, we need a banner. Your banner." At that the Cairhienin nodded emphatically.

Mat was not sure whether to laugh hysterically or sit down and cry. Those bloody memories. If not for them, he would have ridden on. If not for Rand, he would not have the things. He could trace the steps that led to them, each necessary as it seemed at the time and seeming an end in itself, yet each leading inevitably to the next. At the beginning of it all lay Rand. And bloody *ta'veren*. He could not understand why doing something that seemed absolutely necessary and as close to harmless as he could make it always seemed to lead him deeper into the mire. Melindhra had begun stroking the back of his neck instead of squeezing it. All he needed now ...

He glanced up the hill, and there she was. Moiraine, on her delicate-stepping white mare, with Lan on his black stallion towering at her side. The Warder bent toward her as if to listen, and there seemed to be a brief argument, a violent protest on his part, but after a moment the Aes Sedai reined Aldieb around and rode out of sight toward the opposite slope. Lan remained where he was on Mandarb, watching the camp below. Watching Mat.

He shivered. Couladin's head really did appear to be grinning at him. He could almost hear the man speak. *You may have killed me, but you've put your foot squarely in the trap. I'm dead, but you'll never be free.*

"Just bloody wonderful," he muttered, and took a long, choking swallow of the rough brandy. Talmanes and Nalesean seemed to think he meant it as said, and Melindhra laughed agreement.

Some fifty or so Tairens and Cairhienin had gathered to watch the two lords speak to him, and they took his drinking as a signal to serenade him, beginning with a verse of their own.

*"We'll toss the dice however they fall,  
and snuggle the girls be they short or tall,  
then follow young Mat whenever he calls,  
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows."*

With a wheezing laugh he could not stop, Mat sank back down onto the boulder and set about emptying the pitcher. There had to be some way out of this. There just had to be.

\* \* \*

Rand's eyes opened, slowly, staring up at the roof of his tent. He was naked beneath a single blanket. The absence of pain seemed almost startling, yet he felt even weaker than he remembered. And he did remember. He had said things, thought things ... His skin went cold. *I cannot let him take control. I am me! Me!* Fumbling beneath the blanket, he found the smooth round scar on his side, tender yet whole.

"Moiraine Sedai Healed you," Aviendha said, and he gave a start.

He had not seen her, sitting cross-legged on the layered rugs near the firepit, sipping from a silver cup worked with leopards. Asmodean lay sprawled across tasselled cushions, chin on his arms. Neither appeared to have slept; dark circles underlined their eyes.

"She should not have had to," Aviendha went on in a cool voice. Tired or not, she had every hair in place, and her neat clothes were a sharp contrast to Asmodean's rumpled dark velvets. Now and then she twisted the ivory bracelet of roses-and-thorns that he had given her as if not realizing what she was doing. She wore the silver snowflake necklace, too. She still had not told him who had given it to her, though she had seemed amused when she realized he really wanted to know. She certainly did not look amused now. "Moiraine Sedai herself was near collapse from Healing wounded. *Aan'allein* had to carry her to her tent. Because of you, Rand al'Thor. Because Healing you took the last of her strength."

"The Aes Sedai is on her feet already," Asmodean put in, stifling a yawn. He ignored Aviendha's pointed stare. "She has been here twice since sunrise, though she said you would recover. I think she was not so certain last night. Nor was I." Pulling his gilded harp around in front of him, he fussed with it, speaking in an idle tone. "I did what I could for you, of course—my life and fortune are tied to yours—but my talents lie elsewhere than Healing, you understand." He strummed a few notes

to demonstrate. "I understand that a man can kill or Gentle himself doing what you did. Strength in the Power is useless if the body is exhausted. *Saidin* can easily kill, if the body is exhausted. Or so I have heard."

"Are you finished sharing your wisdom, Jasin Natael?" Aviendha's tone was chillier, if anything, and she did not wait for a reply before turning a gaze like blue-green ice back to Rand. The interruption, it seemed, was his fault. "A man may behave like a fool sometimes, and little is the worse for it, but a chief must be more than a man, and the chief of chiefs more still. You had no right to push yourself near to death. Daniele and I tried to make you come with us when we grew too tired to continue, but you would not listen. You may be as much stronger than we as Elayne claims, yet you are still flesh. You are the *Car'a'carn*, not a new *Seia Doon* seeking honour. You have *toh*, obligation, to the Aiel, Rand al'Thor, and you cannot fulfil it dead. You cannot do everything yourself."

For a moment he could only gape at her. He had barely managed to do anything at all, had left the battle to others for all practical purposes while he stumbled about trying to be useful. He had not even been able to stop Sammael from striking where and as he chose. And she upbraided him for doing too much.

"I will try to remember," he said finally. Even so, she looked ready to lecture more. "What news of the Miagoma and the other three clans?" he asked, as much to divert her as because he wanted to know. She seldom seemed willing to stop until she had hammered you into the ground, unless he managed to distract her.

It worked. She was full of what she knew, of course, and as eager to instruct as to scold. Asmodean's soft strumming—for once, something pleasant, even pastoral—made an odd background for her words.

The Miagoma, the Shiande, the Daryne and the Codarra were camped within sight of one another, a few miles to the east. A steady stream of men and Maidens moved between the camps, including Rand's, but only among societies, and Indirian and the other chiefs were not stirring. There was no doubt now that they would come to Rand eventually, but not until the Wise Ones finished their talks.

"They are still talking?" Rand said. "What under the Light do they have to discuss that takes so long? The chiefs are coming to follow me, not them."

She gave him a flat look that would have done credit to Moiraine. "The Wise Ones' words are for Wise Ones, Rand al'Thor." Hesitating, she added, as if making a concession, "Daniele may tell you something of it. When it is done." Her tone implied that Dani might not, too.

She resisted his attempts to learn more, and finally he let it lie. Perhaps he would find out before it bit him, and perhaps not, but either way, he was not going to pry one word out of her that she did not want to speak. Aes Sedai had nothing on Aiel Wise Ones when it came to guarding their secrets and surrounding themselves with mystery. Aviendha was absorbing that particular lesson very well.

Dani's presence at the meeting of Wise Ones came as a surprise, and so did Moiraine's absence—he would have expected her to be in the middle, twitching strings to her plans—but it turned out that one grew from the other. The new-come Wise Ones had wanted to meet with one of the Aes Sedai who followed the *Car'a'carn*, and although she was back on her feet after Healing him, Moiraine claimed to have no time. Dani had been routed from her blankets as a replacement.

That made Aviendha laugh. She had been outside when Sorilea and Bair practically dragged Dani from her tent, trying to pull on her clothes while they hustled her along. "I called to her that she would have to dig holes in the ground with her teeth this time if she had been caught in a misdeed, and she was so sleepy she believed me. She began protesting that she would not, so hard that Sorilea began demanding what she had done to think she deserved to. You should have seen Dani's face." She laughed so hard that she nearly toppled over.

Asmodean actually looked at her askance—though why he should, being what and who he was, was beyond Rand—but Rand only waited patiently until she caught her breath. For Aiel humour, this was mild. More the sort of thing he would have expected from Mat than from any woman, but mild even so.

When she straightened, wiping her eyes, he said, "What of the Shaido, then? Or are their Wise Ones also at this conclave?"

She answered still giggling into her wine; she considered the Shaido finished, hardly worth considering now. Thousands of prisoners had been taken, with a trickle still being brought in, and the fighting had died down except for a few small skirmishes here and there. Yet the more he got out of her, the less he could see them as done for. With the four clans keeping Han occupied, the bulk of Couladin's people had crossed the Madaem in good order, even carrying away most of the Cairhienin prisoners they had captured. Worse, they had destroyed the stone bridges behind them.

That did not concern her, but it did him. Tens of thousands of Shaido north of the river, no way to get at them until the bridges were replaced, and even wooden spans would take time. It was time that he did not have.

At the very end, when it seemed there was no more to say on the Shaido, she told him what made him forget worrying about the Shaido and what trouble they would cause. She just tossed it in, as if she had almost forgotten.

"Mat killed Couladin?" he said incredulously when she was done. "Mat?"

"Did I not say so?" The words were sharp, but halfhearted. Peering at him over her winecup, she seemed more interested in how he would take the news than in whether he doubted her word.

Asmodean plucked a few chords of something martial; the harp seemed to echo to drums and trumpets. "In some ways, a young man of as many surprises as you. I truly look forward to meeting the third of you, this Perrin, one day."

Rand shook his head. So Mat had not escaped the pull of *ta'veren* to *ta'veren* after all. Or maybe it was the Pattern that had caught him, and being *ta'veren* himself. Either way, he suspected Mat was not too happy right that moment. Mat had not learned the lesson that he had. Try to run away, and the Pattern pulled you back, often roughly; run in the direction the Wheel wove you, and sometimes you could manage a little control over your life. Sometimes. With luck, maybe more than any expected, at least in the long haul. But he had more urgent concerns than Mat, or the Shaido.

A glance at the entrance told him the sun was well up, though all he saw otherwise was two Maidens squatting just outside, spears across their knees. A night and most of a morning with him unconscious, and Sammael had either not tried to find him or had failed.

He was careful to use that name, even to himself, though another floated in the back of his mind now. Tel Janin Aellinsar. No history recorded the name, no fragment in the library at Tar Valon; Moiraine had told him everything the Aes Sedai knew of the Forsaken, and it was little more than was told in village tales. Even Asmodean had always called him Sammael, if for a different reason. Long before the War of the Shadow ended, the Forsaken had embraced the names men had given them, as if symbols of rebirth in the Shadow. Asmodean's own true name—Joar Addam Nessosin—made the man flinch, and he claimed to have forgotten the others in the course of three thousand years.

Perhaps there was no real reason to hide what was going on inside his head—maybe it was only an attempt to deny reality to himself—but Sammael the man would remain. And as Sammael, he would pay in full for every Maiden he had killed. The Maidens Rand had not been able to keep safe.

Even as he made the resolution, he grimaced. He had made a beginning by sending Weiramon back to Tear—the Light willing, only he and Weiramon knew how much of one, so far—but he could not go chasing off after Sammael, whatever he wanted or vowed. Not yet. There were matters to be seen to here in Cairhien, first. Aviendha might think he did not understand *ji'e'toh*, and perhaps he did not, but he understood duty, and he had one to Cairhien. Besides, there were ways to tail it in with Weiramon.

Sitting up—and trying not to show the effort of it—he covered himself as decently as he could in the blanket and wondered where his clothes were; he did not see anything but his boots, standing over behind Aviendha. She probably knew. It might have been *gai'shain* who undressed him, but it could just as easily have been she. "I need to go into the city. Natael, have Jeade'en saddled and brought up."

"Tomorrow, perhaps," Aviendha told him firmly, catching Asmodean's coatsleeve as he started to rise. "Moiraine Sedai said you would need to rest for—"

"Today, Aviendha. Now. I don't know why Meilan isn't here, if he's alive, but I mean to find out. Natael, my horse?"

She put on a stubborn face, but Asmodean jerked his arm free, smoothing the wrinkled velvet, and said, "Meilan was here, and others."

"He was not to be told—" Aviendha began angrily, then tightened her mouth before finishing, "He needs to rest."

So the Wise Ones thought they could keep things from him. Well, he was not as weak as they believed. He tried to stand, holding the blanket close, and turned the motion into shifting his position when his legs refused to cooperate. Maybe he was as weak as they thought. But he did not intend to let that stop him.

"I can rest when I'm dead," he said, and wished he had not when she flinched as if he had hit her. No, she would not have flinched at a blow. His staying alive was important to her for the Aiel's sake, and a threat there could hurt her more than a fist. "Tell me about Meilan, Natael."

Aviendha kept a sullen silence, though it looks had had anything to do with it, Asmodean would have been struck dumb as well.

A rider had come from Meilan in the night, bearing flowery praises and assurances of undying loyalty. At dawn Meilan himself appeared, with the six other High Lords of Tear who were in the city and a small host of Tairen soldiers who fingered sword hilts and gripped lances as though more than half expecting to fight the Aiel who had stood silently watching them ride in.

"It came close," Asmodean said. "This Meilan is not used to being thwarted, I think, and the others scarcely more so. Especially the lumpy-faced one—Torean?—and Simaan. That one has eyes as sharp as his nose. You know I am used to dangerous company, but these men are as dangerous in their way as any I have known."

Aviendha sniffed loudly. "Whatever they are used to, they had no choice with Sorilea and Amys and Bair and Melaine on one side, and Sulin with a thousand *Far Dareis Mai* on the other. And there were some Stone Dogs," she conceded, "and a few Water Seekers and some Red Shields. If you truly serve the *Car'a'carn* as you claim, Jasin Natael, you should guard his rest as they do."

"It is the Dragon Reborn I follow, young woman. The *Car'a'carn*, I leave to you."

"Go on, Natael," Rand said impatiently, earning a sniff for himself.

She was right concerning the Tairens' choices, though perhaps the Maidens and others fingering their veils had concerned them more than the Wise Ones. In any case, even Aracome, a greying, slender man with a long-smouldering temper, had been near bursting aflame by the time they reined their horses around, and Gueyam, bald as a stone and wide as a blacksmith, was white-faced in rage. Asmodean was not sure whether it had been the certainty of being overwhelmed that stopped them drawing swords, or the realization that if they somehow managed to cut a path to Rand, he was unlikely to welcome them with his allies' blood on their blades.

"Meilan's eyes were bulging out of his head," the man finished. "But before leaving, he shouted out his allegiance and fealty to you. Perhaps he thought you might hear. The others echoed him quickly, yet Meilan added something that made them stare. 'I make a gift of Cairhien to the Lord Dragon', he said. Then he announced that he would prepare a grand triumph for you when you're ready to enter the city."

"There's an old saying in the Theren," Rand said dryly. "'The louder a man tells you he's honest, the harder you must hold on to your purse'." Another said, "The fox often offers to give the duck its pond". Cairhien was his without gifts from Meilan.

He had no doubts about the man's loyalty. It would last just as long as Meilan believed he would be destroyed if caught betraying Rand. If caught; that was the hook. Those seven High Lords in Cairhien had been the most assiduous in trying to see him dead in Tear. That was why he had sent them here. Had he executed every Tairen noble who plotted against him, there might have been none left. At the time, handing them anarchy, famine and civil war to deal with a thousand miles from Tear had seemed a good way to put a crimp in their schemes while doing some good where it needed doing. Of course, he had not even known Couladin existed then, much less that the man would lead him to Cairhien.

*It would be easier if this was a story*, he thought. In stories, there were only so many surprises before the hero knew everything he needed; he himself never seemed to know a quarter of everything. Asmodean hesitated—that old saying about shouting men might be applied to him, too, as he was no doubt aware—but when Rand said no more, he added, "I think he wants to be King of Cairhien. Subject to you, of course."

"And preferably with me far away." Meilan probably expected Rand to return to Tear, and to *Callandor*. Meilan certainly would never be afraid of too much power.

"Of course." Asmodean sounded even drier than Rand had. "There was another visit between those two." A dozen Cairhienin lords and ladies, without retainers, came cloaked and with faces hidden in their hoods despite the heat. Plainly they knew that the Aiel despised Cairhienin, and just as plainly returned the sentiment, yet they were as nervous that Meilan might discover they had come as that the Aiel might decide to kill them. "When they saw me," Asmodean said wryly, "half seemed ready to kill me for fear I was Tairen. You have *Far Dareis Mai* to thank that you still have a bard."

Few as they were, the Cairhienin had still been harder to turn back than Meilan, growing sweatier and more white-faced by the minute, but stubbornly demanding to see the Lord Dragon. It was a measure of their desire that when demands failed, they finally descended to open begging. Asmodean might have thought Aiel humour odd or harsh, but he chuckled over nobles in silk coats and riding dresses trying to pretend he was not there as they knelt to catch at the Wise Ones' woollen skirts.

"Sorilea threatened to have them stripped and flogged back to the city." His muted laughter turned disbelieving. "They actually discussed it among themselves. Had the requirement allowed them to reach you, I do believe some would have accepted."

"Sorilea should have done it," Aviendha put in, surprisingly agreeable. "The oathbreakers have no honour. At last Melaine had the Maidens throw them across their horses like bundles and run the animals from camp, with the oathbreakers hanging on as they might."

Asmodean nodded. "But before that, two of them did speak to me, once they were certain I was not a Tairen spy. Lord Dobraine, and Lady Colavaere. They clouded everything in so many hints and innuendos that I cannot be certain, but I would not be surprised if they mean to offer you the Sun Throne. They could bandy words with ... some people I used to be acquainted with."

Rand barked a laugh. "Maybe they will. If they can manage the same terms as Meilan." He has not needed Moiraine to tell him that Cairhienin played the Game of Houses in their sleep, nor Asmodean to tell him they would try it with the Forsaken. The High Lords to the left and the Cairhienin to the right. One battle done, and another, of a different sort if no less dangerous, beginning. "In any case, I mean the Sun Throne for someone who has a right to it." He ignored the speculation on Asmodean's face; perhaps the man had tried to help him the night before and perhaps he had not, but he did not trust the fellow enough to let him know half of his plans. However much Asmodean's future might be tied to his, his loyalty was all necessity, and he was still the same man who had chosen to give his soul to the Shadow. "Meilan wants to give me a grand entry when I am ready, does he? So much the better that I see what's what before he expects me." It came to him why Aviendha had become so agreeable, even helping the talk along. As long as he sat here talking, he was doing exactly what she wanted. "Are you going to get my horse, Natael, or must I?"

Asmodean's bow was deep, formal, and on the surface, at least, sincere. "I serve the Lord Dragon."

## CHAPTER 78: Other Battles, Other Weapons



Frowning after Asmodean and wondering how far he trusted the man, Rand was startled when Aviendha threw down her cup, splashing wine onto the rugs. Aiel did not waste anything that could be drunk, not only water.

Staring at the wet spot, she appeared just as surprised, but only for a moment. The next instant she had planted fists on hips where she sat and was glaring at him. "So the *Car'a'carn* will enter the city when he can barely sit up. I said the *Car'a'carn* must be more than other men, but I did not know he was more than mortal."

"Where are my clothes, Aviendha?"

"You are only flesh!"

"My clothes?"

"Remember your *toh*, Rand al'Thor. If I can remember *ji'e'toh*, so can you." That seemed a strange thing to say; the sun would rise at midnight before she forgot the smallest scrap of *ji'e'toh*.

"If you keep on like this," he said with a smile, "I will begin thinking you care for me."

He meant it for a jest—there were only two ways to deal with her, joke or simply override her; arguing was fatal—and a mild one considering they had spent a night in each other's arms, but her eyes went wide in outrage, and she jerked at the ivory bracelet as if to pull it off and throw it at him. "The *Car'a'carn* is so far above other men that he does not need clothes," she spat. "If he wishes to go, let him go in his skin! Must I bring Sorilea and Bair? Or perhaps Enaila, and Somara, and Lamelle?"

He stiffened. Of all the Maidens who treated him as a long-lost son of ten, she had chosen the three worst. Lamelle even brought him soup—the woman could not cook a lick, but she insisted on making him soup! "You bring whoever you wish," he told her in a tight, flat voice, "but I am the *Car'a'carn*, and I am going into the city." With luck, he could find his clothes before she returned. Somara was nearly as tall as he, and, at the moment, probably stronger. The One Power certainly would do him no good; he could not have seized *saidin* if Sammael appeared in front of him, much less held onto it.

For a long moment she met his stare, then abruptly picked up the leopard-worked cup and refilled it from a hammered-silver pitcher. "If you can find your clothes and dress yourself without falling down," she said calmly, "you may go. But I will accompany you, and if I think you are too weak to continue, you will return here if Somara must carry you in her arms."

He stared as she stretched out on one elbow, carefully arranged her skirts, and began sipping at her wine. If he mentioned marriage again, no doubt she would snap his head off again, but in some ways she behaved as if they were married. The worst parts of it, at least. The parts that did not seem a pennyworth different from Enaila or Lamelle at *their* worst.

Muttering to himself, he gathered the blanket around him and shuffled past her and the firepit to his boots. Clean woollen stockings were folded up inside, but nothing else. He could summon *gai'shain*. And have the entire matter spread through the camp. Not to mention the possibility that the Maidens would get into it after all; then the question would be whether he was the *Car'a'carn*, who must be obeyed, or just Rand al'Thor, another man entirely in their eyes. A rolled rug at the back of the tent caught his eye; rugs were always spread out. His sword was inside, the belt with the Dragon buckle wrapped around the scabbard.

Humming to herself, eyes lidded, Aviendha looked half asleep as she watched him search. "You no longer need ... that." She invested the word with so much disgust that no-one would have believed she had given him the sword.

"What do you mean?" There were only a few small chests in the tent, inlaid with mother-of-pearl or worked in brass, or in one case, gold leaf. The Aiel preferred putting things in bundles. None held his clothes. The gold-covered chest, all unfamiliar birds and animals, held tightly tied leather sacks and gave off a smell of spices when he raised the lid.

“Couladin is dead, Rand al’Thor.”

Startled, he stopped and stared at her. “What are you talking about?” Would Lan have told her? No-one else knew. But why?

“No-one told me, if that is what you are thinking. I know you now, Rand al’Thor. I learn you more every day.”

“I wasn’t thinking any such thing,” he growled. “There isn’t anything anybody could tell.” Irritably, he snatched up the scabbarded sword and carried it awkwardly under his arm as he went on searching. Aviendha continued sipping wine; he thought she might be hiding a smile.

A fine thing. The High Lords of Tear sweated when Rand al’Thor looked at them, and the Cairhienin might offer him their throne. The greatest Aiel army the world had ever seen had crossed the Dragonwall on the orders of the *Car’a’carn*, the chief of chiefs. Nations trembled at mention of the Dragon Reborn. Nations! And if he did not find his clothes, he would sit waiting on permission to go outside from a lot of women who thought they knew better about everything than he did.

He finally found them when he noticed the gold-embroidered cuff of a red coatsleeve sticking out from under Aviendha. She had been sitting on them all along. She grunted sourly when he asked her to move, but she did it. Finally.

As usual, she watched him shave and dress, channelling the water hot for him without comment—and without being asked—after the third time he nicked himself and muttered about cold water. In truth, this time he was bothered as much because she might see his unsteadiness as for any other cause. *You can become used to anything if it goes on long enough*, he thought wryly.

She misunderstood his head shaking. “Elayne will not mind if I look, Rand al’Thor.”

Pausing with the laces of his shirt half done, he stared at her. “Do you really believe that?”

“Of course. You belong to her, but she cannot own the sight of you.”

Laughing silently, he went back to the laces. It was good to be reminded that her newfound mystery hid ignorance, aside from anything else. He could not help smiling smugly as he finished dressing, buckled on his sword and took up the tasselled Seanchan spearhead. That last turned the smile a touch toward grimness. He had meant it as a reminder that the Seanchan were still in the world, but it served to recall all the things that he must juggle. Cairhienin and Tairens, Sammael and the other Forsaken, the Shaido and nations that did not know him yet, nations that would have to before Tarmon Gai’don. Dealing with Aviendha was really quite simple compared with that.

Maidens leaped to their feet when he ducked out of the tent quickly to hide the unsteadiness of his legs. He was not sure how far he succeeded. Aviendha kept to his side as though she not only intended to catch him if he fell over but fully expected him to. It did nothing for his mood when Sulin, in her cap of bandages, looked questioningly at her—not him; her!—and waited for her nod before ordering the Maidens to be ready to move.

Breathing deep and hoping his limbs would steady, he searched the crowd. Relief grew with each Maiden he spotted. Renay, Tuandha and Amindha had survived another one of his disasters. Briana and her sisters were still together, still six. Riallin and Branwen, Nerise and Rhamys, all fine. Tenelca was too intent on keeping watch, even here, to meet his eyes. Not so Nici, standing close.

He spoke quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Yesterday was the single worst day of my entire life,” she said, and for once he did not think her melodramatic.

“I wish it had not come to this,” he said. Aiel did not like public displays of affection, and Aviendha certainly wouldn’t like this one. But he had to. He found her hand, took it in his, and gaze it a squeeze. After a moment, Nici squeezed back.

She pulled away when Asmodean came riding his mule up the hill, leading Jeade’en by the reins. Somehow he had found time to don fresh clothes, all dark green silk. With spills of white lace, of course. The gilded harp hung on his back, but he had given up wearing the gleeman’s cloak, and he no longer carried the crimson banner with its ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai. That office fell to a Cairhienin refugee named Pevin, an expressionless fellow in a patched farmer’s coat of rough dark grey wool, on a brown mule that should have been put out to grass from pulling a cart some years back. A long scar, still red, ran up the side of his narrow face from jaw to thinning hair.

Pevin had lost his wife and sister to the famine, his brother and a son to the civil war. He had no idea which Houses’ men had killed them, or who they had supported for the Sun Throne. Fleeing toward Andor had cost him a second son at the hands of Andoran soldiers and a second brother to

bandits, and returning had cost the last son, dead on a Shaido spear, and his daughter as well, carried off while Pevin was left for dead. The man rarely spoke, but as near as Rand could make out, his beliefs had been winnowed down to a bare three. The Dragon had been Reborn. The Last Battle was coming. And if he stayed close to Rand al'Thor, he would see his family avenged before the world was destroyed. The world would end, surely, but it did not matter, nothing did, so long as he saw that vengeance. He bowed silently to Rand from his saddle as the mare reached the crest. His face was absolutely blank, but he held the banner straight and steady.

Climbing onto Jeade'en, Rand pulled Aviendha up behind him without letting her use a stirrup, just to show her that he could, and kicked the dapple into motion before she was settled. She flung both arms around his waist, grumbling only partly under her breath; he caught a few more snippets of her current opinion of Rand al'Thor, and of the *Car'a'carn*, too. She made no move to let go, though, for which he was grateful. Not only was it pleasant having her pressed against his back, the support was welcome. With her halfway to the saddle, he had suddenly not been sure whether she was coming up or he down. He hoped she had not noticed. He hoped that was not why she was holding on to him so tightly.

The crimson banner with its large black-and-white disc rippled behind Pevin as they zigzagged down the hill and along the shallow valleys. As usual, the Aiel gave little attention to the party as it passed, though the banner marked his presence as surely as the encircling escort of several hundred *Far Dareis Mai* easily keeping pace with Jeade'en and the mules. They went on about their business among the tents covering the slopes, at most glancing up at the sound of hooves.

Rand kept looking for people he knew as they rode. Pamela, Zie, Su and Rondha had made it. He called to Elindha, asking if she was glad to see the rest of her clan again, and was left wondering at the relief she confessed to feeling. There were others missing, however. Out among the camps, probably. One of those he felt obliged to ask after.

"Harilyn went with Dana and her sister-father this morning, to see to the burial of her first-brother. She has not returned yet," Aviendha told him.

He twisted in the saddle. "Her ... Rovan? He's ..." Rand's cousin, dead in Rand's war. And no-one had thought to tell him.

Aviendha looked confused. "He was only your second-father-brother. I did not think you had known each other well enough to become near-brothers. Why are you upset?"

Rand wasn't sure he could have explained that if he'd wanted to. But he knew it was part of why he turned Jeade'en aside when his wending path through the camp brought him within sight of Tam. Loial was with him, and the Shienarans, all clustered around a heavy iron cookpot that bubbled over their fire. Aca was there, too, less pleasingly. And Morsa, sitting under Ayame's watchful eye and casting an imperious glower Rand's way as she watched him approach. He'd need to rest before he could deal with her.

"Merile is helping with the wounded, I take it?"

"She is," Aviendha said calmly. "A troubling one. Too short and thin, even if she was not a Lost One. And not very smart. But her intentions seem honourable, and she has some talents."

"Merile is smart enough," he said defensively. "She learned how to channel pretty quickly. She's just a bit sheltered, is all." Aviendha gave a sniff to show what she thought of that.

By then they were close enough to hear Tam speak. "A hard day, lad. They always are. And the days after can be even harder," he said, while the older soldiers nodded agreement. "How are you coping?"

Light but it was tempting. He could climb down off his high horse and answer that honestly. He could pretend he was still the boy he'd been, rest his head on that heavy shoulder and allow himself to weep. Rand stayed where he was. "I endure. I'd rather be back on the farm, but I endure."

Tam sighed low. "It sounds like you've united the Aiel, even if it's not official yet. You've found your people. I'm glad for you, lad."

Lad. Not son. He felt hot. He had never wanted to find his "his people", as Tam called them. The Thereners were his real people. Tam was his real ... Janduin and Shaiel had been no more than curiosities, long-dead strangers he could never know. And the Aiel a weapon to wield in his war. But he had come to know Janduin's kin, and the Aiel in general, better than he'd planned. At Tam's urging. And now what was he? Lad.

"The clans have never been united before. It will be strange, but interesting as well," said Aca.

"That's nice," Rand said sourly. A calm look from Tam was all it took to make him feel guilty at his rudeness. Resentment at feeling that followed hot on its heels. He steeled himself, pushed down the boy he'd been. "I'm heading into Cairhien. I could use some advice."

Tam shook his head regretfully. "Best not. You don't want any of those nobles thinking you dance to my tune, which they might if they saw me talking to you and learned who I am. No. Best I stay where I am, lad."

"I will come with you, if you don't mind," Loial rumbled. Even sitting, he was as tall as anyone present. Though he had taken no part in the fighting, he looked as morose as any.

"The book again? I'll be glad of the company." He took Loial's wordless rumble as confirmation, while wondering over the brevity.

"Are you putting together a procession before entering?" Izana asked.

Rand shook his head at once. "Of course not."

"You should. You're especially famous now, Rand."

Rand shook his head. "I don't see why. Everyone else did the planning. And the fighting. And the dying; they did a lot of that as well."

"Hey, don't keep blaming yourself. It's a war, so it can't be helped. It's not your fault."

Izana's reassurances were kindly meant, but Rand was unconvinced.

Geko took a more practical view. "Look at it this way: without you, none of the fighters or planners would have been here." Rand could find no comfort in that, either. Without him, would any of this have happened at all?

He set off again with Loial striding alongside his horse, while a solemn Tam watched the distance grow between them.

It had been startling to hear of nearly twenty thousand prisoners taken from Couladin's followers—until leaving the Theren, he had never really believed so many people could be in one place—but seeing them was twice the shock. In clusters of forty or fifty, they dotted the hillsides like cabbages, men and women alike sitting naked in the sun, each cluster under the eyes of one *gai'shain*, if that. Certainly no-one else paid them much mind, though now and again a *cadin'sor*-clad figure approached one of the groups and ordered a man or woman off on an errand. Whoever was called out went at a run, unguarded, and Rand saw several returning to slip back into their places. For the rest, they sat quietly, almost looking bored, as if they had no reason to be elsewhere, or desire to be, either.

Perhaps they would put on white robes just as calmly. Yet he could not help remembering how easily these same people had violated their own laws and customs already. Couladin might have begun the violation or ordered it, but they had followed and obeyed.

Frowning at the prisoners—twenty thousand, and more to come; he would certainly never trust one to hold to *gai'shain*—it took some time before he noticed an oddity among the other Aiel. Maidens and Aielmen who carried the spear never wore anything on their heads except the *shoufa*, and never any colour that would not fade into rocks and shadows, but now he saw men with a narrow scarlet headband. Perhaps one in four or five had a strip of cloth knotted around his temples, with a disc embroidered or painted above the brows, two joined teardrops, black and white. Perhaps most strangely of all, *gai'shain* wore it, too; most had their cowls up, but every last bareheaded one wore it. And *algai'dsiswai* in their *cadin'sor* saw and did nothing, whether wearing the headband or not. *Gai'shain* were never to wear anything that those who could touch weapons did. Never. Giladin was one of those who wore it, but he rushed off when Rand tried to ask what it meant.

"I do not know," Aviendha said curtly into his back when he asked her instead. He tried to sit up straighter; she really did seem to be holding to him more tightly than necessary. After a moment, she went on, so softly that he had to listen sharp to catch it all. "Bair threatened to strike me if I mentioned it again, and Sorilea hit me across the shoulders with a stick, but I think they are those who claim we are *siswai'aman*."

Rand opened his mouth to ask the meaning—he knew a scant few words of the Old Tongue, no more—when interpretation floated to the surface in his mind. *Siswai'aman*. Literally, the spear of the Dragon.

"Sometimes," Asmodean chuckled, "it is difficult to see the difference between oneself and one's enemies. They want to own the world, but it seems you already own a people."

Turning his head, Rand stared at him until amusement faded and, shrugging uncomfortably, he let his mule fall back beside Pevin and the banner. The trouble was that the name did imply—more

than implied—ownership; that was out of Lews Therin's memories, too. It did not seem possible to own people, but if it was, he did not want to. *All I want is to use them*, he thought wryly.

"I see you don't believe it," he said over his shoulder. None of the Maidens had donned the thing.

Aviendha hesitated before saying, "I do not know what to believe." She spoke as quietly as before, yet she sounded angry, and unsure. "There are many beliefs, and the Wise Ones are often silent, as if they do not know the truth. Some say that in following you, we expiate the sin of our ancestors in ... in failing the Aes Sedai."

The catch in her voice startled him; he had never considered that she might be as worried as any other Aiel about what he had revealed of their past. Ashamed might be a better word than worried; shame was an important part of *ji'e'toh*. They were ashamed of what they had been—followers of the Way of the Leaf—and at the same time ashamed that they had abandoned their pledge to it.

"Too many have heard some version of part of the Prophecy of Rhuidean now," she went on in a more controlled tone, for all the world as if she had heard a word of that prophecy herself before she began training to become a Wise One, "but it has been twisted. They know that you will destroy us ..." Her control faltered for the space of one deep breath. "But many believe that you will kill us all in endless dances of the spear, a sacrifice to atone for the sin. Others believe that the bleakness itself is a testing, to wear away all but the hard core before the Last Battle. I have even heard some say that the Aiel are now your dream, and that when you wake from this life, we will be no more."

A grim set of beliefs, that. Bad enough that he had revealed a past they saw as shaming. It was a wonder they had not all left him. Or gone mad. "What do the Wise Ones believe?" he asked, as quietly as she.

"That what must be, will be. We will save what can be saved, Rand al'Thor. We do not hope to do more."

We. She included herself among the Wise Ones, just as Elayne included herself among Aes Sedai. "Well," he said lightly, "I expect Sorilea at least believes I should have my ears boxed. Probably Bair does, too. And certainly Melaine."

"Among other things," she mumbled. To his disappointment, she pushed away from him, although keeping a hold on his coat. "They believe many things I could wish they did not."

He grinned in spite of himself. So she did not believe he needed his ears boxed. That was a pleasant change since waking.

Hadnan Kadere's wagons lay a mile or so from his tent, circled in a broad depression between two hills where Stone Dogs kept watch. A cream-coloured coat straining over his bulk, the hatchet-nosed Darkfriend looked up, mopping his face with the inevitable large handkerchief, as Rand rode past with his banner and loping escort. Moiraine was there as well, examining the wagon where the doorframe *ter'angreal* was lashed under canvas behind the driver's seat. She did not even glance around until Kadere spoke to her. By his gestures, he was plainly suggesting that she might want to accompany Rand. In fact, he appeared eager for her to go, and small wonder. He had to be congratulating himself on keeping his being a Darkfriend hidden so long, but the more he was in company with an Aes Sedai, the more he was in danger of discovery.

Indeed, it was a surprise to Rand that the man was still there. At least half of the drivers who had entered the Waste with him had slipped away since crossing the Dragonwall, replaced by Cairhienin refugees chosen by Rand himself, to make sure they were not of Kadere's sort. He expected every morning to find the fellow himself gone, too, especially since Isendre's escape. The Maidens had nearly torn the wagons apart looking for the woman, while Kadere sweated his way through three handkerchiefs. Rand would not regret it if Kadere managed to sneak off in the night. The Aiel guards had orders to let him go, so long as he did not try to take Moiraine's precious wagons. More obviously every day, their loads were a treasure to her, and Rand would not see her lose them.

He glanced over his shoulder, but Asmodean was staring straight ahead, ignoring the wagons altogether. He claimed to have had no contact with Kadere since Rand captured him, and Rand thought it might be true. Certainly, the merchant never left his wagons, and was never out of sight of Aiel guards except when inside his own wagon.

Opposite the wagons, Rand half drew rein without thinking. Surely Moiraine would want to accompany him into Cairhien; she might have crammed his head full, but it always seemed there was

another piece she wanted to fit in, and this once in particular he could do with her presence and advice. But she merely looked at him for a long moment, then turned back to the wagon.

Frowning, he heeled the dapple on. As well to remember she had other sheep to shear than he knew about. He had become too trusting. Best to be as wary of her as of Asmodean.

*Trust no-one*, he thought bleakly. For an instant he did not know whether it was his thought or Lews Therin's, but in the end he decided it did not matter. Everybody had their own goals, their own desires. Much the best to trust no-one completely except himself. Yet he wondered, with another man oozing through the back of his mind, how far could he trust himself?

Vultures filled the sky around Cairhien in spiralling layers of black wings. On the ground they flapped about among clouds of buzzing flies, squawking hoarsely at glossy ravens that tried to usurp their rights to the dead. Where Aiel went across the treeless hills, recovering the bodies of their slain, the birds lumbered aloft fatly, screeching protests, then settled again as soon as the living humans were a few paces gone. Vultures and ravens and flies together could not really have made the sunlight dimmer, yet it seemed so.

Stomach twisting, trying not to see, Rand heeled Jeade'en faster, until Aviendha clung to his back once more and the Maidens were running. No-one protested, and he did not believe it was only because Aiel could maintain that speed for hours. Even Asmodean looked pale around the eyes. Pevin's face never changed, though the bright banner whipping above him appeared a mockery in that place.

What lay ahead was little better. Rand remembered the Foregate as a raucous beehive, a tangled warren of streets full of noise and colour. Now it was a still, thick band of ashes surrounding the square grey walls of Cairhien on three sides. Charred timbers lay crazily atop stone foundations, and here and there a soot-black chimney yet stood, sometimes tilting precariously. In places, a chair lying somehow untouched in the dirt street, a hasty bundle dropped by someone fleeing, a rag doll, emphasized the desolation.

"It is horrible, the things that humans can do," Loial sighed.

"I know," said he who had done those things.

Loial's ears wilted almost to his shoulders. "When I said I wanted to see the world and write a book, this is not what I imagined. It almost makes me miss home."

"And Erith? Her *stedding* isn't far from here." For a wonder, Loial did not stammer an immediate denial. He walked the rest of the way to Cairhien wrapped in his own thoughts.

Breezes stirred some of the banners on the city's towers and along the walls, a Dragon standing out red-and-gold on white at one place, the Crescents of Tear white on red-and-gold at another. The middle set of the Jangai Gates stood open, three tall square arches in the grey stone guarded by Tairen soldiers in rimmed helmets. Some were mounted but most afoot, and the variously coloured stripes on their wide sleeves showed they were retainers of several lords.

Whatever was known in the city about the battle being won, and Aiel allies coming to the rescue, the approach of half a thousand *Far Dareis Mai* created some little stir. Hands went uncertainly to sword hilts, or spears and long shields, or lances. Some of the soldiers half moved as if to close the gates even while looking to their officer, with three white plumes on his helmet, who hesitated, standing in his stirrups and shading his eyes against the sun to study the crimson banner. And more particularly, Rand.

Abruptly the officer sat down, saying something that sent two of the mounted Tairens galloping back through the gates. Almost immediately, he was waving the other men aside, calling, "Make way for the Lord Dragon Rand al'Thor! The Light illumine the Lord Dragon! All glory to the Dragon Reborn!"

The soldiers still appeared uneasy about the Maidens, but they formed into lines to either side of the gates, bowing deeply as Rand rode through. Aviendha sniffed loudly at his back, and again when he laughed. She did not understand, and he had no intention of explaining. What amused him was that however hard Tairens or Cairhienin or anyone else tried to puff up his head, he could rely on her and the Maidens, at least, to take the swelling down. And Dani and Ilyena. And Moiraine. And Elayne and Nynaeve, for that matter. Come to think of it, the lot of them seemed to make that a large part of their life's work.

The city beyond the gates stilled his laughter.

Here the streets were paved, some broad enough for a dozen or more large wagons abreast, all straight as knife cuts and crossing at right angles. The hills that rolled outside the walls were here carved and terraced, faced with stone; they looked as much made by men as the stone buildings with their severe straight lines and sharp angles, or the great towers with their unfinished tops, surrounded by scaffolding.

"I do not understand this place," Tenelca said, staring at the city. "It both revolts and ... entices me at the same time."

Rand's attention was on something else. People crowded the streets and the alleys, dull-eyed and hollow-cheeked, huddling beneath makeshift lean-tos or ragged blankets rigged as tents, or simply jammed together in the open, in the dark clothes favoured by Cairhienin city dwellers and the bright colours of Foregaters and the rough garb of farmers and villagers. Even the scaffolds were filled, on every level to the very top, where folk looked tiny for the height. Only the middle of the streets remained clear as Rand and the Maidens made their way along, and that only for as long as it took the people to surge out around them.

It was the people who stilled his mirth. Worn and ragged as they were, jammed together like sheep in a too-small pen, they cheered. He had no idea how they knew who he was, unless perhaps the officer's shouts at the gates had been heard, but a roar sprang ahead of him as he circled through the streets, the Maidens forcing a way through the throng. The thunder of it overwhelmed any words except for the occasional "Lord Dragon" when enough shouted it together, but the meaning was clear in men and women holding up children to see him pass, in scarves and scraps of cloth waved from every window, in people who tried to push past the Maidens with outstretched hands.

They certainly seemed to have no fear of Aiel, not at the chance to lay a finger on Rand's boots, and their numbers were such, the pressure of hundreds shoving them forward, that some managed to wriggle through. Actually, a good many touched Asmodean's instead—he certainly looked a lord, in all his dripping lace, and perhaps they thought the Lord Dragon must be an older man than the youth in a red coat—but it made no difference. Whoever managed to put hand to anyone's boot or stirrup, even Pevin's, wore joy on their faces and mouthed "Lord Dragon" into the din even as Maidens forced them back with their bucklers.

Between the clamour of acclaim and the riders sent by the officer at the gate, it was no surprise when Meilan appeared, a dozen lesser Tairen lords for retinue and fifty Defenders of the Stone to clear his way, laying about them with the butts of their lances. Grey-haired, hard and lean in his fine silk coat with stripes and cuffs of green satin, the High Lord sat his saddle with the stiff-backed ease of one who had been put on a horse and taught to command it almost as soon as he could walk. He ignored the sweat on his face, and equally the possibility that his escort might trample someone. Both were minor annoyances and the sweat likely the greater.

Edorion, the pink-cheeked lordling who had come to Eianrod, was among the others, not quite so plump as he had been, so his red-striped coat hung on him. The only other Rand recognized was a broad-shouldered fellow in shades of green; Reimon had liked to play at cards with Mat back in the Stone, as he recalled. The others were older men for the most part. None displayed any more consideration of the crowd they ploughed through than Meilan. There was not one Cairhienin in the lot.

The Maidens let Meilan ride through when Rand nodded, but closed behind him to exclude the rest, a fact the High Lord did not notice at first. When he did, his dark eyes smouldered angrily. He was often angry, Meilan was, since Rand had first come to the Stone of Tear.

The noise began to abate with the Tairen arrival, fading to a dull murmur by the time Meilan made a rigid bow to Rand from his saddle. His gaze flickered to Aviendha before he decided to ignore her, just as he was trying to ignore the Maidens. "The Light illumine you, my Lord Dragon. Be you well come to Cairhien. I must apologize for the peasants, but I was unaware you meant to enter the city now. Had I known, they would have been cleared. I meant to give you a grand entry, befitting the Dragon Reborn."

"I have had one," Rand said, and the other man blinked.

"As you say, my Lord Dragon." He went on after a moment, his tone making it clear that he did not understand. "If you will accompany me to the Royal Palace, I have arranged a small greeting. Small indeed, I fear, since I had no warning of you, yet by this even I will make sure—"

“Whatever you have arranged now will do,” Rand cut in, and received another bow and a thin, oily smile for reply. The fellow was all subservience now, and in an hour he would be talking as to someone too feeble-witted to understand facts held under his nose, but beneath it all lay a contempt and hatred that he believed Rand did not see although they shone in his eyes. Contempt because Rand was not a lord—not truly, as Meilan saw it, by birth—and hatred because Meilan had had the power of life and death before Rand came, with few his equal and none his superior. To believe that the Prophecies of the Dragon would be fulfilled someday was one thing; to have them fulfilled, and his own power diminished by them, was quite another.

There was a moment of confusion before Rand made Sulin allow the other Tairen lords to bring their horses in behind Asmodean and Pevin’s banner. Meilan would have had the Defenders clear the way again, but Rand curtly ordered that they follow behind the Maidens. The soldiers obeyed, faces unchanging beneath the rims of their helmets, though their white-plumed officer shook his head, and the High Lord put on a condescending smile. That smile faded when it became clear that the crowds opened up easily ahead of the Maidens. That they did not have to club a path through, he attributed to the Aiel reputation for savagery, and frowned when Rand made no reply. One thing Rand made note of: Now that he had Tairens with him, the cheers did not rise again.

The Royal Palace of Cairhien occupied the highest hill of the city, exactly in the centre, square and dark and massive. In fact, between the palace in all its levels and the stone-faced terracing, it was hard to say there was a hill there at all. Lofty colonnaded walks and tall narrow windows, high above the ground, did no more to relieve the rigidity than did grey, stepped towers precisely placed in concentric squares of increasing height. The street became a long, broad ramp leading up to tall bronze gates, and a huge square courtyard beyond lined with Tairen soldiers standing like statues, spears slanted. More stood on the overlooking stone balconies.

A ripple of murmurs ran through the ranks at the appearance of the Maidens, but it was quickly stilled in chanted shouts of “All glory to the Dragon Reborn! All glory to the Lord Dragon and Tear! All glory to the Lord Dragon and the High Lord Meilan!” From Meilan’s expression, you would have thought it all spontaneous.

Dark-garbed servants, the first Cairhienin Rand had seen in the palace, rushed out with worked golden bowls and white linen cloths as he swung a leg over the high pommel and slid from his saddle. Others came to take reins. He took the excuse of bathing his face and hands in cool water to leave Aviendha to climb down by herself. Trying to help her down might have ended with them both flat on the paving stones.

Unprompted, Sulin chose out twenty Maidens besides herself to accompany him within. On the one hand, he was glad she did not want to keep every last spear around him. On the other hand, he wished Enaila, Lamelle and Somara were not among the twenty. The considering looks they gave him—especially Lamelle, a lean, strong-jawed woman with dark red hair, nearly twenty years older than he—made him grind his teeth while trying to smile reassuringly. Somehow Aviendha must have managed to speak to them, and to Sulin, behind his back. *I may not be able to do anything about the Maidens, he thought grimly as he tossed a linen towel back to one of the serving men, but burn me if there isn’t one Aiel woman who’ll learn I’m the Car’a’carn!*

The other High Lords greeted him at the foot of the broad grey stairs that led up from the courtyard, all in colourful silk coats and satin stripes and silver-worked boots. It was plain that none were aware Meilan had gone to meet him until after the fact. Potato-faced Torean, oddly languid for such a lumpy man, sniffed anxiously at a scented handkerchief. Gueyam, oiled beard making his head seem even balder, clenched fists the size of small hams and glared at Meilan even as he bowed to Rand. Simaan’s sharp nose seemed to quiver in outrage; Maraconn, with blue eyes rare in Tear, compressed his thin lips until they almost disappeared; and while Hearne’s narrow face was all smiles, he tugged unconsciously at one earlobe as he did when furious. Only blade-slender Aracome showed no outward emotion, but then he almost always kept his anger well banked until ready to let it burst into flame.

It was too good an opportunity to miss. Silently thanking Moiraine for her lessons—it was easier to trip a fool than to knock him down, she said—Rand clasped Torean’s pudgy hand warmly and clapped Gueyam on the point of a thick shoulder, returned Hearne’s smile with one warm enough for a close companion and nodded silently to Aracome with a seemingly significant glance. Simaan and Maraconn he all but ignored after one look as flat and cool as a deep winter pond for each.

That was all it needed for the moment, beyond watching their eyes shift and faces tighten in thought. They had played *Daes Dae'mar*, the Game of Houses, their entire lives, and being among Cairhienin, who could read volumes in a raised eyebrow or a cough, had only heightened their sensitivity. Each man knew Rand had no reason to be friendly toward him, but each had to wonder if his own greeting was only to cover something real with someone else. Simaan and Maraconn appeared the most worried, yet the others eyed those two perhaps the most suspiciously of all. Perhaps his coolness had been the true cover. Or maybe that was what they were meant to think.

For himself, Rand thought that Moiraine would be proud of him, and so would Thom Merrilin. Even if none of these seven was actively plotting against him at the moment—something he did not think even Mat would bet on—men in their positions could do much to disrupt his plans without being seen to, and they would do so from habit if for no other reason. Or they would have. He had them off balance now. If he could keep them that way, they would be too busy watching each other, and too afraid of being watched in turn, to trouble him. They might even obey for once without finding a hundred reasons why things should be done differently from what he wanted. Well, that might be asking too much.

His satisfaction slipped when he saw Asmodean's sardonic grin. Worse was Aviendha's wondering stare. She had been in the Stone of Tear; she knew who these men were, and why he had sent them here. *I do what I must*, he thought sourly, and wished it did not sound as if he were trying to excuse himself.

"Inside," he said, more sharply than he intended, and the seven High Lords jumped as if suddenly recalling who and what he was.

They wanted to crowd around him as he climbed the stairs, but except for Meilan to show the way, the Maidens simply made a solid circle around him, and the High Lords brought up the rear with Asmodean and the lesser lords. Aviendha stuck close by, of course, and Sulin was on his other side, Somara and Lamelle and Enaila right behind him. They could have reached out and touched his back without stretching. He gave Aviendha an accusing look, and she arched her eyebrows at him so questioningly that he almost believed she had had nothing to do with it. Almost.

The corridors of the palace were empty except for dark-liveried servants who bowed almost chest to knees or curtsied just as deeply as he passed, but when he entered the Grand Hall of the Sun he discovered that the Cairhienin nobility had not been excluded from the palace entirely.

"The Dragon Reborn comes," intoned a white-haired man just inside the huge gilded doors worked with the Rising Sun. His red coat embroidered with six-pointed stars in blue, a little large on him after his time in Cairhien, marked him for an upper servant of Meilan's House. "All hail the Lord Dragon Rand al'Thor. All glory to the Lord Dragon."

A quick roar filled the chamber to its angle-vaulted ceiling, one hundred and fifty feet up. "Hail the Lord Dragon Rand al'Thor! All glory to the Lord Dragon! The Light illumine the Lord Dragon!" The silence that followed seemed twice as still by comparison.

Between massive square columns of marble thick-streaked with blue so deep it was almost black stood more Tairens than Rand expected, ranks of Lords and Ladies of the Land dressed in their finest, in peaked velvet hats and coats with puffy, striped sleeves, in colourful gowns and lace ruffs and close-fitting caps intricately embroidered or sewn with pearls or small gems.

To their rear were the Cairhienin, darkly garbed except for slashes of colour across the breast of gown or knee-length coat. The more stripes in House colours, the higher the rank of the wearer, but men and women with colour from neck to waist or lower stood behind Tairens clearly of minor Houses, with yellow embroidery instead of thread-of-gold and wool instead of silk. No few of the Cairhienin men had shaved and powdered the front of their heads; all of the younger men had.

The Tairens looked expectant, if uneasy; the Cairhienin faces could have been chiselled from ice. There was no way to say who had cheered and who not, but Rand suspected most of those cries had come from the front rows.

"A good many wished to serve you here," Meilan murmured as they made their way up the blue-tiled floor with its great golden mosaic of the Rising Sun. A ripple of silent curtsies and bows followed.

Rand only grunted. They wished to serve him? He did not need Moiraine to know that these lesser nobles hoped to become greater on estates carved out of Cairhien. No doubt Meilan and the other six had already intimated if not promised which lands would be whose.

At the far end of the Grand Hall, the Sun Throne itself stood centred atop a wide dais of deep blue marble. Even here Cairhienin restraint held, for a throne at any rate. The great heavy-armed chair glittered with gilt and golden silk, but somehow it seemed to be all plain vertical lines, except for the wavy-rayed Rising Sun that would stand above the head of whoever sat on it.

That was meant to be him, Rand realized long before reaching the nine steps to the dais. Aviendha climbed up with him, and Asmodean, as his bard, was allowed up as well, but Sulin quickly arrayed the other Maidens around the dais, their casually held spears blocking Meilan as well as the rest of the High Lords. Frustration painted those Tairen faces. The Hall was so quiet that Rand could hear himself breathe.

"This belongs to someone else," he said finally. "Besides, I've spent too long in the saddle to welcome such a hard seat. Bring me a comfortable chair."

There was a moment of shocked silence before a murmur ran through the Hall. Meilan suddenly wore such a look of speculation, quickly suppressed, that Rand nearly laughed. Very likely Asmodean was right about the man. Asmodean himself was eyeing Rand with barely hidden surmise.

It was some minutes before the fellow in the star-embroidered coat ran up panting, followed by two dark-liveried Cairhienin carrying a high-backed chair piled with silk-covered cushions, and pointed out where to place it with a great many worried glances at Rand. Vertical lines of gilt ran up the chair's heavy legs and back, but it seemed insignificant in front of the Sun Throne.

While the three servants were still bowing themselves away, bending double on every step, Rand tossed most of the cushions to one side and sat down gratefully, the Seanchan spearhead on his knee. He was careful not to sigh, though. Aviendha was watching him too carefully for that, and the way Somara kept glancing from her to him and back confirmed his suspicions.

But whatever his problems with Aviendha and *Far Dareis Mai*, most present awaited his words with equal parts eagerness and trepidation. *At least they'll jump when I say "toad"*, he thought. They might not like it, but they would do it.

With Moiraine's help he had worked out what he must do here. Some he had known was right even without her suggestions. It would have been good to have her there to whisper in his ear if needed, instead of Aviendha waiting to signal Somara, but there was no point in waiting. Surely every Tairen and Cairhienin noble in the city was in this chamber.

"Why do the Cairhienin hang back?" he said loudly, and the crowd of nobles shifted, exchanging confused glances. "Tairens came to help, but that is no reason for Cairhienin to hold themselves in the rear here. Let everyone sort themselves by rank. Everyone."

It was difficult to say whether Tairens or Cairhienin were the most stunned, though Meilan looked ready to swallow his tongue, and the other six not far behind. Even slow-burning Aracome went white in the face. With much shuffling of boots and twitching aside of skirts, with many icy stares on both sides, it was done, until the front rows were all men and women with stripes across their chests and the second held only a few Tairens. Meilan and his fellows had been joined at the foot of the dais by twice their number of Cairhienin lords and ladies, most greying and everyone stripes from neck nearly to knees, though perhaps "joined" was not the right word. They stood in two groups, with a full three paces between, and looked away from one another so hard that they might as well have shaken fists and shouted. Every eye was on Rand, and if the Tairens were in a fury, the Cairhienin were still ice, with only hints of a thaw in the considering way they studied him.

Rand kept his own composure stern, though catching sight of a certain trio of ladies among the gathered Cairhienin did not make that easy. The older one—Breane he thought her name had been—allowed a small smirk to curve her lips when their eyes briefly touched.

"I have noticed the banners flying above Cairhien," he went on once the movement stilled. "It is well that so many of the Crescents of Tear fly. Without Tairen grain, Cairhien would have no living to hoist a banner, and without Tairen swords, the people of this city who survived today, noble as well as common, would be learning to obey the Shaido. Tear has earned her honour." That puffed up the Tairens, of course, bringing fierce nods and fiercer smiles, though it certainly seemed to confuse the High Lords, coming on the heels of the other. For that matter, the Cairhienin below the dais were eyeing one another doubtfully. "But I do not need so many banners for myself. Let one Dragon banner remain, on the highest tower of the city so all who approach can see, but let the rest be taken down and replaced with the banners of Cairhien. This is Cairhien, and the Rising Sun must and will fly proudly. Cairhien has her own honour, which she shall keep."

The chamber erupted in a roar so suddenly that Maidens hefted their spears, a roar that reverberated from wall to wall. In an instant Sulin was flashing Maiden handtalk, but already half-raised veils were being let fall. The Cairhienin nobles were cheering every bit as loudly as the people in the streets had, capering and waving their arms like Foregaters at festival. In the pandemonium it was the Tairens' turn to exchange silent stares. They did not look angry. Even Meilan appeared unsure more than anything else, though like Torean and the others, he watched in amazement the lords and ladies of high rank around him, so coldly dignified a moment before, now dancing and shouting for the Lord Dragon.

Rand did not know what any of them read into his words. Certainly he had expected them to hear more than he said, especially the Cairhienin, and perhaps even that some would hear what he really meant, but nothing had prepared him for this display. Cairhienin reserve was an odd thing, he well knew, mixed at times with unexpected boldness. Moiraine had been reticent on the matter, for all her insistence on trying to teach him everything; the most she had said was that if that reserve broke, it could do so to a surprising degree. Surprising, indeed.

When the cheering finally died down, the giving of oaths of fealty began. Meilan was the first to kneel, tight-faced as he pledged under the Light and by his hope of salvation and rebirth to serve faithfully and obey; it was an old form, and Rand hoped it might actually constrain some to keep the oath. Once Meilan had kissed the tip of the Seanchan spearhead, trying to hide a sour grimace by stroking his beard, he was replaced by the Lady Colavaere. A more than handsome woman in her middle years, with dark ivory lace spilling over the hands she placed between Rand's, and horizontal slashes of colour from high lace collar to her knees, she gave the oath in a clear, firm voice and the musical accent he was used to hearing from Moiraine. Her dark gaze had something of the weighing-and-measuring look of Moiraine as well, most especially when she eyed Aviendha as she curtsied her way back down the steps. Torean replaced her, sweating as he swore, and Lord Dobraine replaced Torean, deep-set eyes probing, one of the few older men to have shaved the front of his long, mostly grey hair, his horizontal slashes a perfect match for Breane's, then Aracome, and ...

Rand felt impatience as the procession continued, one by one up to kneel before him, Cairhienin succeeding Tairen succeeding Cairhienin, as he had decreed. This was all necessary, so Moiraine said—and so agreed a voice in his head that he knew for Lews Therin's—but to him it was part of the delay. He must have their loyalty, if only on the surface, in order to begin making Cairhien secure, and that beginning, at least, had to be made before he could move on Sammael. *And that I will do! I have too much to do yet to let him go on stabbing at my ankles from the bushes! He will find out what it means to rouse the Dragon!*

He did not understand why those coming before him began to sweat and lick their lips as they knelt and stammered the words of fealty. But then, he could not see the cold light burning in his own eyes.

## CHAPTER 79: No Princess She



There was a time Rand would have thought the day after a battle to be a time of relaxation, when men nursed their wounds and celebrated survival. In reality, he barely had time to eat due to the amount of tasks before him. Cairhien was in ruins; not the City itself, but the nation in general. Already a shadow of its former self since the Aiel War, it had now gone through a civil war and the Shaido's attack, with all the damage and loss of life that implied. Fixing that mess would have been work enough for anyone's lifetime, and too much work for most. For Rand, it was a thing he had to do quickly so he could move onto other, equally as difficult, jobs. Attending to that already daunting task was made even harder by the lack of cooperation.

Every question he asked of every noble in the city was turned to politics. He inquired after the food reserves, how many people needed feeding, how long until the farms could be returned to productivity. He got no answers. Invariably, they turned the conversation to the civil war, the appalling behaviour of some other House, and their own claim to the Sun Throne. When he roughly dismissed that nonsense, and asked who was managing the important stuff, none could tell him. Frustrating as that was, the worst answer he got was, "You, my Lord Dragon."

Aiel had followed him into the city, wisely unopposed by their long enemies. It was mostly Maidens and *gai'shain*, securing and preparing the chambers Rand had claimed. As in Tear, he had taken the place once reserved for royalty—the Tower of the Risen Sun. Some Wise Ones had shown up as well, to caution him not to interfere between them and the unaligned chiefs. Amys cautioned him against using *Tel'aran'rhiod*, too, but wouldn't tell him why. He would have dismissed that if it wasn't such a sudden change in attitude. Pressing for an explanation did nothing, of course.

The Shaido were in full retreat. The colossal process of burying all those that had died in the fighting Rand had the privilege of leaving to others. It would be some time yet before the Cairhienin that had fled here were able to return to their homes. Some might be reluctant, but go they would have to. The nation's hopes of rebuilding required it. Not everyone had fled, though. There were still Houses that had felt large enough to defend themselves, or who had not wanted to be trapped in a city with their rivals. He'd have to make contact with them, and make sure any thought of continuing the civil war was firmly stamped out. And all while preparing to move against Sammael.

That was why he had sent Nerise to ask Moiraine to come to him. Why he had sent her several hours ago. It was well into afternoon, and he'd been busy enough that the delay hadn't troubled him, not until he found a quiet moment, looked up and wondered where she was. Though annoyed, he still thought carefully before choosing whom to send. Su was disciplined, and not prone to gossip. He took her aside from the other Maidens, there in the Grand Hall.

"Go to Moiraine," he said quietly. "Find a moment when no-one else can hear you and then tell her I order her to attend me in the palace."

Her eyes widened but she said nothing more than, "At your command, *Car'a'carn*."

*And on your head*, Rand imagined her thinking.

He wasn't idle while he waited. It had become apparent that the three most powerful Cairhienin in the city were Colavaere of House Saighan, Dobraine of House Taborwin, and Maringil of House Aldorwin. Those three had remained close to him for much of the day, until frustration with the smallness of his questions drove them away. The Sun Throne was what they wanted to talk about. They'd left their agents to watch, though. Family members, in Maringil and Dobraine's cases. A pale granddaughter and a far from young daughter, a certain Breane.

He was glad that last was being discreet, other than the occasional incredulous shaking of the head. Her stares fit right in with the other nobles who'd lingered, the few who still lingered. Alaine and Belevaere—the other two "ladies" Rand had dallied with when he'd last visited Cairhien—had been just as shocked to find out who and what he was, and had been even more intent on hiding their past acquaintanceship. As well they might, since their husbands were right there with them this time.

Rand had gotten all the answers he was likely to get out of the nobles, however. It was the grave and greying Holder of the Keys he was questioning when he noticed a hooded figure follow Su into the Grand Hall. Corgaide Marendevi was the Holder's name. She was the head servant, and he'd had to send for her himself. The nobles certainly hadn't thought her a woman who'd have much to contribute. If she was afraid of the Dragon Reborn, she hid it well. It was from her that he got most of his more practical answers, including the source of the giant spears that had been flying from Cairhien's walls. Not a spear at all, as it turned out, but a huge crossbow designed by a certain Idrien Tarsin. Another task, but for another day.

Carefully not looking Su's way, Rand considered the best way to do it. After a moment, he rose from his chair—which he'd had moved from the dais hours ago—and raised his voice. “These have been troubled days for all, Tairen and Cairhienin alike. There is much for you all to do, I am sure. Wounds to bind up, estates to manage. Go and attend to them now. I have matters of my own to deal with, private matters involving my Aiel. Leave me.”

They left, some eagerly, some reluctantly, but they all left. He didn't really think they'd be doing much binding of wounds, the nobles, or managing of estates even. But perhaps that was too harsh. Elayne was a noble, and she'd have done both things in their place. Irritating as they often were, he'd have to be careful about letting himself fall into the habit of thinking them all the same.

It wouldn't be easy. It was even harder with Aes Sedai. The hooded figure remained behind a square column until the Maidens had closed the gilded doors behind the last of his noble guests. Only then did she lower her hood and reveal her ageless face.

“Seal the chamber,” Rand told the Maidens. “Make sure all the doors are guarded.”

Moiraine's dark eyes roamed over the Grand Hall of the Sun, slowly taking in all the details. “With yourselves on the outside,” she added, just as Sulin reached the main entry. Her voice revealed no more than her face. Privately, Rand was glad the Maiden looked to him and waited for his nod before complying.

“Why the secrecy, Moiraine?” he asked once they were alone. “I half-expected to have to fight to keep you from speaking over me today. Instead, you avoid the palace entirely.”

“There is little point to teaching, if you then perform the tasks you have taught. You cannot be my student forever, Rand.”

He folded his hands behind his back and paced towards the dais, his boots clicking on the blue-tiled floor. “Things do have a habit of changing. Meilan wants the Sun Throne. He has no claim whatsoever—he's not even Cairhienin—but he wants it and thinks he can persuade me to give it to him. He's not the only one, though the only Tairen to be bold enough.”

“A man in whom ambition burns that hot is capable of anything,” she said as she glided to join him, her slippers barely making a sound. “Even striking at the Dragon Reborn. Be careful.”

Rand nodded curtly. The prophecies and what they promised if he failed should have been enough to shield him from attacks by any human who was not a Darkfriend. They had not been. Not even close. He did not doubt for a moment that Meilan would put a knife in his back if he saw a chance, and boast of it to his friends right up until the moment the Dark One broke free.

And even those who did believe, who opposed the Shadow as much or more than Rand ever had, could not always be trusted. He watched Moiraine take in the sights, and fancied he saw something wistful in her eyes. “You've never had much faith in my abilities before. As pleasant as it might be to imagine that has changed, it isn't why you avoided being here.”

A wan little smile tried to escape her. “My thoughts of you have changed more than you can know. But you are correct, nonetheless. I am a Damodred, as you know. I have not been to court in a very long time, but there are still those who would recognise me.”

“No doubt. You are hard to forget. And unlike Meilan, you do have a claim.” Her smile disappeared. “And unlike Meilan, I ...” Light. It was harder to say than it should be. “I would trust you at my back,” he finished gruffly.

Moiraine closed her eyes. “That should not matter,” she whispered.

“It does,” Rand insisted. “I can't stay in Cairhien and rebuild. But someone has to. And it has to be someone I can trust, someone smart and driven, someone ... Someone who is already a queen, even without a crown.”

Had Moiraine just trembled? No. It had to have been his imagination. “I cannot stay, either. Rand, abandon these thoughts.”

"Why?" He spoke again into her silence. "Why, Moiraine? I need you to take the Sun Throne, and be my queen. I need you..."

Her eyes snapped open, brimming with emotion. "Recall that I am Aes Sedai. My duty, my fate, lies elsewhere. And..." She looked to the Sun Throne, shining above, and a scowl marred her pale brow. "And I always hated it here. These pompous, selfish fools. My own family even. How they looked down on us, my father and I. He for marrying a peasant, I for being her daughter. I could not wait to be rid of this court. The last thing I wanted was to return."

Rand hardened his heart. "That just means you'd be even better at the job, since you wouldn't be doing it for yourself."

She shook her head. "You will have to choose another."

"Well, Elayne's half Damodred, so I guess she has a claim, too. And I trust her." There certainly wasn't any other Cairhienin noble he could think of.

Moiraine interlaced her fingers. "It is a viable plan. In the short term, which is what matters most."

"But?"

"It will lead to rebellion, in the long term. One queen cannot rule two nations, and Cairhien will not accept being absorbed into Andor. More pressing concerns will override those, but soon or late the civil war will resume. Light willing, it will not be until after Tarmon Gai'don."

Her voice was cold. Rand tried to make his match it. "Better than the alternative."

"Yes. Though if you seek another alternative—one who is not me—there are options. It would take more effort to find a loyal Cairhienin woman who could act as your proxy here, but it should still be possible."

That would involve getting to know the various nobles, questioning, testing, trusting. He had no time. "It should be you who sits the Sun Throne," he growled stepping close.

She looked at it again, her scowl returning. "Fuck the Sun Throne."

Rand's jaw dropped. "Lady Moiraine Damodred Aes Sedai. What did you just say? If the Women's Circle could hear that..."

Though too dignified to roll her eyes, Moiraine's look spoke volumes. "Even if I did not have more important things to do, I would not want it. I would almost sooner put you on it, just to see the look on their faces, though that would be an even more short-sighted folly."

"A half Aiel foreigner." Folly wasn't even in it.

"A barbarian," she said, in a rather breathy voice.

He stared at her, a sudden tension in the air. "And a beautiful princess, alone in the throne room of her conquered palace."

"I am not a princess," Moiraine managed to say, in the moment before he bent to claim her lips. Her black hair was silky between his fingers, her tongue hot against his. She did not push him away.

"A pretty princess in a pretty dress," he said between kisses. "I bet you'll look even prettier out of it." It was only when his hand closed roughly upon the neck of her blue riding dress that Moiraine stopped kissing him, her hands grasping his Dragon-marked arm.

"It is a long ride back to camp to find a replacement. Let me."

Rand smiled as she attacked her buttons. It was already hard to hold back, but the sight of her undressing made it—and him—even harder. There was colour in Moiraine's cheeks, and the way she glanced guiltily about the Grand Hall showed him a distant echo of the girl she must have been.

"That's it. Strip for me," he teased, and smiled wider when her blush deepened.

"You have grown too bold by far. How dare you speak to me like—" She cut off with a gasp when he took her by her slender waist and lifted her easily. He kissed her again as he ascended the stairs, and did not stop until he'd plopped her down on the throne she'd refused.

She wore her white shift, her white stockings, and an unreadable expression. "On the Sun Throne ..." she whispered.

Rand lifted the shift, slid his hands up her smooth thighs, took hold of her underwear, and ripped them to shreds. "Yes. Whether you like it or not."

She let out a little moan. "You brute, you would not dare ..." she said as he was fumbling with his belt, and yanking down his breeches.

What he dared was to take hold of her legs and place one across either arm of the chair. "Yes I would," he said as he knelt between her legs. He put his hand around her slender neck, to feel the way her pulse was racing. "You wanted to imagine their faces? Imagine what those pompous fools would say if they saw this."

This, was his shoving his thick cock into her sopping wet pussy while she sat the throne and howled her pleasure all through the penetration. She felt so bloody hot. She *was* so bloody hot.

He looked into the dark depths of her eyes as he said, "I wonder how many heard that. They must wonder who it was. And what she's doing." And yet, when he moved again, she did not strive for silence.

Moiraine's nails dug into his arms. "Do it. Do it. Fuck ... me ..." she whispered.

And he did. Oh Light but he did. He fucked her hot and fast, only stopping to stare at the naked pleasure on that usually so composed face when she started coming, staining the seat of the throne she had scorned. He stopped and he watched until her moans went quiet, and then he kissed her deep.

"If all conquering was done like that," she murmured after. "The histories would be a much more pleasant read."

Rand smiled, though he wouldn't have needed her confession, what with the way her nipples were straining against her shift. He stared at them for a moment, touched them through the hateful fabric, let his hands drift up to the neck. "Oh, I'm not done conquering yet."

Moiraine gasped as he ripped her shift right down the middle, exposing her palely beautiful body. Gasped again when he squeezed her breasts, and gasped hardest of all when he started moving again. "Stop ... stop ... Rand." He took her words for play at first, until she clasped his face and made him look at her eyes. "Let me."

His silent question was met with a silent answer. Out he slipped, missing her warmth already, away he moved, admiring her body as she rose from the throne, and down he went, smiling as he realised her intention.

So it was that Rand did, in fact, sit the Sun Throne; staring at Moiraine's bottom while she grasped the throne's arms and lowered herself onto his cock. The way it felt was matched only by the way she looked, clad in nothing but her stockings in that grand hall. She was not slow to move, could not have been slow if she'd wanted to be, not while they were both revelling in the depraved naughtiness of what they were doing and where they were doing it.

She was moving her hips so fast that her moans were not moans, just one long noise of pleasure. And yet, when Rand slapped her bottom and bade her imagine if the nobles were watching her now, she started bouncing on his cock even faster.

Rand had no hope of holding out against that. And no desire to. "That's it, princess, milk that cock. Show them ... everything ..." He came so hard that he didn't even realise he was mauling her poor breasts until the flood began to slow. She was merciful, only rolling her hips as she drew the last drops from him.

When she felt it end, she sat back in his lap, breathing heavy. Sweat had broken though even her Aes Sedai composure, and glistened in the light of the lamps. Cock still lodged within her, Rand put his arm under her legs and moved her around until she was sitting properly, head resting against his shoulder companionably. "Blood and ashes," he breathed. "You are so much more than I imagined."

"So are you. On occasion."

He smiled wryly. It was as much as he could hope for, and probably more than he deserved, what with all his shortcomings and the mistakes he'd made. She sat still against him, but he'd noticed how much it had thrilled her to make a spectacle of herself here in this place. He freed a hand and slid it along a slick thigh until he found another place in need of thrilling. A soft sigh tickled his neck when he started rubbing her.

"I suppose most queens wouldn't do something like this."

She shook her head, but not for the reason he'd expected. "Queens are women, too. Most would welcome something like this. I ..." She clasped his arm, but not to make him stop. "Even ... Aes Sedai ... are still ... human. You taught me that. I thought I alone was the teacher, but you ... you showed me what it was like to ..."

He never learned what it was like, for she came then, squirming in his lap as her pussy drank hungrily of the seed he'd left in her.

They sat for a time afterwards, until the quiet grew loud, there in that cavernous chamber. *Light. I wonder if anyone really did hear us.* Well. Given the things that took place behind closed doors at Cairhienin parties, they were in no position to judge so far as Rand was concerned. He'd have to do something about the Sun Throne, though. They'd made quite the mess, and just leaving the Cairhienin throne like that was beyond rude. Asmodean had shown him some tricks that could help there. The man had actually thought such things a priority, early on, until Rand set him straight.

"You know," he mused as he let his hand drift through Moiraine's locks. "If you were queen, we could do this sort of thing regularly."

Her face was hidden against his neck, her melodious voice muffled. "I cannot. Do not ask me again, Rand. Please."

It was that last word, spoken with so much more strain than the rest, that settled him. "Very well," he sighed. "I will let it go." That but not her. Her he did not ever want to let go.

## CHAPTER 80: Swollen Head



It was late when Rand finally allowed the Maidens to steer him towards his new chambers in the Sun Palace. He was only half listening to Sulin talk security and where the Maidens would be posted, but it sounded like she'd spotted far too many potential entries for her liking. The Tower of the Risen Sun was large, and apparently all of it was supposed to be given over to the ruler and her household. A huge stepped tower for Rand alone to sleep in. It seemed such a waste.

They'd only just entered the lowest level when he spotted Mat, in a rumpled green coat, still wearing that black hat despite being indoors at this hour.

"What brings you here, hero?" Rand said, smiling wryly.

Mat's eyes narrowed. "Don't you bloody call me that. Only fools try to be heroes."

"Aye, the wise men just luck into it."

That odd spear of his had been left leaning against a marble wall. Mat snatched it up with such force that some of the Maidens twitched hands towards veils. "I don't even know why I bothered coming. Just letting you know I'm leaving. As soon as I can. That's all. And I mean it this time. Not that you'll notice, with all these idiots fawning over you. Aiel and Tairens weren't enough, you had to get the Cairhienin to kiss your boots, too?"

More than a few hands twitched towards veils this time. "He's a friend," Rand told them. "Despite how it looks."

Briana studied Mat coldly. "You have strange taste in near-brothers, Rand al'Thor."

One of her sisters—Cirana, unless he missed his guess—nodded. "The Shienarans were much better choices, even the one-eyed one."

Mat smirked at them. "That how it is? Well, give Jec and Cara and the rest my best, next you see them."

Sighing, Rand strode for the nearest door. "I want to talk to Mat in private. You lot stay here." The room he let himself into looked like some kind of banquet hall. A table so long you would have struggled to make out the face of the person at the far end dominated it, while rich tapestries and paintings adorned the walls and smaller tables displayed Sea Folk porcelain and flowered vases.

Mat followed him in. "Fancy house you've raided yourself."

Rand scowled. "I hardly raided it. I stopped the Shaido from burning the place down, and put an end to the civil war that's been killing so many."

"That what you tell yourself?"

"I didn't mean I did the work myself. I know you killed Couladin. Well done. All glory unto you, or whatever. I'm not trying to say otherwise, it's—"

Mat growled at the roof. "Blood and ashes! Don't you start that, too. I don't want a bloody parade. Who would want a bloody parade? Other than you, I mean. I hear you had a great one. Burn me, you're really getting into it, aren't you. Are you planning to take over the world or something?"

What parade? The starving refugees? That was no parade; it was a call to action. "I'm planning to win Tarmon Gai'don," Rand said tightly.

There was a long, narrow-eyed delay before Mat spoke again. "That wasn't a denial."

Rand crossed his arms. "I will do what I must."

"If Egwene were still here, she'd tell you your head is swollen up like an overripe melon. And for once she'd be right."

Rand could only sigh. "You really think I do this because I want to? For ... what? Fame?" He supposed a lot of people would think that. Meilan and his sort certainly would. It shouldn't have mattered. He was the Dragon Reborn, already a monster from the moment of his birth. It was an unacceptable weakness to want them to understand. Let them think him what they would. Them, but not Mat. "I don't care about bloody thrones and fools bowing. This is a job I have to do, that's all."

Mat grounded his spear and leaned to as he eyed Rand dubiously. "Sure, and all the wealth and power and cheering crowds—not to mention the women!—that's all just a sad side-effect. You're

angling to be the next Artur Hawkwing. At least be honest about it. Arrogance isn't the worst thing in the world, but arrogance and false humility? That's gross."

Rand stood silent for a moment, then stepped closer. Mat tensed, wary and suspicious. That hit hard, but he tried not to let it show. "I'll show you how false my humility isn't," he said quietly.

The question was aborted when Rand knelt before him and started working on Mat's belt. It was only when the loop came free that Mat rediscovered his voice. "Ah, I'm going. Right now."

He didn't though. He stood there while Rand reached into his underwear and found his limp cock. And he was still standing there when Rand's caress caused it to start swelling and stiffening. By the time it had stiffened enough to spring free, Mat had set aside his spear and was combing his fingers through Rand's hair. He stared wide-eyed as Rand wrapped his mouth around the head and began to suck.

No moans escaped him, conscious as he was of the nearby door and the women waiting beyond it. But his enjoyment was obvious even before he put his hand behind Rand's head and pushed him further down. Rand let him, tasting his friend's hot meat as it conquered first his mouth and then his throat. He moved his caressing hands from the shaft to the balls, urging Mat on with those as much as with his tongue.

Breathing through his nose, and bobbing his head, he did all he could to pleasure that cock. Mat was biting his lip. The silent tossing of his head dislodged his hat but he didn't notice or care. Rand massaged his balls for him, while locking his lips to his shaft and moving them up and down it. Whatever Mat thought, he had done what Rand could not. That parade he scorned would have been no more than his due. As was this.

Rand could feel the life pulsing inside his mouth, and after a not very long time, he felt life pulsing into his throat, too, hot, sticky life. He did not pull away. He let Mat empty his swollen balls into him, and drank their content.

A long, low sigh, and a sudden slackening of face and body would have been enough to tell the tale even if Rand couldn't feel the stream become a trickle. He moved back slowly, Mat's manhood sliding out of him. It glistened gloriously with his saliva in the moments before Mat tucked it away, while shooting wary looks at the door.

Rand wiped his lips with the back of one Dragon-marked hand. He could have wished the banquet hall had something to drink in it. He liked making people happy, but had never really cared for a man's taste. But he had to make do, in this as in so much else. He stood.

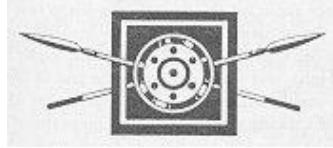
"I thought you said you were going," he teased. "Not ... the other."

Mat snickered. "I am! Soon. There's far too much trouble here. The road's calling, fun and freedom it promises." He looked away suddenly. "I mean ... it's not that this is the worst place in the world, or has the worst people, but it's too much trouble. You understand?"

"I do."

"I am going. Soon. Very soon. And that's that!" Mat gathered himself, recovered his spear and hat and marched to the door. There he paused for a moment, before venting some wordless annoyance, jerking open the door and rushing out.

## CHAPTER 81: *Car'a'carn*



The Wise Ones came the next morning, to tell him it was time to meet the four chiefs who'd remained neutral in the war. His departure from the Sun Palace did not go unnoticed. Rand marked the sudden appearances of Meilan, Colavaere and so many other nobles, and knew himself watched. It was as predictable as their desire to accompany him to his meeting. His refusal was not the most gracious, but that the Aiel would not welcome outsiders was no more than truth.

Jay, of the Stone Row Taardad was the only Wise One among his escort that he recognised as being Taardad. She wondered, smiling, how he'd managed to entrance the Cairhienin so, since they usually ran from Aiel instead of towards them. Colavaere and the others were less amused than his guard of Maidens. Jay was as easy on the ears as she was on the eyes, but Rand was too busy wondering about other things just then to answer.

Aeron, of the Black Water Nakai had often spoken in his favour, but only when Seana was not present. Leyn, of the Cold Water Shaarad might well have been ice for all the regard she'd ever shown. He had to ask Julyana, of the More Water Goshien her name, and only knew she wasn't a new arrival due to having noticed her freckled beauty before. Where were Melaine, Amys, Bair and Dana? He knew that Leta, her long face made longer by her habitual solemnity, was Han's advisor. And Samara had arrived with Dhearic. The youthful-seeming and uncommonly round Patti he'd once heard discussing *saidar* with Dani, and confess to being Sorelia's greatdaughter, which made her Chareen. The other four were complete strangers. *One from each clan, and no-one I know well.* Formality was to be the order of the day, it seemed.

He resolved to hold it even when Elindha addressed the thin woman with the long yellow hair as greatmother. *Blood and ashes.* She looked as young as Nynaeve, and had a similarly determined step. He kept his face smooth, and hoped she never found out about the things that had happened between her granddaughter and him. All four of the new arrivals looked younger than he suspected they should, in fact. None of them looked on him fondly.

The Maidens had gotten in on it, too. It might have been a coincidence that Elindha, Lamelle, Somara, Enaila, Renay, Carwe, Tenelca and even Nici were part of his escort that morning, but he didn't believe it. All of them belonged to clans that had not fought for him in the war.

Though he was the only one on horseback, Rand had never felt so invisible as when he rode through the streets of Cairhien, the lone man in a sea of beautiful women. He was glad it was so early, not because he feared for the women's safety, but because it made their passage so much smoother.

Outside the walls, Aeron directed him towards a distant hill, the tallest in sight. It had been taller a few days ago, before Rand. Now it was supporting a huge tent, open on all sides, in which figures could just about be seen gathering.

The Aiel were camped all around Cairhien, and they had to pass a great many tents before they reached the foot of that hill. There Rand dismounted. He undid his swordbelt and attached Tam's sword to Jeade'en's saddle. The Seanchan spearhead he kept, but there was no sense showing the sword when he didn't have to. He climbed the hill on foot, the Wise Ones keeping pace every bit as easily as did the Maidens.

Rhuarc was the first to greet him. "I see you, *Car'a'carn.*"

Amys spoke right after him. "I see you, Rand al'Thor."

Rhamys and Aviendha were with them, along with Dana and Jecht. It wasn't a family get-together, however. Rand noted the presence of Jurainai, leader of *Aethan Dor*, among their number, as well as Judca, who commanded *Hama N'dore*. They all formed a cluster of expressionless tan faces. Recalling the things Dani had said about favouring the Taardad, Rand nodded solemnly, told them "I see you", and walked by. Rhuarc gave him the tiniest of nods as he passed. He thought Aviendha looked pleased, but dismissed that thought at once. Mat was right. He was getting too full of himself.

The other chiefs were already under the tent, standing in similar knots to Rhuarc's. The Wise Ones who had brought Rand there dispersed as soon as he stepped into the shade. Rand paused, and watched who went where.

Leta joined old, sour-faced Han, of course, whose entourage was among the smallest. Just them, the Stone Dogs' leader, Turol, Dina of *Far Dareis Mai*, and a Thunder Walker whose arrows had felled so many Shaido in the fighting that he'd been honoured with a place as his chief's guard. Despite that, Olivarc looked more interested in engaging Dina's regard than basking in Han's.

Aeron brought a touch of femininity to Bruan's group. Aside from her, the Nakai were all men, and hardened veterans, Roidan, leader of the Thunder Walkers, first among them. Roidan was Bruan's husband, too, a fact which would have scandalized Tairen and Cairhienin alike if Rand had been foolish enough to let them accompany him.

Bael, by contrast, looked almost harried, surrounded by so many women. When Julyana joined Melaine, Yusana and Sulin in their "advising", Rand almost fancied that the Goshien chief inched closer to his tall young son Alec as if for comfort.

Once Jheran might have noticed that and made a comment on it, but not today, and hopefully not on any day to come. His group was more balanced, with Bair and Leyn on one side, and the *Rahien Sorei* leader, Erwan, joining a sept chief on the other. Edon, the latter's name was. Rand looked to Nerise and saw her lips thin, as they usually did when she met her father. He'd never understood why. Though grey of hair, he was a fearless fighter, and still handsome.

Erim's Chareen were a younger than usual gathering. Rand put that down to Sorelia's presence. There was really no point competing with her for the last word, so most people just didn't bother trying. Her granddaughter joined a trio of handsome young warriors, and Celesta the torturer, who Rand knew all too well. Other than Erim and Sorelia, the only white hair could be found mixed in with the red locks of Holaf, the loud-mouthed leader of *Tain Shari*, now conspicuously silent.

Dheariec was surrounded by Wise Ones even before Samara glided over to join him. A pair of red-haired *algai'd siswai* stood at his flanks. Rand knew Urien better than he did Butsca, but both were hailed for their skill at tactics and combat. Neither was as hailed as the whipcord lean leader of the Knife Hands, however, the darkly tanned Banjun.

There his knowing ended and his supposing began. Elindha's greatmother marched towards one group, where a big, heavy-jawed man with pale hair greeted her with the same term Elindha had used, breaking off the conversation he'd been having with Rand's uncle Rhutar. Though he'd moved back to the Iron Mountain, Rhutar had been born High Pass Codarra. The greatmother, whose named he'd heard given as Nevarin, walked right by an amiable looking, orange-haired man, and a not remotely amiable looking fellow with a head as bald as his face was scarred, and spoke instead to a gaunt man with thinning white hair, whose deep-set green eyes were sharp on Rand. All of which made the gaunt man Indirian, chief of the Codarra.

Rand nodded to him solemnly, before his eyes moved to track the hook-nosed Wise One, who had waited only long enough to greet Aviendha before going to join a group of mostly women surrounding a trio of grey hairs. *It was the Miagoma Aviendha's sister married into, wasn't it?* Looking to Tenelca for confirmation was no use, but Lamelle gave him a helpful nod.

"Timolan is the shortest of the men, but be sure not to say anything to him about that. It is rude," she said, which was also helpful. If very aggravating. "The tallest is Perdat of the Water Seekers. The other man is Canderys, sept chief of the Ordo."

"My thanks," he said tightly. Timolan was massively muscled, and his face gave away nothing as he studied Rand in turn.

Rand could find no clues as to the identity of the group the fiery-haired Wise One left his escort for. The very tall, very grey man, or the mostly bald one with the eye patch were the most likely candidates for chief. There were no young chiefs, for all that the handsome fellow standing hipshot near them carried himself with the confidence of one. There were a few Maidens in that group, but none he recognised. A sinewy woman with greying yellow hair. A redhead, still handsome despite the lines graven around her mouth. And a younger one towards the back.

It was a more familiar Maiden who poked his ribs and leaned close. "Those are the Daryne. My clan. Mandelain is the man with the eye patch," Somara said. She shook her head. "You should simply ask if you do not know." At least she kept her voice down, unlike Lamelle.

Rand smiled a sharp little smile. "The fellow trying to rival Bael would be Camar, then." He'd never met the man, but he knew the leader of the Black Eyes was a Daryne. The surprise in her eyes, and her slow nod were most satisfying.

All of which made the last group the Shiande, and no need for Renay or Carwe to clue him in. There's was an elderly gathering, all scars and creases, grey hairs and white, where there was hair at all. He knew the chief's name was Janwin, but had no more hope of picking him out of that crowd than he did Tobiram, the *Cor Darei* leader that he was now sure would be among them.

When Rhuarc led his Taardad into the shade and went to one of the eleven clusters of pillows that had been spaced out around the tent, Rand did not go to join him. Instead, he strode to the centre of the tent while undoing the cuffs of his red coat. "I am Rand al'Thor," he said with the eyes of strangers upon him. He raised his arms to show the markings upon them. "I am He Who Comes With the Dawn."

After a long silence, one-eyed Mandelain stepped forward, shadowed by a Maiden. The wound that had cost him his eye had left a heavy scar up the right side of his face. It gave him a harsh appearance, but his voice was mild. "I see you, Rand al'Thor. And acknowledge you as *Car'a'carn*."

It was not the way things were done among the Aiel, but Rand offered the man his hand. Only when, after a pause, Mandelain took it, did he say, "Thank you."

"The greater gift would have been to come sooner, but we had to be certain," the Daryne explained.

Rand schooled his face. The Shaido would have been defeated much faster, and a great many who were now dead would still be alive, if these men had been less indecisive. Saying that would accomplish nothing. A fresh start was what was needed. "These are uncertain times for us all. That you will be with us for the battles to come is what matters most."

Other men were leaving their groups, stepping his way. Rand released Mandelain and turned to face them. Or half turned, at least. The Maiden with him ... *Is she the same height as me? Blood and ashes. She is!* A big girl by anyone's standards. The biggest he'd ever seen. Striking, too, with that golden hair and those green eyes. Tall girls tended to look willowy, in his experience. Stretched out. But not this one. She was big all over.

Mandelain chuckled. "My daughter Caitlin. And yes, she is tall. As everyone comments."

Rand quashed the temptation to ask if her mother had been an Ogier. They might have laughed, they might have veiled. He did not want to risk it. "I see you, Caitlin," he said instead. "Though it would be hard not to."

Her father chuckled again, though the girl did not. He put that aside, fearing the delay had already cost him. Sure enough, Indiran looked even less pleased now. He was slightly mollified when Rand greeted him by name, however, without needing an introduction, and shook his hand without comment. He, too, acknowledged him as *Car'a'carn*. Introductions were needed for Janwin, the very grey, very lined, very fierce-looking Shiande chief. As tall as Rand but even heavier, he clasped his hand in a hard grip as he spoke the words. The last chief, Timolan, looked a sober man. Thoughts that he would be the least trouble were soon dispersed, however, when he proved the only one unwilling to perform a "wetlander ceremony". He did address Rand as *Car'a'carn*, however, which was what mattered most.

They had drawn an audience, Aiel having streamed in to join the Maidens encircling the tent. It was a time of ceremony, Rand knew. He bent to pluck a single pillow from the nearest pile, and tossed it to a spot between two of the clusters, not knowing who would be sitting where.

"It is the beginning of a new day. Please sit, all of you, and discuss with me what we will do with it." He was the first to sit, separate from all on that lone pillow.

The others soon followed suit, arranged by clan. Chance alone decreed that the Miagoma and the Reyn be the clans placed to Rand's left and right. *Far Aldazar Din*'s leader was a Shaido, and was no more likely to attend than whoever had succeeded Couladin, but other than them the leaders of all the societies and all the clans were present. All of the most influential Aiel men were likely gathered under that tent, and most of the top Wise Ones besides.

Rand crossed his legs, set his hands on his knees, and set about trying to convince them he was worthy to sit among them.

## CHAPTER 82: Of All Clans



As solemn as the meeting had been, it was quite the shock when a great drumming of bucklers thundered from the watching Aiel as soon as Rand and the others stepped out of the shade of the tent. Rand kept his composure but had no idea what they cheered. For all the talking, not much had really been decided, other than that the four formerly neutral clans would have charge of harrying the Shaido out of Cairhien, with Holaf of the True Bloods having final say in any disputes concerning dispositions. Perhaps it was just the sight of them all together. The unification it spoke of. Not all Aiel would welcome that idea, for fighting each other was part of how they forged themselves, but it was nice to imagine that enough of them would.

For once, the Maidens did not rush to surround him. Even faithful Renay was too busy greeting Airc and Cad, *algai'd'siswai* from her clan who had fought at Emond's Field but remained with their chief until now. Rand looked for Aviendha but she was back in the shade, speaking to Cara about something. From the way they kept glancing at him, he suspected he was the topic.

"The past days have been trying. I could use a good steam to relax," he heard Erim say.

Han grunted. "And let no man say you are seeking a place Sorilea cannot follow."

A few of the nearby men chuckled at that, but not before looking around to make sure she wasn't close. Erim was not one of them. "The greater the challenge you face, the stronger you become," he said.

"A chance to speak free of the women would be welcome," said Mandelain. "My wives have spoken books recently. And Shyandha even more."

Rand followed that lone eye. Shyandha was the fiery woman who'd come to fetch him, then. She had an apprentice with her, a busty girl who was looking on her chief as sourly as did the Wise One. He couldn't blame him for wanting to escape that, but other considerations weighed on his mind.

While Erim and the other two moved off towards their destination, Rand lingered. It was quite the crowd. So many watching eyes. So many possibilities. Rhuarc was leaving with Jecht and Rhutar. No advice would come from them. He'd have do judge for himself whether those possibilities would help or hurt his cause.

He spotted Arcaval in the crowd, being zealously avoided by Rhamys, probably for the same reasons Rand wanted to avoid him. Big and handsome fellow, Arcaval, but not remotely nice. That had been a mistake, not his first and probably not his last. But he should still try to learn from it.

The Aielman who'd approached Tenelca was sharply handsome, too, but Rand saw a change in her usual stiffness, a pointed refusal to move away. Bracys, she named him. His thin lips thinned further with each monosyllabic answer she gave.

Bad ideas. He should leave, go back to Cairhien. Or join his aunt and wait for the Wise Ones and Moiraine to descend on him. Dana had a welcoming smile on her lined face. She was nice. And if he went to her the others would join in at once, wanting to know his intentions and what he'd meant by the things he'd said at the meeting and who he'd liked best and what his plans were.

Rand was tired of struggling. Erim was right. He needed to relax for a while. He strolled off in the direction the chief had gone. As sizable as the crowd was, he didn't need to push his way through at all. They parted for him, and some broke off their conversations to follow along.

Bruan and Roidan walked with him. Huge, the pair of them, but among Rand's staunchest supporters. There were good ideas, too ... They spoke more of the journey south, and the difficulty posed by the terrain. Bruan, who had fought in the Aiel War, was less concerned than Rand by that. But then, he cared nothing for the need to pass through Whitebridge. Rand cared a lot. The danger of escalation was very much on his mind. How to convince the Andorans they were just passing through, rather than invading? He'd need to speak to Elayne. About that, and a lot more. Why were the Wise Ones insisting he avoid *Tel'aran'rhiad* all of a sudden?

The tent of heavy dark cloth ahead was as large as that he'd come from, but lower to the ground and definitely not open. There was no smoke hole, for the heat and steam within was meant to

be hoarded, not disposed of. Urien and Butsca were already following Dheanic inside, though Banjun was bound elsewhere.

Rand hesitated for a moment at the outer flaps. He knew what was waiting inside. He stepped forward anyway. The outer section of the tent was narrow and dark, lit only by the bright light that shone from without in the moments before Roidan let the heavy outer curtain fall, and by the redder light that shone past the inner curtain as a naked Dheanic was ducking inside. Dozens of tidy piles of clothes were scattered about the edges of this section, belonging to the men already inside. Rand found an empty spot and set about creating a pile of his own.

He didn't undress alone, but could hardly see a thing, not until the reddish light returned while Butsca held the flap for Urien. They looked much alike, those two, tall, muscular, red-haired. Two warriors in their prime, though Urien was much the handsomer. Bruan and Roidan, undressing nearby, were no longer in their prime, but the two hulking, scarred men looked like they could break any younger man in two, despite having more grey than yellow on their heads. Rand was unbuckling his belt when darkness fell again.

His breeches soon followed. Naked now, he navigated his way towards the inner curtain by memory alone. He bumped into someone in the dark, and a large hand came to rest against his back, gently guiding him clear. His questing hands found the flaps, and he let himself in, bracing against the sudden, crushing heat.

The steam blinded him as he stepped forward, leaving Bruan and Roidan enough room to follow him inside, wondering what, if anything, they might be looking at. That first moment was difficult as always, sudden sweat breaking out all over his body as he tried to adjust to the sudden change in temperature. Adjust he did, though, as the heat seeped in and started massaging him, discomfort and blindness giving way.

Aiel adapted quickly to the environment. Unlike that of the Waste, the richer soil of the wetlands would have quickly turned to muck under all that steam. The tent cloth that covered the ground was a match for that of the walls and roof, all of them already shining with moisture, turning the whole place into a dark cave lit only by the coal fires from which steam burst each time a man fed them water. Rand noted that they were doing that more often today. The sight of the nearby Alguenya must have been quite the shock to these men, most of whom would have never seen a river until a few weeks ago, much less one so wide. They were lavish with that precious water now. Celebratory in that. And in other things as well.

The tent was packed with naked men, lounging or sitting or standing around. A few were anyway. More were involved in clinches of some kind. Holaf was busy teaching a handsome young Aielman how to suck his cock with the same terseness he directed his troops. Saeric, who'd taught Rand some of the finer art of kickfighting, was using his one hand to good effect on the stiff rod of a fellow grey-hair that Rand didn't recognise. Young Seirin was racing his way to climax with help of the ass of the bald old man kneeling before him, while the scarred and weathered Daroc was trying to keep pace with him while humping a youth named Toradin that Rand recognised from the Stone. There was a certain resemblance between the two kneeling men, and the possibilities in that made even Rand blush.

All throughout the tent such scenes could be seen, naked, cavorting bodies, in clinches of two or more. Some of the men present calling greetings at Rand's arrival; warmly, in Giladin's case, with a smirk in Arcaval's. Others, less familiar, greeted him with their eyes alone.

It was the chiefs Rand looked for, however. Those present had gathered towards one side, lounging naked on the ground. Though all were aged, even Han and Indirian—their hair completely white—looked fit and toned.

Naked before so many unfamiliar men, his steps turned of their own accord towards the Taardad group, where trusted figures like Giladin and Mangin were relaxing with his uncles and Mat's friend Acavi. Some less friendly faces were there, too, like Bast and Arcaval, but they were at least known. That was wrong, though. He knew it even before the low mutters sounded from the men of the other clans.

So Rand stopped, and searched the crowd for people he knew. Urien was with a group of Red Shields, discussing what the Shaido had done here. A friendly chat with slender Cai might involve mention of his six Maiden daughters, with whom Rand was far too familiar. He liked Ren's relaxed confidence, but his friend Bhuasta had been anything but relaxed since he saw Rand parting with Aya

back in Rhuidean. Lorent was friendly but even younger than Rand. While Sansu, Daroc, Coram, Mendam and Pearse were older and had fought in Tear. They were all big men, but only Pearse sat alone.

“Another one for the collection,” Rand said, standing over him and gesturing to the recently stitched gash on his shoulder.

Pearse, who sat cross-legged, covered in sweat and scars, shrugged dismissively. “That Shaido was good. I was better. Would never have got this close if not for the need to watch those others.” He was Tomanelle, one of Han’s men, and as grumpy as his chief sometimes. Short red hair, a heavy jaw, and an oft-broken nose gave him a brutal look.

Rand sat with him. “What’s done is done,” he said, more for the benefit of the men of the other clans he referenced.

“Tell them that. Lot of hard eyes. Jealous if you ask me. Our battle at Cairhien is part of history now. Same as Tear. And Emond’s Field, even if it was smaller. Fools to sit it out.”

His blunt words had drawn some dark looks from some of the younger men. And even from Tobiram. Not from Rand. Harsh as he was, Pearse had defended Rand’s home, and followed him across the world. All without showing a hint of servility. He leaned back, to sigh at the dark roof. “There are so many battles ahead that I can’t imagine anyone, even you, not having gorged their full by the end.”

“Hard to believe,” Pearse said, rolling his wounded shoulder. “Flexed a lot of forgotten muscles out there. Should improve my skills in the field.”

“I’d like to see your skills off the field,” Rand drawled.

Hard blue eyes narrowed speculatively. “That so?”

Rand brushed his foot against the other man’s meaty thigh. “It can’t all be battle. Sometimes you want to celebrate ...”

He grabbed Rand’s ankle, nostrils flaring ... but not in anger. The tent floor was slick against Rand’s butt, and then his back, as he was pulled forwards. Pearse loomed over him, kneeling between his spread legs. “Different kind of victory,” he said, before kissing him roughly.

He was aware of questions being asked, and heard Rhuarc’s calm confirmation. There was little in the way of scorn, save for Leiran’s claim that Enaila wouldn’t approve, and Jecht’s usual grumbles, this time about Rand “acting the girl”.

“The game grows more interesting!” said a young *Far Aldazar Din* named Gaven, making Rand blush. That one was always too loud.

There was little time to wonder over what he might have started, however, for Pearse was sitting up, to reveal what Rand’s kisses had inspired. Thick and long, it quested from his red thicket in search of a cave to rest in. It was no question where that cave would be found, even before Pearse placed Rand’s legs against his shoulders and leaned forward, stretching him open. Slick with sweat as he was, he didn’t even bother using the One Power to prepare himself. He just lay there as the warrior positioned his cock between the cleft of his cheeks, and thrust into him.

Pearse was not gentle. He went deep right away. When he leant down to capture Rand’s lips again, he bent him almost double, trapping his feet to either side of his head. So did he pin his *Car’a’carn* as he started pounding his ass.

Rand could not keep his composure, not like that, not while gasping for air in the oppressive heat of the tent while his sensitive butt was being speared so roughly. He was aware of other men watching and listening, saw Jecht leave in a huff. Rhutar had not, though he was red-faced with discomfort.

Others hardly took notice at all. Camar and Feran were glad that Couladin was dead, but agreed that it was a great shame that a wetlander had gotten to him before any *Seia Doon* could. Noryd was busy chatting to his society leader Perdat. The most interest they showed in the happenings was to raise their voices. Rand was a little distracted by their talk of the flora and fauna in Cairhien—it was interesting to him to learn how they saw it—but concentrating on that proved impossible while his ass was being pounded so. Between the steam, their shared body heat, and the intensity of what Pearse was doing, he almost felt like he was on fire.

As such, he didn’t even notice Pearse was coming until the slapping of his hips slowed to a grinding roll. He got off as soon as he was done, sitting back to catch a breath. “Good fuck,” was all he said.

Rand smiled slightly. "Likewise." Relief and regret mingled confusingly when Pearse cock popped out of his hole, but he had little time to think on that. The display had inspired others.

Arcaval stood over him, hand on hip, proudly displaying the hardon he was sporting. That was understandable, as well endowed as he was. The smug leer was understandable, too, unfortunately. "Here we are again. And right in front of the chiefs." His shadowing cronies chuckled in time with him.

When Rand got to his feet, Arcaval looked him in the eye and whispered, "You have got to be the biggest slut in the world."

That might well be true, but even Rand had his limits. "We won't be doing that again Arcaval," he whispered back. "Don't bother trying."

He'd been as quiet as he could, to try and spare the man's pride, but Arcaval's green eyes still widened in outrage. Red of face, he stalked by Rand without a word, marching straight for the exit, his cronies trailing him.

Rand was pleased with himself. He really did have to be more discerning. It was a thing he'd told himself before, and it was no less true here and now than it had been then. Pearse's ministrations had left him with a raging hardon of his own, and it was drawing eyes. The wide and uncommonly brown eyes of the young Goshien, Lorent, were particularly flattering as he sat there hugging his knees. He was cute and slender, and though he gulped nervously when Rand beckoned, he rose to his feet nonetheless, revealing a stiff little cock.

"Do you like what you see as much as I like what I see?" Rand asked quietly once he was close. Lorent nodded. "Have you ever done this before?" he went on in a whisper. Lorent shook his head. "You don't have to if you don't feel ready."

In response, he went to his knees and turned his ass toward Rand. "*Car'a'carn*, I am ready," he said, but his nervousness was in his voice as much as it was on his face.

He was so cute, though, with his package hanging below his puckered little hole. It looked so tight. Rand couldn't help but press the head of his cock against it. He hung over Lorent's back and pushed his hips forward slowly.

It didn't get far. A few startled sounds, and Lorent tensed up. Rand would have had to be far rougher than he could ever dream to force his way past that. "It won't fit while you're doing that," he whispered in the boy's ear.

"Oh ... I am sorry. I ..."

Rand kissed his cheek. "There's no need to be sorry. But trust me and relax a little. I'll be gentle."

"I will," he whispered.

True to his promise, Rand's cock was able to push past the entry this time, though it remained a deliciously tight grip. He stopped, both to savour it and to give the gasping youth time to adjust.

Not much time was needed. "More ..."

"Pardon?"

"Put it in deeper ..." Lorent groaned. His cheeks suddenly reddened. "Oh ... I did not mean to ..."

"Sorry," Rand muttered. The *ta'veren* effect could strike at the oddest of times. He was nowhere near sorry enough not to slide deeper into that ass, though, forcing shameful noises out of the youth.

"Is ... is it good?" Lorent asked.

"Very much so. You have a sweet little ass," Rand assured him. He was only being honest. It was so tight that he didn't think he'd be able to last very long. He was left with little choice but to reach around and grasp Lorent's rather small cock, so he could give it a good jerking while he rode him.

"Think I'm going to come soon," Rand confessed, and tried to salve his pride by telling himself that recent events had left him on the brink. "What about you?"

"Y-yes, I believe I am ... ah ... ah," Lorent said squeakily. That didn't help at all. Rand felt something battering at his dam, demanded release. He couldn't hold it back. Lorent gasped in surprise. "Water pouring into my butt ... It is inside me." It was indeed. When the flow turned to a trickle, Rand recovered himself enough to continue stroking Lorent's cock.

"You are a nice fuck," he breathed as he did so. He didn't have to do it long before he felt the boy swell and twitch against his palm, and a jet of milky fluid shot out to stain the sweat tent floor.

The show the young men had put on had plainly been enjoyed, for they were only separated for moments before other men started pawing at them. He didn't like having to turn down Zell, but there was a point to this besides gratification. He also didn't like that Zell so quickly turned his attentions to Lorent instead. Gaven and Zell had much in common, though Gaven's hair was redder. Another Goshien. That wouldn't do. Nerise's little brother, Jac, was there as well, but Rand very much doubted she would appreciate his fooling around with him. He put on a smile and returned their touches companionably, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

Other men were seeking different company. Corman and Jenric's japes had been silenced by each other's cocks as they lay on their sides. Cad and Airc—more Emond's Field veterans—had arrived while Rand was preoccupied. Balding Cad was propositioning a man he named Basrua, unconcerned with the horrible burns on his face. They went aside, leaving Airc alone. Rand was relieved that he didn't try to approach. Though he had helped defend the Theren and was a relative of Renay's, he'd never been able to like that one's perpetual scowl and curt words.

Rhutar had gone to speak to that heavy-jawed man from the meeting again. An extremely handsome, yellow-haired youth about Rand's age sat with them, sneering at the men who'd gathered around Rand. The sneer lessened only slightly when he met Rand's eyes. Strangers. So many strangers. Canderys was deep in conversation, and Tobiram looked completely disinterested. The men who'd accompanied Indirian were there, but how could he approach such utter strangers with what he had in mind? *This isn't going to work*, he thought.

Gaven was getting more insistent. Argus was touching his bottom, Erarc his flaccid cock. Mangin and Giladin were coming to join in, heedless of Rand's intent. In desperation, he put his arms around the nearest man only to find himself looking at the very surprised and thankfully handsome face of a golden-haired *Cor Darei*. Jordi was not a friend exactly, but he'd never been less than polite and loyal. He was Cold Water Shaarad, and his cock was hard. Rand took hold of it. "That's just what I need," he said, before pulling the shivering man in for a kiss.

It all went quickly after that. Though it was Rand who was penetrated, it was Jordi who was taken. He lay on his back with Rand straddling him, gasping for breath each time Rand's ass sank down on his cock. One-eyed Argus and the eager young True Blood, Erarc, got the compensation of Rand's hands.

Past where they stood, he could see that Gaven and Zell had spitroasted Lorent and were not going nearly as slow as Rand had. Some men were leaving the tent, their sweating—or whatever else they had come for—finished, but even as they left more arrived. One of the arrivals, a handsome man with yellow hair, got a supercilious look on his face when he saw what was going on. His complaints about the decadence of it all, and laments than no-one appreciated the wonder of monogamy alike, fell on deaf ears and he soon turned right back around and left.

As he bounced in one man's lap and jerked two others off, Rand was struck by the strangest realisation. For once, what he was doing was not considered bizarre and perverse. For once, he was not an oddity with strange blue eyes and strange red hair. For once, he was normal.

That was so funny that he didn't even stop smiling when the excitable Erarc spurted early, striking him on the cheek with the first blast. He just aimed him away and kept on bouncing until he felt Jordi reach his climax as well. He stopped then, which made it much easier to suck on the head of Argus' cock until it was time to swallow his salty load.

"That felt good," Argus sighed when he was done.

"Long life to you, *Car'a'carn*," Jordi said once he'd climbed off.

Erarc was too busy looking embarrassed to say anything.

Rand could understand that. "And you. I try to take care of my people," he murmured as he wiped the come from his cheek. Try was the right word. They had no exact count, but Rhuard had put their losses as at least thirty thousand. Perhaps three times that many of Couladin's had died in the battle. Rand counted them all as losses. By rights, every one of those Aiel should have been fighting the Shadow instead of their fellow men.

So it wasn't just because he was Nakai that Rand sought out the big Stone Dog, Sansu. He felt in need of punishment just then, and the square-faced man, taller and heavier than he, certainly looked like he could punish a boy. And the flagpole he had raised certainly wasn't signalling disinterest. He

was standing close to the fire, talking to barrel-chested Tirth when Rand approached. Red-haired and blue-eyed, they resembled each other enough that he might have thought them related if he didn't already know their actual relatives so well. Tirth was the father of Seris, the forward thinking girl he'd so enjoyed back in Rhuidean, while Sansu's sister Aya had helped relieve his worries about the financial issues there, among other things.

If either man knew what had happened, they gave no sign. Tirth was solemn in his greeting, Sansu more exuberant. "A great day! A great celebration of great victories!"

Rand blinked at him.

"Crushing the Shaido is no great feat, especially when outnumbering them," said Tirth, mildly enough. "I am more concerned with the battles to come. Do you truly mean for us to stay in the wetlands, Rand al'Thor?"

"Not forever, but for the foreseeable future. There is much to do."

"Do not make that face," Sansu told his companion. "Do you not you believe in your *Car'a'carn*?"

"I am here," was Tirth's answer. "But I have no great interest in fighting the wetlander clans, should they unite as we have."

Sansu gave a mighty shrug. "Who cares if they do? They will come crashing against the steel wall of our spears. Then they will learn the dream is just a dream."

"I do not think it will come to that," Rand hastened to say. "And will make every effort to ensure it does not."

Tirth nodded. "As you say, *Car'a'carn*. I dislike the idea of taking so many spears from Grimdar Hold for so long, however. The Kigali usually know better than to dance with us, but they have been acting strangely these past moons. You are the *Car'a'carn*, so it will be as you say."

He walked off, but left Rand troubled enough that the erection his activities with Jordi and his friends had inspired was starting to subside. The Aiel Waste was as secure a location as existed. Few were likely to attack it, even with so many of the Aiel elsewhere. Unlikely was not impossible, however. It bordered on the Blight, and the Shadowspawn had proven willing to venture even into the place they called the Dying Land if the Forsaken ordered them to. It bordered the mysterious continent of Kigali to the east as well, and who knew what they would do? He should speak to the dreamwalkers about arranging regular contact with those left behind in the border clans, just in case.

"Smart man, Tirth. He or Jicon would be chosen to lead *Sha'mad Conde*, if Turol woke from the dream." The man he nodded towards, Jicon, proved to be the bald fellow that had been kneeling beside Toradin when Rand arrived. His surprise must have showed, for Sansu went on more quietly. "Do not judge a book by its cover. That is the wetland saying, is it not?"

"It is, and I don't," Rand said just as quietly. He allowed his eyes to drift down Sansu's broad trunk, to the broad branch that sprouted below. "But that is not fit talk for a celebration ..."

He smiled. "Hmm ... you do have good eyes."

"Like them, do you?"

He nodded. "Even warriors need to stop and admire beautiful things every now and then."

"I can think of something else you might like ..."

He reached and claimed.

Rand had been prepared to be thrown to the ground and mounted by the bearlike man, or to bounce on his cock much as his sister had bounced on Rand's, but it was a different kind of joining that the big Stone Dog chose.

Rand had no idea why that should feel so off to him. He was neither short nor thin, so most of the men he'd been with had been smaller. Yet holding to Sansu's broad back and humping away rather than the other way around just didn't fit. Not in his head, at least. It fit just fine farther down.

Perhaps it was as strange for others as for him, when he let them have him, but in those moments, in Rand's head, he was always littler than he truly was.

Sansu seemed to be enjoying it as much as he was, however. Don't judge a book by its cover, indeed. His tight ass grasped Rand's shaft nicely, though it was hardly the punishment he'd been pondering when he sought him out.

That was not to say he never got it. Bhausta was so slender you could have made two of him out of Sansu. He circled them twice, and on the second pass Rand saw his manhood begin to swell.

"If he is not going to come to me, then I have got to go after him," he muttered. When he spoke again he was closer, close enough to be kneeling right behind them. "A man has to do what he has to do, right?" Rand shivered in anticipation.

What he'd been anticipating happened fast. A narrow cock spread his hole while he was still grinding away, and thrust into him sharply. He let it. From Bhuasta he got the rough treatment that his failures merited, a vengeful pounding that, combined with the ass clenching his cock, soon drained Rand of his reserves.

He was gasping for air by then, as much from the pleasure as from sharing the body heat of two men so close to the fire. Bhuasta took his coming as a personal victory, and sped up even more. It wasn't long before he was grunting a victory of his own. Rand had softened by then. While Aya's frustrated admirer slid out of him, her brother swatted away the hands that Rand tried to deploy against his swollen member.

"You do not have to do everything, Rand al'Thor. It is a big tent, with many men." Chuckling, he shrugged Rand's limp form off his back, and rose to seek one of those men out.

Bhuasta said nothing as he left, whatever point he'd felt needed making now made, if only to himself. Rand rose last, and staggered over to the edge of the tent, where Urien and Butsca had been sitting with the whole time, deep in discussion with Erwan. They nodded in greeting, but no more than that. It occurred to Rand that, while Erarc had been Reyn, he was not a man of standing like Urien and Butsca. And handsome Urien had been a strong supporter of his from the start.

"I'm sorry if I interrupted," he said as he sank down nearby. "What were you discussing?"

"You did not interrupt, Rand al'Thor. Butsca was just asking about the things I saw during our search for you," Urien said.

"We must know all we can of the wetlands, if you truly mean for us to remain here as long as you have said."

"That will be necessary, unfortunately," Rand said slowly. Both the staying and the learning. Aiel adapted quickly in some ways, but less so in others. Why running to a battle and arriving tired was supposed to be better than riding there and fighting on fresh legs was something Rand had never understood. But that wasn't what he wanted to talk about just then. "It's the opposite for me. I've been trying to know the Aiel better lately." His eyes slid towards Urien's. "I wonder if there's any way you could help me with that..."

"I am flattered by your interest, Rand al'Thor, but that is not to my taste," the Red Shield said with cool composure.

Disappointment surely showed on his face. Urien was one of those he trusted most. It would have been nice to be closer to him. The rejection didn't change his regard and trust for him at all, of course, but it would have been nice. He put on a smile. "I fully understand. I shall not trouble you again."

"No trouble was caused," Urien said. He studied Rand in silence for a moment. "If you are concerned about making trouble with the chiefs, or giving insult, you should not be. They are all known to have taken part in such activities in tents like this. Your search can be much shorter than my own was."

Rand flushed. "Was it that obvious?"

"What is obvious to some is a mystery to many," said Erwan of the Dawn Runners, a yellow-haired man with thick, dark eyebrows. "What does your enemy want?" he asked. He lowered his eyes when Rand only stared. "I am sorry. That was a strange thing to ask."

"Whatever they want, they can't have," he muttered, rising. The rest of the chiefs had long since arrived and joined Han's group. Rand wended his way through the steamy tent, past men lying at ease or men laying each other. The chiefs were naked, too, of course, though none had been tempted to do more than talk. Rand wondered what they wanted. And what he would let them have.

The saw him approach, but their weathered faces and hard eyes revealed nothing of their thoughts, any more than their sweat-soaked bodies, hardened and scarred, showed their ages. The chorus of, "I see you Rand al'Thor," brought a fit of involuntary laughter from Rand.

"I'm not sure there's any part of me you haven't seen," he said with a nervous grin.

Irascible old Han snorted disdainfully. "Sex is only a small part of the Pattern of our lives. You youngsters often mistake it for more. We have seen that you enjoy the company of other men,

but that is hardly unique. You have seen that we, the Aiel, do not regard such things as unnatural. There is much more we must learn of each other beyond those simple truths."

Bruan and the others nodded agreement.

"May I join you?" Rand asked politely.

"You should," said Rhuarc. He was laying on his side, naked and sweaty, his stiffened cock just sitting there casually. Rand wanted to attend to it, but just sat down and crossed his legs instead.

Bruan was sitting cross-legged, his cock pointing up towards a hard stomach and the thick chest that loomed over all. They weren't the only chiefs aroused, a fact that not a one of them seemed embarrassed by. He wondered what had inspired them.

"Do you seek shade from the heat of their admiration, Rand al'Thor?" asked Erim, another big man. "You looked a bit hunted back then." Several men chuckled, though not all.

"It must be nice to be so desired," said Janwin, whose flesh was sunburnt, lined and scarred all over.

"All of this and the vigour of youth. Do you realise how lucky you are?" Mandelain asked. When Rand, recalling the prophecies, refused to answer, the Daryne chief shook his balding head. "No. They never do, not until the wheel has creaked past."

Han was far from the only one of the men, husbands or fathers all, to grunt sourly over that.

Dheanic, who had a big nose and an uncommonly thick gut for an Aiel, had not been one of them. "He gets his looks from his mother. Janduin was handsome enough, but Shaiel could have made a Goshien and a Shaarad stop fighting to stare."

Bael and Jheran shot him mirrored frowns, then immediately donned such thoughtful expressions, also mirrored, than Rand couldn't help but smile.

"Janduin of the Taardad won much honour," said Janwin. Though his tone was even, an improbable chill drifted into the sweat tent, wiping his smile away at once. Rand was aware of chiefs studying him, and Rhuarc. Bruan, Jheran and Dheanic, too, they who had fought with Rand's father in the Aiel War, and who now led their clans to follow his son.

It did not matter to him, what clan Janduin had been from. Or what clan Rhuarc and Aviendha were from. Or Mangin and the others, for that matter. Yet the concerns Dani had brought to him were not without a basis of truth. Circumstance alone had led to his being so much closer to the Taardad than the other clans, but that wasn't a thing that could just be explained away.

"The day that we spit in Sightblinder's eye approaches. There is plenty of honour to go around. I am not one for hoarding things," he said.

"We will see," Timolan rumbled. Though greying, he was all packed muscle, almost hairless.

Rand smiled slightly. "I thought we'd established that you've already seen."

"The Miagoma saw nothing."

It was not an uncommon chill, but a different kind of heat that drifted by then. Rand spoke the words. "They could. I am willing to make a display of unity and sharing. If you were interested in doing the same, you would not find me as proud and selfish as you imagine." He looked around, catching each man's eye, unable to stop his face from heating. "None of you would."

His eyes darted with unwanted nerves as soon as the suggestion was made. Dheanic's smile was bigger than Jheran's. They were the youngest of the chiefs. Though he was much their elder, Erim grinned fiercely, his cock stirring at the very thought. Bruan stroked his chin thoughtfully, the eyes that travelled Rand's body no longer furtive. Mandelain, Janwin and Timolan—none of whom knew Rand very well, and none of whom were young and lusty—looked more thoughtful than excited. For some reason, Bael kept looking over to where Alec was sitting, though his son was oblivious to all but the words of his fellow Thunder Walkers. Indirian and Han didn't look overly eager, though, and there was a touch of sadness in Rhuarc's eyes.

"I am past the stage of chasing pretty bottoms, but the symbolism is strong," said Mandelain.

"What happens in the sweat tent stays in the sweat tent," Janwin intoned, "but it might silence the complaints of some of my *algai'd siswai*."

"And the order?" Timolan asked.

What was that word Mat was always using? "Doviienza." Luck.

"A roll of the dice to decide the order, then," Bruan said.

A gesture brought Roidan, and a quiet word sent him away again. None in the tent were watching particularly carefully as he let himself out, being busy with other things. Lorent was very

busy, in fact, this time with Seirin, who had recovered from his last bout. Sansu had found a new friend as well, and Toradin was commiserating with Mangin over something. They were just starting to get physical when Roidan returned and pulled Rand's attention back to his own situation.

It was a pair of dice that the Thunder Walker delivered to his chief. Rand was left sitting there, a wry smile on his face, as his elders gathered around and rolled over who would have sex with him first. It occurred to him that that should have been the strangest moment of his life. In truth, it wasn't even close. *Madness is a sneaky foe*, whispered through his mind even as dice rattled, and grunts of satisfaction and tisks of annoyance drifted across his awareness.

As it happened, it was Erim who rolled highest. When he rose from his crouch, Rand rose with him. The Chareen was taller than him, and tall downstairs, too. The strength visible on his body seemed to mock the white invading his red locks. He had the pugnacious face and fists of a man who'd been hit often, and who'd hit back harder.

"I take you at your word, Rand al'Thor," he said, before spinning him around and bending him over. He took him in another way then. Rand braced with his hands on his knees against that big intruder. A little moan escaped him as it slid inside, and a glance showed that it was no longer just the chiefs who were watching. He noted the Chareen in the tent, their reactions ranging from Ren's amused smile to Holaf's narrow-eyed frown. With Rand and Erim standing the way they were, everyone could see.

What they saw was their young *Car'a'carn* getting buggered fiercely by one of his chiefs. They heard his hips slap against Rand's ass with each hard thrust, and they couldn't help but know what was happened when he finally stopped to pump his seed into him.

Soon after Erim tottered aside, a rock-hard Bael stepped up to loom over Rand, who licked his lips in anticipation. Bael leaned down and took hold of Rand's arms, placing them around the towering Goshien's shoulders. Then he placed his own hands behind Rand's knees and picked him up with no visible sign of effort. Holding Rand aloft, he placed his hole above that long cock and lowered him onto it.

It was a heady experience. There weren't many who could lift Rand like that, but Bael managed it surprisingly well. The tall man used his hips at times, and at others he would simply lift Rand up and down upon himself. The motion caused his balls to rub up against Bael's hard belly, and stirred new pleasures in with the old.

Rand was not a slight man, and no matter how strong Bael's arms, they could not hold on forever. Yet he was too proud to set him down until he'd finished. While Rand was still searching for a solution, he felt someone's hands brace against his back.

Bael's face showed nothing, but there was gratitude in his eyes. "You were to be next, Shaarad, but there is no need to wait. My shade is yours." He slid his cock out of Rand, leaving him hanging stretched and helpless in front of whom he now knew to be Jheran.

"I accept, and will share mine also," he said. What he accepted was the offer of Rand's ass for his use. His cock slipped right in, and he wasted no time before he started humping.

He didn't hoard the hole for himself, though. They passed Rand back and forth between them, the chiefs who had ended the blood feud between their clans, penetrating him over and over again in a way that had him throwing back his head. Bael came in him first, but continued to help hold him there so that Jheran could finish seeking his pleasure. Once they were both done, they held him dripping between them for a long moment while they exchanged nods of significance. Only then did they set him down.

For all his talk of symbolism, Mandelain made less of a show of it. He was content to take Rand on the ground, kneeling between his spread legs. His remaining eye was bright blue, and studied him with a keenness that was not reflected in the slow rocking of his hips. Rand tensed up and rocked his own, to speed things along, something that Mandelain also noticed and filed away.

While they were cavorting Rand noticed some things of his own, such as the way Han was trying to work himself to hardness; sinewy hand jerking at the cock nestled amidst his white pubis. He knew the Tomanelle would be the next to fuck him, and hoped age would not shame him. Han had answered the call at once. Not without complaint, mind, but he *had* answered it.

His hope bore fruit, for by the time Mandelain was finished Han had gotten himself ready. Darkly tanned all over, his body a battlefield of slackening stockiness, Han knelt where Mandelain had been, but preferred to place Rand on his side. Once he was in, he pushed down on Rand's hip, making

him as tight as possible before starting to move. He closed his eyes as he fucked. Rand did not begrudge him his imaginings, though he wondered who in Han's long life had managed to wipe the sourness from his lips and make them smile like that. He closed his own eyes and waited in patient silence until the Tomanelle added his trickle to the tribute already filling Rand's butt.

"Strange times, I lived to see," Han muttered as he was getting up to make room for the next chief.

That was Janwin, who got his show, such as it was. He wanted Rand sitting in his lap, rocking back against him, the young and the old moving in tandem. Moving slowly. It might have been nice, if it had been someone he knew better. Intimate. As it was, Rand had to resist the urge to go faster. Whether it mollified the watching Shiande or not, he could not say.

Perhaps he should have been glad of Janwin's restraint, for Timolan was up next and he showed no such. The chief of the Miagoma put his heavy hands to the top and bottom of Rand's spine and pushed him down onto his stomach. He proved to be a rough lover, his large cock thrusting in and out of Rand's ass in long, hard strokes. Their coupling played out to a duet of grunts and, when it was time for it to end, Timolan took a firm grip on Rand's hair and hissed out his satisfaction as he flooded the young wetlander's ass with his seed.

As he was climbing off, Rand saw some of the watching Miagoma, Canderys and Bracys among them, nodding in approval.

"Well. We're all getting to know each other, at least," he muttered as he pushed himself up.

"Do we not already?" Rhuarc asked quietly. He squatted down, hands folded, close by where Rand knelt. "I worry for you sometimes, Rand. There are other ways to do these things."

He wasn't sure what was meant, but it was plain Rhuarc was troubled. He reached for the stiff cock that hovered between his thighs to make things right. "I'm sorry," Rand said. When he lowered his head to seek it out, Rhuarc sighed and sat back on his heels. He sighed under Rand's ministrations, too, until an even sharper taste joined that of the meat he'd been sucking on. Yet, once Rand had drank it down and filled, for now, the aching hunger within him, he raised his head to find that Rhuarc's expression had not changed.

"You should do the same with the next one, so that none can claim favouritism," he whispered after a moment. Rand got the impression they were not the words he had wanted to say.

Strange. He was sure it was not jealousy. Rhuarc was a married man, after all.

He put it out of his mind when Indirian stepped out of the cluster of sated chiefs standing nearby. Taller, if thinner, than Han, he was prepared to be serviced. It was surprisingly large, the cock that Rand rose to grasp. It almost looked unnatural on such a thin man. The sounds he made when Rand kissed it were natural enough, however, and the taste of what trickled free when he licked the purple head. Eager to please, Rand worked his way down the shaft until the stiff white hairs of his sex were tickling Rand's nose. The balls that dangled so oddly low he caressed as gently as he could, sucking all the while, until another salty tribute, slower than Rhuarc's, was delivered.

"A fine boy," Indirian pronounced in a deep voice once he was done, his hand resting atop Rand's red head. That had no business thrilling him so much, coming from a relative stranger, yet his skin tingled.

Not all were as pleased. The handsome youth he'd noticed earlier went angry from the tent, quickly followed by Rhutar and the other. The heavily scarred man who'd come to the meeting with Indirian was studying Rand in a way that reminded him of Celesta.

Regardless of such things, his skin was still tingling when the Codarra went and levered himself down beside Han.

Hands caressed his shoulders. Though callused, they trailed softly down his back to cup his bottom, squeezing as they parted. *Who is this?* he wondered. Their cock felt thick and hard as it poked against Rand's hole. The initial penetration brought more pleasure than pain, and the joining that followed no pain at all. He was gentle, the man who rode his *Car'a'carn* so slowly and steadily. Even when his breath caught and his climax began to build he was careful not to do anything to hurt the youth before him.

When he felt Bruan coming within him, Rand opened his eyes and smiled back at the hulking man. The chief of the Nakai reached out to place two fingers upon Rand's face as he pulled his manhood out.

So it was that Dheanic, who had raced to Rhuidean only to arrive long after Rand had already left, was the last chief to join their display of solidarity, too. They exchanged smiles, the two of them, while Rand wondered how the husky man would take him. He was surprised when Dheanic went to his knees and offered his broad bottom, but endeavoured not to show it. All the stimulation he'd experienced had long since restored the starch to his rod, so it was not a question of desire, only of choice.

He chose to enter Dheanic's ass slowly, up until he popped past the first defences, then he went harder.

"That part you got from your father," he whispered when Rand bottomed out within him.

Rand didn't want to think about that. Or the things he'd seen during his testing in Rhuidean. He sped up, seeking a pleasure that could blind him to the world. It made him selfish, so much so that when he felt a rumbling on the horizon and came back to himself, he was relieved to see Dheanic jerking on his own member. Freed of responsibility, he fucked on, until the storm broke and his come thundered into his chief. Perhaps feeling it excited Dheanic, because he did not have to keep jerking himself for very much longer before his own come fountained up to mark the end of their celebration.

He sat back, freeing himself, and Dheanic lay on his side on the very damp floor of the sweat tent. The other chiefs were scattered nearby, standing or sitting or laying down, but all looking a lot more relaxed than at the meeting earlier.

The activity elsewhere had stopped while men watched Rand and their chiefs. Thoughtfulness was what he saw most on those faces, when he rose again. It would not bring the clans together, certainly not by itself. But it was a step down that path. He went to find a seat among the chiefs, and when he turned back he saw men drifting away from the groups they had been with, to mingle with those of the other clans.

"So now we have all shared water," Rand ventured.

Erim snorted. "We have all shared water with you, *Car'a'carn*."

"And we will spill more for you in the battles to come," Timolan allowed. The words came reluctantly, just as some of the chiefs had, but they came nonetheless.

Rand was pleased. Spent, but pleased. They lingered together for a time, the dozen of them, talking idly of wars past and future. Janwin was the first to leave, citing a need to settle his clan with what had happened that day. The other three newcomers soon followed, Han going with them. One by one they left, while Rand recovered and other men cavorted all around them.

Bruan lingered for another round, the only chief to do so. This time he brought Roidan with him. His murmured suggestion made Rand blush, but he let them anyway. This time it was Roidan who poked Rand's hole, while Bruan knelt at his other end, holding him in place as he gently fucked his mouth. Those hands were so strong they could probably have crushed his skull, but Rand wasn't afraid at all. Roidan's grip was just as firm, which it needed to be to stop Rand from gagging on the cock in his mouth each time the other slammed into his ass so forcefully. Roidan came first, unsurprisingly, but Bruan did not change position, savouring Rand's mouth for a good long while before allowing his own climax to wash over and into.

Later he was approached by and turned down an offer from Bracys, taking his heading from Tenelca, but gave Zell a much rougher fucking than he had Lorent just after. Lorent himself had staggered from the tent some time before, unable to match Rand's stamina. Or perversion.

Such was the way of things, here. Men grew excited, quenched their excitement and became relaxed, only for others to grow excited watching and move to quench their own lust on and in the relaxed ones. The cycle was as constant as the turning of the Wheel of Time itself.

Giladin he let fuck him while he was on his back, legs and arms wrapped around him. It was so very warm but a crazy chill went through him when Giladin whispered the name Alette as he was coming. Rand blinked those feelings away. He had no business being jealous, or whatever that was. Giladin was a heavy weight atop him anyway, plainly oblivious to what he had said.

It wasn't long after he left Giladin sprawled on the floor of the tent, sweaty and relaxed, that another young Taardad saw fit to pounce. Bast did not find him as welcoming to his pawing as Rand's admittedly less than dignified displays might have hinted.

Unfortunately, he didn't take the rejection as well as some before him had.

"Oh come on! You even sucked off that ugly old blacksmith," he complained. "All you wetlanders are sluts for Aiel cock."

The “ugly old blacksmith” was Mofram, and had been willing to help with the reforging of Tam’s sword, even if he’d insisted on only touching it with his tools as firmly as he’d avoided all talk of clan politics. Rand had been glad to repay his help, and glad too to see someone here from other walks of Aiel life than the warriors.

“Bast ... I’m glad you’re not with the Shaido,” Rand said. Or tried to tell himself, at least. Though a fellow child of the Iron Mountain sept—if only by blood, in Rand’s case—and an agemate, he doubted they would ever be friends.

“Shaido? Hah! As if I would ever leave my clan because of the likes of you.” He stood there looking down at Rand, and never mind that Rand was taller, heavier, higher ranked, and had a cock twice the size of his. Some people’s egos were as impenetrable as the Stone of Tear.

Which hadn’t been all that impenetrable, come to think of it.

“Tell you what, Bast,” Rand said from where he sat. “We can have a little sparring contest. Whoever falls first has to let the other do whatever they want with him.”

Bast grinned. “Ha! Fool wetlander. I have trained all my life for this. If I lost to you, I would make myself a *gai’shain* for life.”

Rand shrugged. “That’s up to you,” he said, just before kicking both of Bast’s shins and sending his feet skidding back on the uncommonly wet floor.

Bast fell on his face. Keeping him there was no great difficulty, not with Rand’s bulk resting atop him, and one arm pinned behind his back. His struggles only served to rub his taut buttocks up against Rand’s crotch, speeding the renewal of his exhausted member.

“Remember the agreement?” Rand asked when it was decently stiffened. Bast gasped. “Well, remember, too, that you started this.” He gasped even louder when the shaking of Rand’s hips allowed him to find his crack, and the loudest of all when he pressed into what hid within.

Rand wasn’t gentle. He went all the way in, and only rested long enough to say, “Now lie still and meet your *toh*. It hasn’t been long since my last climax, so this will likely take a while.”

And it did. Too long in truth. Rand was rubbed raw by the time he finally came in Bast’s little butt. With his round face, his yellow hair, and that slack-jawed stare, he looked as close to innocent as Rand had ever seen when he got up off him. Even though he was, well, quite the opposite.

“He did not win,” Bast insisted. “The wetlander cheated!”

All that won him was a few chuckles, some rolled eyes, and a lot of jeering.

Rand was spent, and in more ways than one. He must have fucked a third of the men in that tent by then. His private parts, no longer very private, felt tender and bruised. Leaving was very much advisable, so leave he did, staggering to the exit. The falling flaps drowned out the last of the calls that they would see him next time. They probably would at that, if he was being honest, but not for a while. Things tended to get a bit out of hand when he visited the sweat tents.

Such misgivings aside, however. After all the sweating, the loosening of limbs, and the draining of his urges, Rand was as relaxed as he’d ever been by the time he sauntered out of the darkly secretive tent and back into the light of day.

## CHAPTER 83: War's End



Rand met Dani on his way back to Cairhien, in a crowded street made less so by the ring of Maidens that prevented anyone from pressing in on him. The other Accepted had all leapt at the opportunity to refresh their wardrobes after their time in the Waste, but she was still wearing that same hat, those same braids, this time with a tan coloured dress divided for travel.

He thought it suited her well, but did not smile in greeting when they reined in their horses side by side, not with so many strangers peeking at them as they wandered by. "Heading back to the tents?"

"Raine doesn't want to come into the city and face the usual questions. That's what I told the others anyway." She looked past him, and lowered her voice. "I don't like it here."

He lowered his own as well. "I think I understand. I've been here before, and wasn't looking forward to coming back. Don't have much of a choice but to make the most of it now."

"There's often a big difference between the things we want to do, and the things the world wants of us," she sighed.

"For me there certainly is. But not for you, I don't think." He studied her profile, long black hair, coppery red skin, those sharp cheeks. The proud and determined set of her face. "You could do anything you wanted to."

She glanced at him, a small smile tugging at her lips, but then looked away. "That was easy to think, when the White Tower was far on the other side of the Spine of the World. Now? I think we both have lessons ahead of us, and ones that are going to be a bit less dreamlike."

A touch of her heels made Brightwind amble off, leaving him to stare after her until she'd rounded the corner. She wasn't wrong. How was he possibly supposed to face the White Tower in all its splendour? Victory here was only a small thing, with the wider world and the wider war waiting ahead of them. He touched his own heels to Jeade'en flanks and resumed his journey.

It was difficult to tell what the hard faced soldiers who guarded the Sun Palace made of Rand and the Aiel he'd led here. Many would have bled against Aiel before. And none were likely to welcome a foreign ruler, whatever the circumstances of his arrival. They recognised him on sight already, however, and none tried to bar his passage.

The nobles were lying in wait farther in, of course, to flatter and cajole and scheme. Probing for information and offering unwanted advice that was surely intended to elevate them or inconvenience a rival. Rand endured as best he could, bolstered by the presence of a small girl who slipped though that rich and richly-clad group with a fine lack of concern.

Merile had shed her travelling clothes and donned again the fine green dress she'd bought in Tear. Her dark hair was longer now, and fell in loose waves. She drew looks from more than a few of the nobles, and understandably so, but it was Rand she searched for.

He was quite happy to let her draw him away from the others. "Is your wound hurting again?" she asked. She ignored his claim that it was fine and laid hands on him. A cold wave washed over him briefly. He'd used to hate it when Moiraine did that—Heal him without asking—especially after what Alanna had done. But somehow it never bothered him with Merile. Besides, while the wound really hadn't been hurting any more than it always did, a regular jolt of Healing helped to get rid of any bruises, strains and ... nascent itches from his other activities.

"Thank you. Did they assign you a room like I said?"

Merile nodded. "In your big tower. It's lonely without Saeri and the others, though. Dani said she was going to make Raine move in. I'll help. She's being silly. No-one is going to hurt her because of her eyes, not when they all know she's your girl."

Rand found himself blinking. That seemed wrong somehow. Being connected to him was what brought danger, not what warded it off. Wasn't it? Merile nattered on, oblivious to his concerns.

"Some of the Aiel are being a bit strange, too. I said you'd need your maids again if you were going to be the big king and they got all 'what is the Way?' and loomed, which is weird because they

are all so much taller than me but they get all sad like the dogs when they were scolded sometimes and then they ask me strange things and I'm all like I don't have any answers, I'm not even sure of the questions, but it's like they don't hear what I said, really, just what someone else said, even though they aren't there, and I don't know what—”

“Sounds tough,” he interrupted, afraid she would go all night. “None of them have given you trouble have they?”

She smiled. “Of course not, silly. I’m your girl, too.”

He fell silent in his wonder then. A touch on his hand was her farewell, but a lifting of his spirits was what she left him with. If she was truly safe from the Aiel, complicated as the history between her people and theirs was, then maybe there was a kernel of truth to her claim. Maybe avoiding Dani wasn’t the best way to protect her.

His own protectors followed him home, or to his new home, at least. It would be a temporary thing, but the Maidens were extra certain to secure the tower, deep in the heart of a treekiller city as it was. Sulin put women on every entrance into the Sun Palace proper, on every stairwell of every level they climbed; she hid some in random rooms, and had others outside every window. Rand was so moved by her thoroughness that he didn’t even try to get her to let some men do it instead so that the women wouldn’t be risking themselves.

It was to the top floor he went. Passing through the ridiculous anteroom, with its lines of chairs and miniature throne, he went straight to the bedroom. The furniture there was all blackwood and ivory, in an odd mimicry of the ancient Aes Sedai symbol he’d adopted. Had he not moved in so soon after arriving, he might have thought it flattery rather than coincidence. Most of his things had already been brought over from the tents, he saw. Closing the door firmly on the Maidens—to stop them deciding they needed to watch him sleep as well, not to thwart any amorous intentions, alas—he unbuckled his swordbelt and set it beside the unstrung Theren longbow that leant in one corner of the bedroom.

The books he’d requested had been delivered, he was pleased to see. The Royal Library of Cairhien was reputedly second only to the Aes Sedai’s library in Tar Valon. He was eager to see how their translations of *The Karaethon Cycle* matched up to those he’d found in Tear.

He was deep into a recent Valreio translation, wondering if they had meant *Car'a'carn* when they said *Rie'a'rrien*, when he heard something tap against one of the tall and narrow windows. Setting the book aside slowly, he slid off the bed in his stocking and shirtsleeves, and retrieved Tam’s sword.

Padding over, ready to draw, he peered out into the night, seeing nothing at first, until a pale face pushed against the glass. Rand gaped for a moment, then set the sword aside and undid the latches. When he opened the window he found that it had not, in fact, been a figment of his taint-addled imagination. There she hung, in her *cadin'sor*, big dark eyes, curly red hair and an aggrieved expression painted across her pretty face.

“Well? Are you going to let me in or not?” Nici asked.

Laughing, he took her by the forearms and hauled her up the rest of the way. “You know, here in the mysterious wetlands, we have these things called doors. They are a lot easier to use.”

She didn’t smile back as she twisted and wriggled her way in the window. “Well, it might be pretty here, but easier is not good for you. The greater the challenge, the stronger you become.”

“I’ll bear that in mind. Going to be a bit awkward climbing up here instead of using the stairs, though.” He looked down the stepped tower, a long way down, before closing the window. Nici stood there with her bow and spears strapped to her back, trying to look casual. He smiled.

“You must be very thirsty ... after a climb like that.”

There was not even a hint of amusement. “I have done more for longer without drinking.”

He gestured to one of the tables, where a pitcher and glasses rested. “Well, my water is yours.”

For all her posturing she was quick to fill a glass, and took several long drafts as she looked about the room. The rich furnishings fascinated her and drew her hand, but Rand was only dimly aware of them, black like her eyes, white like her skin.

“What brings you up here?” he asked.

Avoiding his eyes, she gave a little shrug. “I was just making sure no enemies sneaked up on you.” It was just as well she couldn’t see how high Rand’s brows rose.

She stared at all the gold on display, in lamps and vases and mirror frames. Then peeked into the wardrobe at all the silks and velvets that someone else had put there. Her hand tested their texture, compared it to her *cadin'sor*; she shivered.

When she looked his way, her expression did not change. "Aviendha must like it here. I suppose your water is hers now, too, huh?"

"Not hers alone," Rand said. He'd long since stopped trying to hide that.

"You are a real breaker of hearts, you know that? Doesn't it bother you to sleep around without being in love? Don't you want any respect?"

"What makes you think I'm not in love?" he said quietly.

Nici stared, swallowed, looked away. "So Aviendha really has taken your heart."

Had she? He shouldn't have allowed it. He shouldn't allow himself to love anyone, but couldn't manage the kind of delusion that denying it called for. "That isn't hers alone, either."

"Oh? Who else? The Lost One, the girl with the glowing eyes, the dark-skinned Aes Sedai; maybe even the treekiller one?"

Yes, yes, yes, and Light help him, yes.

Nici's bravado was cracking. There was pain in her high voice. He did not want to guess how many of the Shaido who had died here she had known. He went to her, just to comfort, to pull her head against his chest and whisper, "Them, and some silly Shaido girl who hides her heart away."

She hugged him back, and mumbled, "I have never met her," against him.

"You would like her. She's a bit full of herself, and complains a lot, but she's brave and sweet and honourable. She has fiery hair, and the stars shine in her midnight eyes." Nici looked up at him, proving the truth of his words. "I wish you could see how beautiful she is."

"I think I see it," she whispered, and stood there with her lips parted.

He had to, and the Shadow take what Sulin would say if she found out. Nici's kiss was a match for his in hunger. She moulded her body to him and started pulling at his shirt at once. She pressed herself against him as soon as she'd pulled it off, but it was still flesh against cloth, and a frustrated little moan escaped her.

As much as he liked that sound, there were others who would not. He brushed her cheek by way of apology for disengaging, and made for the door. "Take those off," he said as he went. "You'll find the bedsheets are even softer than those shirts in the wardrobe." Her soft gasp followed him.

He latched the double doors, carefully and quietly. When he turned back, Nici's spears and other weapons were on the floor with the top half of her *cadin'sor*. He watched her breasts jiggle as she yanked down the bottom half, revealing her slender body in full, and the red-thatched young pussy that his cock was straining against his breeches to reach.

It was plain she wanted this as much as he did but, when she straightened, something drove her to cover her private parts with her hands. "I did not swear. Remember? I left. But you must not tell them anyway."

"Who knows or does not know what passes between us will be yours alone to decide. I swear it," he said as he advanced.

He had no idea what she started saying in response, for his lips found hers again, his hands closed around her waist, and he was picking her up, carrying her to the bed, climbing on top of it with her. His chest lay against hers, their hearts thundering against each other. Nici twisted and squirmed, rubbing against flesh and silk both. Her hands were at his breeches, struggling to free his manhood.

He did it himself, sitting up only long enough to throw off the last barriers between them. Her skinny butt was already disappearing under the covers when he looked back, but he soon caught up to her. Wide eyes followed his member as he climbed in, and wide legs welcomed it as soon as he climbed on top. She was so wet, and so hot, and the sounds she made so sweet that thoughts of going slow and asking after her losses evaporated in a haze of lust.

So he took her passionately in that royal bed, silken blankets and silken skin caressing them both while hands explored and clutched. Her full breasts trembled against him each time he moved, her full lips parted in pleasure each time a hard thrust cut her kisses short.

Nici moved constantly as they made love, touching with every part of herself. That would have been enough to drive him wild by itself, but the fact that it was her woke someone he'd thought buried in an icy grave. So many lost. So much destruction and death. He hadn't wanted it. He wanted ... he wanted this. He wanted her. He wanted life.

The legs that rubbed his sides were stilled when he grasped her by the knees and loomed over her, holding her in place as he let her heat bring him closer and closer, staring into her eyes until at last he was ready to pump the Shaido girl's womb full of his seed.

Rand collapsed atop her, breathing heavily, murmuring her name. The way she touched him as he shivered in pleasure was more gentle than he would ever have suspected.

He rolled off, to lie beside her and catch his breath.

"That was not what I came here for," a red-faced Nici insisted.

"No? Well, I'm glad you did. I needed to remember that we can live and make life together."

While she gaped, he gathered her in his arms and let a hand trail over her flat stomach. It rose and fell with her breath, but it was a different kind of proof he sought.

Nici bit her lip to stifle a moan when he touched her sex and gently brushed across her petals. She tried to do the same when he found her budding orgasm, but failed. That failure didn't seem to bother her much, though, and it definitely didn't bother him. Smiling all the while, he listened to her moans and watched the play of expressions across her face, until he felt her tremble in his arms before going suddenly still. Only then did he kiss her, with the slow tenderness he hadn't been able to find before.

They lay together in silence for a while, basking in the aftermath. It was Nici who ultimately disturbed their quiet time.

"Sleep time is coming real fast. Climbing back down would be silly. It is a bother, but I will just have to stay here tonight."

He had no objections to that, though if Aviendha left the tents and showed up during the night things might get heated. It was unpleasant, imagining them at odds. But even so ... "You are welcome to stay."

Nici smiled, then tried to hide it by fussing with the pillows.

He laughed softly. "And there I used to think you didn't care."

"I still do not care. It is just that you need me, to make sure no-one attacks you in the night. So I thought I would stay with you a little longer."

Rand found her bottom under the covers, and gave it a little squeeze. "Well, you attend to your duties with skill and vigour," he teased.

Nici twisted free of him, shot him a scowl that looked more a sulk, and rolled away. "Are you going to douse the lamps, or do we still have to sleep in the light?"

"No need," he muttered, and seized *saidin* long enough to extinguish the fires. The wards that prevented Myrddraal from appearing out of the Shadows he'd learned from Asmodean. That made them suspect, but the Forsaken had not taken any of his other chances at betrayal. He had decided he would risk trusting this not to be a trap.

Despite all of that, and everything else that had happened that day, Rand found it hard to settle down in the bed. He'd been so alert to danger for so long that he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to truly relax again. Emond's Field seemed a dream of another lifetime already. In this life danger was everywhere. In this life he was almost Aiel.

He grunted softly in the dark. *No. Hardly that.* He was what he was, and nothing could ever change that. Not even if he'd wanted it to.

He wasn't the only one finding it hard to sleep. A voice spoke quietly into the darkness. "Will you kill them all?"

Quite a few people had tried to murder Rand in the few short years since he'd left Emond's Field. He'd almost developed an instinct for it. It was usually something in the eyes, or the voice, the presence. So he moved.

But only to wrap his arms around Nici, as she lay with her back to him in the bed. He bathed her in his warmth, and whispered in her ear. "It won't come to that. Even if the remains of Couladin's army refuse to back down, it won't come to that. There are all those left behind in the septs, and the ones taken as *gai'shain*. The Shaido aren't going to die. That is not at all something I want. Besides, with Couladin gone and no-one else likely to claim to be *Car'a'carn*, the people who followed him might be persuaded to see reason. I certainly intend to try."

Nici took his hand, and held it between hers, close to her heart. "I thought you might. You are not so bad, really. For a jerk."

“Neither are you.” *For a Shaido.* He didn’t add the last part. Didn’t want to think it. If there were more like her, his hopes might not be childish. If the clans and nations of the world could see reason, they would only need to fight the Shadow. If not ... He would do what he had to.

## CHAPTER 84: *The New Mistresses*



There was one good thing about returning to Cairhien, and that was the return of that spicy food. Rand finished every scrap of the dinner Merile brought him. He would have begrimed anyone but her the bites she'd plainly taken on her way from the Sun Palace's kitchens to his rooms. She stayed with him while he ate in the far too big dining room, chatting away, and cleared the dishes when he was done. That felt wrong to him, but she shrugged off his reminder that there were servants being paid to do that sort of thing, claiming that it was better if it was her.

He got the door for her, at least. Jubes was waiting in the anteroom outside, leaning against the wall in a dark grey dress that he expected Moiraine had bought her. She was scowling, though not at him. Dani and Ilyena had persuaded Raine to move in at last.

"Look at them, walking around so proud. Like they own the place," Jubes muttered when Merile and her burden tinkled close. "Like they own the whole world. Bet they aren't scared of anyone. Bet nobody dares give them grief. They're so ... beautiful. I wish ... I wish I was ..." She sighed. "Not a prayer."

"Do you want a fancy dress, too?" Merile asked. She was wearing the green and black one she'd got in Tear. Fancy it was, and beautiful on her.

Jubes turned to face her. "No, I—" Her slightly hooded eyes widened when she saw Rand, and her cheeks reddened furiously. "It's nothing!"

Rand ignored her. She had not been even a little bit wrong about the three women. Raine had tidied herself up and donned her light yellow frock before coming to court, the rest of her belongings in the packs slung over her narrow shoulders. It left her arms and shins and a fair bit of chest exposed. Dani had shed her hat but stuck with the solemn Cairhien style of dress, in tan. Ilyena, on the other hand, had to have searched far to find the new dress she was wearing. He didn't recognise the cut, with the loose shoulders and tight skirts, but the colours spoke loudly. Bright red trimmed with black. From the challenging way she was looking at him, she'd picked the colours with great deliberation. Tense as that made him, he couldn't deny the truth of Jubes' words. They were so beautiful.

"It's good to see you all," he said truthfully.

Their smiles said they were very well aware of it. Even Raine's. "Are you going to show me to my room?" she asked.

"Gladly."

He swiftly moved to do just that. The glumness he'd been expecting Merile to show those dishes finally emerged. She muttered something that widened Jubes' eyes. And when Dani and Ilyena came along with Raine, the girl's jaw outright dropped.

The room he showed Raine to was almost as richly furnished as Rand's, though green predominated among the carpets and hangings, and the furniture was oak. The four-poster bed was big enough to fit six Raines. She stood in the doorway, gaping.

"Is this for me? It's, it's like a princess' room!"

Rand had never seen a princess' room. He shrugged. "Is it? Whatever. It'll be comfortable, at least."

She followed him in, setting her packs down on one of the sofas. "It might be ..." she said, staring at the bed. She bit her lower lip, before flicking a golden glance his way. "I'd need to test it to be sure."

"Hmm. How could you be sure it wouldn't collapse in the night? It might need some, ah, vigorous testing ..." he said, trying not to smile.

Raine drifted close, her arm touching his. "I think I'll need some help with that."

She was well over a foot shorter than him. He had to bend low, and she had to go on tiptoe so they could kiss. Rand didn't mind. She was so cute, reaching for him like that.

"It's a very big bed. You'll need some help."

Neither he nor Raine were surprised by Dani's arrival. They opened an arm each, and welcomed her into their embrace. It was Raine she kissed first. Rand would have been content to watch their sweet lips moving against each other, but they knew he was watching. Cheeks flushed, bright-eyed glances were sent, and soon Dani was moving, her mouth coming hungry to his.

A dim recollection of a time he would have hesitated to love her flitted across his mind, before he'd found her to be so much more than the mere Accepted he'd thought her. He found her tongue with his as well, and her bottom with his hand.

"You're both so beautiful," Raine whispered. "But that's no surprise. I could never get tired of looking at you." Her eyes were hugely golden, yet got bigger still when the door clicked shut.

"You never know. There's always the unexpected. Like me, for instance," Ilyena said. She stood with her back to the door, head lifted in proud defiance of the pink that stained her cheeks. For all her cutting barbs and sharp smiles, there was a wariness in the way her eyes flickered between the three of them, even Dani.

The Domani had not moved from Rand's side when her lover entered. It was he that had jumped, and her arms that prevented him from stepping guiltily away. She smiled at Ilyena, never a hint of surprise to be seen on her face, and gave Rand a rather hawkish, knowing look, before turning to Raine.

"We want him, too. What say we join forces?"

She hunched a bit. "She's mean. Says bad things."

Dani, who knew her best, nodded. "She is a bad girl. But she's my bad girl."

Ilyena's face was a sight, as a smile and a scowl both tried to break out. Rand laughed softly.

"I've known some mean girls who say bad things before," he told Raine. "They turned out to have good hearts underneath. I think she might be the same." Ilyena looked away.

Raine shifted under their gazes. "Long as she doesn't be mean, or try to do my bum, she can stay."

Dani gaped at her. "Who did what now?"

Raine hunched more. "Don't want to talk about it." She turned her back and walked to the bed, the bum in question hidden by her loose frock.

Rand was left to wilt under Dani's black stare. It didn't help that Ilyena was smirking at him. He cleared his throat. "I take it you two have already spoken about, um ..."

"About our affairs with you? Yes. No more secrets," said Dani.

Ilyena stole up on her, and began undoing her braids. "We should keep at least a few secrets. You wouldn't want to be completely exposed, Dani. Or would you?"

She said nothing, but she was so obviously enjoying having Ilyena play with her hair that Rand decided to take the other braid in hand. It took a while, but between the two of them they freed a wave of midnight, one that Ilyena savoured as much as he did. He found her hand within those locks. She would not meet his eyes, but her fingers closed around his.

Dani's dress was their next victim. Ilyena undid the buttons, so that Rand could lift it up, exposing long, stocking legs and loose underwear. It was Ilyena who robbed her of her shift, the better to grab her coppery breasts with their darker nipples. The way she giggled over the sounds that caused broke the Domani of her stupor.

"We said we would share, so why am I the only one naked?" she demanded. Taking Ilyena by the hand, she dragged her towards the bed—not that there was much resistance—and sat her down at the foot.

She was much more direct, was Dani. There was no playing with the Volsuni's pale locks. She just undid the ties of her dress and pushed it down, baring her pale chest for all to see. Raine stopped sorting pillows to join Rand in staring as Dani took one of those pink nipples in her mouth and started sucking.

He could see the soft flesh being shivered by her mouth, almost trace the rotation of her tongue in the way Ilyena's breast moved. He could trace her pleasure, too, in the free nipple that swelled as they watched and, more importantly, he could see the adoration in those big blue eyes of hers. Her face softened, lips parting, a frown he hadn't even noticed, hidden as it was under her long fringe, ease off, allowing him to see for once how young she looked. She was a beautiful girl.

And so was Dani, kneeling there between her legs, arms around her back, eyes closed as she lovingly suckled on that pert breast. Her underwear was not able to hide how effected she was, and

Rand wanted very much to go to them and take a hand—to take a lot more than a hand!—but he planted his feet firmly and refused to move. Part of sharing lay in knowing that not everything was about you.

Eventually Dani rose up to stand over the girl on the bed. Her own nipples were every bit as stiff as the one that now glistened with her saliva. Smiling, Ilyena rid her of her stockings and her underwear, until she was as naked as the day she was reborn.

And then she turned that smile on Rand. “You want her, too, don’t you?” He said nothing, and no answer was needed. “I can understand that, I suppose. Well get over here, then. I want to see what you have been getting up to behind my back.”

Dani didn’t object. She just stood there, breathing heavily as she watched Rand attack his own clothes. The coat and shirt were easy, but getting rid of the rest requiring some yanking and bouncing and kicking, all of which had his straining erection waving around for all to see.

Though Dani only stared, Raine and Ilyena giggled, the cute sounds echoing so closely that they ended up staring at each other. They were still staring when Rand swept Dani into his arms, carried her to the side of the bed, and dropped her there. It was a soft landing, but he might have worried the forcefulness of his actions had offended, had her legs not opened immediately. Underneath her glossy thatch the folds of her womanhood shone with arousal.

Should he say something? He should say something. Try to come up with something romantic, like Mat or Perrin would. She was so utterly beautiful. And before he knew it, he was so utterly inside her. Dani moaned loudly when she was first penetrated, and tried to stifle the rest by biting her lip. Her passage was too sensitive to his, however, and Ilyena got to hear as much as see what they’d been doing. Once his balls were resting against the cheeks of her ass, he leaned over to wrap his arms around her and kiss her deep.

The warmth of her embrace was such that he almost forgot they were not alone. Yet the mindless grinding of their hips soon parted their lips. Her eyes shone into his as they fucked.

It was Ilyena who made them part, if only in that way. “You really do love it, don’t you? You love ...”

Dani stretched out her hand. “I love you,” she said firmly.

Ilyena took it. “I love you, too.” She chewed her lip for a moment. “And I have to admit, you look bloody hot when you’re being fucked like that.”

Rand couldn’t help but speed up, her words spurring him on as much as Dani’s wet heat did. The bed moved as Raine crawled towards them. Still gripping Ilyena’s hand and Rand’s cock, Dani shot the wolfsister a guilty look. “And you! I love you, Raine,” she managed between moans.

“You’ll love this even more,” Raine said as she crawled past Dani’s head. She brought her face close to the place he and Dani joined, stretched out her pink tongue, and flicked it across the flesh right above.

He had only thought Dani had been wracked with pleasure before. She screamed now, back arching, head tossing from side to side with each passage of Rand’s shaft and Raine’s tongue. He saw Ilyena wince from the pressure of her grip, but she didn’t try to pull free.

Dani could not hope to last long like that. She came explosively, and was left shaking on the bed, her climax plain for all to see. “And you,” she gasped between shakes. “I love, you, too.”

It was him she was looking at. A pleasure beyond even what her body could bring him shivered his spine and tried to drive him mad. He knew his answer, but he shouldn’t say it. Couldn’t say it. He should send her away. To love her was to kill her. *Ilyena*.

It was indeed Ilyena, though not the one he’d—they’d—Lews Therin!—had been thinking of; it was Dani’s oldest friend who hid her face from Rand’s stricken sight. Naked now, she showed him her bottom but quite by accident.

“Use it or move it,” she told Raine as she threw a slender leg over Dani’s head, to kneel over her. “So. Bloody. Hot,” she gasped. Though Raine pulled away, he could tell how Dani responded to the move from the way Ilyena’s gasps sharpened.

“I can tell,” came her muffled voice. “You’re dripping fire down here.”

“Fire ...” Ilyena reached back. Though his cock was still lodged in Dani’s body, Rand had stopped moving to watch her come. Ilyena found him, wrapped her hand around him, and started jerking him off while he was still inside her lover.

He found those pale locks of hers. And he combed them exactly as he'd combed Dani's. He found a breast, too, and measured its softness thoroughly. Ilyena had been staring downwards, but when she felt his cheek against hers, she turned to offer him her lips.

It was in that thrill of connection that his climax shot through him, as sudden as it had been inevitable. Ilyena felt it move through him, he could tell by the wide eyes that stared into his. Dani could certainly feel it spilling into her, but she didn't stop licking Ilyena's slit for a moment.

In the midst of that shocking thrill, it took some time before he realised how hard he was clutching Ilyena's breast and hair. His mumbled apology didn't move her—not in the way he'd hoped, at least. Instead, it moved her to grab the hand that was squeezing her breast so hard and hold it in place, straining to stop him releasing his grip.

Rand hated to hurt people, especially women. But he liked to please, too. Torn, he tightened his grip in her hair slowly, pulling down, making her raise her head higher and higher as those shining strands went taut. And soon, very soon, Ilyena was crying her climax to the roof of that royal room.

As mean as she sometimes was, she was sure to use the last of her strength to fall away from Dani. The two Accepted sprawled on Raine's bed, thoroughly sated. Rand slipped his softening manhood out of Dani, and took a seat on the bed, too, catching his breath.

And all the while the bed's new owner sat there in her pretty dress, sadly neglected. His conscience smote him as soon as he caught her eye. Well, he might have exhausted one of his weapons, but he had others. "C'mere, you," he said, reaching.

But she scooted away. "You both really like her, huh? I guess I understand. She's really pretty." Drawing close, she lifted Ilyena's hair without asking and weighed it in her hands, not noticing the frown that peeked out from under Ilyena's fringe. "I wish I had hair like that, but mine's all short and messy."

"Is someone preventing you from taking better care of it?" the Volsuni asked scornfully. "Or trimming your nails. Or wearing a dress like that more often, instead of whatever that thing you usually wear is."

"No ..." Raine admitted.

"Then stop fishing for compliments and go earn them."

"Ilyena ..." Dani said warily.

"Raine doesn't need to change anything. Or earn compliments. She perfectly wonderful just the way she is," Rand said, though not as firmly as he perhaps should have. It was hard to be stern with someone so soon after being intimate with them.

At least, it was for him. Not so Ilyena. "Oh, that's a wonderful attitude to have. Things are fine, why bother changing at all. If you like someone, just let them do whatever they want, to themselves or others. I'm sure no-one could possibly get hurt from that!"

Rand didn't know what to say.

Raine barely did either, though she did mutter, "You agreed not to be mean ..."

Dani was the one with the answer. "You did agree. And I brought our toy ..." Ilyena gasped at the implications. "The Aiel would call it meeting *toh*."

"Blood and ashes! We're not in the Waste anymore, you can stop pretending to be Aiel any time you want," Ilyena said.

"Who says I want to?" Dani pointed to one of the packs on the sofa. "I slipped it in among your stockings, Raine. Go get it, would you?"

The wolfsister went at once to do as she'd told her. She soon came walking back, a polished horn shaped like a penis in her hands, the straps that could be used to attach it to a woman's waist dangling below. Rand had seen such things used before, and wondering what the pairing would be. All the options swayed scandalously through his mind, and his cock tried to strain upwards again already.

Dani took the toy from Raine, who turned at once and lifted her skirt. She lowered her underwear—or tried to, until Dani's hand stopped her. "No, no. Not this time." She tied the straps around Raine's legs and hips herself instead, until the diminutive wolfsister was standing there in a pretty frock that was unable to fall back into place due to the fake hardon that protruded from her crotch. Raine was disturbingly outspoken at times, but something about that situation had her face blazing red.

"Should I ... just do to you what Rand did?" she asked Dani.

“Me? Oh no. It’s not me who has *toh* to meet.”

The smile she directed at Ilyena was met with a scowl. “I do not care about *toh*.” In his head, Rand heard Aviendha gasp. It was just as well she was off with the Wise Ones.

“But you do keep your word. And you said you’d not be mean,” Dani pointed out. Her smile sharpened into something he was more used to seeing on the other Accepted. “Besides, we both know something she doesn’t. And maybe she should learn it. After all, that’s what we’re doing, isn’t it? Getting to know one another. Getting closer.”

Ilyena sighed. “I always keep my word, that’s true. For good or ill. Fine!” She hopped up onto all fours, her pretty bottom pointed towards Raine. “But do not read too much into this, Cinclare!”

Raine looked at Dani uncertainly. “You want me to do your girl’s pussy?”

“Actually, it was something else I had in mind,” she chuckled.

Ilyena hissed low but did not move.

Neither did Raine. He almost expected her to pounce the way Ayla would have, but she hesitated, somehow managing to look more girlish than ever, with her glowing eyes and fake penis. He could tell she was worried about hurting Ilyena, as Ayla had hurt her. Mean words, as she called them, were not enough to make her want to do that. She’d told him once that she’d been a good girl before becoming a wolfsister. It seemed to him that becoming a wolfsister hadn’t changed nearly as much as she thought.

Again Rand knew what he was supposed to say. Again he didn’t. “Don’t worry, Raine. She’ll like it if you do it right,” he said instead.

Ilyena pushed her hair out of the way, so she could glare at him. “Traitor!”

Raine gaped. “You bummed her, too, Rand?”

“Too!? Blood and ashes, am I the only—” Dani cleared her throat. “Never mind. Here, let me help you, Raine.”

As he watched, a wetness spread across the toy. Goosebumps rose on Rand’s skin, but faded away again as quickly as they’d arrived. A hand at the small of Raine’s back sent her clambering onto the bed, to crouch awkwardly over the posing Volsuni.

Dani helped to aim the tip at Ilyena’s tight butt, too, before kissing Raine on the cheek and whispering something that made the wolfsister grin. While Raine was slipping it in with a slowness born of visible uncertainty, Dani lay down beside Ilyena and pulled her head to her chest.

“It’s okay. Sharing really isn’t that bad. Not even close,” she whispered to Ilyena as she watched Raine probing her back passage. “I saw how much you liked what Rand did. You like this, too, don’t you?” Ilyena didn’t answer, not with words, but the sounds she was making were not pained. “You like having my sweet Raine fuck that naughty butt of yours … And I like watching her do it.” Ilyena wrapped her arms around Dani’s neck, and tried to muffle her moans against the other woman’s breasts. Raine was moving the toy in and out now, still slowly and awkwardly, but it was definitely having the desired effect. On Ilyena, and on Rand.

Dani noticed, and smiled. “You look so pretty, the pair of you. Rand thinks so, too. Don’t you, Rand?”

The other two turned to look, eyes wide, pink suffusing their pale cheeks. So beautiful. “You look incredibly cute right now,” he confessed. “You should see the effect you’re having on her, Raine. She’s dripping back there.”

While Ilyena went even pinker, Raine tried and failed to see what he was talking about. “Really?”

“Burn you both!” Ilyena growled. “I’m only cute when I want to be.”

Dani laughed softly, and pulled her back into her embrace. “You’re always cute to me.”

“I wish that was so,” he thought he heard Ilyena whisper.

Watching them had restored Rand to working order, but he was still uncertain of his welcome. “As much I’m enjoying this sight, do you mind if I join in?” he asked.

“Wasn’t the dripping you mentioned invitation enough?”

Dani laughed at Ilyena’s words. “Bad girl! Raine, give her butt a slap for me.”

“O-okay …” she said, before delivering one of the most pitiful spanks Rand had ever seen.

As much as he’d enjoyed watching Raine’s pretty little bottom rise and fall as she was straining to fuck Ilyena, he was glad that it stilled at his touch. Raine turned in his arms, her lips seeking his. He found her breasts through the frock, even as he was searching for Ilyena’s heat down

below. That, too, he found, and the slap of his cock against her soft mound was enough to make her cry out in Dani's arms. Smiling, the Domani took her face between her hands.

"Show me your eyes, Ilyena. I want to see what you look like when he enters you."

They were staring right at each other when Rand's slow, searching tip found Ilyena's free hole. He pushed forward slowly, as much to savour the feel of her as to allow Dani her revelation.

"You love it," Dani declared once Rand was fully inside.

"Does she love this, too?" Raine asked, and pushed her toy back in.

"It isn't fair," Ilyena moaned. She hid her face against Dani again, but that didn't stop them from tormenting her. Rand almost fancied he could feel the toy moving on the other side of Ilyena's silky walls. He helped Raine to shed her dress, and supported her weight as they moved in tandem, fucking both of Ilyena's naughty holes. He kissed the back of Raine's neck and as far down her spine as he could go, all while playing with her excited nipples. When he craned past her to look at the other two girls, he saw that Ilyena's hand was busy between Dani's thighs.

The Volsuni was tough even here. While she didn't take what they were doing in silence, she didn't scream or thrash half as much as many would have to be pinned like that. When she came, however, she screamed so loudly it was as if she was trying to make up for the quiet. He could feel her going wild inside, and stopped to concentrate on it. Raine kept going, though, driving more and more shudders from her, until she slid to her belly, thoroughly defeated. He stared at her soaked and gaping holes as she clung to Dani.

Ilyena was flushed, wide eyed, and not at all mean looking. But that didn't make her innocent. When she saw Rand trying to undo the ties on the straps of the toy—intent on ridding Raine of that and her underwear for obvious reasons—Ilyena rolled out of Dani's embrace and took hold of his cock. Despite knowing Raine wanted and deserved his attentions, he could not resist the sight or sensation of Ilyena tasting her own juices on his member. Those huge blue eyes of hers captured him in fascination as she went from licking to sucking. Down and down she worked, and such were the thrills she gave him that it became a struggle not to thrust even deeper. He managed to resist, only resting his hand atop her head, but Light! The temptation.

The shift in position let Dani see all that Rand had just been staring at. She bit her lip, but did not look horrified at what they had done to her girl, or at what Rand was currently doing. She set about finishing what he'd started with Raine.

Ilyena's wicked tongue drew his attention back to those eyes, and this time he was unable to stop his hips from shaking a little. And then a lot. She let it happen, though tears leaked from her eyes at the strain.

When he glanced at the others, he found Raine naked with her legs spread wide. Dani was hugging her from behind, chin resting on Raine's shoulder, while their fingers entwined deep within the wolfsister's pussy. They were watching him and Ilyena while they did it. How could anyone want to destroy a world with such beauty in it?

He looked back to Ilyena when he felt it begin. The eyes that peered up from under her golden fringe went wider still when she felt his come surge down the shaft between her lips and flood her throat and mouth. Her efforts to swallow failed, and some bubbled past her lips; a little even leaked from her nose. Such obscenity combined with her doll-like innocence almost broke Rand's mind.

He fell to the bed like a puppet with its strings cut. He could barely see, much less think.

Even so, he was glad to hear that Ilyena was none the worse the wear from the experience. "Naughty boy. Are you trying to bend my emotions to your will, to maybe make me your slave?" she asked. Answering was beyond Rand's ability just then.

For a time, all he could was lie there, breathing heavy and staring at the ceiling.

When he came to, he found Ilyena lying nearby, not quite touching him. He followed her stare to the others, and matched it.

Dani was still behind Raine, and Raine's legs were still spread wide, but it wasn't fingers she had in her now, and it wasn't in her pussy, either. She sat in Dani's lap, the hands under her thighs helping to move her up and down the shaft of the toy Dani had strapped to herself. Raine's red pussy was overflowing with arousal. The pleasure on her face was equally as naked, and Dani smirked as she watched it.

She smirked at Rand, too, when she saw him staring. "My sweet Raine," she said. "You like that, don't you?"

"Uh huh. I like being your bitch."

Dani flushed. "My girl, Raine. You like being my girl."

"That, too."

Ilyena snickered. She got up and crawled over to them. "Fine. She's cute, I admit. You can keep your little pet, Dani. So long as I get to play with her, too." She put her face between Raine's thighs. Whatever she did there, she did it well, for the girl starting whimpering like a puppy.

Not wanting to be left out, Rand dragged himself up. The breasts that rose and fell with each panted breath drew his hand, while golden eyes beseeched his understanding. It was easily given.

"Are you going to come for us, Raine?"

"Yes, Shadowkiller. It's close."

He kissed her flushed cheek. "Good. I like seeing you happy, in our girl's arms." The Dragon marked arm he stretched behind them brought them together, his and Dani's cheeks pressing to each of Raine's. They were still sitting so when Raine howled, alerting them all to her pleasure. All three of them kissed her through her climax, though it fell to Rand to lift the stunned and shaking girl off Dani's toy and carry her to the pillows of her new bed, where she could rest more comfortably, then and for a long time to come.

Her eyes drifted shut. She looked so tired, and so happy, that he thought she might sleep there, despite the hour. Dani and Ilyena came to join him in watching her.

"This is nowhere near as hard a decision as I'd expected it to be," Dani said after a moment. Though tall for a girl, she had to go on tiptoe to brush her lips across his. "No-one is taking this away from me." She got onto the bed, to pull an unresisting Raine into her arms, the girl's head resting above her heart.

"Aren't you going to join them?" Ilyena asked.

Rand sighed. "I'd love nothing more. But duty is on the other side of that door, along with the nobles and the chiefs and the wide world beyond them. I have to go persuade them to fight the Shadow instead of each other."

"You've got the power. You could force obedience," she said.

"I will, if I have to. I'd much rather they just did what needs doing, though. It should be easier. It's the Shadow, for the Light's sake! Who wouldn't oppose the Shadow?"

Ilyena's lips thinned, and a dark scowl formed under her fringe. "Too many. Even those who should know better. You will need to be strong. And ... heartless. Build your power, Rand. Without power, you're always a victim."

She got on the bed as well, to lie on Dani's other side with her back to him. Chill as her advice was, he welcomed it, and not just because it suggested she might actually care for him, after all. It reinforced his own resolve. If he was going to win the wars to come, he'd need to be all she suggested and more.

Leaving the three women to rest, Rand pulled on his clothes and let himself out. He had work to do. Nations to rule, more to conquer. And enemies to kill.

And the Glory of the Light did shine upon him.  
And the Peace of the Light did he give men.  
Binding nations to him. Making one of many.  
    Yet the shards of hearts did give wounds.  
    And what was once did come again  
        —in fire and in storm  
        splitting all in twain.  
            For his peace ...  
            —for his peace ...  
            ... was the peace ...  
            ... was the peace ...  
            ... of the sword.  
    And the Glory of the Light did shine upon him.

—from “Glory of the Dragon” composed by Meane vol Ahelle, the Eleventh Age

The End  
of the Seventh Book of  
The Wheel Turns Anew